

## **Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Yugioh, Media Mixes, and Everyday Cultural Production**

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Many of the essays in this volume bear witness to the powerful alchemy of personal cultural production and communication combined with large-scale networks of digital distribution and archiving. While the implications of peer-to-peer exchange for the media industries have attracted considerable public attention, there has been much less consideration of how these exchanges operate in the everyday practices of individuals. In a world of networked and viral cultural exchange—of cultural life captured in distributed archives, indexed by search engines, and aggregated into microcontent feeds for personal information portals—areas of practice once considered inconsequential dumping grounds of cultural production become irrepressibly consequential, even productive. The despised category of “mass consumption” fractured by several generations of poststructuralists, and corroded by ongoing research in fan and reception studies, may find a still greater foe in the undisciplined practices of teenage music sharing, game hacking, and personal journal blogs. These emergent digital culture forms signal the active participation of previously marginal and invisible groups in what we must now recognize as *cultural production*, not simply as derivative acts of *active consumption* or ephemeral *personal communication*. What does it mean for those previously constructed as “consumers”—non-generative, passive audiences for professionally produced culture—are handed the means not only to distribute media through alternative peer-to-peer networks, but to remix, repackage, re-value, and produce media through amateur cultural production?

Shifting structures of participation in the production/consumption matrix are a theme common to many of the essays in this volume (Manovich, Sundaram, Taylor, Nideffer). I approach this question through ethnographic research on children’s new media—media targeted at a demographic group most often characterized as uniquely passive, uncritical, vulnerable, and receptive. One focus of my work was *Yugioh*, the craze among elementary age boys<sup>1</sup> in Japan in the years from 2000-2002. *Yugioh* is an example of a “media mix” of the type pioneered by *Pokemon*, integrating different media forms through licensed character content. The *Yugioh* animation was released in the US in 2001, and now the card game has overtaken *Pokemon* here in popularity. *Pokemon* broke new media ground in its repackaging of strategies and narrative forms of video games as content for serialized, non-interactive forms of media (TV, *manga*). It innovated further in relying on portable and intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Although some girls engage with *Yugioh*, it was decisively marked as boys content, unlike *Pokemon* which had a more mixed gender identity (Tobin 2004c). Unlike the “cute” style of *Pokemon* (Allison 2004), *Yugioh* is stylistically closer to medieval and occult fantasies, with often grotesque and scary monsters. Limited space prevents me from describing a case of a girls’ media mix, and consequently, from taking the topic of gender difference head-on. But I would note that, like most kinds of technology-oriented media culture, the trends in *anime* media mixes are being set within boy-identified media and filtering over to girls.

technologies (Game Boy, playing cards) that enabled kids to perform these narratives in diverse settings of social interaction (Allison 2002; Tobin 2004a). *Yugioh* similarly relies on virtual game play as the focal object of serialized narratives enacted in digital, analog, and everyday sites of play. This chapter analyzes forms of participation in *Yugioh*-related culture through three key concepts: the media mix, hypersociality, and extroverted childhood. My description seeks to highlight the unique characteristics of Japanese children's culture, while also locating this case within a broad set of shifts linked to a transnational digital culture.

### **Network Creativity in Everyday Practice**

My central argument is that everyday life, pursued by—in Jean Lave's (1988) terms—"just plain folks" needs to be theorized as a site of generative cultural creativity and production. This is a *structure of participation* in cultural life that, since the modern era of mechanical cultural production (Benjamin [1955] 1968), has been overshadowed but never eliminated by centralized, professionalized, and capitalized forms of media production. In many ways, this approach draws on established anthropological concerns with everyday practice, folk arts and crafts, apprenticeship, and community. It differs, however, in that it takes up forms of social life that are very unlike the small-scale, geographically localized communities and villages that characterize the classical fieldwork encounter. My objects of study are social groups mediated and focused by new media and networked cultural forms, many of which are mass-produced by media industries. My effort is to rediscover local knowledge and practice within the belly of the massively mediated beast.

Although this paper is not grounded in as finely textured an observational approach, I take my cue from a wide range of practice-based studies that have described the inherent creativity of everyday practice, ranging from Lave's (1988) studies of everyday mathematics as shoppers navigate supermarket aisles, to Edward Hutchin's (1995) studies of cognitive tasks involved in ship navigation, to Raymond McDermott's (1988) description of how children generate their own meanings within oppressive classroom settings. Energized by Michel de Certeau's (1984) suggestion that engagement with texts and places demonstrates a similar generative practice, I draw most immediately from studies of fan communities (Jenkins 1992; Penley 1991; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995) and ethnographic reception studies (Mankekar 1999; Morley 1992; Radway 1991) that describe how mass media forms are integrated and reshaped in local ecologies of meaning. The current digital ecology, however, constructs far-flung networks of exchange at the "consumer" or, more appropriately, the "user" level (Benkler 2000) that radically extend the boundaries of these more longstanding processes of media engagement and reinterpretation. My effort here is to expand this perspective on everyday practice and media reception into digital culture and technology studies. How does everyday practice and local media (re)interpretation and (re)mix articulate with the translocal, impersonal, and automated systems of exchange mediated by the Internet?

The current digital culture ecology introduces two key sociotechnical innovations central to my framing of the *Yugioh* case. The first (guided primarily by media industries and by Japanese culture industries in particular), involves the construction of increasingly pervasive mass-media ecologies that integrate in-home media such as television and game consoles, location-based media such as cinema and special events, and portable media such as trading cards and handheld games. Following the industry label, I call this the "media

mix.” The second (primarily user-driven) is characterized by peer-to-peer ecologies of cultural production and exchange (of information, objects, and money) pursued among geographically-local peer groups, among dispersed populations mediated by the Internet, and through national peer-to-peer trade shows. This is what I call “hypersociality.” These twinned innovations describe an emergent set of *technologies of the imagination*, where certain offerings of culture industries articulate with (and provide fodder for) an exploding network of digitally-augmented cultural production and exchange, fed by interactive and networked cultural forms.

Together, these dynamics describe a set of *imaginaries*—shared cultural representations and understandings—that are both pervasive and integrated into quotidian life and pedestrian social identity, and no longer strictly bracketed as media spectacles, special events, and distant celebrity. I treat the imagination as a “collective social fact,” built on the spread of certain media technologies at particular historical junctures (Appadurai 1996a, 5). Anderson (1991) argues that the printing press and standardized vernaculars were instrumental to the “imagined community” of the nation state. With the circulation of mass electronic media, Appadurai suggests that people have an even broader range of access to different shared imageries and narratives, whether in the form of popular music, television dramas, or cinema. Media images are now pervasive in our everyday lives, and form much of the material through which we imagine our world, relate to others, and engage in collective action, often in ways that depart from the relations and identities produced more locally. In children’s toys, Gary Cross (1997) has traced a shift in the past century from toys that mimicked real-world adult activities such as cooking, childcare, and construction, to the current dominance of toys that are based in fantasy environments such as outer space, magical lands, and cities visited by the supernatural. Appadurai posits that people are engaging with these imaginings in more agentive, mobilized, and selective ways as part of the creation of “communities of sentiment” (1996a, 6-8). My focus is on the more recent technologies of networked digital media and how they are inflected towards more ubiquitous, activist, and customized engagements with a technologized imaginary.

From 1998-2002, I conducted fieldwork in the greater Tokyo area among children, parents, and media industrialists, at the height of *Yugioh*’s popularity in Japan. My description is drawn from interviews with these various parties implicated in *Yugioh*, my own engagements with the various media forms, and participant observation at sites of player activity, including weekly tournaments at card shops, trade-shows, homes, and an afterschool center for elementary-aged children. I organize my narrative along the twin threads of media mixing and hypersociality, concluding with a discussion of the implications of these technologies of the imagination on the construction of childhood.

### **The Media Mix**

In the past decade, study of digital culture has increasingly recognized that the “virtual world” of the Internet is a site of “real” politics, identities, and capital rather than a dematerialized realm of free-flowing information (for example, Castronova 2001; Hine 2000; Lessig 1999; Lovink 2003; Miller and Slater 2000; Rheingold 2002). The media mix insists that we also recognize the reverse flow: the real is being colonized by the virtual as technologies of the digital imagination become more pervasive in the everyday environment. *Yugioh* and its associated ecology of digital technology in urban Japan are indicative of this porous membrane between the real and virtual, the imagination and everyday life. The

Yugioh media mix encourages this porosity through products that manifest Yugioh's creatures and fantasy encounters in everyday life—with increasing fidelity and portability via virtual or augmented<sup>2</sup> reality technologies.

Trading cards, Game Boys, and character merchandise create what Anne Allison has called “pocket fantasies,” “digitized icons . . . that children carry with them wherever they go,” and “that straddle the border between phantasm and everyday life” (Allison 2004, 42). The imagination of *Yugioh* pervades the everyday settings of childhood as it is channeled through these portable and intimate media forms. These forms of play are one part of a broader set of shifts towards intimate and portable technologies that enable lightweight imaginative sharing between people going about their everyday business. In many ways, this ecology is an illustration of concepts of ubiquitous or pervasive computing (Dourish 2001; McCullough 2004; Weiser 1991; Weiser and Brown 1996), extended to popular culture. In Japan, this pervasive media ecology includes trading cards, portable game devices, “character goods” such as mobile phone straps and clothing, screens and signage in the urban environment, as well as multimedia mobile phones that capture and exchange visual as well as textual information (Ito 2003; Okabe and Ito 2003). Imaginative fantasy is now more than ever part of the semiotics of everyday social life.

In the *Yugioh* comic book (*manga*), monsters are an intimate presence in the lives of the characters. Characters carry cards that ‘contain’ the monsters, and engage in duels that combine a card game with life-like monster battles, projected in holographic 3D from “duel disks” worn on the players’ arms. Boundaries are blurred as the duelists suffer collateral harm from monsters blasting the playing field with dragon fire and destructive magic. *Yugioh* is thus a very explicit drama of the *hyperreal*—of objects of the imagination becoming more vivid, life-like and omnipresent, to the point of sapping the strength of flesh-and-blood bodies. But the strange mingling of the real and virtual in the pages of *Yugioh* is just one aspect of a larger drama of simulation. The *Yugioh manga* series has spawned a television animation, an immensely popular card game, at least ten video game versions, and character goods ranging from T-shirts to packaged curry to pencil boxes. All project *Yugioh* into different sites of consumption, play, spectatorship, and social action.

*Yugioh* is similar to the media mixes of *Pokemon* and *Digimon* in that they involve human players who mobilize other-worldly monsters in battle. There is a difference though, in how this fantasy is deployed. In earlier media mixes, such as *Pokemon*, the trading cards are a surrogate for “actual” monsters in the fantasy world: *Pokemon* trainers collect monsters, not cards. In *Yugioh*, Yugi and his friends collect and traffic in trading cards, just like the kids in “our world.” The activities of children in our world thus closely mimic the activities and materialities of children in Yugi’s world. They collect and trade the same cards and engage in play with the same strategies, rules, and material objects. Scenes in the *anime* depict Yugi frequenting card shops and buying card packs, enjoying the thrill of getting a rare card, dramatizing everyday moments of media consumption in addition to the highly stylized and fantastic dramas of the duels themselves. In Japan, during the period when I was

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<sup>2</sup> Virtual reality is a term that gained currency in the early nineties as a way of describing immersive, computer generated virtual environments that a user “entered” through technologies such as stereoscopic goggles and instrumented gloves. Augmented reality is a more recent term describing technologies such as see-through displays that juxtapose digital images and real-world objects and environments.

conducting fieldwork, *Yugioh* cards were a pervasive fact of life, a fantasy world made manifest in the pockets and backpacks of millions of boys across the country. A 2000 survey of three hundred students in a Kyoto elementary school indicated that by the third grade, every student owned some *Yugioh* cards (Asahi Shinbun 2001).

As corporate marketing expertise with media mixes has grown—even in the very short trajectory from *Pokemon* to *Yugioh*—the media mix has come to signify and rely on more than just product diversification across sites of consumption. Instead, media mixes are increasingly designed to sustain intertextual referencing across the different media incarnations. Among other things, this permits the hierarchies of value elaborated in one domain (e.g., between different cards described in the *manga* story) to underwrite economies of scarcity in another (the card game, the video games, etc.). A biography of one card in the *Yugioh* pantheon provides an example: the Blue Eyes White Dragon card (or Blue Eyes, for short) is probably the most famous of the *Yugioh* trading cards. Blue Eyes makes its first appearance in 1996, in the ninth installment of the *Yugioh* comic series in the weekly *Jump Magazine*. “This is the Blue Eyes White Dragon Card” explains Yugi’s grandfather. “It is so powerful that production was stopped right away. It is the ultimate rare card that any card addict would give a right arm for” (Takahashi 1997). The card plays a central role in the origin story of the feud between Yugi and Kaiba, the two protagonists, and ultimately becomes closely identified with the latter. Both Yugi and Kaiba are card masters: Kaiba in the mode of ruthless individualism, battling for his own pride and power; Yugi in that of selfless kindness, battling to help his friends and family as well as perfect his game.

A few years after Blue Eyes appeared in the *manga*, the cartoon series was launched on TV Tokyo. Soon after, the Blue Eyes card was released by game maker Konami in several versions as part of its *Yugioh* Official Card Game, thereby entering into circulation among the kids of our world. The first version was released in March 1999—packaged as a starter box complete with cards, playing accessories, and instructions. Konami put Blue Eyes at the top of the card hierarchy—both in terms of rareness and the number of ‘attack points’ it represented. The cards were printed with a shiny surface and labeled “ultra rare,” in contrast to normal cards, plain old rare cards, and super rare cards. As the card game grew in popularity, Konami released new cards in smaller five-card packs, costing just over the equivalent of \$1. Konami thereby engineered scarcity within the flow of physical cards (and consequently within the regime of economic exchange). Unlike the starter box, with its fixed set of cards, the smaller packs imply a gamble: like baseball cards, one doesn’t know exactly what one is getting. There is a chance of receiving rare, super rare, and ultra rare cards, in addition to the normal cards.

Variations on this theme followed, including the EX pack, divided into a Yugi and a Kaiba deck (Kaiba leading with his signature Blue Eyes and Yugi with his own Dark Magician), and special edition Blue Eyes cards, such as the undocumented “ultimate rare” card in the ‘Spell of Mask’ Series and another version distributed at the *Jump Magazine* Trade Show in 1999. Product spinoffs and launches have continued to be accompanied by special-edition releases, from the launch of *Jump Magazine* in Japan and the U.S. to new versions of *Yugioh* Playstation and Game Boy software. Stickers, notebooks, T-shirts, and pencils, many featuring Blue Eyes, round out the product lineup.

This cross-marketing drives sales and connects the different levels of *Yugioh* play. Game Boy software ties together the fantasy world of the comic characters and real life game play, allowing the player to play against the comic characters in story mode, or against other kids

by connecting Game Boys together. The linkage between the physical cards and the virtual game cards extends beyond the card inserts in the game packages. Each physical card carries a printed code that can be inputted into the online version, translating the physical card into the online space. In fact, it is nearly impossible to play the Game Boy game without having a collection of physical cards available for virtualization.

Despite the endless forms of production, reproduction, and engineered scarcity through which the Blue Eyes card circulates, the actual utility of this card in game play is limited. Among professional players—and by this I mean both children and adults who compete in national and international tournaments—use of this card is impractical as well as passé. For players playing by the expert rules, the card is too powerful and unwieldy, requiring two other monsters to be sacrificed in order to be able to play it. The spectacular duels enacted in the comics and cartoons feature flashy, powerful monsters that find their way more into card collections than card play. In other words, the regimes of value (Appadurai 1986) between the symbolic, monetary, and competitive value of cards are interconnected, but also distinct. For example, gamers value cards primarily for playability, but might also include a card like Blue Eyes in their deck because they identify with Kaiba. Similarly, card collectors who buy and sell card primarily price based on rarity, but a card like Blue Eyes, that has a prominent role in the narrative forms, fetches a higher price than other cards of similar scarcity.

While the intertextual dynamics of media mixing have existed for as long as people have transcribed oral narratives or dramatized written ones, contemporary versions have unique qualities. They go beyond the more familiar form of adaptation between one media form and another, as when a movie is made with the characters of a prior book or video game. With *Yugioh* and similar media properties, multiple media forms *concurrently* produce an evolving but shared virtual referent of fantasy game play and collection. Unlike earlier forms of card play, *Pokemon* and *Yugioh* cards are tied to an immense narrative apparatus of *anime* and *manga* series spanning years, as well as digital gameplay. The media mix forms a heterogeneous but integrated web of reference, manifest through multiple technologies of the imagination. At the corporate level, and as the formats multiply, this requires an integrated set of alliances across a wide range of industries, retailers and advertisers. At the user level, this means that *Yugioh* players, readers, and viewers can experience the *Yugioh* imaginary as a sustained and omnipresent engagement. Unlike the spectacular film release or the cyclical television special, this form of engagement is often nurtured over years of ongoing viewing, reading, collecting, and social exchange, a relationship more of connoisseurship than consumption.

## **Hypersociality**

*Yugioh* demonstrates how pervasive media technologies in everyday settings integrate the imagination into a wider range of sites of social activity. Far from the shut-in behavior that gave rise to the most familiar forms of anti-media rhetoric, this media mix of children's popular culture is wired, extroverted and hypersocial, reflecting forms of sociality augmented by dense sets of technologies, signifiers, and systems of exchange. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton Green have argued in the case of *Pokemon* that "activity—or agency—is an indispensable part of the process rather than something that is exercised post hoc" (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004, 19). The image of solitary kids staring at television screens and twiddling their thumbs has given way to the figure of the activist kid beaming

monsters between Game Boys, trading cards in the park, text messaging friends on their bus ride home, reading breaking *Yugioh* information emailed to a mobile phone, and selling amateur comics on the Internet. This digitally-augmented sociality is an unremarkable fact of life to the current generation of kids in urban Japan. With the majority of Japanese accessing the Internet through mobile phones and with the rise of the handheld Game Boy as the preferred platform for gaming, computer and TV screens are no longer privileged access points to the virtual and the networked world.

Congregating with their Game Boys and *Yugioh* playing cards, kids engage in a form of hypersocial exchange that is pervaded by the imagination of virtual gaming worlds. Buzzing with excitement, a group of boys huddles in a corner of their after-school center, trading cards, debating the merits of their decks, and talking about the latest TV episode. A little girl rips open a pack of cards at a McDonald's, describing their appeal to her baffled grandparents. A boy wears a favorite rare card around his neck as he climbs the play equipment at the park, inciting the envy and entrepreneurialism of his peers. As their mother completes her grocery shopping, a brother and sister walk into an elevator dueling with coupled Game Boy Advance machines. When *Yugioh* players get together, (hyper)social exchange involves *both* the more familiar discursive sharing of stories and information, and the material exchange of playing cards and virtual monsters.

Rather than the one-way street connoted by the term mass media or mass culture, hypersocial exchange is about active, differentiated, and entrepreneurial consumer positions and a high degree of media and technical literacy. This builds on the sensibilities of kids who grew up with the interactive and layered formats of video games as a fact of life, and who bring this subjectivity to bear on other media forms. The interactivity, hacking, and first-person identification characteristic of video gaming is integrated with card play and identification with narrative characters. Players collect their own cards and monsters, combining them into decks that reflect a personal style of play, often derived from the stylistic cues presented by the *manga* characters. *Pokemon* decisively inflected kids game culture towards personalization and recombination, demonstrating that children can master highly esoteric content, customization, connoisseurship, remixing, and a pantheon of hundreds of characters (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004; Yano 2004)—an environment of practice and learning that Sefton-Green has called a “knowledge industry” (Sefton-Green 2004, 151). These more challenging forms of play have also attracted a wide following of adults.

Like most popular forms of *anime* content, *Yugioh* has an avid following of adult fans, often labeled by the Japanese term for media geek, “otaku” (Greenfeld 1993; Kinsella 1998; Okada 1996; Tobin 2004c). Adult *otaku* communities are the illegitimate offspring of the *Yugioh* media empire, and exist in uneasy relationship with the entertainment industries that create *Yugioh* content. They exploit gaps in both dominant systems of meaning and mainstream commodity capitalism, using tactics that circumvent the official circuits of mass marketing and distribution. With the advent of the Internet, *otaku* communities found their communications medium, an organizing ground for special-interest fan communities and a site for distributing alternative content and grey market goods. Cultural remix is about the appropriation and reshaping of mass cultural content as well as its revaluation through alternative economies and systems of exchange.

One kind of *otaku* knowledge is known as *sa-chi* or “searching,” methods by which card collectors identify rare card packs *before* purchase. I find myself out at 1 AM with a

group of card collectors, pawing through three boxes of just released cards. The salesperson is amused but slightly annoyed, and it takes some negotiating to get him to open all three boxes. My companions pride themselves on the well-trained fingertips and disciplined vision that enables them to identify the key card packs. They teach me a few tricks of the trade, but clearly this is a skill born of intensive practice. After identifying all the rare, super rare, and ultra rare cards in the store, they head out to clear the other neighborhood shops of rare cards before daybreak, when run-of-the-mill consumers will start purchasing.

Single cards, often purchased in these ways, are sold at card shops and on the Internet. In city centers in Tokyo such as Shibuya, Ikebukuro, and Shinjuku, there are numerous hobby shops that specialize in the buying and selling of single cards, and which are frequented by adult collectors as well as children. These cards can fetch prices ranging from pennies to hundreds of dollars for special edition cards. Street vendors and booths at carnivals will also often have a display of single-sale *Yugioh* cards that attract children. Internet auction sites and *Yugioh* web sites, however, mediate the majority of these player-to-player exchanges. The total volume is extremely large. One collector I spoke to purchases about 600 packs of cards in each round of searches and could easily make his living buying and selling *Yugioh* cards.

Children share the same active and entrepreneurial stance, cultural fascinations, and interests as the adult gamers, but they lack the same freedom of movement and access to money and information. The rumor mill among children is active though often ill-informed. All the children I spoke to about it had heard of search techniques, and some had half-baked ideas of how it might be done. Children create their own local rules, hierarchies of values, and microeconomies among peer groups, trading, buying, and selling cards in ways that mimic the more professional adult networks. Despite adult crackdowns on trading and selling between children, it is ubiquitous among card game players. Once mobile phones filter down from the teen to the elementary-aged demographic, these exchanges are likely to be central to an expanded range of communications between kids, exchanging information, beaming character .jpegs and cutting deals during their down-time hours in transit and at home in the evenings.

Another arena of *otaku* cultural production, which I will mention just briefly here, is the publication and selling of amateur comics, often derived from mainstream content such as *Yugioh*. During my years of fieldwork in Tokyo, I would make an annual pilgrimage to the Comic Market, by some estimates largest trade show in Japan and the epicenter for *manga-otaku*. The show occupies Tokyo Big Site twice a year, an immense convention hall located on new landfill in the synthetic port entertainment town of Daiba at Tokyo Bay. It attracts hundreds of thousands of *manga* fans, including large numbers who camp at the site and line up at dawn. The convention center is packed with rows of tables displaying self-published *manga*, ranging from booklets constructed of stapled photocopies to glossy bound publications costing the equivalent of \$20 USD, much more than the average commercial publication. Millions of yen exchange hands as fans queue up for their favorite artists and series.

Unlike the world of the card and video game *otaku*, the *manga* *otaku* are dominated by working class girls (Kinsella 1998, 289), with much of the content featuring boy-boy relationships idealized by a feminine eye. For example, *Yugioh* fan zines often feature romantic liaisons between Yugi, Kaiba, and Yugi's best friend, Jounouchi (Joey in the US). Unlike professional cultural production, fan zines center on tight-knit communities of peers

that both create and buy amateur *manga*. Artists sit at their booths and chat with artists and readers who browse their work. Comic Market is the largest show of its kind, but a greater volume of zines changes hands through a more distributed exchange network which includes the Internet, regional events, and events focused on specific form of content, such as a particular *manga* series or genre. There are an estimated 20,000-50,000 amateur *manga* circles in Japan (Kinsella 1998; Schodt 1996, 37). Most participants are teenagers and young adults rather than kids, but these practices are an extension of childhood practices of drawing *manga* and exchanging them among friends. As in the case of the card *otaku*, *manga otaku* translate childhood imaginaries into alternative adult networks of amateur cultural production and commerce.

Unlike spectacular narratives of good and evil told on the TV screen, the buzz of competitive exchange between kids in the park, the furtive nighttime rounds of collectors, and the flow of cards, monsters, and fan zines through Internet commerce and street-level exchange point to a peer-to-peer imaginary that is heterogeneously materialized and produced through highly distributed social practices. The *Yugioh* imaginary exceeds the sanctioned networks and contact points of mainstream industrialists and the hegemonic narratives they market to supposedly passive masses of children. While the Internet has taken center stage in our theorizing of new forms of communication and relationality, media mixes in children's content, below the radar of mainstream adult society, have been quietly radicalizing a new generation's relationship to culture and social life.

### **The Cultural Politics of Wired Childhoods**

The backchannel discourse of the *otaku* is an example of new forms of commodity capitalism mixing with and sustaining an increasingly entrepreneurial, extroverted, and wired childhood. *Yugioh* demonstrates how the market for media mix content is becoming organized into a dual structure, characterized on one side by mainstream, mass distribution channels which market to average consumers, and an intermediary zone that blurs the distinction between production and consumption—fueled by the Internet, *otaku* groups, amateur cultural production, and peer-to-peer economies. Joseph Tobin distinguishes between “otaku and snackers” among *Pokemon* aficionados, tracing the symbiosis between the geekier—often older—groups of hardcore players who lead the way in adopting new forms and innovations, and the less intense, faddish engagement of average kids (Tobin 2004b, 277-281). The consumption/production cycle of popular media mix content like *Yugioh* and *Pokemon* is driven forward by this dynamic interplay of connoisseur and popular markets. While these markets are somewhat distinct, they also speak to each other, as certain kids gain local expertise and notoriety even among more casual players, or other kids gain access to the adult gaming communities. The media mix fuels this interplay, leading to new anxieties and efforts to regulate of children's behavior. Ultimately, the media mix supports a complex set of media environments and markets that give rise to new kinds of contact zones, tensions, and cultural politics surrounding childhood.

The cultural establishment, represented by the voices of parents and educators, and by Konami's official marketing discourse, maintains a boundary between the sanctioned consumption of *Yugioh* content by children and certain unsanctioned forms of consumption of *Yugioh* content by adult core gamers and collectors. In this view, the legitimate place for children's entertainment is in the home, under the surveillance of parents, and that the

legitimate economic relation is one of standardized commodity relations, distributed through mainstream channels such as convenience and toy stores. Konami has been rumored to have tried, unsuccessfully, to pressure some card shops to stop the sale of single cards. They have also tried to exclude the members of at least one core gaming team from the official tournaments. Mainstream publishers of *manga* are similarly quick to distance themselves from the amateur market, which they see as derivative and unsavory, catering to the cultural margin. In some rare cases, artists have transitioned from amateur to professional status, but the amateur market is generally quite distinct from mainstream markets and industries (Kinsella 1998; Schodt 1996).

In her work on *otaku* and the cultures of ‘cute’ in Japan, Sharon Kinsella describes discourses in the seventies and eighties that correlated popular media and consumerism with the infantilization, irresponsibility, and materialism of youth. While girlish pop idols and cute character goods are appealing to the Japanese mainstream, *Otaku* represent what some consider a pathological extreme of adult engagement with kids culture (1998, 290-4). *Otaku*-identified cultural forms became a source of moral panic in the late eighties and early nineties, after Miyazaki Tsutomu was arrested in 1989 for the abduction and murder of four small girls. His bedroom was walled with *manga* and videos that evidenced an obsessive interest in young girls and associated cute cultures. Through the image of the obsessive *otaku*, media fans became associated with social pathology that mirrored their marginalized status in economic and cultural life (Kinsella 1998). Although there are efforts to reclaim a positive image of *otaku* as media savants (Okada 1996), and although the term has been taken up with more positive valences in the US and Europe (Greenfeld 1993; Levi 1996; Napier 2000), it is still associated with social dysfunction for the Japanese mainstream.

Although few parents had problems with *Yugioh* games and card trading among peers, most were nervous about children participating in adult gaming and collecting circles. In contrast to most critiques situated outside Japan, notably those focused on the consumerist logic of *Pokemon* (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004; Yano 2004), Japanese parents did not exhibit much concern with their children’s participation in mainstream commodity capitalism. Instead of battle lines being drawn between parents and industry, Japanese parents tend to align themselves with mainstream capital against the subaltern practices of unregulated and unpredictable *otaku* economies. None of the parents I interviewed condoned buying and selling single cards at professional card shops, although some turned a blind eye towards occasional visits. In particular, they did not like the idea of their kids selling and buying rare cards for high prices in the professional networks. Part of the problem was price and the fanning of consumer desire to levels well beyond what children could manage financially and psychologically. One parent describes her perspective on monetizing the value of cards.

If my child can understand the meaning of spending 5000 yen on one card, then it would be okay. With 5000 yen I could buy this, and this, and this. But instead, I want to buy this one card. Understanding this trade-off is quite different from just buying it because he desires it.

There is also the fear of exploitation—that children are bound to lose in financial negotiations with adult collectors.

This may be a strange way to put it, but I explain it this way. I know not all these guys are like this. But what if some strange guy came up to you and said, “Check this out. This is really rare. It really could be sold for 10,000 yen, but just for you, I will sell it for 1000 yen.” What if you buy it, and later find out that it wasn’t rare at all. Could you really make that judgment? And could you take that responsibility?

Card vendors also see relations with kids as a difficult border zone. Some see kids as a legitimate market for their goods. Some admit that there are collectors who exploit kids by selling counterfeit cards. Others prefer not to sell to kids because they see them as unreliable and irresponsible in their financial transactions. Most card shops prevent kids from selling cards, though buying is generally not a problem. Buying, trading, and selling over the Internet, however, remains a significant gray zone, where different expectations of conduct often come into conflict. Cards are sold on brokered auction sites such as Yahoo or Ebay, but also on private sites of individual card traders. One card trader I spoke to described a problem he had in an Internet trade with a middle school student who sent him the wrong card. What was most galling to him was the response of the parent, when he visited the child’s home to try to talk through the problem. “The father took the attitude that his son had done nothing wrong. After all, he is just a child. And he had his wallet out ready to resolve the problem with cash.” While the adult trader felt it was an issue of honor and responsibility, and the child should be held accountable, the parent insisted that *Yugioh* was “mere” child’s play. The father also assumed the trader was primarily motivated by mercenary motives independent of his engagement with the game and desire for the cards themselves.

Overall, the adult collectors I spoke to had a less innocent view of childhood. In the words of one hardcore gamer, describing children’s often-desperate efforts to get the cards they desire, “Kids are dirty.” This same gamer described with some distress how he used to share cards and information with neighborhood kids. Soon, however, false rumors spread that he was selling cards, and parents asked him to stop talking with their children. The dynamics between parents, kids, and adult gamers occasion a familiar protectionist impulse toward childhood, and toward its maintenance as a separate space. This wish finds itself increasingly at odds, however, with media mixes that introduce children to subcultural, mixed-age social arenas beyond the surveillance of protective adults such as parents, teachers, and the sanctioned media industries and markets. A rising generation of young adults, at least of the *otaku* variety, tends to see a more porous boundary between childhood and adulthood, and childhood subjectivity as an attractive arena for culturally productive activity. Although *otaku* continue to be objects of suspicion, adult engagement with childhood products is steadily becoming more pervasive in Japanese society.

Notwithstanding critiques by cultural commentators from both inside (Doi 1973; Okonogi 1978) and outside Japan (Kerr 2001), the popularity of Japan’s cultures of cute, epitomized by *manga*, *anime*, and character goods, continues unabated. Such cultural products have become a central element of Japan’s “gross national cool” (Iwabuchi 2004; McGray 2002) in the transnational arena (Allison 2004; Kinsella 1995; Napier 2000). The culture of cute is by no means restricted to children: approximately one third of all character goods in Japan are consumed by adults aged nineteen and older (Databank 2000). In his study of advertising images in the sixties and seventies, Thomas Frank (1997) describes what

he calls “the conquest of cool”: the appropriation by marketers of hip, youthful, counter-cultural images that broadcast resistance to the square mainstream of work and discipline. I believe we are seeing a similar process of the conquest of cute in the commodification of images and products of childhood.

While in the US, identification with cute culture is generally considered effeminate for young men and adolescents (Tobin 2004c), in Japan there appears to be a growing willingness to embrace childhood and cuteness as a source of alternative adult identities of both genders. In his discussion of *Pokemon* and gender identity, Samuel Tobin (2004c, 253) points out that “toys and TV shows are not inherently appropriate for certain ages or genders.... instead ... these factors change with time.” Social, cultural, and historical context naturally plays a large role. Moreover, as my *Yugioh* work suggests—such shifts can be traced within much broader cultural formations. In the current moment in Japan—and arguably with increasing frequency outside Japan—childhood play is being imagined by kids and adults as a site for alternative forms of symbolic value and economic exchange. In part, this is a form of refusal or resistance to ‘adult’ values of labor, discipline, and diligence and institutions of school and workplace. This valence is central, for example, to Kinsella’s account of the popularity of child-identified and cute products among young adults (Kinsella 1995).

Although studies of children’s culture have recognized the agency of kids even in the face of stereotypically passive TV-centered consumer cultures (Jenkins 1998; Kinder 1999; Seiter 1995), the current media mix represents a stronger integration of this agency with the design of the media apparatus. Childhood agency can be performed as well as imagined through the new combination of digitally-inflected media mixes and peer-to-peer forms of cultural and financial trafficking. This alchemy has created zones where adults and kids participate in communities of rich cultural production and exchange. Media industries have found a new market in both kids and adults who are attracted to a certain *depiction* of childhood—one that is distinguished from and resistant to certain structures of adult society without being depicted as inferior. Symbolized by tiny Yugi’s triumphs over corrupt adult society, childhood play is represented as mobilizing the power of the margin.

Although it would be easy to dismiss these imaginings as the false liberatory fantasies of people who will remain, in reality, resolutely marginal and disenfranchised, we can also see these new cultural productions as part of a growing significance of the margin when augmented by digital networks. The media mix of *Yugioh* does not end with the player’s interpellation into the narrative fantasy, or even with the recontextualization of the imagination into local knowledge, but extends to the production of alternative material and symbolic economies that are informed by, *but not mediated by*, the corporate media apparatus. In other words, these practices produce alternative cultural forms that are disseminated through everyday peer-to-peer exchanges below the radar of commodity capitalism; they are a mode of cultural production that does not overthrow capitalism, but operates in its shadow, through “cultures of insubordination” (Sundaram, this volume) that both rely on and disrupt the dominant mode.

It seems likely that the mainstream will continue to characterize these practices and imaginaries as socially dysfunctional, psychologically immature, and out of touch with reality. At the same time, the ethic of the *otaku* and the entrepreneurial kid-consumer seem to presage a technosocial shift, much as the rise of geek chic in the past decade was tied to a shift in the mainstream perception of a marginal subjectivity. The technological tinkering,

amateur cultural production, and media connoisseurship enacted by kids and *otaku Yugioh* fans is a subjectivity with loose analogs in other digitally-mediated cultural spaces. The *otaku* resemble the Euro-American hacker or geek, or the player-producers described by T.L. Taylor in this volume. At the same time, the strong identification with childhood, remix, and revaluation cultures ally *otaku* more strongly with specific phantasmagoric cultural arenas rather than with digital technology per se. Also, importantly, these cultures are more strongly associated with the socially disenfranchised and subaltern—kids and working-class youth—and thus represent a greater distance from elite centers of cultural and technological production.

Working with highly technologized and phantasmagoric social sites like *Otaku* practices and the media mix for Japanese children suggest a differently inflected *research imaginary* for those of us who study media technology. My effort has *not* been to suggest that we have seen a decisive shift in technologies of the imagination, but rather to evoke an emergent set of research questions tied to the new technologies and practices of a rising generation, and to an increasingly transnational network of *otaku* media hackers. Just as the electronic media and globalization have forced a re-reading of more traditional social-scientific concepts such as place and locality (eg., Appadurai 1996b; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Meyrowitz 1985), media mixing invites attention to social and cultural processes in all media—both old and new. Media mixing involves attention to a highly distributed and pervasive imaginary that spans multiple material forms, an imaginary that is massive, but not mass. In addition to an analysis of the relation between reality and text, production and consumption, media mixing also demands that we query the relation *between* differently materialized and located texts, exploring issues of intertextuality, multiple materialities, and a distributed field of cultural production. Perhaps most importantly, the media mix demands a continued attentiveness to the politics, productivity, and creativity of the everyday, as technologies of the imagination populate even the most mundane corners of our daily lives.

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