

The Gender Dynamics of the Japanese Media Mix

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Although never named as a social movement, Japanese gaming culture has, ever since since *Pac Man*, produced a range of highly successful games that have appealed to girls as well as boys. In addition to *Pac Man*, games such *Donkey Kong*, *Pengo* and *Dig Dug* provided alternatives to shooting, fighting, and racing as idioms for game play. Further, across different game genres, many (if not most) Japanese games have been characterized by relatively girl-friendly cute characters derived from anime (animation) styles. Many of the most memorable characters in Japanese gaming—Mario, Yoshi, Baby Kong, and the early *Final Fantasy* characters—were depicted with big eyes and cute child-like proportions. More recently, Pikachu demonstrated on a global scale that cute characters and (relatively) non-violent game play idioms appeals to both boys and girls. Although gaming culture in Japan as elsewhere continues to be dominated by boys, the post-*Pokemon* landscape in Japan-origin media exhibits an ongoing attention to cute characters and a growth in girl-friendly content.

This essay addresses the question of the girls' game movement from a somewhat oblique angle. Rather than take up issues specific to girls and gaming in the US, I introduce some of the contemporary cultural politics surrounding video games, children's media culture, and gender in Japan, a context quite different from the US, but one that has had a strong influence on US gaming cultures. My goal is not to analyze the problematics of gender and gaming per se, but rather to present some historical and ethnographic cases of how boys and girls have engaged with the popular cultures surrounding gaming in Japan, in hopes that this might inform alternative imaginings of a gender politics. Although Japanese gaming has not been considered central to the girls gaming movement, the role of Japanese gaming genres in bringing girls into electronic gaming should not be overlooked. Much as the *Sims* has provided a relatively gender-neutral avenue into gaming for women (Jenkins 2003), *Pokemon* broke new ground for girls who subsequently adopted the Game Boy platform and trading card games. In this essay I first describe some cultural and historical background to Japanese gaming, including media mixing, cute culture and otaku culture. I then describe two cases of contemporary Japanese mixes—*Yugioh* and *Hamtaro*—which illustrate some of the gender dynamics of gaming among elementary aged children in Japan.

Contexts of Japanese Gaming Cultures

Although Japanese gaming and anime has evolved over the years into an international market, the local Japanese context for popular culture and gaming still remains distinctive in many respects. As background to my discussion of *Yugioh* and *Hamtaro*, I describe some of the key elements of this distinctiveness in relation to US children's media

cultures: the mixing and cross-referencing between media types, cultures of cute, and otaku.

The Media Mix

Electronic gaming in Japan needs to be understood as one component of a broader media ecology that includes anime, manga, trading card games, toys, and character merchandise. I borrow the native industry term, “media mix,” to describe this linked character-based media. Although each media platform has particular emphases, Japan has a more integrated and synergistic relationship between different media types than you tend to see in the case of US children’s culture. Popular series will make their way to all of the different platforms of the media mix and each plays off the strengths of the other. Weekly or monthly manga magazines provide the serialized narrative foundation for the series, as well as a venue for disseminating information about new game and toy releases, strategy, and tournaments. TV series provide a focus for younger children, a broader audience, and a marketing channel. Gaming packages that same content into an interactive form, building on existing recognition of character and backstory established through the narrative media. The synergies between the different media types have grown from the postwar period to the present, beginning with manga in the sixties and seventies, then incorporating the anime and toy industries. While electronic gaming was in a somewhat separate domain through the eighties, by the nineties it was well integrated with the overall media mix of manga and anime characters, aided by the popularity of game-origin characters such as Mario and Pikachu. The close ties between manga, animation, and gaming are one distinctive element of the Japanese media mix.

The other distinctive element is the centrality of serialized print media. Manga are generally (but not always) the primary texts of the media mix, generating the characters and narrative that go on to populate anime and games. The Japanese manga industry is unique in that it comprises about 38% of all printed matter in Japan (Schodt 1996, 20) and spans a much wider range of genres and topics than in other countries. Topics taken up by manga include fictional and non-fictional topics that are generally not published in comic books elsewhere, for example, romance, pornography, stories of businessmen, child rearing, mah jong, sports, and historical fiction. Today, manga are enjoyed by all age groups in Japan, and are generally the primary literacy experiences for children. Manga are such a central fixture of Japanese childhood that one editor asked me with puzzlement after our interview, ‘What do American children *do* without manga?’ Serialized manga, printed vastly and diversely on cheap newsprint are a way for content industries to test the market. When a series takes off it can be simultaneously released in an integrated way throughout the other avenues in the media mix ecology. The base in popular, serialized print media can support long running, complex narratives that can be easily revisited and mined by other media platforms. In relation to gender dynamics, this is significant in that media content for girls and women, including complex and soap operatic narratives can become the basis for gaming content in a form of translation that is cultural well established.

Cultures of Cute

From the perspective of style, Japanese media mix content is also distinctive because of the centrality of “kawaii” (cute) culture. Hello Kitty and Pikachu are the face of kawaii culture overseas. In Japan, these kinds of cute characters are much more ubiquitous and central to cultural life. Sharon Kinsella (1995) describes kawaii culture as one of the dominant forms of Japanese popular culture in the eighties and beyond. “Kawaii or ‘cute’ essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances.” It is a cultural style that manifests in domains including pop idols, handwriting, fashion, speech, music, and food, but has its most iconic manifestations in media mix characters. Kinsella (1995; 2000) suggests that young girls’ cultures of cute operate from an outsiderly position of resistance and irresponsibility, cut off from mainstream sources of power. She echoes the arguments of Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (1995) when they describe how Japanese women came to take a central role in the domains of popular culture and consumption, reflecting their disenfranchised role in production. While this relegation of women to the role of consumption is not unique, the dominance of girl-centered popular culture is somewhat more noticeable. Kinsella writes, “While old fashioned mums in England grumble that they can no longer distinguish between girls and lads because the girls all dress like boys these days, Japanese social commentators have bemoaned the domination of modern culture by young women and the increasingly cute, little girlish appearances of young men.”

Far from being a marginal cultural form, kawaii culture is embodied by girls, but embraced by people of all ages and both genders. It is quite unremarkable in Japan to see characters such as Miffy or Snoopy advertising adult-oriented services such as travel agencies and insurance policies. Approximately one third of all character merchandise in Japan is consumed by adults aged eighteen and over. The consumption of cute characters also crosses gender lines. Popular culture for young boys is overwhelmingly kawaii, and even young men adopt kawaii culture in some forms, becoming fans of kawaii idols and anime characters, adopting cute fashion, buying character goods. More insidiously, school girls and childlike comic characters have become objects of adult male desire. Trade shows like the annual Character Show are oriented primarily to the young adult male, and you see erotic images of young anime girl characters alongside booths selling Snoopy pencils and hamster note pads. Although a limited market overseas, bishoujo (beautiful girl) genres of manga and games are a sizeable portion of the Japanese market, and often feature cute but sexy girl characters. The “dating sim” genre, feature narratives for getting to know bishoujo, has barely registered in the US, but comprises about a quarter of the market for Japanese electronic games.

Although kawaii culture is something that has found a large international audience, the cultural dominance and consumption by adults and men is something that is still relatively distinctive. This tendency is one indication of the cultural centrality of girls’ and children’s culture in Japan. Not only is girls’ and children’s culture fetishized as something unique, pure, and special—a tendency common to most cultures with modern notions of childhood—kawaii culture is also seen as something that other can adopt and emulate. The analogue is how in Euro-American contexts male-dominated youth culture

styles are often emulated by people of all ages and genders. This tendency means that, at least in some cases, it is culturally acceptable for boys to engage with games that are girlish in style. We don't have to assume that a title crossing genders lines necessarily means girls accommodating to boyish genres.

Otaku

In addition to kawaii culture, Japan is also home to the distinctive subculture of otaku, a term that can be roughly translated as "media geek." In the mainstream, otaku is a pejorative label attached to young men and women who are avid fans of media mix content, and who go one step further to remake and traffic in the elements of that culture. In the area of computer gaming, these are the subcultures that own hard technical and gaming mastery. Elsewhere I have written about otaku culture and how it embodies the ethic of amateur cultural production, remix, and connoisseurship central to contemporary media literacy (Ito Forthcoming). For my purposes here, I would like to note the gender dynamics of otaku culture. Although otaku-like engagement with media is culturally acceptable for young boys who spend hours at their game consoles or playing trading card games, girls who are highly involved in media mix content tend to be more socially marginalized. In my fieldwork with boys and girls in Japan, I found that it was generally cool for boys to have an intense interest in popular culture and games, but the most popular girls tended to be focused more on real life friendships than fantasy oriented play. While gaming otaku cultures have been largely dominated by boys, girls have had a leadership role in the cultures of doujinshi (amateur manga), an arena of otaku practice that is in many ways more challenging to mainstream sensibilities than young men obsessed with computers and video games.

The more common way of girls to get involved in otaku-like media engagements is through the drawing of manga. Girls will often learn how to draw manga characters at an early age, and might even make their own "pencil manga" with some friends. It is when they start to produce more serious doujinshi or amateur computer games that they enter the subculture of otaku. Although nearly invisible to the mainstream in Japan, the girls' otaku subculture of amateur comics is immense. The bi-annual, Comic Market, dominated by young working class women, is the largest trade show in Japan, convening up to 300,000 people buying and selling doujinshi. Different days of the Comic Market are dedicated to bishounen (beautiful boys) doujinshi created mostly by girls, bishoujo, and amateur computer games. Despite the centrality of girls' participation in certain elements of otaku technoculture, they still are overshadowed by male otaku, particularly in terms of technical mastery. Girls' more activist participation in media mix cultures is dominated by the relatively non-techie skills of drawing and making costumes, unlike boys who gravitate towards the computer and gaming based elements of the media mix.

Today's Media Mix

The contemporary media mix for children needs to be understood in relation to *Pokemon*, a breakthrough media form that has informed all subsequent media mix series. *Pokemon* pushed the media mix equation into new directions. Rather than being pursued serially, as

in the case of manga being converted into anime, the media mix of *Pokemon* involved a more integrated and synergistic strategy where the same set of characters and narratives was manifest concurrently in multiple media types. *Pokemon* also set the precedent of locating the portable media formats of trading cards and handheld networked game play at the center rather than at the periphery of the media ecology. This had the effect of channeling media engagement into collective social settings both within and outside the home as kids looked for opportunities to link up their game devices and play with and trade their *Pokemon* cards. 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).

From the point of view of gender dynamics, *Pokemon* broke new ground by hybridizing styles and game play that crossed gender lines. The large pantheon of *Pokemon* meant that they could include creatures that appealed to both boys and girls, but by and large they were dominated by the kawaii aesthetic. The game mechanic is also hybrid, including competitive battles between the monsters, as well as a dimension of pet care, nurturance, and social networking with more feminine overtones. The main character in the series is predictably a boy, but one of his close companions is a pre-adolescent girl *Pokemon* trainer. Part of *Pokemon*'s success was clearly based on its ability to appeal to girls as well as boys, and become a central part of the childhood status economy. Given that Game Boy gaming was so central to *Pokemon*, it also had the side-effect of drawing girls to gaming in large numbers. The dominance of the Game Boy as the preferred platform for girls persists to this day.

My research was conducted in the wake of the *Pokemon* phenomenon. From 1998-2002, I conducted fieldwork in the greater Tokyo area among children, parents, and media industrialists, at the height of *Yugioh*'s popularity. My research focused on *Yugioh* as a case study, as it was the most popular series in currency at the time. 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. Among girls, *Hamtaro* was the most popular children's series at the time, so it became a secondary focus for my research. I also conducted research that was not content-specific, interviewing parents, participant observing a wide range of activities at the afterschool center, and reviewing diverse children's media. I turn now to descriptions of *Yugioh* and *Hamtaro* and the gender dynamics surrounding these two series.

Yugioh

Like other media mixes, *Yugioh* relies on cross referencing between serialized manga, a TV anime series, a card game, video games, occasional movie releases, and a plethora of character merchandise. The manga ran for 343 installments between 1996 and 2004 in the weekly magazine *Shonen Jump* and is still continuing as an animated series. In 2001 the anime and card game was released in the US, and soon after in the UK and other parts of

the world. The series centers on a boy, Mutoh Yugi, who is a game master, and gets involved in various adventures with a small cohort of friends and rivals. The narrative focuses on long sequences of card game duels, stitched together by an adventure narrative. Yugi and his friends engage in a card game derivative of the US-origin game *Magic the Gathering*, and the series is devoted to fantastic duels that function to explicate the detailed esoterica of the games, such as strategies and rules of game play, properties of the cards, and the fine points of card collecting and trading. The height of *Yugioh*'s popularity in Japan was between 1999 and 2001. 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).

Compared to *Pokemon*, where games are only loosely tied to the narrative media by character identification, with *Yugioh* the gaming comprises the central content of the narrative itself. In media mixes such as *Pokemon* and *Digimon*, 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. This is similar to a series like *Beyblade* that followed *Yugioh*, which involves kids collecting and battling with customized battle tops. The objects collected by the fantasy characters are the same as those collected by kids in real life. When I was 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.

Unlike *Pokemon* and *Digimon*, *Yugioh* has relied more heavily on aesthetics and play mechanics that are more tied to boys cultures. Although some of the characters are cute (most notably Yugi), the series overall is based on a dark, occult-like theme. Unlike the cuddly *Pokemon* and *Digimon*, the monsters in *Yugioh* are mostly scary and ferocious (eg. Blue Eyes White Dragon, Dark Magician), with just a few exceptions (eg. Time Wizard, Magician Girl) that seem designed as small concessions to girls. Unlike *Pokemon*'s Misty, who is a formidable game player, Yugi's girl companion is a mediocre one and takes on a spectator, victim, and support role. The series is also more closely tied to competitive game play and the narrative focuses on the esoterica of card game play itself, featuring long, drawn-out duels depicted in somewhat excruciating detail. The narrative tends to focus on Yugi's progression through different competitive scenarios, like tournaments or the hostile incursions of evil duelists. These features of *Yugioh* have coded it as much less girl-friendly than *Pokemon* or *Digimon*. At the same time, it was such a central part of children's popular culture during the peak years that girls also took an interest. Almost all girls owned some *Yugioh* cards and watched the anime at least sporadically. When *Yugioh* tournaments were held at the afterschool center I observed at, a handful of girls might participate, but they tended to watch in the sidelines even though they likely had their own stash of cards. When the girls did participate, they seemed well-

versed in the characters and idioms of game play, attesting to their ongoing role as spectators in the series.

Hamtaro

As we saw with many of the media mix series that followed *Pokemon—Yugioh*, *Beyblade*, *Duel Masters*, *Mushi King*—for content that centers on gaming, boys' culture is still central. It sets the trends in media mixing that girls' content follows. But girls' content *is* following. The trend is slower but as of the late nineties most popular girls content will find its way to Game Boy, though not usually to platforms like Nintendo consoles or Playstation. There is yet to be a popular trading card game based on girls content, but there are many collectible cards with content oriented to girls. Otaku-like forms of character development and multi-year and multiply threaded narrative arcs are also becoming more common in series oriented towards girls. Series like *Card Captor Sakura*, *Corrector Yui*, and *Angelic Layer* relied on boyish idioms of action and battle, but rendered in the shojo (young girl) style of manga. Although the main characters in these series were girls, they appealed to both girls and boys. To give one example of how the dynamics of new media mixes is making its way girls content, I will describe the case of *Tottoko Hamutarou* (or *Hamtaro*, as it is known in English), the series that was most popular among girls during the period of my fieldwork.

Hamtaro is an intrepid hamster owned by a little girl. The story originated in picture book form in the late nineties and became an animated series in 2000. This year, the anime series will pass the 300 episode mark. After being released as a television anime, *Hamtaro* attracted a wide following, quickly becoming the most popular licensed character for girls. It was released in the US, UK and other part of the world in 2002. *Hamtaro* is an interesting case because it is clearly coded as girls content, and the human protagonist is a girl. But the central character, *Hamtaro* is a boy. It has attracted a fairly wide following among boys as well as girls, though it was dwarfed by *Yugioh* in the boys' market during the time that I was conducting my fieldwork. The story makes use of a formula that was developed by *Pokemon*, which is of a proliferating set of characters that create esoteric knowledge and domains of expertise. While not nearly as extensive as the *Pokemon* pantheon or *Yugioh* cards, *Hamtaro* is part of a group of about twenty hamster friends, each of which has a distinct personality and life situation. To date the series has introduced over 50 different quirky hamster characters, and complex narratives of different relationships, compatibilities, antagonisms, and rivalries. The formula is quite different from the classic one for girls' manga or anime that has tended to have shorter runs and is tightly focused on a small band of characters including the heroine, friend, love interest, and rival. Instead, *Hamtaro* is a curious blend of multi-year soap opera and media mix esoterica, blending the girly focus on friendship and romance with otaku-like attention to details and a character-based knowledge industry.

In addition to the narrative and character development that follows some of the formulas established by *Pokemon*, the series also exhibits the convergent characteristics of the contemporary media mix. *Hamtaro*'s commercial success hinges on an incredibly wide array of licensed products that make him an intimate presence in girls' lives even when

he is not on the screen. These products include board games, clothing, curry packages and corn soup, in addition to the usual battery of pencils, stationary, stickers, toys, and stuffed animals. Another element important element of the *Hamtaro* media mix is game boy games. Five have been released so far. The first (never released overseas), *Tomodachi Daisakusen Dechu (The Great Friendship Plan)*, was heavily promoted on television. Unlike most game commercials that focus on the content of the game, the spot featured two girls sitting on their bed with their Game Boys, discussing the game. The content of the game blends the traditionally girly content of relationships and fortune telling with certain formulas around collection and exchange developed in the boys media mix. Girls collect data on their friends and input their birthdays. The game then generates a match with a particular hamster character, and then predicts certain personality traits from that. The game also allows players to predict whether different people will get along as friends or as couples. Girls can also exchange data between game boy cartridges. The game builds on a model of collection and exchange that was established in the industry since *Pokemon*, but applied to a less overtly competitive girl-oriented exchange system. The subsequent Game Boy games have been based on an RPG format. In Japan, *Hamtaro* even has a trading card game associated with it, though it pales in scope and complexity compared to those of *Yugioh* and *Pokemon*.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to provide some background and description of how gender dynamics operate in Japanese children's popular culture. The hope has been to illustrate a different set of gendered cultural politics in order to suggest alternative ways of imagining the relation between girls and games. While the gender differences between boys and girls play are resilient in Japan as elsewhere, there are unique points of fluidity and crossover. Japanese media mixes have become increasingly visible in international gaming, exerting a particularly strong influence in content directed at children. In many ways, Japanese media mixes have become ambassadors for Japanese notions of gender and childhood to different parts of the world. These gender dynamics are embodied in the seemingly innocuous form of cute characters, a kind of stealth gender politics that has demonstrating a surprising international appeal.

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