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Introduction

Japan's media culture is local and global. What is Japan's media culture? The singular is deceptive. Media culture is far too complex to speak of one. And what is "Japan" in this context? If media culture is global, how do we justify singling out a specific place or territory for the inquiry? What is local; more specifically, what is global about "Japanese media culture"? Does this question even matter? Aren't the contours of the nation – and indeed of media – as such blurred under the influence of regionalization and globalization, and isn't everything increasingly connected, transregional, ecological? The chapters included in this book say yes, but. Each of them engages with a specific site or phenomenon constituted by and constitutive of concrete local and global relations. Instead of presenting one grand narrative of why the local or the global are relevant, this collection aims to provide insight into the diversity of issues and dimensions involved in considering particular phenomenon through the lens of this guiding theme. Likewise, the selection of texts is not based on such a coherent theoretical framework. The book has its origin in a series of workshops about Japan's videogames and digital media between local and global, organized as part of an exchange between Leipzig University in Germany and Ritsumeikan University in Japan between 2017–2020, for which we received generous support from the German Foreign Exchange Service (DAAD) and the PaJaKo (Partnership with Japan and South Korea) programme.

While primarily meant to bring the group participating in the exchange together, the workshops quickly became a site of exchange between a much broader group of scholars interested in its theme. The rich interactions we had during the workshop, as well as the experience of a community of researchers emerging from them, inspired us to continue our collaboration in written form, even after the project had ended. Precisely because they were embedded within an exchange between graduate students, many of whom had not been to the respective partner institution or country, the workshops and the exchange more generally also became sites for discovering, negotiating, and reflecting on the different positions from which we research media. At times, common themes turned out to be not so common at all, while at other times, surprising

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connections could be drawn. Summarizing this in terms of positionality does not do justice to the individual and collaborative effort that went into such explorations up to the point of writing the chapters included here. The experience certainly emphasized the difficulty of and the rich rewards awaiting us in such engagement. And it reminded us of the importance of reflecting on and communicating our position. If anything, we have come to understand labels like "Japan" or "local and global" as invitations or – to put it in more urgent terms demanded by the generalization and homogenization implied by these labels – prompts for open-ended discussions.

Many of the contributions to this volume have grown out of such discussions or have been discussed within our network on multiple occasions. All chapters underwent a rigorous double review by the editors. Moreover, we have asked the group to comment openly on each other's final product. Inspired by the First Person book project (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004), you will find that these additional comments at the end of each chapter are not just a footnote. They are essential to our aim of advancing discussions about the phenomena, dimensions, perspectives, and processes considered in this volume within our network, with colleagues and, we dare say, friends scattered across the globe, even in such challenging times as these, when meetings and "on site" workshops are difficult. The comments have sparked further discussion during the editorial process. In some cases, the authors would have liked to expand on their argument or respond in order to clarify their position. We hope this edited volume advances such continuous discussion amidst the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in today. The book does not compensate for in-person discussions (and drinks afterwards), but it does incorporate the idea that we can help each other in finding answers to our research questions and aims if we work together across disciplines, cultural and language barriers. Working together in this way, however, requires non-trivial effort, or to adopt a term from game studies, "ergodic play" (Aarseth 1997). This book is the result of such ergodic research play – which we believe to be the only way of situating our research about Japan's media between local and global contexts, and of creating awareness about our individual positions.

The wide range of inquiries and perspectives included in this volume document the complexity of questions of location, position, and flow, as they consider local, transnational, and transregional aspects of Japan's media culture. A first set of chapters in this collection considers particular media, art forms, genre, or services that have emerged locally, in Japan, in specific ways. In doing so, they also relate their inquiry to the work of Japanese theorists and cultural critics such as Hiroki Azuma or Gō Itō, who have contemplated the popular and subcultural media landscape of manga, anime, light novels, and

novel games in Japan from a specific, local position, and who figure prominently in several of these chapters.

Martin Picard's contribution uncovers, or rediscovers, the origins of game cultures in Japan. Readers will soon notice that the author's perspective is immediately apparent by the fact that the words in the title, "origins" and "cultures", are in the plural. Through his archaeological survey with extensive materials and resources, the author unravels the complex and identifies *gēmu* (the Japanese word for game) as a historical intersection of the four distinct domains in the Japanese post-war popular culture: game arcade; home entertainment; personal computer; and mobile phone. These four domains not only have different roots in the tradition of Japanese entertainment culture, as the author shows, they are also connected to particular technological backgrounds and social contexts in their respective ways. Moreover, by tracing the formation and development of a peculiar notion of *gēmu*, this chapter arouses our general interest in the process of how a country in East Asia adapted, translated, and finally completely appropriated concepts and technologies imported from Western culture. **Yasuo Kawasaki's** column on the diversity of game centres in Japan complements this inquiry with a detailed account of the diverse shapes such spaces of play have assumed over time. Explaining the view far beyond the field of games, **Dorothea Mladenova** offers a nuanced analysis of the recent shift towards platform-based services in the local Japanese funeral industry. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and empirical research, she shows how platformization contributes to rationalization and outsourcing on a large scale. What makes this analysis particularly compelling and informative is that Mladenova develops her argument against the background of a well-structured historical overview of modern funeral practices in Japan. The established structures and practices are not replaced by contemporary platform-based routines, but rather assimilated in a particular way. While examining the shift of Japanese funeral culture towards digital platforms, the chapter thus urges us not to forget the material infrastructures such platforms and the related lean business models depend on.

Masako Hashimoto considers the popular phenomenon of *bungō manga* from a literature studies perspective. Taking prominent considerations on contemporary popular culture and the function of characters into account, Hashimoto draws attention to the ways in which one of these manga, *Can't be howling at the moon*, takes up the otherwise largely avoided topic of wartime poetry in an accessible, entertaining way, and adapts it in its critical consideration of the act of literary creation. Manga, she argues, may provide new pathways for considering complex and uncomfortable questions about past and present Japan, and for confronting new generations of readers with them. Considering the popularity of manga outside of Japan, it would be interesting

to see whether such engagements with Japanese history also travel beyond Japan, or whether they remain confined to the local – we may wonder in what ways manga are being used as a space of critical inquiry by manga artists in other parts of the world. **Tani Levy** introduces us to the recent genre of *isekai*, stories about protagonists who find themselves propelled into another world, which has been highly popular in the otaku subculture in recent few years. Coming mostly from online amateur productions of light novels, the author analyses two of its most popular proponents in order to explore the ritualistic functions of participatory culture among Japanese youth, drawing in large part on classical theories of genre, audience reception, and otaku culture, from Azuma to Lamarre.

Alongside others, Itō's and Azuma's contribution to understanding Japan's media culture has certainly had a strong impact on the global academic perception of Japan's media culture. As such, finding these concepts in several of the chapters is not surprising. In sum, however, the chapters in this book express the need to move beyond these foundational theories, and towards more granular discussions of the media and media practices in question. In fact, several chapters employ data-driven methods in order to critically revisit and refine some of the conclusions by the abovementioned theorists.

Zoltan Kacsuk draws on his work in the Japanese Visual Media Graph (JVMG) project, using metadata collected from anime, manga, and video game fan communities to revisit Azuma's classic, now twenty years old, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Kacsuk focuses on two main theses from Azuma's work, but specifically the one in which Azuma noted a significant shift in the production of manga, anime, and video game characters towards a database-based production and consumption. The chapter suggests instead that this type of production seems to have always operated in this template, instead of being a distinct characteristic of the so-called otaku subculture, in which Azuma has positioned it. **Luca Bruno** brings us a systematic understanding of the genre of visual novel games, based on data-driven examinations, through data gathered by fan-curated databases like the Japanese Visual Media Graph project. While Japanese visual novel games have attracted a great number of fans and, indeed, a global audience since the 1990s, an overall picture of its production, reception, and practice remains understudied. The author explores the underlying affordances of the environment in which Japanese visual novel games are produced and received, and demonstrates how the particular agencies – character design, plots, player interaction, etc. – are closely interconnected in that environment. Through these analyses, the author also responds to and opens a new stage at the debate on "database consumption" proposed by Azuma in the 2000s.

Another set of chapters makes positionality a central theme of the inquiry, often in conjunction with transnational phenomena or questions. **Kyōhei Itō** develops a theoretical perspective on the ways in which we perceive the world through mirrors. His exploration of the mystery of plane symmetry sheds light on a variety of mechanisms at work in our perception. Ito suggests that we may describe our surroundings by either imposing our internal frame of reference, meaning our relation to an object onto how we describe relations between objects, or might transfer our viewpoint to resemble the viewpoint of another. Likewise, he suggests that we may either apply a common frame of reference to all objects, including ourselves, or separate frames of reference depending on the state in which we perceive an object. All this happens continuously in our daily life, without us thinking much about it. If this is the case, we may wonder about the extent to which our perspective on global and local are also reflections of our internal frame of reference. To what extent does the way in which we, as individual researchers, make sense of the world and its objects and phenomena reflect our own relation to these objects? To be sure, theories and concepts are supposed to provide a frame of reference that is not just commonly applied to all objects, but shared by those applying it. But insofar as theories and concepts are also abstractions, their interpretation has much to do with our individual position. The exchange between researchers that serves as the basis for this collection of texts, and the discussion distilled in these texts, testify to such positionality. **Stevie Suan** focuses on Virtual YouTubers, examining how they are performed through two modes of acting utilized in concert with certain technologies: embodied acting in the usage of motion-capture, and figurative acting in the facial expressions from anime performed on a digital avatar after getting filtered through facial recognition technology. Analysing the varying tendencies of embodied and figurative acting of Vtubers, this chapter concentrates on the popular Vtuber Kizuna Ai, who is an "official cultural diplomat" for Japan, but also has an official Chinese "version" of herself on BiliBili. Through her existence across platforms, nations, and languages, Kizuna Ai raises questions about the contemporary intersection between digital, national, and cultural boundaries, and how we perform ourselves in digital media, at the intersection of different modes of selfhood. **Melanie Fritsch** presents an overview on the field of ludomusicology, and points out the still existent manifold blank spaces in the academic study of game music created by Japanese composers as well as the music of games produced by Japanese companies. The author makes us sensitive to some missing pieces in this field by proposing that aspects of the cultural context, such as the situation in the game industry in Japan, corporate culture, as well as doujin games and fan culture, touch points between game music and other dominant trends on the Japanese music market at the time, among other topics, are also yet to

be more thoroughly investigated and added to the landscape. The author also encourages further collaboration and exchanges within the several subfields of Game Studies, and invites scholars from other fields to include Japanese game music, game music culture, and the interrelationships with broader culture into their studies. **Juhyung Shin's** column complements these considerations of location and locality by considering how different gaming places in Korea offer diverse gaming experiences, and, while doing so, also influence the perception society has about gaming culture. Her case in point are serious games, the educational deployment of which depends on detaching them from the largely negatively perceived gaming culture.

A final set of chapters in this collection explores transregional phenomena, which render the distinction between local and global particularly elusive. Contemporary media contents and digital platforms are very much transregional, and so are their related practices. **Fanny Barnabé** takes a closer look at the phenomenon of speedruns in order to understand the transformative and subversive character of this particular form of "play." By analysing two *Pokémon* speedruns, the author proposes new rhetorical figures of play, marked by a deconstructiveness and a re-formalization of videogame practice. **Konstantin Freybe** offers a close analysis of the videogame *Metal Gear Solid 3* to expose the historical ambiguities set up by Hideo Kojima in his work. Drawing on historical video game studies, Freybe is particularly interested in the figure of the scientist in the game, as well as the scientific developments of rocket technologies and weapons of war, to criticize Kojima's framing of these aspects, which seems to obscure a problematic past, from Nazi Germany to the Cold War. **Peter Mühleder and Martin Roth** consider player practices in and outside of the *Dark Souls* games and show how such practices contribute to the emergence of communities. Their analysis suggests that the *Dark Souls* series has become a space for a variety of communities on different levels, ranging from the vaguely defined, broader Souls community to niche groups with particular interests. Considering how their attempt to locate similar common practices and codes in the English- and Japanese-language space fails, the analysis suggests that the ways in which players and communities engage with a game series in different languages may vary significantly, with only little overlap between actors and issues. The global distribution of the series notwithstanding, its appropriation is in many ways local – specific to language spaces, in this case. While limited in range, Mühleder and Roth's chapter proposes a series of methods for identifying such variation in an increasingly interconnected platform-based media space.

The fact that this final set of contributions focuses on videogames should not suggest that the blurring of local and global is reserved to digital play. However, this coincidence is also not entirely surprising, considering that, as

Picard shows in his chapter, videogames have emerged as a local and transregional project from the start. Finally, the term "global" is used only scarcely in this volume. Just as many of the chapters are not content with solely focusing on "the local", this absence of "the global" speaks to the necessity of moving beyond generalizing arguments about media cultures and media phenomena.

Before we enter the content section of this book, we would like to express our gratitude to a number of people who made this volume possible. **The authors** contributed a rich set of inspiring inquiries and comments to this endeavor. The **DAAD** funded the exchange that led to this volume. **Uta Friedrich** at Leipzig University provided invaluable support by dealing with the financial side of this project – literally ensuring the survival of the participants. The participants turned the workshops into a fantastic, stimulating experience, and the authors contributed chapters, columns, and comments without which this volume would not exist. **Anna Yeadell-Moore** provided rigorous copyediting in a very short timeframe – without which the publication of this volume would have been delayed considerably. Our publisher **Crossasia eBooks** and especially Nicole Merkel, who supported this project and Frank Krabbes, who provided the layout for the volume. **Ai Ikeda** provided the cover design and **Benjamin Roth** created the artwork it is based on. And last but certainly not least, **Masako Hashimoto**, who suggested this volume initially, has worked tirelessly since, coordinating the efforts enclosed in this book. Thank you all for making this possible!

Kyoto, Tokyo, and Leipzig, September 2021
Martin Roth, Hiroshi Yoshida, Martin Picard

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Local spaces

Martin Picard

Gēmu Communities and Otaku Consumption

The (Sub) Culture(s) of Videogames in Japan

Videogames have earned a significant place in contemporary cultural practices with the rise of digital technology, new communication interfaces, media convergence and transmedia, the global boom in cultural industries, and, of course, the development of internet and online communities. Understood as a global one, the gaming industry is still mostly divided into distinct region markets, especially those under what is known as the (economic) "triad" (Ohmae 1985) that includes the United States, Europe, and Japan. Based on a specific economic and sociocultural context, the videogame industry in Japan has developed into a strongly different market than in the West, despite the transnationalization of the video game industry (Consalvo 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter 2003). This particular context helped to form a specific gaming culture that is still being discovered outside of Japan, an examination of which could help us better understand the spaces between the local and the global in relation to videogames from and in Japan (Consalvo 2006).

In order to do so, I want to explore Japan's video game subcultures, which comprise various cultural practices and manifestations, influenced by a broader culture of consumption (especially among the youth), and a media environment led by a singular *media mix*, finding their place alongside manga, anime, and other cultural products. However, this media infrastructure is insufficient to entirely explain Japan's videogame realm as it is also characterized by specific gaming aspects and practices, which are themselves divided by market segmentations into four main sectors: the game centres (*gēmu sentā*) or the arcade market; the consumer (*conshūmā*) or console market, including both the home and portable consoles; the PC (*pasokon*) market; and the mobile market, which emerged from Japanese technocultures and high-tech industries (for example through the ubiquitous presence of the cellphone [*keitai*] industry since the late 1980s).[1]

1 See Larissa Hjorth's work on mobile media in the Asia-Pacific, as well as Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda (2006). I should also note that, at the time of writing, the Virtual Reality (VR) industry is also on the rise in Japan, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

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These sectors or submarkets have provided a variety of niche gaming practices and communities: the performative, competitive, and communicative aspects of arcade gaming (Katō, 2011); the "hardcore" gaming practices of console games (such as the popularity of Role-Playing Games (RPG) in Japan); the fan consumption of cute characters from visual novels and erotic games inside a *media mix* ecosystem (Ōtsuka 1989; Steinberg 2012)[2] and the personalization/cute cultures (Hjorth 2009); and the subsequent casual, social, and mobile gaming phenomenon (Matsumoto 2012). In this essay, I will explore how these practices are related to cultural differences between the mainstream and the subcultural (*sabukaruchā*) in Japan[3] (Ōtsuka & Steinberg 2010, 99), as well as between Japan and the West[4] (Napier 2005). I will also engage with the (mostly academic) discourses around these subcultures, which are as diversified and segmented as the game sectors or markets.

Through critical readings of previous accounts, I will show that the figure of the "Japanese gamer" is a complex and heterogeneous one. Although some of the specificity of the gaming culture in Japan has been strongly associated with a media mix market and an otaku culture[5] as we will see, the figure of a Japanese gamer cannot be completely reduced to these models, or to other cultural industries in Japan (such as anime, manga, J-Pop, and so on).

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2 *Media mix* is defined by Marc Steinberg as: "The practice of releasing interconnected products for a wide range of media 'platforms' (animation, comics, video games, theatrical films, soundtracks) and commodity types (cell phone straps, T-shirts, bags, figurines, and so on) […] wherein commodities and media types do not stand alone as products, but interrelate and communicate, generally through the existence of a principal character and narrative world" (Steinberg 2009, 4). The media mix is a pioneer marketing strategy where narrative worlds from a variety of media are no longer offered in a hierarchical manner, that is, initially with an original work followed by derivative products that extend the universe, but rather in an horizontal way, where the starting point is often simply a concept (a character or a fictional world) that is spread via the most efficient media platforms.

3 The term "subculture" has a different connotation in Japan than in the West. In Western cultural studies, it has long been associated with a counterculture in opposition to or in rebellion against the mainstream culture. In Japan, however, the term "*sabukaruchā*" is more akin to the Western signification of "fandom."

4 In Western Japanese studies, manga, anime, and videogames are mostly seen as forms of Japanese popular culture. However, these media are not really part of the mainstream culture (in the same way as, for example, TV drama or J-Pop music), while fans of these media (as fan communities) are more part of a subcultural phenomenon, as we will see in the case of videogames.

5 Otaku refers to "cult fans", that is, to those fans who are intensively into manga, anime, videogames, and a range of related merchandise and events (Lamarre 2009, xvii).

Videogames in Japan: A subcultural phenomenon

In her article, "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies," Adrienne Shaw was already mentioning that "[t]here has been a great deal of 'cultural' work done around video games, particularly in the past 10 years" (Shaw 2010, 403). However, even twenty years later, our understanding of the specificities of the videogame culture(s) in Japan is still in its infancy.

Our claim that video gaming in Japan is comprised of diverse subcultures is tied to the assumption that videogames are a subcultural phenomenon in general. Therefore, before exploring the videogame subcultures of Japan, we must put the phenomenon in a broader context and explore the possibilities of videogames as a subcultural occurrence. In Games Studies literature, it is common to read that videogames are part of popular culture and that the videogame industry is constantly growing and exceeding revenues in other cultural industries, such as movies or music. As Dymek mentions, this discourse, which he calls the "infinite expansion narrative," is "part of the very essence of the game medium discourse – its phenomenal hypergrowth and its conquering of the world – a game medium hero's journey narrative of sorts" (Dymek 2012, 34).

However, since the early 2000s, academic interest in media and fan studies (Booth 2010; Hills 2002; Jenkins 2006) has taken a more critical turn towards the dichotomy between the mainstream/pop culture and subcultures as, "[n]ew media consumption generally, and digital games playing specifically, allows for the emergence of highly visible participatory cultures, where there is a collapse of distinction between the dominant culture (the games industry) and the subculture (games players, modders and skinners) […]" (Williams 2006, 77).

J. Patrick Williams distinguishes between organizational and expressive dimensions of the subculture: "The organizational dimension refers to how the gaming industry structures gameplay as well as how an objectified status hierarchy is established. The expressive dimension refers to the intersubjective accomplishment of subcultural identity" (Ibid.)[6]. Jason Rutter and Garry Craw-

6 An important element of the organizational dimension is that it "emphasizes and supports monetary commitment from players and how players' identities are linked to these commodities, albeit in objectified form" (Williams 2006, 88). In this sense, the organizational dimension is very strong in the videogame industry in Japan, as it supports a culture of consumption where "identity [is] defined through the consumption of objects" (Ibid., 81). The corporate *media mix* structure, linked to heavy merchandising and sales of promotional items and limited editions, and the Nintendo business model (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter 2003, 109–127) are two main examples of this phenomenon. On the other end of the spectrum, player's subcultural identities are

ford distinguish these two poles as "top-down" and "bottom-up" (Crawford and Rutter 2006). The top-down approach conceives "cultural texts as 'encoded' in such a way as to embody the values of the powerful and ruling segments of society and act towards exploiting and pacifying other members of society" (Ibid., 162). By contrast, with the bottom-up perspective, "these texts can be read creatively and even subverted or resisted by everyday consumers, readers or gamers, which can associate these with alternative cultures and struggle against power asymmetries" (Ibid.).

On the other hand, King and Krzywinska already asserted in 2006 that, although game play in some ways is a subculture of subcultures, it is also a part of mainstream culture: "If game playing has an array of niche cultures, and the broader subculture of self-identified 'gamers,' it has also established a place in the much wider landscape of popular culture and entertainment in recent decades" (King and Krzywinska 2006, 222). A few years later, Shaw saw videogame culture "as something on the fringes of, but which nevertheless influences, popular culture. This has ideological and political ramifications as it allows for video games to be dismissed both as a form of entertainment or the culture of an 'other'" (Shaw 2010, 415). Winkler also stated that videogame culture has been mostly defined as a subculture marked by certain tastes (Winkler 2006, 147). Ten or fifteen years after these claims, there is no doubt that videogame culture is increasingly "pervading" pop and mainstream culture, while many of its practices and communities are still kept at the fringe (from the inside as much as from the outside).

Despite this, Dymek made a strong assertion at the time by claiming that "the video game industry is a subcultural industry that produces subcultural content for a subcultural audience with a subcultural industry logic" (Dymek 2012, 36). For him, a subcultural perspective for understanding videogames is more productive and relevant, as "video gaming is not necessarily seen as a mass-cultural phenomenon (as some claim) or eventually as such in the future, but rather treated as isolated and parallel 'world within a world' – instead of 'eventually everywhere' it is 'already everywhere, but isolated'" (Ibid., 50). Videogames are, therefore, a commercial and consumer-oriented type of subculture, "a subculture that lives in a dynamic symbiosis with an organization, company or entire industry as is the case of the video game industry" (Ibid., 38).

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visible through "multiple symbolic markers," including the hardware and items with which they play, knowledge of game contents and history, gaming styles or skills, commitment to the gaming community, a broader love for imaginary worlds and other types of games, and so on (Williams 2006, 89).

As we will see, Japan's videogame culture is an excellent example of a commercial and consumer-oriented type of subculture. Consequently, it is also a brilliant illustration of the struggle between organizational and expressive (or top-down and bottom-up) subcultural dimensions. Related to more general analyses of cultural industries in Japan, commentators tend to give more power to producers (or corporations) than to consumers. Nevertheless, some expressive dimensions exist within Japanese subcultures, exemplified by specific youth cultural practices.

The gēmu subcultures

As argued by Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter (2003), the cultural aspects of videogames are indissociable from the other two circuits of "digital play," which are the technological and marketing aspects. Academic interest in Japan's videogame culture does not lie solely in technological progress or product sales, but mostly in the dynamic interactions that occur between gamers and videogames. In fact, what happens between videogames and its gamers is so broad and complex that the term "gamer" is almost inappropriate for describing a situation in which "gaming" in Japan can cross conventions, fanzines, amateur productions (*dōjin*), cosplay (costume play), and fansubbing. There is also the dynamism of a media mix industry that involves crossovers or tie-in products such as manga, anime, light novels, character franchises, toys, music, and other goods.

Consequently, the manifestations of videogame culture in Japan are at the intersection of specific local marketing strategies (including the media mix), national industrial regulations and mechanisms, and technological and artistic developments in which some aspects were, subsequently or synchronously, established globally and under an increasingly transnational mode, all forming a particular media ecology that I have already named "*gēmu*" (Picard 2013).[7]

To reuse some of my previous arguments, videogames in Japan, or gēmu,[8] are not linked to an "essence" of any kinds (national, mediatic, etc.), but to a

7 *Gēmu* is the Japanese term for "game," while, more specifically, the term "videogame" is commonly rendered as "*TV gēmu*" or "*bideo gēmu*" in Japanese. For reasons of simplicity, and because the term is often used in common parlance in this simplified form, I use simply "gēmu".

8 As in "manga" or "anime", the term "gēmu" refers to both the media and the products/games. In the context of this article, "Japanese videogames" or "gēmu" are used interchangeably, even though the use of the qualifier "Japanese" likely implies essentialist, if not nationalist, connotations.

market, or rather to – admittedly unstable and fluctuating – markets,[9] which have led to a particular gaming culture, or rather cultures (and subcultures). The gēmu cultures manifest themselves through various cultural practices of consumption, fan activities, and reappropriations related to larger contexts such as the media mix and otaku cultures. However, over the years, they also spawned particular gaming subcultural practices, ranging from reading specialized press about video games (such as *Famitsu*), *kōryakubon* (strategy guides), or *urawaza* (game tips and tricks) to participation in dedicated game websites, blogs, or forums (such as *2ch* or *Nico Nico Douga*) or game contests and tournaments, through retro-game shopping at Akihabara (Galbraith 2010; Kohler 2004, 183–204) or attending 8-bit music concerts, as well as student gatherings at McDonald's at the time to play *Monster Hunter* (Capcom) via networks on the Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP), and so on.

These cultural manifestations are themselves travelling and shifting under the influence and regulation of industrial infrastructures (console manufacturers, publishers, developers, marketers, localizers) and interpretive communities (specialized press and media, gaming and fan communities). Thus, gēmu is also a concept influenced by various discourses (from the industry, the fans, the academia) and practices that evolve according to social, cultural, economic, and (trans)national contexts.

The post-war economic development of Japan, which has led to the arrival and the success of the videogame industry, is fundamental for understanding how a gēmu culture could emerge and grow.

We can highlight some foundational events, such as the sociocultural consequences of the introduction of computer culture, television and home entertainment, the leisure boom (*rejā būmu*), and the outbreak of mass consumption, tied to aggressive government campaigns for the consumption of "Made in Japan" products, which have allowed technology to grow rapidly. But more factors came into play.

We can highlight several key sociological, cultural, and economic factors in Japan (which can sometimes seem contradictory) that explain the emergence and development of the videogame industry and culture and why they had such a great success locally and globally: the intense industrialization of Japa-

9 The formation of multiple markets is mainly due to a strong segmentation in the industry, as is the case for other major content industries in Japan. However, market segmentation in the videogame industry is characterized by generic distinctions (RPG, fighting games, shoot'em ups, puzzle games, sports and race games, simulations games, dating sims, visual novels, to name only the most popular to Japanese players) and divided into "sectors," according to different game platforms (arcade, home consoles, portable and mobile consoles, personal computers/PC).

nese society; the high economic growth in Japan's post-war era; the consumerism that has intensified since the 1950s; the increased emphasis on leisure and entertainment (especially with the development of the toy and electronics industries); the importing attitude and practices of Japanese culture and industries; the material and cultural exportation of Japanese products (linked with globalization, transnationalization, and transculturalization issues); the isolationist and protectionist practices and policies of the national industries; and the dominance of the content industry in Japan (including mostly manga and anime, but also other industries and cultural products).[10]

Thus, gaming in Japan has its own practices and culture (or "habitus" and "field" to use Bourdieusian terms) built upon a specific framework. However, this context is far from homogeneous as there are as many videogame cultural spaces as there are sectors and subsectors. Yoshimasa Kijima divides Japan's videogame market into five key sectors: the arcade business; the consumer business (including the home [*sueoki kata*] and portable [*keitaigata*] consoles); the PC business; the mobile (*keitai*) business; and the online business (Kijima 2007, 115).[11] The next step in our understanding of Japan's gaming is to examine the technical and historical transformation of the game cultures in Japan through the evolution of these different sectors, with overlapping and shifting paradigms and tendencies over the course of the almost fifty years (from 1973 to today) of videogame history in Japan.

10 For obvious reasons, we cannot explain these factors in more depth here without narrating the history of post-war Japan, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is worth mentioning that the first (four) factors share a common basis for the development of the American and European videogame industries (though Japan has dealt with some of these factors very differently). The other factors mark the distinction and specificities of Japan in its socio-economic and industrial aspects that caused the emergence of different markets and cultures.

11 This chapter focuses primarily on the first three sectors since they are the most significant ones in the history of gaming cultures in Japan. However, for a while now, the mobile market has surpassed the market size of the consumer sector (Matsumoto, 2012). The online gaming market, which seemed less present in Japan than around the world (or compared to its Asian neighbours, such as South Korea and China) also experienced a boom in the 2010s thanks to popular web-browser games such as *Kantai Collection* (Kadokawa Games, 2013–).

Arcade gaming: A place of competition, camaraderie, communication, and performance

The advent of the Japanese arcade (called game center/*gēmu sentā* or *gēsen*) could not have happened without the prior development of the amusement business, with roots as far back as the Corinthian games introduced during the Taisho Era at Japanese festivals, exhibitions, and other outdoor entertainment venues, and later with department store rooftops and pachinko parlours (Eickhorst, 2006). Moreover, as Eickhorst points out, it would not have remained a relevant entertainment outlet without "constant adaptation to changing currents of popular culture" (Ibid., 81).

The widespread cultural attitudes towards game centres, such as a greater acceptance of adult leisure activity in Japanese society and the continued vigour of gamer communities (known as *gēmātachi*) since the *Space Invaders* boom,[12] are important factors for the prosperity and survival of the game-centre industry compared to their earlier declines in North American or Europe. Eickhorst claims that "Japan's attitudes toward modern pop culture and entertainment are at times so substantially different from American perspectives that it is difficult to overestimate the impact of those differences in the sustainability of the Japanese game center market" (Ibid., 82).

According to a 2005 "White Paper on Leisure", 24.6 million Japanese entered a game centre in 2004 (equivalent to more than 22 per cent of the total population of Japan) (Ibid., 50).[13] The same year, there were still 10,109 game centres in Japan. Since then, the number of game centres has dropped below 10,000 (7,137 in 2010) and has been in steady decline since the mid-1980s (26,573 in 1986).[14]

The arcade market revenues went from 649.2 billion yen in 2005 to 495.8 billion yen in 2011. In 2009, the arcade market was still the largest market in the videogame industry in Japan (Sambe 2009); however, in 2012, the console

12 In July 1978, Taito introduced one of the most popular arcade games, *Space Invaders* to the market. In Japan, the game became a social phenomenon with "Invader Houses" appearing almost everywhere, and all public establishments installing cocktail-table *Space Invaders* cabinets in their cafés or amusement spaces. *Space Invaders* is also one of the first games to keep players' high scores, helping establishing the practice of friendly competition in game centres (Symonds 2010).

13 It is not indicated, however, whether they are unique users or whether this also includes repeaters.

14 The source of these data is, surprisingly, the National Police Agency (in their annual reports), since the arcade industry falls under the "*fueiho*" or Businesses Affecting Public Morals Regulation Law.

market took the lead with $4.6 billion as the mobile market experienced a huge boom of up to $4.3 billion. The following year, the Japanese mobile market took the largest market share and has since become one of the largest mobile game markets in the world.[15]

Despite the decline, the longevity of the game-centre market lies in the diversity of its entertainment offerings, which is linked to deep market segmentation in Japan. As explained by Ashcraft in his introductory book, *Arcade Mania* (2009), game centres usually extend over several floors, with each floor having dedicated sections or genres tied to a particular public, from crane games to online trading-card games, through fighting and shooting games, as well as *purikura* (print club) photo sticker booths. The game centre culture is varied and serves multiple purposes for diverse communities. As Eickhorst explains: "Whether one's aim in going to a game center is to blow off steam after a hard day's work, to test one's skill against challenging human competitors, or to make new friends and to meet with old friends, game centers serve all of these functions and probably dozens more to countless people" (Eickhorst 2006, 81).

Competition, camaraderie, and performance are the main characteristics of Japan's arcade gaming. Citing a survey conducted among arcade gamers in Japan, Eickhorst shows that "the impact that self-improvement and competition ["to test one's own strength"] have had in compelling people to return to game centers" has resulted in the development of a unique subculture comprising competitive gameplay, gaming tournaments (at both local and national levels, *Tōgeki – Super Battle Opera* being the biggest one in Japan), friendships, information exchanges,[16] and communications.

Hiroyasu Katō devoted a book to analysing Japanese youth at game centres, with a particular focus on a specific communicating tool known as "communication notes" (Katō, 2011).[17] Eickhorst defines them as follows:

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15 The latter figures come from the annual CESA (Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association) Games White Papers.

16 The competitive gaming culture has been covered extensively in Japan, now online, but previously in dedicated magazines such as *Monthly Arcadia* (1999–2015), which provided news and information exclusively about arcade videogames, techniques, and tournaments held at game centres.

17 Hiroyasu Katō's work tried to emphasize the social and communicative aspects of the arcade game culture of the 1980s and 1990s, also including the friendly competition around high scores, sharing of secret techniques, and the creation of promotional pamphlets or *chirashi* (see Pelletier-Gagnon 2019). These cultural practices have also been analysed by Shin'ichi Nakazawa (1984), in one of the first academic articles in Japanese on videogames, about the fandom created around Namco's arcade game *Xevious*

> Originally placed in game centers as a channel of communication between management and customers, "communication notes," or "CN," are notebooks intended for customers to express maintenance concerns, requests for new machinery, and other matters related to the operation of the facility. However, the notebooks soon metamorphosed into a forum for game center customers to communicate among themselves. Customers used the notebooks to develop a sense of community, writing to schedule future matches, sharing information and techniques about various games, and drawing intricate illustrations. Some game centers even began to dedicate bulletin board space for customers to post messages to each other, highlighting the culture that exists at many game centers today (Eickhorst 2006, 57–58).

In the mid-1980s, years before the advent of the internet, "communication notes" were the only way for gamers to exchange information and work together to find ways to beat a game. For example, the arcade game *The Tower of Druaga* (Namco 1984; designed by Masanobu Endō of *Xevious* fame) received a cult following because of its level of difficulty with respect to finding all the hidden treasures spread over its 60 levels. As game historian Kevin Gifford has argued, it was only through this network of notebooks, of people talking to each other, and by word of mouth, that this game could be beaten. It was the cumulative efforts of all the gamers in Japan in 1985 that found a way to solve this game:

> Yes, *Druaga* is ridiculously difficult. No, there's no way you could ever figure out how to get all the treasures singlehandedly. But *Druaga* succeeded in 1984 because it forced arcade rats to work together, writing down their discoveries in public notebooks and pooling their wits (and 100-yen coins) together to get to the end. It created a community, in other words, just like *Street Fighter* eventually did – one that wrote strategy guides and dojinshi in droves. In a way, *Druaga* solidified the concept of a "game fandom" in Japan more than any other individual game (Gifford 2010).

Beyond the camaraderie and competition found in game centres, performance is also an essential aspect of their appeal. Most modern game centres feature not only linked game cabinets, but also monitors on which spectators may view a play session in progress. For Surman, in his analysis of the "performing gamer," especially in the famous *Street Fighter* series (Capcom, 1987–present), fighting games (but we can also add other genres such as rhythm and shooting [shoot'em up] games) emphasize the "spectacular potential of play," in which there is a "relationship between the spectacular aesthetic and a sense of grat-

(1983). This nascent culture was accompanied by the emergence of the first fanzines or *dōjinshi*, in which the collection published by Game Freak, future creator of *Pokémon*, were among the most popular.

ification associated with skilled gameplay" that he calls a "reward-spectacle" (Surman 2008, 206). He adds:

> [G]ameplay and representational assets – ranging from the meekest of punches, grand special moves, fragments of hallucinatory looping animation comprising the background, the pulse of the user interface, the acceleration of the music, and the feedback of moments of impact — form the hierarchy of spectacular gameplay. From the 'atomistic' low-level punch to the larger special move; each exists for the pleasure of interactive spectacle (Ibid., 206).

Fighting games helped to create a distinctive gaming culture in game centres (in Japan, but also abroad in arcades): "In the consequential 'tournament' culture that arose (particularly in the urban centres of Japan and the United States), it was through mastery of revolutionary special moves and attack combinations that players achieved distinction as 'hardcore gamers'" (Ibid., 210).

Yoshimasa Kijima uses a typical Japanese designation to talk about Japanese fighting gamers: "otaku gamers," characterized by their "self-publishing and exhaustive game play, obsession with game mechanics, and how they display their passions by performing to an audience" (Kijima 2012, 252). For Kijima, the fighting game community is a version of otaku culture as it shares many characteristics with *anime otaku*, but "with a unique form of competitive performance at its core" (2012, 270). Fighting gamers mimic otaku qualities – or what we can rather call fandom qualities – in their ability and desire to extend the play experience and in "perceiving value in objects that most do not attribute social value to, broadcasting their attachment to the object in question, and, as a result, influencing the existing industry in some way" (Ibid., 267).[18]

The definitive concept behind the fighting gamer otaku community is "*yarikomi*," which is a sort of power gaming, exemplified by the joy of manipulation: "Yarikomi is exhaustive and intensive gaming that goes beyond casual play or the goal of simply finishing a game. Instead, game otaku go after the ultimate achievements possible in a particular game" (Ibid., 250). These kinds of otaku gamers favour self-punishing forms of gameplay and devote their time to learning sophisticated skills and strategies for completion.[19]

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18 However, the "fighting gamer otaku" described by Kijima is different from the "media mix otaku" that we will describe shortly (based on analyses by Marc Steinberg (2012) and Thomas Lamarre (2009)). As we will see in the next sections, even if they indeed share some similarities, the former is closer to the distinctive features of the "hardcore gamer," and the latter to the "anime otaku."

19 As we have already noted, the performer-makers or "superplayers" are not only tied to fighting games, but also to other arcade genres, such as shooting games and rhythm

The fighting gamer community (or the fighting game world as their members call it) has many cultural characteristics, such as an interpretive community (not defined by physical boundaries but cognitive ones) where the most fundamental criterion is the skill level, obtained through hard training (the process of gaining mastery over the game controls) and research (which involves devising new strategies and mapping out the flow of events in hypothetical fights). It is this "ability to gauge an opponent's level against one's own [that] is the ticket for entry into the fighting gamer community" (Ibid., 261). As Alex Kierkegaard mentions with regard to the arcade industry's business model: "Only the skilled may live – the rest will die" (2007).

Another key characteristic of fighting games is that players can exhibit their individuality through the selection of their *my-chara* (chosen character), not only manifesting their individuality, but also acknowledging the one of their peers (Kijima 2012, 263). There is also a sense of camaraderie where gamers are making friends out of enemies, especially through the practice of *dōjō yaburi* (dojo challenge), influenced by the long tradition of the martial arts scene in Japan, "which blur further the line between the fighting game community and communities of martial arts and competitive sports" (Ibid., 265).

Through all these nodes of interaction, arcade gamers cultivate a cohesive gaming community that was thriving up until the COVID pandemic, which appears to have dealt a fatal blow to the business (Ashcraft 2021). The game centres helped to establish a dynamic gaming culture at the same time as a console gaming culture was being constituted at home.

Nintendo, the family, and the home: The construction of the (Japanese) gamer

Even if home consoles have existed since 1975 (the first being released by the toy company Epoch), we can argue that the beginning of console gaming in Japan started in July 1983, with the release of the Nintendo Family Computer or Famicom and Sega's first console, the SG-1000. The impact of the Famicom on the subsequent development of the industry is undeniable. Katayama Osamu, for example, symbolically compares the launch of the Famicom with the open-

games. The biggest difference probably lies in the larger gaming community among fighting gamers. As Kijima pointed out: "Arcade fighting games became a platform for expanding social networks directly through game play, laying the groundwork for a new type of gaming community" (Kijima 2012, 257).

ing of Tokyo Disneyland, a defining moment for the transformation of Japan as a leisure society:

> Its launch coincided with the opening of Tokyo Disneyland, an event many saw as marking a shift in Japanese popular culture from the compulsive work ethic of postwar reconstruction towards a greater interest in entertainment and leisure activities (Katayama 1996, 161).

Several business strategies helped Nintendo to gain huge success in the home console market in Japan and to become dominant in Japan's videogame industry,[20] and, subsequently, in worldwide territories. In order to increase and sustain the commercial success of the console, they carefully managed an effective structure of production and consumption, from licences to third-party publishers, rigid in-house software development infrastructures, and carefully planned promotional activities that initiated a console gaming culture, as the company developed, first in Japan and then abroad, in-store Nintendo merchandising displays, sponsored videogame competitions,[21] co-sponsorships and cross-licencing arrangements with multinationals, and a network of numerous fan clubs (Sheff 1999).

The "Famicom culture" was built gradually with the emergence of numerous videogame magazines whose focus was often the Famicom. Pioneers in this regard include *Beep* (1984–1989), the monthly *Family Computer Magazine* (started in 1985), which would become the bimonthly *Famimaga*, and the bimonthly and thereafter weekly *Family Tsūshin* (1986–1995), which eventually became *Famitsu* (1995–present), the most popular magazine today.[22] The videogame magazines have strongly participated in creating a gaming culture characterized by a gamer identity and gaming discourse, as has been the case elsewhere. As Kirkpatrick argues for UK gaming magazines, "[t]he thwarted autonomy of gaming discourse then becomes its most interesting characteristic, since it positions gaming as essentially transgressive in relation to key cultural distinc-

20 Nintendo dominated 90 per cent of the 8-bit market in Japan one year after the release of the Famicom on 15 July 1983, and 85 per cent of the home console market throughout the years, until the mid-1990s with the arrival of 32-bit consoles. Moreover, during the mid-1980s, 30 per cent of the toy market in Japan was related to the Famicom (Gorges 2011, 64).

21 Such as the Hudson Caravan Tours (Takahashi 2010).

22 Other dedicated console and PC magazines followed Famicom magazines such as *PC-Engine Fan*, *Beep Mega Drive*, *MSX Fan*, *Sega Saturn Magazine*, and so on, as well as some magazines with a more critical perspective, such as *Used Games* (which became *GameSide*) and *Gēmu hihyō* (Game criticism), the latter being one of the few to openly criticize RPGs.

tions that it cannot fully leave behind (technology/art; childhood/adulthood; health/pathology)" (Kirkpatrick 2012).

In addition, since 1985, Japan's publishing industry has developed a very lucrative market of *kōryakubon* (strategy guides), including one dedicated to *Super Mario Bros.*, which was the best-selling title in Japan in 1985 (Gorges 2011, 100), as well as *urawaza* (game tips and tricks), both still very popular today with dedicated sections in most bookstores in Japan.

The "TV gēmu generation"[23] was also largely established through the contribution of a few games and series, the most prominent being, of course, *Super Mario Bros.* (September 1985; 6.81 million units sold in Japan), but also the *Dragon Quest* series from Enix, the series of baseball games *Family Stadium* from Namco, the *Zelda* series from Nintendo, the *Final Fantasy* series from Square, plus a few anime and manga licences.

Together with the *Mario* franchise, the *Dragon Quest* series was also a resounding success, particularly permeating the community of young gamers at the time. *Dragon Quest III* (1988) can be considered the first console game to become a social phenomenon (like *Space Invaders* in game centres). Upon its release, young Japanese skipped classes to go and queue to buy the game in stores (Gorges 2011). The government subsequently asked Enix to release *Dragon Quest* games only during weekends, a practice that has remained current until the release of the MMORPG *Dragon Quest X* (on Thursday, 2 August 2012 for the Nintendo Wii). The success of the *Dragon Quest* series, and subsequently the *Final Fantasy* series (especially from the seventh installment), saw role-playing games become one of the main genres for "hardcore" console gamers in the Japanese marketplace.

Hardcore gaming is a highly specific and complex subculture dedicated to the game medium. The hardcore gamer is associated with numerous attributes, aesthetical preferences, and values that emanate from the game medium and the subculture around it. As Dymek defines it, the hardcore gamer is a "dedicated gamer who is part of a lucrative subculture of video gaming. This type of gamer is technologically savvy, willing to pay for gaming hardware/software, plays many and long sessions, is part of the gaming community (online and offline) and is interested in the latest information and news from the video game industry" (Dymek 2012, 38). This subculture is vibrant, enthusiastic, communicative, and web-based with dynamic discussion forums, blogs, clubs, game servers, and dedicated media.

23 As coined in a special DVD box set: *Geemu Jienereeshon X ~8 Bitto No Tamashii* (Game Generation X: 8-bit Spirit) DVD (Columbia Music Entertainment, 2008).

The hardcore gamer segment also applies to Japan, but its dynamics diverge from the North American and European markets as well. Several cultural practices define the console gamer in Japan, such as reading magazines (the weekly *Famitsu*[24] has a weekly circulation of 500,000 per issue, according to the publisher Enterbrain), and news websites (*4gamer*,[25] *game.watch.impress*,[26] *GameBusiness.jp*[27]), blogs (*hachimo*[28]) and forums (*2channel* or *2ch*[29] being the most popular).[30] Moreover, console gaming practices in Japan are strongly linked with consumption in terms of the construction of the gamer identity and for purposes of social distinction. As Williams argues, obtaining limited editions and rare items and figurines (or even displaying them, such as in case rentals) gives gamers credibility and status (Williams 2006, 92). In Japan, this type of merchandising, often linked with otaku culture, is one of the main businesses targeted at young consumers. Hardcore gaming in Japan is indeed strongly linked with intense consumption,[31] either as a "gamer" favouring the realm of game consoles, or as an "otaku" favouring transmedia franchises or visual novels on PCs.

24 http://www.famitsu.com/.

25 http://www.4gamer.net/.

26 http://game.watch.impress.co.jp/.

27 http://www.gamebusiness.jp/.

28 http://blog.esuteru.com/.

29 http://www.5ch.net/.

30 The Nintendo DS game *Retro Game Challenge* or *GameCenter CX: Arino no Chōsenjō* (Namco Bandai Games, 2007), based on the television series *GameCenter CX* (Fuji TV, 2003–), offers a simulation of this game culture.

31 There are many similarities between a hardcore gamer in Japan and one in Europe, for example, but in Japan they tend to be disregarded in academic literature for other types of better -known or discussed consumers such as media mix otaku, especially since the latter are the target audience for the marketing strategies of the highly profitable content industry. However, the videogame industry in Japan has also been addressing various niche groups (such as *otome* games, dedicated to female players, or *eroge*/erotic games, just to name a few) as well as a mainstream audience, from kids (the core audience of Nintendo console games, especially with *Mario* and *Pokémon* franchises) to adults (successful examples being *Brain Age* on the Nintendo DS or *Wii fit* on the Nintendo Wii, as well as many casual games on mobile platforms).

PC gaming, dōjin communities, and character consumption: The era of otaku consumption

Personal computers (PCs) underwent a unique development in Japan, partially due to the need to process *kanji* (Chinese characters). Consequently, the graphic processing power of Japanese PCs helped the technological development of games, a market that was very strong in Japan in the early 1980s. Eventually, the success of the Famicom and its dominance in the mid-1980s shifted the videogame development industry from home computers to home consoles (at least in the case of major video game developers). The NEC PC-98 series remained popular until the end of the 1990s, with thousands of games developed for it, and, until the Windows takeover, it remained the platform of choice for indie game development and niche genres, such as dating sims (*renai'* games), visual novels, and *eroge* (erotic games). As in the United States and the United Kingdom, devotion of then PC hobbyists and now independent developers led to the emergence of *dōjin* soft (or *dōjin gēmu*) on the Japanese PC market in the early 1980s. Initially, they were distributed by mail order, on cassette tapes or floppy disks, or even "on line" via a telephone modem. In the mid-1980s, dōjin soft began to be distributed at the Comic Market with the formation of "circles" dedicated to creating and selling them, popularizing the genres of *ren'ai gēmu* (love sims), *galge* or *bishōjo gēmu* (girl games), and visual novels. Some titles have a strong following, such as *Touhou Project* (NEC PC-9801 1995–1998; Windows 2002–present) by Team Shanghai Alice, *Tsukihime* (Windows 2000) by Type-Moon or *Higurashi no naku koro ni* (Windows 2002–2006) by 07th Expansion.

A strong subcultural phenomenon in Japan, the dōjin community is mostly unknown and non-equivalent in the West, but its deployment in Japan is nevertheless significant for understanding fandom practices in general, especially since its activities were pioneers in the emergence of a participatory culture, taking shape at least since the 1970s. The dōjin product (*dōjin seihin*) can be broken down into different platforms and media (mostly following media mix trends), but the most common are *dōjinshi*. Dōjinshi are, as Fan Yi Lam defines them, "amateur publications, written, illustrated, designed, published, and marketed by fans, usually employing manga-style art and semiotics" (Lam 2010, 233). These amateur creations include both original and derivative works. They are particularly well known in this latter form, as fan fictions. These works not only parody commercial manga, anime, or videogames, but also some dōjin works themselves, which have become as popular within the

culture.[32] In the same vein, dōjin soft or dōjin gēmu are less indie games than amateur or fan games, even though these divisions are sometimes blurry and open to debate.

These products are frequently sold at fan conventions, or rather marketplaces, of which the Comic Market, or Comiket, is the most notorious.[33] As a principal event of Japanese youth subculture or fandom, the Comiket has followed, and even generated, the main trends of otaku culture since its inception in mid-1970s (Ibid.). The complex relationship between dōjin communities and professional content industries echoes the ambiguous connection between otaku and society.

An impressive body of literature has been dedicated to otaku culture in Japan (Azuma 2009; Galbraith and Lamarre 2010; Ito, Okabe, and Tsuji 2012; Lamarre 2009; to name some of the most well-known). The common perception in Japan tends to define the otaku as a boy or young man who is supposedly obsessed "to the point of dysfunction with collecting, disseminating, commenting on, and retooling *anime*, *manga*, and games" (Lamarre 2009, 108). As Lamarre argues, the reference to otaku in the 1980s "was often to boys and young men who played video games together without really interacting in ways traditionally deemed sociable – these guys weren't talking much to each other or roaming the streets together; they were interacting through the games" (Ibid., 152).

However, reducing the term "otaku" to a type of person or small group may prove unproductive. Following Lamarre, it is preferable to see otaku, "less as an identifiable type of person (fanboy, or geek, or recluse) and more as a set of activities related to constructing personalized worlds amid the media flows […]" (Ibid., 109). Otaku, then, refers to a set of practices related to the reception of anime, games, manga, and related media. These activities are too numerous and varied to mention them all here, but they can build on or extend into fanzines, amateur production (dōjin), cosplay (costume play), conventions, fansubbing, toys, garage kits, and music venues. In the context of the consump-

32 This is the case, for example, with Type-Moon erotic adventure games, the first being *Tsukihime* (or *Princess Moon*), followed by *Melty Blood* and *Fate/Stay Night*. *Tsukihime* became the first megahit in the dōjin scene (with many parody *dōjinshi* of its own), and even received professional manga and anime adaptations, including various merchandising. After these successes, Type-Moon became a professional company creating commercial games as well as a variety of spin-offs from their popular series.
Two other dōjin games, *Higurashi no naku koro ni* by the circle 07th Expansion and *Touhou Project* by the Shanghai Alice Gengakudan circle, later became commercial hits of a similar or even surpassing scale, the latter becoming its own genre at the Comiket.

33 http://www.comiket.co.jp/index_e.html.

tion practices of these subcultures, the term has also been replaced by other denominations, such as Akihabara types (*Akiba-kei*), who organize their daily life around anime, manga, and electronics, especially for hanging out in anime, manga, and game stores in the Akihabara area, perfecting their collections (Galbraith 2010; Kohler 2004, 183–204). In such a context, gēmu, like anime, "becomes a nodal point in a culture industry that generates crossover, spin-off, or tie-in productions in the form of manga, light novels, character franchises, toys, music, and other merchandise" (Ibid., 185).

A common understanding of otaku practices is to link them with new forms of contemporary or postmodern consumption, from world and character consumption and desires (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010; Saitō 2011; Steinberg 2012) to database consumption (Azuma 2009). As already discussed, character merchandising, character licencing, and character franchises have long been important in generating and sustaining connections across media, in the form of media mixes (since at least Tetsuwan Atomu in 1963). As Lamarre explains, especially with the work of studio Gainax, which culminated in the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* boom, the serialization of merchandise associated with media mix products, such as videogames and garage kits, reinforced the narrative-character connections, gradually giving character priority over narrative (Lamarre 2009).[34] For Azuma (2009), otaku consumers grasp the narratives on the same level as card games, videogames, and other ways of interacting with the character. Narrative or stories did not disappear (like the importance of worlds), but narrative is now effectively subordinated to character and character-centred game-like activities. Azuma, as well as Steinberg (2012) or Nozawa (2013), stress the centrality of character, and especially what we might call the design or elements of attraction of characters.

In this character consumption, otaku subculture produced a new mode of cultural reception based on a "database structure" (Azuma 2009). Consumers are no longer interested in games, anime, or manga for their grand narratives of worlds, but rather for the little narratives that are constructed to allow affective responses to characters. The term that describes these arousals is *moe* (or *kyara-moe*), which refers to the attractive elements of characters (*kyara* is an abbreviation of *kyarakutā*, the Japanese term for "character"). The term *moe* means more precisely "sprouting/budding" or "blazing/burning" (Galbraith

34 For example, Azuma is referring to a transformation from a narrative-centred media mix to a character-centred media mix (Azuma 2009). By the mid-1990s, following the commercial success of *Evangelion*, "otaku-related activities had to be recognized as an economic opportunity if nothing else. Interest in otaku was renewed, but with greater emphasis on otaku-type consumption" related to characters (Lamarre 2009, 249).

2009), referring in these cases to the "affective responses to elements that appear to sprout from manga, anime, or game characters, such as cat ears, colored hair, rabbit tails, eyeglasses, costumes or uniforms, and poses, gestures, or situations" (Lamarre 2009, 258).

As Lamarre argues (Ibid., 262), Azuma's discussion centres on media structures and consumer behaviours, rather than on desire and symptoms, as is the case for Saitō Tamaki (Saitō 2011). Focusing on visual novels (novelistic stories with multiple endings accompanied by illustrations of beautiful girls [*bishōjō*]) and light novels,[35] Azuma emphasizes that male otaku gamers are not interested in pornography and sexual elements, rather the experiences of "pure" affective responses. They focus on particular elements of the characters, thus promoting the extraction, reuse, and reassembling of these (attractive) elements in the form of a database structure. This database consumption underlines that otaku consumers are more interested in *moe* elements (data or database) than whole characters or worlds.

Characters, as narratives and worlds, now circulate between many platforms and media. However, this circulation does not occur freely, while corporations are trying to own and control these flows. With the advent of virtual communications, mostly through social media and mobile platforms, (corporate) gaming now intervenes and circulates almost everywhere, resulting in new practices of consumption and entertainment.

Over the years, the term otaku has become so commonplace in Japanese popular culture studies that it became associated with any type of consumption practice related to anime, manga, and videogames. However, we can now wonder whether it is still an appropriate concept to apprehend the rapid changes of the new media landscapes. Nevertheless, in affiliation with new perspectives and concepts that have been emerging in recent years in the study of Japan's videogames,[36] it still highlights specific cultural practices that allow us to understand some consumption patterns of an important subset of contemporary Japanese youth.

35 In his second book (Azuma 2007), Azuma focuses his analysis on the ludic aspect (talking about a game-like [*gēmu-teki*] realism) of the media consumption of characters.

36 The Replaying Japan conference series and journal is one of those prime venues.

Conclusion: Gaming on the go – Portable and mobile gaming in a society on the move

Since the mid-2000, Japan's videogame market has become handheld-centric (Nakamura 2012). Many reasons, from cultural to industrial, explain this inclination. The ubiquity of portable and mobile gaming[37] in Japan is most often linked with the commuting aspect of Japanese society[38] and small apartments in cities. The particular success of the mobile gaming business is interconnected with the strength of the *keitai* market (Chan 2008; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2006; Larissa 2007).

Therefore, at the intersection of mobile communication culture and social networks, mobile gaming is a "nodal point in information-rich wired environments with multiple media interfaces, as if somehow filling in the gaps generated by the layers of acceleration, of speeding up and slowing down, which make up the rhythms of everyday life as a perpetual commuter" (Lamarre 2009, xvi). Gaming practices are therefore inseparable from contemporary culture in Japan, both influencing each other in meaningful ways.

To summarize, many cultural characteristics are attached to videogame culture in Japan, as each subculture relates to different objects. Each of these four domains of *gēmu* connects to other social and cultural domains or spaces. Part of urban public spaces, the arcade developed as a social space for a gaming subculture based on entertainment for Japanese of all ages. The arcade gamer therefore relates to competition, camaraderie, performance, and even collection (with online card-based arcade games). Tied to home or a domestic space, the console market (aptly named "consumer" market in Japan) created a hardcore gaming subculture that does not relate to a particular genre, artist, or even country, but rather to an entire medium. The *media mix* environment surrounding Japan's videogame industry has also created a profitable space of consumption (of titles, merchandising, characters, and remix practices). Especially strong in the PC gaming market, it shaped an attractive space for *otaku*, encouraging emotional attachment (*moe*) to characters as well as a dedicated community of independent creators (the *dōjin community*). The otaku or media

37 Portable games are released on dedicated handheld consoles (Game Boy, Nintendo DS [NDS], PlayStation Portable (PSP)). Mobile games are offered on cellphones (*keitai* in Japan), smartphones, and tablets. Christian McCrea argues that these two different "platforms" lead to different gaming practices and relationships between game, platform and player (McCrea 2011).

38 This aspect is behind the idea of Gunpei Yokoi's *Game and Watch* and eventually the *Game Boy* (Makino, 2010).

mix gamer relates mainly to recent forms of (postmodern?) desires (Saitō 2011) and character consumption (Azuma 2009; Steinberg 2012). Finally, as social networks are becoming a way of life, mobile platforms have evolved into more complex gaming platforms, bringing back a casual gamer looking for a pastime and distraction. The portable and mobile platforms also helped to implement a play space on the go, often tied to micro-transactions and addictive gameplay or to a simple need to pass the time during a commute in a society that is characterized as being, and frequently encouraged to be constantly on the move.

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Comment by Masako Hashimoto

Thanks to Dr. Picard's insightful chapter, we have a clear overview of the history of Japanese game (gēmu;ゲーム) culture with a particular focus on its consumption. As he argues, Japanese game (sub)cultures have progressed through a number of steps from their inception to today's achievement. Game (sub)cultures in Japan are a conglomerate composed of digital industry, publications, media mix strategy, fan and consumers activities and legal systems, and so on. However, the culture also has a kind of autonomy and has made distinct improvements so that it is capable of producing unexpected phenomena in future as well. As a result of Covid-19, playing games online on smartphones and other devices and building virtual friendships through digital games have become invaluable to young adults. Moreover, the way that otaku is consumed appears to have changed from a player's need to satisfy their own desire to showing off their supremacy though SNS. Our lifestyles and personal relationships have been confronted with a dramatic change since the pandemic and, I for one, am interested in how game (sub)cultures will respond to this and evolve in the near future.

Comment by Stevie Suan

Martin Picard's chapter on "Gēmu Communities and Otaku Consumption" presents a detailed overview of the various (sub)cultures of gaming within Japan, providing not just the specific practices employed, but also the relations to other media (such as anime, manga, doujinshi, magazines, guidebooks, social media) and how this has evolved over time. While the focus is on what is going on within Japan, Picard does not frame this in terms of exclusivity or homoge-

neity regarding locale, media, communities, or practices. Rather, Picard makes regular reference to the transnationality and globality of their production, distribution, and consumption practices. This perspective permits attention to lived, localized, specifics while still acknowledging and addressing the global potential of these media. This comes across when Picard discusses the fighting gamer community, noting how this interpretive community is "(not defined by physical boundaries but cognitive ones) where the most fundamental criterion is the skill level, obtained through hard training (the process of gaining mastery over the game controls) and research (which involves devising new strategies and mapping out the flow of events in hypothetical fights)." Such an approach presents a promising point of departure for examining our relations to and performances with media as a method for exploring the potentials of new geographies, communities, and modes of existence.

Yasuo Kawasaki

The Power of "Place" in Videogame Culture

Focusing on Game Centers in Japan (Column)

In the digital environment of amusement culture, the place where games are played is determinative and influential for gameplay. Simply put: the digital game itself, the game players, and the place where the game is played are three essential constituents for creating the situation of playing digital games.

Today's digital games have evolved to the point where they can be played anywhere and at anytime, at least in Japan. However, depending on location, there are restrictions on the digital games that can be played. In Japan, for example, anyone wanting to play a digital game on a train is limited to smartphone-based games and portable game consoles. And enjoying an arcade game-type experience at home is generally beyond the reach of most Japanese people. On the other hand, in "game centers",[1] the game machines are mainly dedicated arcade games. Playing anything other than arcade games in game centers is difficult because few game center managers are willing to allow smartphones and mobile game consoles to be played in their stores. Thus, we can see that the acceptance and tolerance of game consoles alone vary depending on location.

Furthermore, social relations change dramatically in these places and spaces of gameplay. One example of this change is the difference in communication spaces. For offline gameplay at home is likely to occur in a space that facilitates communication with people you know, such as friends and family. As Hiroyasu Kato (2011) and Yoshiaki Kijima (2014) analyzed, the game center creates a space for direct and indirect communication, including tacit understanding, with an unspecified number of people. Furthermore, a variety of communication spaces with an unspecified number of people have been created in gameplay spaces that are connected to the internet.

Thus, the environment and context of digital games is determined by the place where they are played. In particular, the gameplay environment outside

1 In America, it is called a "game arcade" or "amusement arcade". In this column, I will use the English term "game center," which is commonly used in Japan.

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the home is inevitably linked to society, and is therefore liable to generate particular differences among countries.

This column focuses on "game centers" in Japan in order to illustrate these differences in the place and environment of videogames.

Game centers have various names and definitions in different countries (see footnote 1), but Mark J.P. Wolf's definition of game arcades comes closest to a generally accepted definition. Wolf describes them as "commercial venues that feature coin-operated devices such as video games, pinball machines and other electromechanical games, and merchandiser and redemption games."[2]

In previous studies undertaken in various countries, the term game centers usually refers to stores that operate as independent commercial facilities, equivalent to the American game arcade (hereafter referred to as "independent stores").

Independent stores' main source of revenue is the sales garnered from game consoles. There are also versions of these stores that are open to all, but whose main clientele are individuals wanting to communicate through gameplay. As a result, players who frequent independent stores have developed their own communication culture, which has been the subject of research in Japan by e.g. Kato, Kijima, and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2019).

In Japan, however, in addition to independent stores, arcade and similar game machines are installed at locations that become game centers or a small game corner. Specifically, both locations function as "store formats" of more traditional game centers and each have their own culture and context. This column focuses on "game corners for children" as an example of a store format that differs greatly from independent stores.

Game corners for children are a store-based format where game machines are installed as a side business in the store frontage or inside stores aimed at children, such as toy shops and dagashi-ya (a Japanese penny candy shop). In this case, the game machines that usually leased for free on the agreement that the leasing companies receive a portion of the revenue generated. Most often, you will find arcade-style videogame machines and medal game machines for children (games played with a specific type of medal coins) in these spaces.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Kawasaki, 2017), such store formats have created a gameplay space that differs from the so-called game arcade or independent stores. For example, the primary customer base for this store format consists of individual children of elementary school age or younger. They visit dagashi-ya and toy stores for sweets and toys, and play arcade games while they are there. Since such locations are primarily private stores, their

2 Wolf, 2012, 34.

owners allow the children to play under their supervision. In addition, children have been observed playing in these places under rules that have been clearly defined by store owners. As mentioned above, my analysis suggests that the existing children's communication culture and the emerging digital gameplay culture are well-matched in this store format.

In this way, the same game machines are played in game centers in Japan albeit in a variety of store locations. Even in 2020, when the diversity of store formats itself has declined, game centers are still firmly oriented toward being entertainment facilities for all, incorporating a range of customers of all ages and genders. In a sense, we can speak of a chaotic gameplay culture in these spaces. This historical trend emerged from the rise of arcade-game manufacturers in Japan and the popularity of the arcade games themselves. The most significant factor, however, is the fact that it was socially possible to install game machines in the aforementioned locations, and that these store formats were accepted in various parts of society.

Based on the above premise, it can be suggested that the game-playing environment outside the home has been influenced by and forms part of the history of games and the social culture of each country.

In Europe and America, for example, "family entertainment centers," offer amusement facilities for parents and children. Such places are an entertainment facility that also features arcade games. From a Japanese perspective, such locations can be considered as a form of game center or game arcade. As far as I can see, however, these places are treated completely differently to game arcade facilities, and, moreover, they appear not to have been analyzed in previous studies to date.

The family entertainment centers that are to be found in America but also throughout Europe are considered as places that have a significant influence on the society and game culture of these places. Consequently, we must discuss them in terms of their social position as "game centers" or places where digital games are installed.

These global comparisons of the "places" where gameplay of digital games occurs can encourage thinking about the game culture itself in each country. Indeed, in the context of the subject discussed in this column, it is necessary to consider the definition of a game center based on the characteristics of the "places" as well as the characteristics of the "coin-operated devices" defined by Wolf.

Based on my research, I would like to define a game center more broadly, as "a facility that presents a variety of cultures based on coin-operated entertainment devices." Under this definition, game centers are more than game arcades; they are also an opportunity to think about the possibility of other amusement facilities with coin-operated devices. I would suggest, therefore,

that our understanding of this issue of "place" in relation to videogames would be enhanced by researchers from a range of countries working together in future.

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Dorothea Mladenova

Platformization in the Funeral Industry

The Case of Online Funeral Discounters

Introduction

Would you order a Buddhist monk on Amazon or purchase a funeral online? This is just one of the new possibilities for a twenty-first-century funeral in Japan. The Japanese funeral industry has certainly witnessed tremendous changes in the past two decades. With digitalization affecting almost all areas of everyday life, it should not be too surprising that even death and dying are increasingly related to digital services, e.g. for end-of-life preparation (*shūkatsu*), the purchase of funerals, and grief and mourning. Research on the digitalization of death and dying has primarily focused on digital mourning practices for individuals as well as social/collective memory (e.g. Jakobs and Ziefle 2010; Kohn et al. 2012; Walter 2015; Hajek, Lohmeier and Pentzold 2016), and the digital afterlife on social media, sometimes referred to as "digital immortality" (e.g. Bassett 2015; Van Ryn et al. 2017; Öhman and Floridi 2017; Savin-Baden and Burden 2019). However, studies on the question of how the internet and its specific characteristics affect the production side of funerals are harder to find, at least in the social sciences. In his introductory textbook *Death and Dying in Germany*, Frank Thieme (2019, 159–160) quotes one study by the Federal Association of German Undertakers in 2016, which found that 35 per cent of the respondents had conducted a web-based search of a funeral home. Other than this, Thieme barely mentions the internet and, when he does, it is mainly in regard to mourning. In one notable exception, Wenzel, Wagner, and Koch (2017) deliver an economic study on the funeral industry in Berlin, Germany, based on the theory of strategic path dependence. A decisive factor in the specific case of Germany is that there used to be a funeral allowance (*Sterbegeld*) paid by the statutory health insurance to the families of every member in the case of death. Its purpose was to cover or at least partly subsidize the funeral costs. Therefore, Germans were not used to paying the entire bill for the funeral and the grave from their private funds. However, this funeral allowance was first

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reduced by 50 per cent in 1989 and then eliminated in 2004. These two events certainly played a significant role in breaking the existing strategic path of the funeral industry, but there were two further critical circumstances: the market entry of "discount funeral homes" in the early 1990s and the emergence and more widespread use of the internet in the late 1990s. Wenzel et al. (2017, 371) argue that while discount funerals were quite a strong market force already in the early 1990s, back then they did not yet seriously affect the funeral industry. Their disruptive potential was unleashed only when the internet became widely used:

> Although the discounters' market entry threatened the business of the incumbent funeral homes, these funeral homes' economic circumstances did not drastically change until the end of the 1990s [...] when "discount funeral homes gained a dominant market position" [...] by exploiting the Internet to make their offers. (Ibid., 371)

Digitalization helped the discounters in Germany to acquire new customers beyond their immediate vicinity and out-compete the old players (Ibid., 373). However, it took one more critical event in 2004, the elimination of the funeral allowance, to "intensify consumers' price sensitivity" (Ibid., 372) and break the old pattern. Similarly, analysts of the contemporary funeral culture in the United States name "lower-priced products and services purchased over the internet" as a main factor "profoundly impacting the funeral industry today" (Harrington 2007, quoted in: Cengiz and Rook 2016, 155). As we have seen in the Berlin case study, lower prices and the internet seem to go hand in hand.

We can observe a similar pattern in Japan. One of the biggest and most disruptive trends in the funeral industry is the market entry of a growing number of "outsiders" (*igyōshu*) who seriously challenge the traditional market players (Aveline-Dubach 2012). These outsiders include "private retail groups (Nankai and Hanshin in Osaka; Keikyu in Tokyo), major retailers (the Aeon Group, which aims to take a 10 per cent share of the market, and the regional retailing chain Maruhiro), and even hoteliers (Otani and Keio Plaza)" (Ibid., 12). Furthermore, consumers have overall become more cost-conscious, funerals have become smaller in size, and there is a tendency towards market concentration in the funeral industry, a process that results in the demise of many small undertakers (Ibid., 16–17).

The study of the funeral industry in the digital age is located at the intersection of sociology, economics, business, and information studies[1] and requires

1 Notably, a lot of interest in digital memorialization is published in computer science or human-computer interaction related publications (e.g. Lopes, Maciel, and Pereira

an understanding of all of those realms. This chapter is only a first attempt to find some adequate vocabulary and tools for analysis of the digitalization of the funeral industry. The underlying premise is that the digitalization of the funeral industry does not just mean that one can now purchase online what one has previously bought offline (i.e. the digital being a mere continuation of the analogous), but that digitalization has the power to permanently disrupt the market and change the culture of mourning and bereavement altogether. The reason lies in the business model of the platform, which makes use of the advantages of the online space and is nowadays used in all possible industries. Just like Uber changed the attitudes and availability of cab driving and Airbnb changed the way of accommodation, online funeral discounters are changing the way funerals are seen and conducted on a big scale.

This chapter focuses on online funeral discounters that have entered the market since the 2000s. They are commonly referred to as "cheap internet funeral companies" (*kakuyasu netto sōgisha* 格安ネット葬儀社, cf. Shūkan Asahi 2019). Since their common business model is that they do not execute the funerals themselves, but have created a network of existing funeral parlours who are bound to offer standardized funeral products to the customers, they are also known as "internet intermediaries" (*netto chūkai* ネット仲介) or "internet intermediary sites" (*netto chūkai saito* ネット仲介サイト). Throughout this chapter, I refer to them as "online funeral discounters" since their most salient feature is that they offer low-cost funerals online.

Online funeral discounters are feared by the incumbent funeral homes for their radical price transparency and price dumping. Their low-cost funerals are the reason for the paradoxical situation that the revenues of funeral homes are falling despite a growing number of deaths per year. In fact, demographic forecasts predict that, until 2040, the number of deaths will keep growing steadily, which has led market participants and observers[2] to call Japan a "society of many deaths," *tashi shakai* 多死社会 hyper-aged.

The online funeral discounters accelerate commercialization at a hitherto unknown pace. In the following sections, I first shed some light on the history of the Japanese funeral industry and trace the emergence of commercialization and rationalization (subsumed under the term "McDonaldization"). I then ana-

2014; Maciel and Pereira 2015). However, there is a need to look at this topic from a sociological, or ideally a transdisciplinary perspective, as well.

2 For example, the Funeral Business Fair 2016 in Yokohama used the term in its concept http://sogo-unicom.co.jp/pbs/fair/fbf/2016/concept.html (now only available via WaybackMachine). Death researcher Kotani (2014, 41; 2015, 2) describes the "society of many deaths" as the downside of the ageing society.

lyse the main features of online funeral discounters as opposed to incumbent funeral homes and discuss how they have disrupted the market. I do so by looking at concrete examples, and placing them against the theoretical background of Platform Capitalism and the updated version of George Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis. I hope that this will help illuminate some of the processes that are taking place right before our eyes and that are still ongoing.

The commercialization of the Japanese funeral: Is it really ending?

> "*The shift from community funeral rituals to commercial funeral ceremonies is manifested in the commoditization, commercialization, mass consumption, and professionalization of funerals.*"
> (Suzuki 2000, 5)

In her book *The Price of Death* (2000), Hikaru Suzuki traces the history of the funeral industry. She shows how the pre-modern community-based funeral (*sōshiki*) practiced by the extended household and neighbours was gradually replaced by the commercial funeral (*o-sōgi* or *o-sōshiki*) organized by funeral companies. While the first funeral parlour in Japan was opened in Tokyo in 1887, until the end of World War II funeral parlours mostly served the wealthy classes with their display of status in mimicking aristocratic funerary rites (Ibid., 10, 51). It was only after the war that urbanization and poverty drove common people to engage the services of commercial funeral suppliers on a huge scale (Ibid., 10, 53). Long into the twentieth century, community (*kumi*) members had still largely supported each other in funeral rituals, as had been commonplace in premodern times; in fact, funerals had played an important role in reaffirming these long-term reciprocal ties of mutual support (Ibid., 206–207). After World War II, with intensifying urbanization, these ties gradually disintegrated, and people lost both the human resources and the knowledge about how to perform funeral rituals (Ibid. 217); vice versa, funeral rituals lost their function of reaffirming long-term community ties. Common people therefore increasingly turned to commercial funeral services. Among the two main factors driving this change was the establishment of funeral companies (*sōgisha*). They played an important role for the standardization and mass-consumption of the funeral (Ibid., 56), because they started "providing comprehensive services and dominating the entire funeral process" (Ibid., 216). This constituted a competitive advantage compared to funeral parlours (*sōgiya*), which only offered fragmented services and even had a bad reputation of being unreliable (Ibid., 57). The establishment of these funeral companies was, in many cases, a consequence of a more pivotal change in the funeral system:

the establishment of Mutual-Aid Cooperatives (MAC; in Japanese: *gojokai*). The first MAC was founded in 1948 with the "objective of taking over the community members' role in funerals and weddings in urban settings where community ties had become weak" (Ibid., 54). The MAC system works in a way that members pay a monthly installment for a fixed period of time, e.g. for five or ten years, which grants them a reasonable wedding or funeral ceremony in return – much like a funeral insurance (Ibid.). Based on this system, many start-up companies were established to deliver the funerals. By 1973, there were already about 350 of them under the recently established National Wedding and Funeral Mutual-Aid Association (Zenkoku Kankon Sōsai Gojokai Renmei) (Ibid., 55). During their peak, in the mid-1980s, there were more than 400 companies (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013, 57). Especially after the war, this system was highly popular, because it allowed even people from lower classes to hold affordable ceremonies with at least a minimum amount of decency. MACs are highly effective in that they foster long-term ties between funeral homes and customers (Suzuki 2000, 204, 208). This liaison guaranteed funeral companies a steady supply of customers without having to advertise their services much through other means. In Suzuki's case study, at Moon Rise Funerals in Kita-Kyūshū, for example, in the mid-1990s funerals conducted for MAC members accounted for 70 per cent: "Moon Rise has used its MAC membership as the primary means of expanding its business" (Ibid., 208). Therefore, MAC (*gojokai*) fulfilled the role of the main advertiser or the main means of establishing ties between the funeral industry and new customers. Interestingly, the social relation does not begin or end with the funeral transaction. As Suzuki shows, funeral homes and MAC sales staff have developed strategies to maintain long-term relationships with their customers. For example, MAC salespeople pay multiple visits to prospective customers, paying just as much attention to building a relationship as to signing them up for the membership (Ibid., 208). Furthermore, in order to encourage them to renew their memberships or recommend the company (word-of-mouth marketing), even after the funeral MAC salespeople and funeral professionals pay regular visits to the homes of the customers or send condolence cards (Ibid., 212). Customer loyalty is of utmost importance for the success of these post-war funeral companies. Offering both weddings and funerals under the same roof further helped to acquire and retain customers. As Goldstein-Gidoni (1997, 36) notes: "While the *gojokai* organizations offered other ceremonial occasions in addition to wedding services, their rapid growth in number during the 1950s and 1960s was strongly connected to weddings."

In sum, MACs were established as a way to offer wedding and funeral ceremonies to impoverished people after the war; their growth reflects the need of a new urbanized lower class for affordable ceremonies. Poverty acts here as a

catalyst for a new commodity that meets new needs and responds to a change in values. With the high economic growth in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, (parts of) this lower class moved into the middle class, and salarymen's funerals came to be paid by their company (*shasō*), so funerals overall became more lavish.

In a 2003 article, Suzuki extends her commercialization argument employing the theory of McDonaldization by George Ritzer (1993), playfully calling the new standardized way of getting buried "McFuneral." Here, Suzuki argues that the existence and popularity of MACs further led to standardization, since every new funeral company, even if it was not a member of a MAC, was held against the high standards of professionalism of the MAC-related companies (Suzuki 2003, 52). McFunerals operate in a Toyotism-based just-in-time system. They are mass-produced and mass-consumed (Ibid.). This is evidence for the incorporation of the principle of rationalization as described by Max Weber, and, more recently, in the McDonaldization thesis. While Weber based his argument on bureaucracy, Ritzer built his on the fast-food chain McDonald's (Ibid., 55). McDonald's restaurants, according to this thesis, follow the four main rationalization principles of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control (Ibid.). Suzuki (2003) demonstrates that contemporary funerals in Japan organized by funeral companies largely follow this pattern. This standardization results in homogenization to a certain degree. Note, however, that this does not mean that all funerals will look exactly the same (Suzuki 2000, 219; 2014, 11). In fact, people can customize the product, albeit to a limited extent, according to their values and preferences. Moreover, by choosing the more luxurious option, for example a more opulent funeral altar in the McFuneral, they are able to demonstrate a higher social status, thus engaging in "conspicuous consumption." Following Suzuki (2014, 11), we can refer to this as the stratification of the standardized funeral.

However, while it may have constituted an adequate response to urbanization and poverty in the immediate post-war period, over time the rationalization of the Japanese funeral started breeding discontent. This is related to the "irrationality of rationality" phenomenon that is described in the McDonaldization thesis. With knowledge about funerals being monopolized by funeral companies, the dependency on commercial services increased and so did the prices. The timing and implementation came to be controlled entirely by the funeral homes, and the bereaved were stripped of any control. Beyond expressing one's social status, the McFunerals failed to express one's individuality; they further failed to provide space and time for proper grief. To many, they became too efficient, too calculated, too rational (Ibid.). People who were fed up with such standardized funerals that followed the same pattern and were beyond their control started turning to alternative forms of funerals in order to regain some of the control. Suzuki (2003) names funeral-while-alive (*seizensō*) and

non-religious funerals (*mushūkyōsō*) as two examples for alternative funerals intended to serve as a counter-model to the standardized McFuneral. We could add natural funerals (*shizensō*), like scattering of ashes (*kaiyō sankotsu*) or tree burial (*jumokusō*). Suzuki concludes:

> From the mid-1990s, Japanese consumer culture with regard to funeral ceremonies blossomed. Japanese consumer choices did exist earlier, the rich and famous had had special ceremonies created for them, but after this period, not only could common consumers vividly express their choices but the funeral industry was forced to innovate, create new options, and address the needs of consumers. The mass-reproduction of funerals is ending today. (Ibid.)

McFunerals came under scrutiny as mass media attacked them for being too impersonal and consumers started demanding more individual forms of funerals. In numerous publications and magazines, consumers were challenged to think about how they want their funeral to be and not to rely on standardized mass funerals that much. This individualization discourse, which started in the mid-1990s, culminated in the invention of the term *shūkatsu* in 2009, which aims to bundle the activities surrounding the organization of an individualized funeral (cf. Mladenova 2020). *Shūkatsu*,[3] the activity of preparing one's end-of-life, is a media buzzword created in 2009 by funeral consultants. The word describes the practice of getting one's end-of-life in order by organizing one's funeral and grave while alive, and is essentially a content-marketing tool for different services in the funeral industry. While there are training programmes, like the Shūkatsu Counsellor Association, which enable successful participants to act as "experts" in questions related to the administrative side of the end-of-life, online funeral discounters also make use of it, e.g. AEON Life with its "Shūkatsu Fairs." Their rhetoric of *jibunrashisa*, literally "being like oneself," encourages consumers to organize their own funeral as one that "suits them." In order to achieve that, consumers are dependent on the knowledge of experts like the Shūkatsu Counselors. *Jibunrashisa* is a tricky phrase, since it insinuates individuality of some sort, while what is sold are, in the end, mostly packaged funerals, albeit customized.

In sum, we can name roughly four periods of the Japanese funeral:

1) premodern community funerals, which were common among the large majority of the Japanese population until World War II,

3 終活, not to be confused with 就活, job hunting.

2) the modern urban funeral organized with the help of a funeral parlor, mimicking the lavish rituals of the aristocracy, transforming the rituals to adapt them to city life,
3) mass-produced McFunerals that made the services of funeral companies available to the initially impoverished masses, but gradually became available for conspicuous consumption and the expression of class difference,
4) the postmodern individualized funeral that emphasizes the deceased's life and turns away from the mass-produced McFuneral of the post-war period.

However, these periods or types of funerals do not neatly substitute each other; they rather show new developments or dominant trends, while the other types still exist in the periphery. For instance, type (2), the modern urban funeral organized by funeral parlours was a new development, which was, however, practiced only by a limited number of people, i.e. the urban elites, while common people still stuck to the community funeral. Similarly, type (4), the postmodern individualized funeral, is a new phenomenon for a financial elite and certain cultural milieus, while a large number of common people and lower classes continues to make use of the mass-produced McFuneral.

Studies in funeral practices and changing values towards death and dying in Japan have given much attention to new, alternative, individualized/personalized forms (e.g. Boret 2014, 2017; Kawano 2010; Rowe 2003), which challenge the McFuneral, up to the point where they predict its demise. However, while Suzuki (2014, 11) claims that "[t]he mass-reproduction of funerals is ending today," looking at the growth of online funeral discounters in the past decade I would rather say that the McFuneral is returning to its point of departure, which is: extremely cheap funerals for the masses. The level of poverty since the 1990s might not be reaching the level of poverty after the war, which, as Suzuki has shown, was one of the driving forces for the standardized, mass-produced funeral. Nevertheless, it seems as if one important factor that has favored large-scale-innovations in the funeral industry since the end of the 1990s is once again a drop in the general wealth. Here, wealth is not limited to financial means, but also extends to the question, whether people can rely on their relatives to take care of them.

As I have argued elsewhere (Mladenova 2020), individualization is often conterminous with cost cutting and relieving relatives from the burden of having to care for oneself, and has little to do with a desire for self-realization. In his study on tree burial, Boret also points out that the trend towards individualization is born out of necessity rather than personal choice:

> [...] many couples to whom tree burial caters are initially the instruments rather than the agents of their choice. Most of these couples *have neither successor (i.e., a biological or adopted son) nor the financial resources necessary for the acquisition of a generational grave.* They are therefore *constrained to purchase* a non-ancestral grave. Because of their instrumentality, however, these people have consequently become agents of their own representations of death through the process of establishing a grave in the tree burial cemetery. By representing their own identity and relationships at their final resting place, such couples have given meaning to and thus become agents in the planning of their own death rites. (Boret 2017, 243; emphasis added)

Moreover, the market tends to appropriate and commercialize innovative, alternative funerary practices, turning them into the new normal (Suzuki 2003, 72). We therefore find different understandings of individualization in the funeral realm today. As I will show in the next section, individualization may also be found to a certain degree in low-cost McFunerals, only there it comes in the form of variants of a pre-defined product.

In the following section, I want to look at how the McFuneral moves into the platform, and how this differs from the post-war commercial funeral. The focus will be on the production side, not on the consumer side.

Welcome to the platform: The funeral industry goes online

Despite the individualization[4] trend in recent decades, standardization and commercialization in the funeral industry are far from over. Instead, new players enter the market tapping into the demand for cheap funerals, while at times incorporating the discourse of individualization. The actors who drove the post-war mass-production of the funeral, the MACs, are in slow but steady decline, although they still have one of the biggest market shares (an estimated 40 per cent; Shūkan Economist 2017, 34). According to Shūkan Tōyō Keizai (2013, 58), nowadays only 70 per cent of the once over 400 companies are left, and several of them are in the red. Besides not having reacted well to the deflation in the 1990s, their reputation also suffered several blows, with customer complaints and legal cases filed against horrendous contract cancellation fees of up to 15–20 per cent and hidden costs that were to be paid for a funeral on top of the advance deposits (Ibid., 57). Most importantly, both MACs and independent (non-MAC) funeral homes (*senmon sōgisha*, approx. 50 per cent market share;

4 Boret (2017, 237ff) prefers to speak of "personalization" instead of individualization; I cannot go into a detailed discussion of the terms subjectivation, individualization, and personalization in this paper, but I do acknowledge that there are significant differences.

Shūkan Economist 2017, 34) came under scrutiny for having an opaque pricing structure. They are now challenged by business outsiders (*igyōshu*) entering the funeral market, whose biggest selling point is price and product transparency (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013, 61–62).

Who are these "outsiders"? Shūkan Tōyō Keizai (2013) divides them into three types: 1) the peripheral industry (*shūhen gyōkai*) that is somewhat related to the funeral industry, e.g. stonemasons, Buddhist altar craftsmen, and flower companies;[5] 2) outsiders coming from other, unrelated industries (*igyōshu*); and 3) start-ups (*venchā-kei*) – new companies that previously had nothing to do with funerals whatsoever. This phenomenon strikingly differs from funeral parlours in the Meiji and Taishō eras, which initially grew out of craftsmen shops, who sold coffins or funeral ornaments and were therefore directly linked to the funeral (Suzuki 2000, 51). Today's newcomers have such diverse backgrounds as retail, tech, economics, law, publishing, wedding, and even railways (for examples see Shūkan Economist 2017 and Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013). Despite lacking experience in the funeral and grave industry, based on their business and tech expertise, they bring innovations and, most notably, a particular business approach to the field. One of the most striking innovations is the hitherto largely untapped potential of digital platforms.

The Japanese funeral business is a relative latecomer to information technology, especially to the internet (Shūkan Economist 2017, 23). In the first years of the twenty-first century, most funeral homes did not even have a homepage (Ibid., 33). This is why online marketplaces (*netto chūkai saito*, literally: internet intermediary sites) had a carte blanche to enter the digital niche and change the balance of the market. They took funerals online by applying business principles like cost transparency, cost-performance, scaling, and clear product development. They introduced a business mentality into an industry that indeed had been commercialized before, but was still placing special emphasis on interpersonal relationships to achieve long-term customer loyalty and an individual solution for every customer without a clear price tag (with a purported possibility of high-cost funerals). Their respective business models might differ in detail, but there are three common features.

The first common feature of online marketplaces is that they do not themselves conduct the funerals, but instead contract existing funeral parlours from across the country. This means that they use the existing funeral infrastructure

5 One example for a flower company-cum-funeral operator is Hibiya Kadan (https://www.hibiya-lsp.com/) – after all, the centerpiece of the contemporary funeral is the altar richly decorated with flowers, with more flowers expressing a higher social status (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013).

and optimize it in various ways. Firstly, they optimize product and pricing by defining a product with several variants and customization possibilities and by attaching a fixed price tag to them. Customers can easily browse through the limited (but seemingly endlessly customizable) options and quickly select the one that suits them best. The locally contracted funeral home that is selected then has to implement the funeral for the pre-agreed fixed price. This means that the customers do not select a particular funeral home, but a certain product variant – a type of standardized funeral. Thus, funeral homes become interchangeable, since they are supposed to offer a certain standardized product across the country, which is defined by the platform. When selling these funerals, they act more like a franchise than like an independent company.[6] This, in fact, does not differ much from the MAC system.

One of the new companies that apply this model is AEON Life, a subsidiary of AEON, Japan's major retail company operating more than 300 outlets across the country. With AEON's funerals, launched in 2009 and handed over to the subsidiary in 2013, customers do not select a funeral home through the platform, but a product, which they are guaranteed to receive at that price by the funeral home ultimately executing the funeral. The online marketplace makes profits through commission fees. It is worth looking at AEON's product definition, since this is a key to their growth. AEON has divided its funeral product into several different components, from the collection of the body (*o-mukae*) and the laying out (*go-anchi*) on the day of death, to the ritual placement of the body in the coffin (*nōkan*), the wake (*tsuya*) and a farewell ritual (*o-wakare no gishiki*) on the second day, to the "farewell ceremony" (*kokubetsu-shiki*), another farewell ritual (*o-wakare no gishiki*) and the cremation (*kasō*) on the third day.[7] The variants of the AEON funeral are then determined

6 This is proven by the fact that the intermediary company invites customers to report to them immediately if the executing funeral homes unexpectedly charge them additional costs, so that they can intervene. In some cases, additional charges are levied by the funeral homes, and this is accepted by the platform, but this is stated in the fine print.

7 While these components may look like a traditional ceremony, some of them were invented in modern times and are now being rationalized by funeral homes and discounters. Bernstein (2006, 150) notes for example that *kokubetsu-shiki* was invented in 1901 as an alternative form of the religious *sōgi*. Nowadays, both terms are mostly used without distinguishing them (Ibid. 151). When we talk about the "traditional funeral ceremony" in Japan, we tend to think of premodern practices. However, those were diverse and by no way unified across the country or different social strata. The traditional Japanese funeral, if there is such a thing, is maybe described best as the "Japanese way of death" (Bernstein 2006, 6) that developed since the Meiji era. It incorporated some old rituals, invented new ones (e.g. the hearse, see Rowe 2000) and turned them

mainly by selecting and de-selecting components as well as by the number of people. For example, one can have just two out of eight or all eight out of eight components. Figure 1 shows how the five main product variants are constituted: the "family funeral" (*kazokusō*), which is the best-selling variant, the one-day funeral (*ichinichisō*), cremation only (*kasōshiki*), the general plan (*ippansō*), and the non-religious cremation only plan/direct funeral (*chokusō*).

The product variants are referred to as "set plan" (*setto puran*), a term reminiscent of mobile phone contracts or restaurant menus rather than funerals. This comparison is probably not so far-fetched, considering that different courses in a restaurant follow the same principle of selecting and de-selecting different components. Therefore, we can say that the individualized funeral here comes in five clearly defined sets, which are the outcome of thorough product development, following the definition of several target segments. After all, in marketing and product development, personalization boils down to defining a limited number of target segments and their respective products that suit their needs best. After choosing one of the five set plans, one can further customize the plan by adding some optional features and "upgrading" the funeral. In AEON's terms, this is expressed in the categories "standard" and "select." At all steps, prices are clearly indicated. The product set-up is that the basic or standard product is the most inexpensive and the one with the fewest features. Through customization, one can "individualize" the basic product. Therefore, the basic product is extremely cheap, but can become more expensive with certain add-ons, with the most expensive product being the most "individual" one. This is how individualization is (ostensibly) built into the very fabric of standardization. In this context, *jibunrashisa* ("suiting oneself") is only possible within fixed parameters and results in the expression of status.

Second, the internet intermediary companies optimize the use of facilities. In fact, one particular company, Yorisou (formerly Minrevi), pioneered the idea of exploiting the unoccupied time of funeral facilities. Founded in 2009 as an online comparing platform for dentists (歯科レビ) and funerals (葬儀レビ), the company became aware of the demand for affordability and cost-transparency in funerals and launched the product "Simple Funeral" (*shinpuru na o-sōshiki*) in 2013. It was later rebranded "Compassionate Funeral" (*yorisou o-sōshiki*). The goal is to offer "low-cost funeral service with clear (*meiryō*) pricing and content" across the whole country (Yorisou 2021). The key to cost cutting

into mass practices (e.g. cremation, see Berstein 2006, 67–90). New trends also affect the ways of dying: for example, the practices of embalming and encoffining (*nōkan*) were not traditionally part of the Japanese funeral, but became popular after the release of the internationally acclaimed movie Departures (J: Okuribito, 2008, by Takita Yōjirō).

Figure 1. AEON Life funeral variants (AEON Life 2021).

is by chartering funeral facilities during their idle time, i.e. when they are not otherwise booked. Just like AEON, Yorisou does not own brick-and-mortar-facilities, which reduces their costs significantly. However, their business model slightly differs from AEON's.

> According to a study conducted by the company itself, funeral homes operate at about 30% of their capacity, and are idle 70% of their working hours. By making use of these hours when they are empty, we can offer 'Simple Funerals' at such a low price. The funeral home prioritizes its own business during its busy hours, and can accommodate 'Simple funerals' during the off-hours. (Shūkan Economist 2017, 33)

Yorisou currently contracts around 1,000 funeral homes across the country (PRTimes 2020). Another company with a similar business model, Uniquest, has 900 partners (Shūkan Economist 2017, 33), and AEON Life has 600 funeral parlors (*sōgisha*) and more than 4,000 associated funeral halls (*sōgijō*) (AEON Life 2021). What these companies offer, therefore, is an easier and cheaper access to the existing funeral infrastructure, which is why they are also referred to as "funeral discounters." While this may be convenient from the perspective of the customers, it has several downsides for the specialized funeral homes. First, by participating in this intermediary business model, they are involuntarily turned into independent contractors (*senmon sōgisha no ukeoi gyōsha-ka*) or subcontractors (*shitauke-ka*), who bear the responsibility of delivering a certain product at an extremely cheap price, which gets additionally reduced by commission fees of 15–30 per cent (Shūkan Economist 2017, 35; Yamamoto 2020). This leads to a downward spiral of unit prices, in which, ultimately, small- and medium-sized funeral homes cannot compete and go bankrupt in considerable numbers (M&A Online 2019). Second, when using the same hall for differently priced funerals, the customers that pay a higher price may feel like they get ripped off. MAC members, for example, may feel that they are treated unfairly compared to customers of online funeral discounters who pay considerably lower fees to hold a ceremony at the same funeral home (Shūkan Dayamondo 2020, 27–28). This, in turn, further accelerates the price dumping.

Yorisou has further launched some other funeral-related digital services, taking its radical price transparency to the extreme and showing that operating as a platform does not mean that one cannot make use of other platforms at the same time. With the notorious product "O-bō-san-bin" (お坊さん便), literally "monk delivery," people could order a Buddhist monk via Amazon for a fixed fee of ¥55,000. This offer not only got Yorisou a complaint from the Japan Buddhist Federation, for putting a price tag on Buddhist services, but also a lot of publicity – inasmuch as any publicity is good publicity. However, it is not as if the other internet intermediaries did not launch similar services.

AEON Life also optionally offers to introduce customers to a Buddhist temple and has attached clear price tags (again, defining four different products) to the monk's services (https://www.aeonlife.jp/expense/option/buddhistpriest/). Similarly, the competitor Uniquest offers an optional "fixed-price monk arrangement" (*teigaku no o-bō-san tehai*) (https://www.osohshiki.jp/plan/temple/). They were not spared from public criticism either. Already in 2010, only several months after launching its funerals, AEON was itself criticized by the Japan Buddhist Federation, which complained that AEON's practice of displaying a fixed price for Buddhist services was like "trampling on the original spirit of Buddhism" and "giving the impression that the temple is trading the posthumous names (*kaimyō*)" (Asahi Shinbun 2010). Receiving this criticism, they initially removed this price tag, but it since reappeared. This shows that with their radical pursuit of price transparency, the online marketplaces hit and are slowly pushing a taboo in the Japanese funeral order.

The Japan Buddhist Federation was not the only entity to voice criticism in light of the cheap deals. For example, the Consumer Affairs Agency (Shōhisha-chō) reprimanded Uniquest for advertising its "Small Funerals" as "fixed price" and "no additional fees," when in some cases, additional fees did in fact apply (Asahi Shinbun 2018). In the past, funeral rituals performed by Buddhist monks had been compensated not with an honorarium, as the "fixed price offerings" now can be understood, but with donations or offerings (*o-fuse*), which depended on one's financial possibilities. With the burst of the bubble economy and the detachment from Buddhism, this practice began losing its legitimacy with large parts of the population. Online marketplaces like AEON Life, Yorisou and Uniquest broke a taboo by resolving this uncertainty surrounding the "price" of Buddhist funerary services. With their biggest selling point being clear and transparent pricing and low-cost options in a market that used to apply a rather oblique pricing structure (cf. Aveline-Dubach 2014, 12), the public was particularly concerned with the question of how such cheap funerals could be sustained. As it turned out, in the case of "Small Funerals," it could not – the funerals were, in fact, more expensive, since the displayed price did not reflect the final cost.

Third and most obviously, the marketplaces make the products available online. They offer the funeral homes a means to acquire customers via the web without having to invest in an elaborate online infrastructure or in SEO. The marketplace then acts like a platform, in certain regards comparable to platforms like Uber, Airbnb or Amazon. Even if online funeral marketplaces do not share all characteristics with platform companies, it is worth comparing them in order to notice some of the specific tools that they use, which turn their product into something different from just the online version of previously offline services.

Ritzer and Miles (2019) claim that digitalization has intensified McDonaldization, because the digital platforms actually implement the principles of McDonaldization (calculability, efficiency, predictability, control) even better than McDonald's itself. For example, in the case of the Japanese online funeral discounters, both predictability and calculability increase due to the policy of radical price transparency and the "what you see is what you get"-mentality applied in the display of available services. By affording little to no own physical infrastructure (aside from servers and an office for a small number of employees),[8] they are able to cut the price of a funeral to a bare minimum and still generate profit. This is possible because as a re-seller they can sell more funerals than one funeral home alone. That same lack of an own physical infrastructure means that expanding the business and thus generating more profit (i.e. scaling) is relatively easy, since it is possible to do that at little to no additional (= marginal) cost (Srnicek 2018, 48). Online funeral discounters do not enable hyperconsumption like Amazon, Uber or Airbnb do (Ritzer and Miles 2019, 12), at least not by the same customers, since funerals cannot be consumed endlessly by the same customer. However, they do somewhat succeed in "maximizing opportunities for consumption" (Ibid., 6) since they make it possible that more funerals are booked through their platform, so that, in sum, more funerals are purchased on their marketplace instead of on other marketplaces. This underscores the tendency towards market concentration, which is inherent to platform capitalism (Srnicek 2018, 11, 48), although they are still far from dominating the market.[9] Online platforms are further likely to offer on-demand services. Traditionally operating 24/7 hotlines, funeral homes have always been on-demand, and are thus especially prone to shifting into the online platform.

In his 2017 book on Platform Capitalism, Nick Srnicek presents an insightful taxonomy of (mostly US-American) platforms, which can serve as a useful heuristic device to gain a deeper understanding of online funeral discounters. In this taxonomy, online funeral discounters share most features with the fifth and last type, the lean platform. "In each of these areas, the important element is that the capitalist class owns the platform, not necessarily that it produces a physical product," he writes (Ibid., 34). I already discussed this element in detail: the online funeral discounters do not own their own physical infrastructure. Instead, they make use of the (idle) infrastructure of pre-existing funeral

8 AEON Life, for instance, had only 36 employees in total in July 2016, but operates in the whole country (source: interview with a representative).

9 It is estimated that online funeral marketplaces have a market share of 5–8 per cent (Yamamoto 2020).

homes. However, they do not just offer a platform where funeral homes could advertise their own services. Rather, they define intangible products, which have to be put into practice by the contracted funeral homes. In a sense, they "impose" the products, which they have defined, on the funeral homes who have agreed to work with the online marketplace under these conditions. This leads to a further standardization of the funeral, which has already been an element of pre-digital McDonaldization (see Ritzer and Miles 2019; Suzuki 2000, 2003), but now occurs at an accelerated speed and larger scale. Srnicek (2017, 2018) differentiates between the product platform, which owns the assets it rents out, and the lean platform, which does not own assets: "Zipcar owns the assets it rents out – the vehicles; Uber does not. The former is a product platform, while the latter is a lean platform that attempts to outsource nearly every possible cost" (Ibid., 45). In this regard, online funeral discounters are more similar to lean platforms like Uber and Airbnb: "'Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles […] and Airbnb, the largest accommodation provider, owns no property.'" (Ibid., 48) Since these are asset-less platforms, Srnicek also refers to them as "virtual platforms." However, in the case of AEON Life, there is a quite real and large retail company behind the funeral services provider. Uniquest and Yorisou rather fit the description of lean or virtual platforms. Srnicek adds:

> Yet the key is that they do own the most important asset: the platform of software and data analytics. Lean platforms operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained. (Srnicek 2017, 48)

This is the case with online funeral discounters. In order to run their business, they require a minimum amount of assets, yet are able to extract the minimum of commission fees. They control product, design, and marketing and with their nationwide reach, they have a high negotiating power. In this sense, they are not doing much more or differently than the MACs in the post-war era, but they have managed to cut the costs, make prices more transparent than them (although there have been some negative examples) and, most importantly, to cater to a demographic that is more comfortable with booking an on-demand funeral online than having to deal with door-to-door funeral home staff whose purpose is to build a long-lasting, stable relationship with customers living in the area.

Predictably, the phenomenon is not unique to Japan. In fact, the platform principle seems to be applied to funeral industries around the world and others have drawn comparisons between such online funeral discounters and lean

platforms of the so-called sharing economy. An article in *The Guardian*, for example, introduces an Australian funeral operator, George Inglis, who originally came from a completely unrelated field – sales – and makes excessive use of outsourcing, in a similar vein to the Japanese online funeral discounters introduced here (Hunt 2017):

> "If you'd told me years ago I'd be in the funeral business, I've probably have had you committed." In a change in direction in a 25-year career in sales, Inglis set up Picaluna funerals, serving the Sydney and central coast region of New South Wales, in September last year. It has no chapels, no hearses – no fixed infrastructure at all, in fact, and no permanent staff. Instead, Picaluna outsources all of the services involved with conducting a funeral – "sort of like the Uber of the funeral industry", says Inglis. (Hunt 2017)

Similar to the Japanese case, Inglis was also confronted with a funeral industry that was "confusing and costly." When applied to the funeral business, the lean platform model of Uber and Airbnb seems to cater to the need for cheap and price-transparent funerals.

Conclusion

> This ninth edition of *The McDonaldization of Society* is in many ways the most important and dramatic of all the revisions. […] From its inception in the early 1950s, and for several decades beyond that, the heart of the McDonaldization process lay in brick-and-mortar structures devoted to consumption (most notably, of course, the fast-food restaurant). However, its center has increasingly moved to the digital world, especially its consumption sites (most importantly, Amazon.com). While for the foreseeable future the vast majority of consumption will continue to take place in brick-and-mortar structures, an ever-increasing amount of it will occur online. (Ritzer 2019, 14)

Something has changed in the standardization of mass-consumption – after all, there must be a reason why George Ritzer (2019) introduces the ninth edition of his book *The McDonaldization of Society. Into the Digital Age* with the dramatic statement that it "is in many ways the most important and dramatic of all the revisions." Between the first edition of his book in 1992 and the most recent edition in 2019, much has changed in the ways consumption works and, while there is certainly some continuity, there is reason to believe that digitalization does not simply intensify and accelerate commercialization and standardization, i.e. it is not a mere augmentation of "brick-and-mortar" services (Ibid., 16). Instead, digitalization takes consumption to another level,

with new qualities that differ from how consumerism worked until the 1990s. This argument holds true both for the US, for Germany, and Japan.

While Ritzer and Miles briefly consider renaming McDonaldization "Amazonization" (Ibid., 11), they conclude that the rationalization processes described by McDonaldization apply to digital sites even to a higher extent than to brick-and-mortar structures. By comparing online funeral discounters with other platforms within Platform Capitalism, some salient features have become apparent. One central point should have become clear: although offering their services online does help the companies achieve significant levels of scaling – by making their services available to customers across the entire country they can achieve substantial growth without increasing the input of resources equally substantially – "platformization" means more than simply going online. Rather, "platformization" includes a certain business model that entails the radical outsourcing of assets, optimizing the use of the existing infrastructure instead of investing in a new one, elaborate product definition and marketing, price transparency, and the pursuit of the lowest possible price. Profound knowledge and experience in the field of funeral rituals is not at prerequisite for starting such a business, which explains why the main drivers of this new development are start-ups, companies from the peripheral industry (*shūhen gyōkai*) and outsiders (*igyōshu*). The innovation in this segment of the funeral industry does not come from new extras, but from the definition of a new product (or a re-definition/optimization of an existing one): the low-cost, fixed-price, customizable funeral available across the country. With this new product, they react to a growingly impoverished society, proving that necessity is the proverbial mother of invention.

By putting a price label on what was previously a non-transparent deal, these online funeral discounters severely disrupted the market. Just like Airbnb severely disrupted the hotel business all around the world, so Uniquest and the like disrupted the funeral business in Japan. The established funeral homes come under pressure and have to adapt to the new cost-consciousness among the consumers. Similarly, established companies in the hospitality industry were challenged by Airbnb and had to change their products and advertising, especially when Airbnb moved into the higher-priced segment. The fight for market shares even led to travel companies like TUI or hotel chains like Mariott copying the Airbnb business model and building their own platforms in order "to save what can be saved" (Hecking 2019). Interestingly, while Airbnb started out as a platform for cheap accommodation for young people, it gradually became more expensive and professionalized (Ibid.). I have shown above how online funeral discounters similarly manage to bridge the gap between low-cost funerals and the demand for individualization, which is attainable through additionally charged customization.

Following Ritzer and Miles (2019), we can conclude that the online funeral discounters are, in a way, completing – or carrying to the extremes – a process that started in the post-war period: the radical commercialization of the funeral. They manage to incorporate the growing demand for "individualized" (*jibunrashii*) funerals, while still being disproportionately cheap. Despite having only a small market share as of now, their lean platform business model leads to a downward spiral of prices and affects the funeral industry as a whole. In effect, they change the rules of the game and force the rest of the funeral industry to adapt and to reinvent itself. Where this pressure for innovation will lead the Japanese funeral industry is unclear; but it will certainly continue to be a fascinating field to observe in the years to come.

Several questions remain for future research. According to Srnicek, platforms "are an extractive apparatus for data" (Srnicek 2017, 34), with data having come "to serve a number of key capitalist functions: they educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms; they enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; they allow for the optimisation and flexibility of productive processes; they make possible the transformation of low-margin goods into high-margin services; and data analysis is itself generative of data, in a virtuous cycle" (Ibid., 30–31). It would be interesting to investigate whether and how online funeral discounters collect, analyse, and use data or what other features they share with – and how they differ from other platform companies.

Further, qualitative research at contract funeral homes of the platforms could ask how they see their role, how well the intermediary system works for them, how they see the future of the funeral business and how their customers respond to the double price structure.

Another question that should be addressed is whether and how these ultra-cheap online discount funerals change the attitudes that people have towards death, the deceased, or the funeral rite, and how this relates to philosophic or religious perspectives on the end-of-life.

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Comment By Goki Atoyama

This chapter examines a new-style funeral industry in Japan and offers a recent history of the existing Japanese funeral industry while introducing previous research on this theme. The work successfully shows how the business has developed and the role of outsiders in its development. However, as the author also mentions in the conclusion, I also think this research misses arguments about the history of Japanese traditional funeral culture to enhance the discussion of how the online platform has a considerable impact on Japanese funeral culture. I think this work is exceedingly important given that the world has been gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 and, consequently, it became difficult to mourn each death. Under such circumstances, we have seen the use of online funerary tools in the deaths of Covid-19 virus patients. I think that we must reconsider the relationship between death and digital technology, and this chapter makes a good start in this regard.

Comment By Luca Bruno

Dorothea Mladenova's contribution, "Platformization in the Funeral Industry: The Case of Online Funeral Discounters", is a seldom-seen perspective on the digitalization of one of the most corporeal matters of the human condition,

death. “Platformization in the Funeral Industry” focuses on “online funeral discounters,” intermediary companies relying on “a network of existing funeral parlours who are bound to offer standardized funeral products to the customers.” What I found most interesting about Mladenova’s work is her account of the progressive standardization of funeral practices driven by ever-encroaching digital technologies. Standardization is juxtaposed with an apparent increase in the possibility of customizing one’s ceremony, selected from what is a standardized list. Price is transparent, responding to the need of an ever-impoverished society. Beyond strictly economic aspects of these practices, what stems from platformization is the stabilization of choice along known and repeatable avenues: *everybody* gets the same options. No deviations from the prescribed courses are permitted. While the selection is abundant, there is no option beyond what is provided. There is nothing outside the platform, it seems, and works like Mladenova urge us to shift our gaze from products themselves, be it a video game, a hotel stay, or a funeral, to the platform.

Masako Hashimoto

Beyond Character Consumerism

A Manga Adaptation of *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* and the Problem of War Poetry[1]

Introduction

In Japan, where the manga[2] industry has been most prolific, numerous works of literature have been adapted into comics, anime films, and video games. These manga or anime adaptations exhibit prevailing cultural power due to their visual impact and accessible depictions of classical literature. For example, the 1974 TV series of *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* and the 1985 film adaptation of the juvenile literary work *Night on the Galactic Railroad* have gained greater popularity than their original source materials.[3]

In recent years, a new genre has developed within manga adaptations of literature: *bungō* manga (文豪漫画), which feature the great literary masters of early twentieth-century Japan. This chapter attempts to show how a genre of popular culture such as manga adaptation is conducive to the analysis of

1 Many thanks to Dr. Kanae Kawamoto of Kyoto University for her supportive advice in improving the structure of this article, and to Philomena Mazza-Hilway of the University of Chicago for editing and proofreading.

2 The Japanese word *manga* (漫画／マンガ／まんが) is written in kanji, katakana, and hiragana according to the context. The orthography is not determinable, but in this chapter, a general style is used except in citations and in bibliography.

3 *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (*Arupusu no shōjo haiji* ; アルプスの少女ハイジ) was based on *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre* and, written by Johanna Spyri in 1880 and 1881, respectively. The original novels are not read in Japan at all, but the characters of the animation are so popular that they can be seen in contemporary television commercials. The animated adaptation of *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (*Gingatetsudō no yoru* ; 銀河鉄道の夜) received the Ono Fujio Award of the Mainichi Film Competition, one of the most prominent awards for animation, in 1986. It is regularly broadcast as part of midnight TV programming. The original story was written by Kenji Miyazawa (宮沢賢治 1896–1933) and it remains unfinished after Miyazawa's death.

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previously undiscussed issues in Japanese literary studies. I attempt to conduct a subtle but stimulating discussion at the intersection between literary studies and representations of wartime in manga. This study focuses on Yukiko Seike's *bungō* manga *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* (*Tsuki ni Hoerannē* ; 月に吠えらんねぇ, 2013–2019) in the context of modern Japanese literary studies. The manga comically depicts how the protagonist Saku-kun, a model of Sakutarō Hagiwara, and many other poets struggle to create poetry within a fictional world.

The manga also confidently depicts those poets' involvement in war works. Increasingly drawing readers' attention, *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* unexpectedly succeeds in shedding light on the taboo topic of wartime poetry, as the comical depiction features the ability to disclose this taboo within a subcultural context. Since literature was employed as one of the most practical methods of propaganda throughout the Japanese Empire, especially during the time of the Asia-Pacific War, many poets willingly wrote works that functioned to raise the nation's morale and the people's admiration for the Empire of Japan. However, once the war ended and was succeeded by a significant wave of democratization, the propagandist works of these poets became an unspeakable topic in post-war Japan for a long time, and they still remain undiscussed in the Japanese literary world today.

Bungō manga not only increases younger generations' access to those writers' literary works, but also functions as an example of the pop cultural phenomenon of characterization (*kyarakutāka* ; キャラクター化). The phenomenon of *kyarakutāka* is distinct to Japanese subculture. *Kyarakutāka* is remarkable in post-war Japan as a function of the cultural industry, involving the consumption of characters who are either fictional or based on historical figures. The Japanese word *kyara* is not a mere abbreviation of the original English "character." In his foundational book on Japanese manga culture *Tezuka Is Dead*, Gō Itō describes the definition of *kyara* as not necessarily related to the original story of a figure or the attendant background that it is designed to promote; instead, a *kyara* can be independent from its context (Itō 2005, ch. 3). In terms of *kyara shōhi* (character consumerism ; キャラ消費), Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō argues that the Japanese consumption of *kyara* is circulates throughout Japan; so, it is not only a part of *otaku* culture (Saitō 2014).[4]

4 As BBC Future reported, the business of *kyarakutā* has greatly influenced Japan's economy. For example, *Kumamon* was originally a mascot of Kumamoto prefecture, but its popularity spread nationwide and it is used to stimulate economic activities throughout Japan (BBC Future, 2016).

In his well-known book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (Azuma [2001] 2009), Hiroki Azuma challenges the "theory of database consumption" that post-modern Japanese consume cultural contents just as they extract fragments of those contents from databases: unsystematically, without contextualizing them within their original background (Azuma 2001, ch. 2). Since the 2000s, his theory has been applied to critique a wide range of cultural phenomena, all of which are deeply influenced by the spread of the internet.

Likewise, each writer or poet appearing in *bungō* manga is consumed as a *kyara*. There is more than one historical reality, and fictional works are expected to differ from any reality. These depictions function to make the reader feel closer to these authors, as humane characters, and, by extension, to their works, as accessible, rather than the typical way that readers learn to relate to these authors as remote literary figures through school textbooks.

With its accessible status as a pop cultural production, *bungō* manga exerts a powerful potential for broaching delicate but important subjects in both society and history eloquently and humorously.

1 The increasing popularity of *bungō* manga

1.1 What is bungō manga?

Bungō, literally "literary giant" in Japanese, is a term that refers to great novelists or poets who were primarily active from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Prominent examples include Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata (川端康成 1899–1972), Nobel Prize nominee Yukio Mishima (三島由紀夫 1925–1970), and Sōseki Natsume (夏目漱石 1867–1916), known for the novel *I Am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa neko dearu* ; 我輩は猫である). In the process of developing modern Japanese literature, the works of *bungō* writers came to be acclaimed as serious literature. Although their works can be challenging for the average Japanese reader because of the language in which they are written, even now these texts are highly recommended as reading for educational or cultural purposes. In terms of academic importance, both the works and the life stories of *bungō* writers are a major focus within Japanese literary studies.

Bungō manga is opened to readers of any generation, as long as they are familiar with the "manga-fied" way of pictorial expression, for example, exaggerated facial expressions.[5] As mentioned above, it is read not only for

5 For example, Michael Abbott and Charles Forceville argue about visual expressions in manga and their specific meanings (Abbott and Forceville 2011). When we understand

entertainment purposes, but also for educational and cultural aims. For this reason, teachers and parents encourage children to read *bungō* manga, as well as *rekishi* manga (manga regarding historical stories ; 歴史まんが) or *kagaku manga* (manga containing scientific information ; 科学まんが) and they are considered recommended books.[6]

1.2 Four subtypes of bungō manga

There are four subtypes of *bungō* manga in Japan. The first and most important subtype is historical manga, which heavily references episodes in *bungō* writers' lives. However, these episodes are not necessarily related to the known historical chronology of their lifetimes, but often parodied in a subcultural context. Instead of sombre black-and-white portraits in school textbooks, these manga-fied writers are mostly depicted as comical and humane characters, which endears them to the reader, fostering a feeling of closeness. Since *bungō* writers existed in the real world, and not as fictional characters, it is not unknown for readers to create a fictional figure to fall in love with. For example, a reader may develop an infatuation with a particular handsome character in the manga and then try to research the *bungō* writer's history in a library to get more information. This type of manga potentially motivates the reader to read the *bungō* writer's difficult original works and to find them interesting. As a result, the reader comes to associate the *bungō* writer's work with that of the beloved character they encountered in the manga, and eventually will come to regard it as precious.[7]

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what is meant in manga, we decode specific representations in manga. Reading manga therefore demands an ability to understand its grammar. Many Japanese begin to read manga in their youth, so it is common for them to have the literacy for manga reading.

6 These kinds of manga are generally called *gakushū manga* (学習まんが). This genre of manga is expected to play an educational role for children. However, *gakushū* manga is sometime enjoyed by adults, too. A project, *Koremo gakushū manga da*! (*This is also manga for education!* ; これも学習まんがだ！) promotes the expansion of this genre by claiming that manga is well worth reading by all generations who want to be informed about important issues.

7 An example is the "rediscovery" of Shūsei Tokuda (徳田秋声 1872–1943), one of the most popular characters in *Bungō and Alchemist* (*Bungō to arukemisuto* ; 文豪とアルケミスト), originally an online game published in 2016 and also adopted into manga and anime (*Animemiru*, 2020). While Tokuda was a novelist of naturalism, his works have not been well-read. However, his popularity in manga works increased interest in his novels. A bookstore's blog regards the increased prices of some second-hand books by *bungō* as having an influence on the popularity of manga and *bungō* subcultural content

This subtype of *bungō* manga is fostered by the availability of richer and more detailed sources for creativity or re-interpreting than other works of fictional manga. In Japan, the reader can access most *bungō* writers' collected works and their biographies, including personal letters, diaries, private notes, and even school reports from their youth. Since these publications are available at libraries and online, such ease of access encourages both professional and amateur cartoonists to create and recreate historical *bungō* manga.

The second subtype of *bungō* manga is based on *bungō* writers' novels or essays. In this case, only their literary works are treated in manga adaptations, without reference to their biographies. In general, manga adaptations aid young readers in understanding both the plot and themes of literary works, as younger generations tend to be familiar with manga reading conventions. For example, teachers recommend that high school students read *Asaki yume mishi* (あさきゆめみし), a manga adaptation of the eleventh-century novel *Tales of Genji* (*Genjimonogatari* ; 源氏物語) in order to better understand the story. In addition, the cartoonist's vivid graphics, including impactful onomatopoeic words, can provide the reader with new interpretations of the *bungō* writers' difficult works.[8]

The third subtype of *bungō* manga serves as a guidebook that encourages the reader's interest in the original texts. In most cases, cute and funny characters, who are booklovers, explain why *bungō* works are worth reading.

In the fourth subtype of *bungō* manga, the story is a complete fiction, unrelated to any of the *bungō* writer's original work or life at all. For example, in *Bungō Stray Dogs*, characters named after existing *bungō* writers use magical powers and fight each other in a fictional world.[9]

(Shijōhanbunko [四畳半文庫], 2018). Such price increases are an example of a reaction to the "real" by *bungō* manga fans.

8 Many fans also like to visit the collaborative memorial archives of authors. Both in Tokyo and more rural areas in Japan, there are many small memorial museums dedicated to each *bungō*. Original houses where *bungō* writers actually lived a century before are maintained and open to the public today. *Bungō* writers in manga are indeed depicted unrealistically, but their depictions nevertheless preserve a kind of circuit to the world in which we live. Readers can thus modulate their views of how *bungō* figures operate both in and beyond the manga world.

9 *Bungō Stray Dogs* (*Bungō sutorei doggu* ; 文豪ストレイドッグ), created by Kafuka Asagiri (朝霧カフカ) and Sango Harukawa, (春河３５) has been published from 2012 to the present. Twenty volumes of the manga have been published by Kadokawa, and more than 80 million copies were sold by 2019, according to the official website. From 2014, the manga was novelized and adapted as anime in 2016. A theatrical adaptation also followed. *Bungō Stray Dogs* and its spin-off works represent one of the most famous *bungō* manga.

2 *Bungō* and war poetry

2.1 The role of bungō in the Asia-Pacific war

There is an unspeakable issue in the academic field of Japanese literature – *bungō* poets' involvement in the Asia-Pacific War. During wartime, they voluntarily assisted the Japanese Empire by writing numerous poems in admiration of the Empire and its "holy war." Under post-war democratization, this involvement on the part of both professional and amateur poets was largely ignored. During wartime, writing poems was regarded as an effective propaganda tool in the service of nationalism. According to Hideto Tsuboi, moreover, it was important that those poems were actively broadcast on the radio and sung or read aloud in order to increase a sense of national unity (Tsuboi 1997, chs. 8–9).[10]

Toshio Nakano argues that the cultural commitment of these propagandist poets did not begin suddenly. According to him, cultural mobilization for war formed steadily with the increase in popular and local songs after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, after which the Japanese people demonstrated their willingness to join in the mobilization, which, in turn, created a foundation for the acceptance of war poetry (Nakano 2012). Tsuboi argues that a fanatical movement automatically grew out of the mobilization, which developed pre-war Japanese poetry; indeed, he defines the war poems as "an inevitable result" in the history of Japanese poetry (Tsuboi 1997,11). He claims this war poetry movement advanced not only because of public fanatics and governmental expectations, but also because of the relative deadlock of modernist Japanese poetry. Modernist poetry had developed a heavily visual bias and emphasized technical styles such as the unnatural typography of kanji, hiragana, and katakana. These works were appreciated by the general public, who expected poems that were easy to read aloud and listen to, and so a large number of *minshūshi* (poems for the public ; 民衆詩) appeared in mainstream literature. These intelligible poems, addressed to the general public, including students and working-class people, gained popularity as a means for raising morale and acclimatizing the populace to the idea of sending soldiers to the battlefield. Writers were encouraged to produce propagandist war poems, even if they

10 Especially Tsuboi points to the importance of the power of recitations in the dissemination of war poetry. Recitations of war poetry were done on the radio regularly from December 1914. The broadcasts of war poetry had a strong influence on the public. In addition, recital meetings were frequently held, in which announcers and poets gave readings of war poems.

were not skilled in poetic composition, in the service of the Japanese Empire and the Imperial Army (Tsuboi 1997).

Within this historical context, the involvement of *bungō* poets was unavoidable. According to Tsuboi, their participation was not simply a question of unfortunate timing and circumstances, but rather that many of them voluntarily created war poems that played a decisive role in the national and cultural politic. While Tsuboi admits that many *bungō* poets devoted themselves to this "project" because the act of writing, even war poetry, fulfilled their essential passion for creation, he argues that they still bore a responsibility for their poetic themes, even during such difficult times (Ibid., 159–160).[11] The contemporary poet Tomio Sakuramoto (櫻本富雄 1933–) is critical of the war poets in this regard. He asserts that the poets were complicit in the popularization of war poetry and that they wrote the poems of their own free will.[12] According to Sakuramoto, the *bungō* poets' support for propaganda inevitably led to them being blamed.

2.2 Post-war attitudes towards war poems and the advent of bungō manga

After World War II, most Japanese literary scholars refrained from engaging with propagandist poetry or considering its potential literary merit. Referring to war poetry became a taboo, the aim of which was to protect the *bungō* poets' honour. When the *bungō* poets' complete collections were published, their war poems were intentionally omitted. In Japan, the field of literary studies relies heavily on authoritative collected editions, but the manipulation of information in this case stifled any discussion of the war poetry by these poets. Regarding war poetry as shameful also affected education in Japan. For example, Kōtaro Takamura (高村光太郎 1883–1959, a *bungō* writer and a sculptor who was the head of the Association for Cultural Contribution to the Asia-Pacific War, is well-known for his poems *Dōtei* (*Road* ; 道程) and *Chieko* (*Chieko-shō* ; 智恵子抄). Many of his works are featured in school textbooks, but none of his war poems ever make an appearance.

11 However, Tsuboi does not just blame the poets who joined the war poems movement. His main concern is what produced a sterile literature in wartime and how it related to a vulnerability in modern Japanese literature, a concern he shares with Hotsuki Ozaki (Tsuboi 1997, 166).

12 Sakuramoto continues to raise issues of responsibility for war poetry from the position of a current poet. He has published many books, including for children, that deal with the problematic relationship between war and literature. *Shijin to sensō* (1977) and *Kūhaku to sekinin* (1983) are among his most important works.

Thus, literature is easily affected by the circumstances in which it is created. The suppressing of such works discussed above also informs us how difficult it has been for researchers in post-war generations to conduct an unbiased overview of particular authors' works. Certainly, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to explore and research the extensive corpus of wartime armature and works and by unknown poets.

However, *bungō* manga offers a breakthrough, along with an opportunity for change, though perhaps unintended by cartoonists and unexpected by readers. *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* is a successful example of this breakthrough dynamic. Taking advantage of the impact of cultural representation in order to spark readers' interest, this *bungō* manga uncovers the taboo relating to war poetry while entertaining the reader with artistic manga depictions. I will describe the particularities of this manga in the next section.

3 *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* and its rhetorical power

3.1 Can't be Howlin' at the Moon and Sakutarō Hagiwara's Howling at the Moon

Can't be Howlin' at the Moon, authored by Yukiko Seike (清家雪子), was serialized in the manga magazine *Monthly Afternoon* (*Gekkan afutanuun* ; 月刊アフタヌーン) from November 2013 until September 2019.[13] In 2017, the manga won the 20th New Face Award in the manga division of the Japan Media Art Festival in 2017. The manga is named after *Howling at the Moon* (*Tsuki ni noeru* ; 月に吠える), the 1917 collection of verses by Sakutarō Hagiwara (萩原朔太郎 1886–1942), who is considered one of Japan's most preeminent modern poets. The book comprises 55 poems, essays by Sakutaro Hagiwara, Saisei Murou (室生犀星 1889–1962), and Hakushū Kitahara (北原白秋 1885–1942), and also features eleven illustrations by Kyokichi Tanaka (田中恭吉 1892–1915) and three woodblock prints by Koshirō Onchi (恩地孝四郎 1891–1955) with additional information about visual matters, as Hagiwara intended to make an illustrated book in the manner of *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley (Hagiwara [1916]1977, 13:137).[14]

13 *Monthly Afternoon* is a comic magazine marketed to young adults, and one of the most popular works serialized in the publication is *Parasyte* (*Kiseijū* ; 寄生獣), created by Hitoshi Iwaaki (岩明均) in the 1990s.

14 Hagiwara to Onchi in mid-October, 1916.

Howling at the Moon is a text with monumental status in the history of Japanese modern poetry, as it is recognized as the first instance of free verse poetry written in colloquial Japanese. In the poems, Hagiwara evokes his own emotions, including the sadness and joy of life, through images of bamboo, the moon, cherry blossoms, and chrysanthemums. While these motifs are found in Japanese literature at large, the collection is remarkable in the sense that Hagiwara deliberately casts these usually auspicious motifs in a negative light – as old, rotten, and uncanny – in order to express his feelings of loneliness and melancholy. His poems are occasionally criticized for being mysterious and even strange, but they are also acknowledged as having the power to touch the emotions hidden deep within the human heart.[15] Hagiwara wrote just one war poem, in admiration of the fall of Nanjing, and died before the height of the Asia-Pacific war.

3.2 Particularities of Can't be Howlin' at the Moon

On the first page of *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon*, the following narration outlines the relationship between Hagiwara's poetry and manga:

> The characters of this story were inspired by my impressions of the poetical works of modern Japan. Many episodes of the authors' lives are referenced, but these are embroidered with my impressions; thus those characters are not exactly like the real authors. This manga includes a lot of exaggerated expressions, but I would like you to understand that it was because I dealt with their works seriously, and sincerely respect all the authors of modern Japan (Seike 2014, 1:1 [my translation]).

The characters in *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* were inspired by Seike's personal interpretations of the poems. She says that she depicts neither *bungō*'s actual figures, nor faithful visualizations of the poems. Instead, the manga is intended to be her interpretation of poems in modern Japan, and, as such, it should be seen as a kind of offshoot of the poets' history.

The manga takes place in the fictional setting of the "Town of poetry," where the poets live while devoting themselves to their creative endeavours. All the protagonists, who are named after real *bungō* writers, are depicted as handsome young men, and are featured not only in funny episodes that

15 For example, "Bamboo" (*Take* ; 竹), "Sad Moonlight Night" (*Kanashī tsukiyo* ; 悲しい月夜), Chryanthemum Gone Rancid" (*Suetaru kiku* ; すえたる菊), and "Essence of Spring" (*Haru no jittai* ; 春の実体) also share the characteristics of *Howling at the Moon.*

originate in historical fact, but ones that are also based upon media critiques or academic research. The leading character, Saku-kun (朔くん), is modelled on Sakutaro Hagiwara and is portrayed as a sensitive person in touch with his emotions. Sai (犀) is modelled on Saisei Murou, who was Hagiwara's closest friend in real life. Haku-san (白さん), who is named after the famous poet and Sakutaro's teacher Hakushū Kitahara, is depicted as being in a romantic relationship with Saku-kun. This fictionalization is based upon the fact that Hagiwara had a kind of teacher-like affection for Kitahara that went beyond a mentoring relationship, while the latter valued Hagiwara purely as a great poet in his youth. Miyoshi-kun (ミヨシくん), who ranks highly as a fan favourite, is modelled upon Tatsuji Miyoshi (三好達治 1900–1964). Historically, he was one of Hagiwara's few disciples, evincing a sincere respect for Hagiwara.

Seike's manga emphasizes how these poets struggle with their creative works and with painful self-awareness in their relationships. Many of their poems are quoted as part of scenes in the manga, and they leave deep impressions upon the reader. Seike attempts to pay respect to the poets' works and to academic fidelity, providing a detailed bibliography at the end of each manga volume in a fashion that is quite different from other works of *bungō* manga.

Can't be Howling at the Moon is composed of many fragmented episodes in an unrealistic world. Within the manga, elements such as dreams, amnesia, time warps, and magic result in the reader perceiving the story as unsystematic, amusing, and elaborate.

3.3 The theme of war poetry in Can't be Howling at the Moon

According to Jun Ishiko, a large portion of post-war manga has been explicitly critical of war. Many established cartoonists, such as Osamu Tezuka (手塚治虫 1928–1989), Shigeru Mizuki (水木しげる 1922–2015), and Keiji Nakazawa (中沢啓治 1939–2012), have published works based on their own experiences during wartime in order to depict the misery of war for their readers, especially younger generations.[16] While a significant number of manga depict war in a

16 Osamu Tezuka created many manga that depict wartime tragedies not only in Japan, but also worldwide. In *Message to Adolf*, which first appeared in 1983 (*Adorufu ni tsugu* ; アドルフに告ぐ), Tezuka dealt with the crimes of the Nazis in World War II. Shigeru Mizuki is well-known as a pioneer of *yokai* (fantastic monsters ; 妖怪) manga; he lost his left arm in the battle of Rabaul when he was young. Keiji Nakazawa was the author of *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen* ; はだしのゲン), which was published from 1973 to 1987 and is an autobiographical manga based on his experiences as a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

heroic manner, or that praise the Pacific War, such as the series *Sensōron* (新ゴーマニズム宣言 SPECIAL 戦争論) written by Yoshinori Kobayashi (小林よしのり 1953–present), Ishiko asserts that the majority of war manga are written from a stance of pacifism (Ishiko 2016, 8–16). *Can't be Howling at the Moon* is included in this majority. Seike's advocacy for peace is not expressed openly, however, it is not difficult for readers to identify and to sympathize with it. Through funny episodes involving the *bungō* poet characters, the manga makes evident her love and respect for the modern poets who were subjected to the horrors of war. Her creative attitude is bolstered by her awareness of the cultural power of manga.

Likewise, *Can't be Howling at the Moon* is not a mere manga adaptation of the *bungō* poets' lives as entertainment. Rather, it is an attempt to deal with the creation of propagandist literature during the Pacific War. Saku-kun explains one shocking reason for the poets' creation of war poetry as follows:

> Poets who hang around in society, writing and writing without making money, who were also called good for nothing, were mocked in the hierarchy of the literary world, which places novelists on top. Poets have been looked down on as worthless dropouts from society. In wartime, it was the first time people saw us being useful. Our poems were known among a limited range of people, as they were unreadable. But once our poems were given the label of "patriotic" poems, they were broadcast and spread through the radio. The time of war poetry was the time when the largest number of poetry books were published; the first time when poetry answered a call from society. If the poetry that society judges to be the best is devalued in terms of artistic merit, I can say the peak of modern Japanese poetry is war poetry (Seike 2016, 5:140–142 [my translation][17]).

Representing this Saku-kun's lament, Seike implies why many poets joined the creative effort to uplift the Japanese Empire and its "holy war." Art, including poetry, includes not only sacred but also worldly elements; every form of art requires an audience to appreciate it. Moreover, during wartime, when any creative activities or productions were subject to governmental scrutiny, it was incredibly difficult to revolt against prevailing pro-war viewpoints.

17 「世間から離れたところでうだうだしていた詩人たちが/書いても書いても金にならず穀潰しと呼ばれ/金になるってだけで小説至上の文壇からも軽視され/落伍者と馬鹿にされ続けた詩人たちが/初めて社会に求められた/みんなの役に立った/一部にしか知られていなかった/民衆には意味の掴みにくいおれたちの詩も/愛国の詩との熨斗をつけられることにより/音波に乗って拡散していった/戦争詩の時代/それは詩集が最も多く発行された時代/はじめて詩が社会の要請に応えた時代/社会が最上と認めるものが芸術の価値ならば/日本近代詩の頂点は/戦争の詩なんだよ/」

Such dilemmas about creation remain universal. The contemporary poet Harumi Kawaguchi (川口晴美 1962–present) candidly confesses her struggles. She cannot refuse proposals to write poems on subjects that she would not otherwise engage with if only she had a wider readership for her works, insofar as any poet desires to have readers read their poems (Kawaguchi 2018, 47).

The manga includes parallel stories of Sai's travels, portraying his feelings of regret and helplessness on various battlefields, including Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. These parallel stories imply that many poets admired the war while keeping a safe distance from the dangerous reality of the frontlines. In one scene, an innocent girl, Haruko, flees with Sai into the jungle; she is eventually killed but he manages to survive. Sai's travels demonstrate the dilemma of the poet, suspended between the miserable reality of the battlefields and the imperative of providing cultural assistance to the state. In another scene, Sai holds a dead child in his arms while crying out that he has been writing admirations of the Japanese Empire, composed in his safe cottage surrounded by flowers, without having to face the harsh realities of the war. His painful scream gives voice to how the poets might have felt about their involvement in their prior glorification of the war once it had ended. Sai's travels invite the reader to imagine what happened in the field of literature in both pre- and post-war Japan.

4 *Bungō* manga and consumption culture

4.1 Otaku desire for kyara commodification

Bungō manga fans enjoy these works in the context of character commodification in the same manner as they consume other popular cultural products. Once *bungō* is created into *kyara*, *kyara* become a target of consumption. Then, the reader does not necessarily consider each *bungō* writer's historical existence. *Kyarakutāka* allows us not only to approach historical figures and events as they actually existed in the past, but also to consume them arbitrarily. As Hiroki Azuma writes in his database theory, character consumption is a subcultural activity in which the fans consume different fragments extracted from the works or personality without the original context, and find every fragment, like scattered dots, valuable. Just as in the consideration of a large database, the reader does not interpret the fragments beyond initial impressions, and, moreover, cannot grasp the entire narrative arc of the fictional world (Azuma 2001). Instead, the information in the database is fragmentary and mutable. The real *bungō* authors differ from their fictional characters, but this difference is necessary in order to transform them into desirable objects.

Moreover, the enjoyment of *bungō* manga is a manner of *otaku* subculture. Tamaki Saito describes how *otaku* understand that the real world is different from the fictional world of *kyara*, but they make them their desirable objects to love. *Otaku* never mix up realities with dreams (Saito 2006). In same way, the readers of *bungō* manga do not equate the real *bungō* authors with the fictional *kyara.*

This *otaku* method of consuming *bungō* manga is also related to that of *yaoi* or BL (boy's love), which denotes fiction featuring homosexual relationships between males, in particular for the consumption of female readers. These readers enjoy *bungō* manga by replacing historical friendships or mentoring relationships between *bungō* writers and their disciples with imagined romantic relationships. Since most *bungō* writers are men, *bungō* manga satisfies the female reader's desire for immersion in their fictional romances.[18]

Bungō writers in *bungō* manga can be understood not only as characters, but through the Japanese concept of *kyara* as defined by Gō Itō. Itō argues that, taken out of their original context, *kyara* gain independence, and are, in turn, consumed independently by readers. In the process, *kyara* can be manipulated and recreated freely in different contexts (Itō 2016, 117–119). Thus, the commodification of *bungō* is an example of consumption of *kyara.*

Once a reader comes to love a *bungō* writer as a *kyara*, the *bungō* becomes a mere symbol in accordance with the reader's arbitrary desires. Accompanied by creation and consumption, *bungō* manga demonstrates the inner workings of a widespread Japanese popular culture.

18 Many manga are based on the historically chauvinistic literary world of modern Japan, in accordance with the educational system that began in the Meiji era (1868–1912) and the publication conventions of that time. Yet, this male-dominated world provides a convenient backdrop for contemporary female readers who desire exciting and immersive fiction to meet their particular tastes. In some *bungō* manga, characters are depicted as handsome young men in the *shōjo manga* style. This shows that *bungō* writers can become a target for female readers who approach the male-dominated landscape as a resource for their own desires. A few female *bungō* writers, such as Akiko Yosano (与謝野晶子 1878–1942) and Ichiyō Higuchi (樋口一葉 1872–1896), also debuted in the literary world. In spite of the fact that many women and girls attempted to write poems, novels, or essays and contribute to magazines or newspapers, their works have remained relatively unexplored even in contemporary scholarship.

4.2 Grand narrative

While readers may not understand the entire story of *Can't be Howling at the Moon* due to its complex mixture of historical facts and sometimes unreal depictions by Seike – the story's structure is so complicated that it is often confusing – this complexity and unclear structure has two effects on the reader. One effect is that the reader simply fondly appreciates the appearance of their favourite *kyara* in each episode. The other is that instead of grasping the story, readers are motivated to float in the confusing state where they are left and also to imagine a bridge between episodes.

In other words, readers are attracted by the "grand narrative" that emerges within their confusion, as defined by Eiji Ōtsuka. This "grand narrative" (*ōkina monogatari* ; 大きな物語) refers to an overview, in the background, that is obscured by individual issues. Otsuka suggests that Japanese consumption since the 1980s has been shaped by fragments or events that arose in the world of the text with the specific purpose of achieving a totality that is hidden from our eyesight. He argues that what people actually consume is not any individual drama or object within the text, but rather the total system itself, which is a barely detectable framework in the background. This system is also a comprehensive background composed of fragments (Ōtsuka 2001, ch. 1).[19] Marc Steinberg translates Ōtsuka's idea of the consumption of grand narrative (*monogatari shōhi* ; 物語消費) as "narrative consumption" (Steinberg 2010, 109).

In the case of *kyara* consumption, practiced in the field of manga, the reader initially attempts to consume each individual *kyara* or a certain episode, as seen in *bungō* manga as well, but the readers are simultaneously consuming a "grand narrative" implicit in the manga as well as the explicit contents. Furthermore, this "grand narrative" plays a role in motivating the reader to consume the manga.

In other words, the "grand narrative" is consumed but also motivates the reader's desire because its presence "behind" the story arouses the reader's curiosity. This process has something in common with readers who thirst for the hidden framework that controls the world of *Can't be Howling at the Moon*. Specifically, readers imagine what is at play behind each complex manga episode.[20]

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19 Ōtsuka's concept of "narrative consumption" features in *Monogatari shōhiron* (1989), which becamea pioneer in the Japanese subculture discourse. Indeed, the concept influenced the development of Azuma's "database theory."

20 In addition, Seike shows her talent for demonstrating the technical manipulation of information and creative suggestion within the manga so readers remain gripped until

Not all manga have such a hidden framework; indeed, in some instances, it might actually obstruct the reader's enjoyment and immersion into the world of the manga. If readers notice that they are being controlled somehow by an invisible force, this might spoil their pleasure. However, as discussed, Seike appears to employ this "grand narrative" function in *Can't be Howling at the Moon* and reveals the existence of hidden framework. It is possible, for example, to interpret *Kami* (the Creator ; 神), who is supposed to dominate the "Town of Poets" universe, as an invisible ruler; indeed, as a metaphor for the "grand narrative." *Kami* does not appear as a particular *kyara*, but defines the worldview in the fictional town. *Kami* is selected from the poets in the "Town of poets," and he dominates the modalities of the world of manga. Given that Seike announced her manga to be created based on her own interpretation and overview of modern Japanese literature, it is safe to say that she is conscious of the effect of a hidden "grand narrative" that catches readers' attention. In other words, from a cartoonist's meta view, Seike metaphorically reveals the dominant function of the "grand narrative" in *Can't be Howling at the Moon.*

Thus, we can locate the definitive characteristics of *Can't be Howling at the Moon* at the intersection of two dimensions. One is the conventional way in which *kyara* is consumed based on the subcultural phenomenon of character commodification within Japanese pop culture, in which fragments of information become objects of consumerism for the *otaku*'s desire. In particular, romance, including the homosexual relationship between Saku-kun and Haku-san, becomes an object of pleasure for female readers. The second characteristic is a framework that secures the readers' desire to grasp the worldview hidden behind each episode and individual *kyara.* One of the strengths of *Can't be Howling at the Moon* is its ability to harness the reader's attention despite its confusing story, continuing to entrance them until they extract the "grand narrative." Together, these two characteristics reveal a tension between character consumption and narrative consumption. In other words, *Can't be Howling at the Moon* features a meta-framework formed by two opposing pillars of consumption culture: the manga is a criticism of culture, by culture.

Conclusion

My analysis clarifies two interpretive facets of *Can't be Howling at the Moon.* First, the manga takes up an issue that authorities on Japanese literary studies

the end. She is good at entertaining readers in terms of both modelling attractive *kyara* and controlling narrative in her work.

deemed "shameful" and thus have carefully sought to avoid in the post-war period by exercising the flexible power of popular culture. *Can't be Howling at the Moon* is neither an academic study, nor a thesis, and thus Seike can exercise her imagination and creativity freely within the context of popular culture. As she explains at the outset, the manga does not attempt to portray the historical reality of authors as they were, but to depict her own impressions of them, inspired by modern Japanese poetry. She intends her readers to regard the manga as a complete fiction based on a cartoonist's interpretation. In other words, this manga should be read principally as pop cultural entertainment. Readers can certainly enjoy *Can't be Howling at the Moon* in this way, but a careful reading also reveals the text's engagement with issues that lie behind our common understanding of *bungō* writers and Japanese modern literature, particularly with regard to the world of Japanese poems during wartime and the reasons why such poems are not widely known.

Secondly, as a popular cultural product, *Can't be Howling at the Moon* transcends simple character commodification as, ultimately, it tackles the problem of creation itself within a meta-framework. The manga demonstrates an innovative interpretation perspective combined with two types of consumption culture: *kyara* consumption and narrative consumption.

Manga has largely been understood as a part of popular culture that features dynamic and free expression. Its hilarious and eloquent approaches have the potential to deal even with sensitive issues that wider society tends to avoid. Likewise, *Can't be Howling at the Moon* is much more than an object of the character consumerism that encompasses Japanese cultural products. *Bungō* manga therefore provides new perspectives and critiques not only with respect to its influence on modern Japanese literature but also within an *otaku* cultural context.

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Comment by Hugo Gelis

Masako Hashimoto's study approaching Japanese wartime poetry through the lens of a twenty-first- century manga highlights the popular roots of texts that we instinctively classify as classical literature and high art. These patriotic poems were not published with any reverence: they were products of the cultural industry; propaganda aimed at the masses and broadcast on radio, a mass media.

It thus makes sense to see these shameful verses resurface not in scholarly publishing, which rarely acknowledges their existence, but in a popular manga. There, they are completely decontextualized: the appalling text is removed and only the poet – an appealing character – remains.

The reader's activity is "consumption of an historical figure," which cannot be explained by literary critics or cultural industries but rather by contemporary fan theories. Indeed, reading *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* as a biographical fiction would miss the point that, in fact, it is a derivative work itself, a *bungō* fanwork. Given that its follow-up manga, *Tsuki ni HoetaNnee* (月に吠えたンねえ, 2020) is published on Pixiv Comic, a digital platform pivotal to Japanese manga and fan culture, the tools of non-linear and subcultural consumption are even more relevant.

Comment by Zoltan Kacsuk

The chapter by Masako Hashimoto provides an interesting perspective on how popular culture offers ways to address parts of Japan's wartime cultural history that have been suppressed in the post-war period. The *bungō* manga phenomenon, in which the creators of the stories draw on the literary greats of modern Japanese literature and/or their respective works, is one such example, and allows for the problematic surrounding the war poetry of these former masters to be touched upon. Furthermore, in her discussion of one of these popular *bungō* manga, *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon*, Hashimoto highlights the *kyara* nature of the great writers as they appear in the series. Discussing

the fragmented nature of this manga's story building, she draws attention to the way it underpins the joys of both the database consumption of the *kyara*/characters and the narrative consumption of piecing together the larger picture of the world setting. Hashimoto's reading of *Can't be Howlin' at the Moon* thus not only provides a perspective on *bungō* manga's potential for engaging with controversial subjects, like authors' engagement with war poetry, but also offers an excellent case for the need to reconsider the either/or approach to theorizing the relationship between database and narrative consumption.

Tani Levy

Entering Another World

A Cultural Genre Discourse of Japanese *Isekai* Texts and Their Origin in Online Participatory Culture

Isekai, a whole new world?

In recent decades, anime and manga have increased their international recognizability, as a part of Japanese visual culture, among fan communities and in academia. As media that "emerged, and [are] still emerging, into the global market in conjunction with the new economies of globalization and informatization" (LaMarre 2002, 337) both are critically important as fields of observation within media studies. For Japan, anime and manga are important cultural exports that have established fan communities beyond domestic borders and continue to expand into different platforms, mainly online. Today, these media are reaching more audiences than ever, and their current trends deserve closer observation.

Since the early 2010s, the medial landscape of Japan has been confronted with a growing influx of stories about protagonists getting transferred to another, fantastical world, vastly different from ours, where they begin a new and adventurous life. As an example, the story *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* continues to be successful both as a light novel (Tables 2–6), anime adaption, and in many other media instalments. These so-called *isekai* stories, originating from writings posted online by amateur authors, often with subsequent adaptations into manga and anime, have gained remarkable attention and market share not only in Japan, but also overseas through online publishing, streaming services, and fan communities.[1]

Currently, isekai works are regularly discussed as stories with implied social and cultural concerns, possibly problematic qualities, and, above all, as a

1 How the medium of anime is thriving internationally can be observed in the recent trend of streaming services investing in it and producing original anime instalments (Reuters 2021).

Published in: Martin Roth, Hiroshi Yoshida, Martin Picard (eds.): Japan's contemporary media culture between local and global. Content, Practice and Theory. Heidelberg: CrossAsia-eBooks, 2021. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/crossasia.971.c12880

storytelling staple within different media (Margolis 2020). Among the anecdotal evidence for that observation is, for example, the genre's pre-emptive exclusion from a writing contest organized by *Bungaku Free Market* and *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*[2] with a view to achieving more variety among the submissions; or the pledge by the media publishing giant Kadokawa in a segment of its annual report from 2019 (Kadokawa, 32) to produce and broadcast at least one isekai anime every season.[3] The reasoning behind this decision was the extraordinary success of two isekai series *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* and *Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* Within the ever shifting "brand" of anime, these texts appear to be the most contemporary cluster among trending patterns that create areas of prominent discourse (Suan 2017, 65). Isekai, I would argue, is one such cluster that has been increasingly discussed among online fan communities and media publishers since the early 2010s and due to its growing number of adaptations into anime.

This article proposes the idea that isekai stories and their worlds are indications of a larger media trend within and driven by fan culture. They excel at fulfilling certain functions for their target audience, which results in their increasing occurrence among fictional works. In this chapter, I will first introduce the theoretical framework of genre analysis based on social as well as cultural dimensions of genre theory. Outlining an almost "mythical" nature of many contemporary genres, I will then focus on the cultural practices of creation, circulation, and reception as the main driving forces behind texts within the isekai genre, thus justifying a closer look at the sites of production, taking as an example the platform *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and its audience, which I locate in the otaku subculture.[4] For my concluding analysis, I examine two popular isekai texts: *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("That Time I got Reincarnated as a Slime") and *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* ("Re:ZERO – Starting Life in Another World") to identify the cultural and social implications therein and examine how their narrative elements meet the expectations and desires of their audience. Moreover, I aim to show how these elements mirror certain social practices that constitute them as a genre linked to otaku culture. Isekai

2 https://buntanpen.hinaproject.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

3 The serialization format of Japanese anime productions follows the rhythm of three-month-long "cours."

4 In this article, subcultures should be understood based on Itō Gō's concept of "mainstream subcultures" (2008, 138) indicating that Japanese manga, anime, or computer game fandoms have long lost their subversive or niche connotations and partly subsumed popular cultures. Mentions of pop and subculture should be understood with this idea in mind.

might be the most contemporary "anime world" or "anime culture" brought into existence by the very nature of anime, which, as Thomas LaMarre has described, "tend to unfurl anime worlds or anime cultures that blur the boundary between production and reception, with fans participating enthusiastically in the dissemination of products and in the transformation of media and narrative worlds" (LaMarre 2009, xiv).

Cultural Genre Theory

Isekai translates as "another" or "different world." While, according to the *Kōjien*, *sekai*[5] means "world" in the strictest sense of the word, as a spatial dimension for sentient beings to exist in, *i*[6] denotes something "different," "unusual," "strange," and "non-conforming" in contrast to something generally accepted. As a genre, isekai describes a primarily Japanese phenomenon within the domestic popular cultural landscape, manifested in written forms, manga, or anime. The majority of isekai stories originate in so-called light novels (*raito noberu*). Without an exact definition, the marketing term describes today's isekai as partly illustrated novels, in an easy-to-read format, whose main target audience is teens and young adults (Enomoto 2008).

Today, an abundance of texts, both light novels and anime adaptations, with striking similarities, seem omnipresent in the current popular cultural media landscape of Japan and beyond. Critics debate about "too many isekai" or even "isekai posing danger to the light novel market" (Margolis 2020). The situation suggested is similar to Schweinitz's (1994) impression of "dense reoccurrence" and "schematic narration" within classical Hollywood cinema, tempting us to perceive genres, and isekai specifically, as "intertextual structures of invariance," only ever containing iterations of the same "conflicts, themes, and narrational patterns" (Ibid., 107). While there is some truth to this statement, this view on genre in general is widely considered outdated (Müller 1995; Schweinitz 1994; Stam 2000). In the context of anime, the term *sekai* (world), from traditional kabuki and bunraku, seems more applicable, as has been elaborated by Stevie Suan (2013). *Sekai* are, in contrast to the conventional concept of genre, particular repetitive formulas "in which the setting, the characters, and plot lines were previously decided upon" (Ibid., 94). These formulas would be familiar to the audience before experiencing a play and could be given a

5 世界 (Shinmura 2018, 1623).

6 異 (Shinmura 2018, 124).

"certain twist" (*shukō*) to become new iterations that were enjoyed within a specific *sekai*.

The adequate definition of genre, and the theory that is accompanied by it, depends on practice, purpose, academic tradition, and discursive context (Chandler 1997). Jason Mittell (2005, 39) provides a summary of different theoretical perspectives on genre, categorized by the three guiding questions of "definition," "interpretation," and "history." "Questions of definition" aim at identifying the central elements that constitute a given genre by "examining texts to delimit the formal mechanisms constituting the essence of a given genre" (Ibid.). This process of attempting to provide elaborate definitions of genres has been repeatedly deemed difficult, if not impossible (Chandler 1997; Stam 2000; Neale 2012), as it runs into certain difficulties like "extension," "normativism," "monolithic definitions," or "biologism."[7] However, as instances of repetition and difference, genres have narrative *formulas* that repeat narrative elements to fulfil the expectations of the viewers, but also include variations that keeps the viewers interested (Neale 2012; Suan 2017). These formulas, including their ability to shift within different iterations, can be identified as the general narrative structures of texts, without determining what, for example, isekai must be in any given instance. "Questions of interpretation" look at the textual meanings of genres and situate them within larger social contexts. Utilizing cultural studies, these are questions I will extrapolate in this chapter, with a focus on the mythical character of genre and its social function, following the studies of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Finally, "questions of history" focus on genre flexibility over time through specific cultural conditions. In the present chapter, I am not searching for a (possibly far-reaching) isekai lineage, instead I focus on isekai as a phenomenon bound to contemporary media developments and the means of creation and circulation they are emerging from. As emphasized by Mittell (2005), media analysis should focus on looking beyond the text as the locus for genre, and instead "locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (Ibid., 43), thus justifying an exact observation of these fields. Even if genres are categories of texts, they are not constituted by, or intrinsic to them since they are unable to interact on their own. Mittell states that "genres exist only through the creation, circulation and reception of texts within cultural contexts" (Ibid.).

For this observation, I will introduce the concept of "genre as myth," which has generally gained importance in the popular arts (Grindon 2012;

7 These problems are described in more detail in Daniel Chandler's *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (1997, 2).

Schatz 2012). Based on the social studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Altman 2012), this perspective parallels the repetition characterizing genres to the retelling of myths in oral traditions, addressing them as modern "folktales" that portray social problems as dramatic conflicts. In this sense, each individual text is a retelling of the myth, each offering a new opportunity for an imaginative resolution of these problems. However, while the myth model of genre is prominent in genre research,[8] scholars are making different observations as to its function, particularly in relation to the audience. Thus, it has bifurcated into two perspectives of *ritual* and *ideological* approaches.

The ritual approach is mostly concerned with the audience's experience of specific social conflicts and their resolution that is offered within texts. It attempts to explain the popularity of genres through the satisfaction or catharsis it can provide to the audience, which has the desire to mitigate the social concerns underlying the texts of a genre (Altman 2012; Grindon 2012). It addresses the usefulness of genres, which Müller (1995, 116) exemplifies with the term "social utility value," which describes a genre's ability to fulfil certain social functions better than other genres so it can "develop, assert itself and spread." This approach also attributes agency to the audience, arguing that it can influence the media landscape, at least over time. By choosing the films or series it favours, the audience reveals its preferences to the institutions, thus causing them to produce media that mirror their desires and provide social value (Altman 2012). As the counterpart, the ideological approach addresses the economic or political interests of media-producing institutions for social control, as an attempt to distract from the real nature and causes of prevalent social concerns. At worst, it implies "deceiving or seducing the audience into believing in a simplistic and ineffective resolution" (Grindon 2012, 48). While both approaches appear to be contrary to each other, Altman (2012) argues that these approaches can work in conjunction, as it can lead to "extraordinary energy generated by the play of contradictory forces" (Ibid., 31). Taking both approaches into consideration like this, genres enjoy greater popularity when they are able to carry out both functions simultaneously: fulfilling the ritual satisfaction for the audience and social control as part of an institutional agenda.

Since the origin of isekai can be located in fan-based media production, I will focus on the conception of ritualistic reception while, to a certain degree, both ideas can be at work here. The subsequent analysis will be an in-depth examination of the following three aspects that, by interacting with one anoth-

8 Most discussions in this context refer to traditional Hollywood cinema as their subject (Altman 2012; Neale 2012).

er, constitute the genre of isekai: First, the audience, located in otaku culture, and its particular mode of reading fictional works, as has been established through the literary studies by Azuma Hiroki; second, the production, in order to answer the question of origin and distribution. I intend to indicate how isekai stories are results of democratized production within participatory culture, and how they become part of larger media enterprises. Considering the findings of the first two steps I will, thirdly, analyse two isekai texts; specifically, their plots, characters, and settings. Focusing on storytelling elements, I will show how shared characteristics in these aspects amount to a narrative formula, while also pointing out key differences in how they provide a solution to the narrated conflicts.

Audience: Otaku and database consumption

According to cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2009, 4) "any attempt to consider seriously the contemporary conditions of Japanese culture must include an investigation of otaku culture." Azuma perceives otaku to be one manifestation of a larger trend towards the postmodernization of culture in Japan. Based on this assessment – the fact that many discourses mention otaku as important actors within Japanese popular culture, specifically anime (LaMarre 2009, 2018) – and because isekai texts link to them in different ways, I identify otaku as one of the main audiences for isekai texts.

The cultural activities of otaku are especially visible in Akihabara (Morikawa 2003; LaMarre 2018), one of Tokyo's major shopping districts for anime, manga, and videogames. Kaichiro Morikawa links the architectural trends within this district, with its opaque, windowless buildings, to the "the personalities of the people who go there, rather than function in the classic sense of the term" (Morikawa 2008, 124). As otaku, these people, "confine themselves in their hobbies and icons" (Ibid.).

This "personalized city" is "inhabited both by otaku and anime characters" (LaMarre 2018, 201). In such an environment, otaku and the transmedia characters from the manga, anime, and games that they can encounter there, are on an "equal footing" (Ibid). The exact term Morikawa uses for these closed-off social spaces is *isekai*, which is crucial for observing the genre of the same name and its function in a social context. It enables us to read this social practice of going to Akihabara, entering comic shops and arcades, engaging with icons from popular cultural texts, as "visiting another world." Morikawa (2008, 125) confirms this idea by stating that the case of Akihabara could signal a phenomenon where a "city is simulating cyberspace."

This idea establishes a discussion about the relations between reality and fiction, or, in other words: "the real world" and "another, fictional world." This idea is supported by Shinji Miyadai (2011, 236), who associates the social practices of otaku with the "realization of fiction" or "transformation into another world," which becomes evident and essential regarding the isekai genre.

The importance of otaku as the audience also becomes clear through their "database consumption," which Azuma (2009) established as their distinct way of perceiving texts based on their "excessively detailed knowledge about non-existent fantasy or media worlds" (LaMarre 2018, 196). This mode of reception is built upon the "narrative consumption" of Ōtsuka Eiji (1989) and implies the consumption of the database of otaku culture as a whole. The recipients are aware that works of fiction are simulacra with a complex layered database of characters and settings behind them. Each of those layers is open for reception to them, including a single work (a small narrative), a worldview behind it (a grand narrative), or consuming characters and settings (a grand non-narrative). This idea, as a practice of fan consumers, becomes observable on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, a web platform where many contemporary isekai texts originate. Here, every layer of the database is accessible through search engines and key words.

Understanding where the website came from and how it functions creates historical context and possible causes for the success of the isekai genre.

Production: The participatory culture of *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*

The beginnings of light novels can be situated in the self-published works of fan consumers creating both fan fiction and original works on personal blogs and websites. This so-called *dōjin* culture and the works emerging from it, often derivative in nature, are identified as an important aspect within otaku culture (Azuma 2009). It includes rereading and reproduction of original manga, anime, and games sold in the form of fanzines, fan games, and fan figures. This situates the movement in the larger concept of *participatory culture*, as conceptualized by Henry Jenkins (2006), as three, intersecting trends leading to more active consumption: First, the emergence of "new tools and technologies" that help fan consumers to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content." Second, the existence of subcultures promoting "Do-It-Yourself" media production and publication. Third, economic trends of horizontally integrated media conglomerates encouraging the circulation of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media types (Ibid., 135–136). In Japan, the third trend is known as *media mix* (*media mikkusu*), which describes the development of media franchises across multiple media types over long periods of time. Specified as the *anime media mix* by Marc Steinberg (2012), it denotes transmedia

storytelling between anime television, manga, and merchandise items within Japanese popular culture. Within this trend, the web platform *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* ("Let's Become a Novelist") has gained importance since the 2010s as a platform of participatory culture. Today, it plays a crucial role in the origin of many franchises within the Japanese media mix, including isekai stories.

Shōsetsuka ni Narō began as a personal project by the university student Umezaki Yusuke, in 2004, as a centralized platform for light novel creators to post their works and better access for readers. In 2010, he founded the company Hina Project to corporatize the platform (Okada 2014). Around April 2019, the site had two billion page views each month,[9] with 14 million unique users. Today, there are close to 800,000 works posted and over two million registered users.[10] The source material of most anime reviewed within this chapter originated as light novels on this platform. The concept of the website is simple and free: anyone who registers can write any kind of fiction and upload it for other users to read, review, and rate, which leads to statistical insight available to the creators. This results in a community mainly consisting of amateur authors, whose fictional works gain or lose popularity based on trends set by the community's reading habits. Through participation by voting, reviewing, reconstructing, and congregating as fan communities around certain stories, they determine their success. With enough popularity, these stories can gain the attention of large media publishers, which, in turn, adapt these into manga and anime to commercialize them in the media mix.

For readers, the site gives an immediate overview of the available genres, their subgenres, and a monthly ranking in each of them, with isekai being an established category alongside other familiar categories: General (*sōgō*); romance (*renai*); fantasy (*fantajii*); literature (*bungei*); science fiction (*SF*); miscellaneous (*sonota*); and other world reincarnation/transference (*isekai tensei/teni*).[11] The site also provides an elaborate search engine[12] to assist users in finding stories by including or excluding the aforementioned genres, subgenres, and a plethora of keywords that can describe a story's tendency (*keikō*), characters (*tōjō kyarakuta*), setting (*butai*), epoch (*jidai settei*), or various elements (*yōso*).[13] This multitude of detailed search options signifies two things: first, it addresses questions of definition, the dilemma of categorizing texts that can

9 Based on an interview with Hirai Miyuki (2019a), current director of Hina Project.

10 https://syosetu.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

11 https://syosetu.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

12 http://yomou.syosetu.com/search.php; accessed 12 March 2021.

13 These elements include very specific, situational tropes such as game (*gēmu*), military (*miritarii*), or even harem (*hāremu*).

actually belong to multiple genres whose different themes and elements overlap. Second, it acknowledges the users' demand for certain types of information, including those unique to their fan culture, which are deemed helpful or desirable when they browse fictional works. Based on this detailed information, users can perfectly know what to expect from each work and find their own niche among all these stories. The usage of these systems mirrors the practices described by Azuma (2009) and LaMarre (2002), where consumers' narrative experience begins to resemble the "experience of informatization itself" (Ibid., 337).

While *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* represents a viable venue for today's amateur authors to publish works outside of the top-down corporate media distribution, its specific role for the emergence of the isekai genre needs to be explained. Some attribute the general rise of the light novel industry, which Saito Satomi describes as a "curious return in content-delivery media from audio-visual media to older text media" (Saito 2015, 144), to the success of *Sword Art Online*. Kawahara Reki started serializing the series on his own homepage in 2002, before it was republished by Dengeki Bunko in 2009. Its successful anime adaption in 2012 caused a rise of web novel publications and their adaptations into the larger media mix, making it one of the pioneering works for the commercialized production and circulation process of light novels we see today. It has also been voted the most popular light novel of the 2010s (see Table 1) by the guidebook *Kono raito noberu ga sugoi!* ("This light novel is amazing!"). *Sword Art Online* emerged from a lineage of survival type stories (*sabaibukei*) and while, strictly speaking, not an isekai story, it still thematizes the relation between the "real world" and an "imaginary world" that is rooted in popular culture and operates under different rules. The characters, some of whom could be described as "game otaku," must navigate and survive in a virtual game world. The text addresses their "awareness of belonging to multiple worlds – but not belonging to any one world" (Saito 2015, 144). From the nature of such stories, isekai emerged as the most popular category, determined by popular opinion of fan communities, to tell stories about a Japanese youth and their social concerns, trying to find their identity within different worlds. In popular cultural discourse, isekai, and other stories with a similar narrative formula, are contemporarily referred to as *narō-kei*, based on their origin on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. However, it is an ambivalent term, sometimes used derogatorily for the overwhelming trend of these texts. The web platform does not officially use it and even wants to avoid it in order to promote its variety of different fictions (Hirai 2019b). Still, the top ten most popular stories on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* are, in fact, isekai stories (see Table 2).

Participatory culture, media mix, database consumption; all these terms denote a shift that caused the boundaries between production and reception

to blur, where "producers are, above all, fans; and fans are budding producers" (Lamarre 2006, 367). A fan-based light novel can be adapted into manga, anime, a game, or vice versa since there is no conventional order anymore. *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* represents a crucial step in this shift, as a dynamic web platform where readers, writers, and publishers are provided with efficient tools and statistics to set these intricate circuits of multi-layered media production into motion. Here, the creation and circulation of media is even further democratized with audiences being able to determine more directly which texts of fiction will thrive within the media mix. These texts, as the analysis will show, often feature fan characters or otaku as their protagonists, which suggests that *isekai* stories could be understood as works made by fan consumers for fan consumers. However, the acquisition of fan-based source materials through big publishing corporations marks a shift from subcultural media creation merging into pop cultural media distribution. I argue that these observations of audiences gaining agency confirms the idea of the isekai genre fulfilling a ritualistic function.

Texts: Profiling the isekai genre

In order to choose a group of texts for the analysis, a bottom-up approach, according to Hickethier (2002) was used. Isekai stories are told across many different formats within the larger media mix, with anime adaptations often being the instalment that proves their success. Additionally, anime make it possible to examine the aesthetic choices for a story's world and characters at large, within the bounds of conventional film analysis. For that reason, the goal was to find available anime adaptations with their source material being light novels on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. Several rankings from guidebooks, community websites, and market data (see Tables 1–6) have been evaluated to identify several noteworthy texts, based on their popularity among viewers and their economic success. Most of these isekai anime have been reviewed for a general understanding of the genre, with the awareness that it is impossible to determine a text corpus with clear objectivity. Ultimately, the two anime series *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("That Time I got Reincarnated as a Slime) and *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* ("Re:ZERO – Starting Life in Another World") were chosen. They will be simply referred to as *TenSura* and *Re:Zero* in the following, which are the established abbreviations in fan discourse.[14] Both

14 There is an infamous tendency of light novels towards having conspicuously long titles. Like the blurb of printed texts, they directly give content information about the

stories are performing well in terms of light novel sales, placing second and third in the *Oricon News* statistics for 2020 (see Table 4). On *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, *TenSura* is the most popular story among all web novels, with *Re:Zero* following in fifth place. In the following, I will provide short synopses of both texts to introduce their general narrative structure.

Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken

TenSura started in 2013 as a light novel by author Fuse on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and was licenced by Micro Magazine to be published since 2014. In 2018, it received its first anime adaptation with 24 episodes, under the direction of Kikuchi Yasuhito.

The story follows Mikami Satoru, a 37-year-old general contractor from Tokyo, who gets stabbed on the street by an assailant while protecting one of his friends and work colleagues. With his dying breath, he reminisces about the missed opportunities of his life, one being that he never had a girlfriend, and he asks his friend to destroy his computer's hard drive. After his death, he awakens in a dark cave, realizing that he has been reincarnated into a slime in another world. As Satoru died, his pain and regrets were interpreted into many powerful, "game-like" skills that keep evolving and give him a leg-up in this new environment, despite his appearance as a harmless slime. After adopting the new name "Rimuru," he leaves the cave and is increasingly recognized as a powerful entity by different ancestries of monsters inhabiting this other world. The story progresses with Rimuru founding his own nation and inviting more and more monsters, developing a progressive town with him as the leader figure.

Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu

Author Nagatsuki Tappei began writing the story on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* in 2012 before it was licenced, in 2014, by Media Factory, a brand company of Kadokawa, with illustrations by Ōtsuka Shin'ichirō. The anime adaption's first season, directed by Watanabe Masaharu, started airing in 2016. The story fol-

light novel to users and, within their web-based platforms, provide important information for tagging and search engines.

lows Subaru Natsuki, a high-school student and shut-in (*hikikomori*),[15] who, on leaving a convenience store in the middle of the night, is suddenly summoned to another world. Finding himself in a medieval marketplace, he struggles to orientate himself in this new environment and receives support from a silver-haired half-elf girl, who later introduces herself as Emilia. After learning that Emilia is searching for an important artefact, Subaru decides to help her investigate. Both get attacked and killed in the process, but in the next moment Subaru finds himself alive again some hours in the past. While trying to help Emilia again and figuring out the events around him, he dies several more times, realizing he has gained the power to return to a certain point in time with his memories intact. After successfully aiding Emilia to retrieve her insignia, he learns that she is a candidate for the next ruler of Lugunica, the kingdom he has been summoned to, and is received into the mansion of Emilia's supporter, the margrave Roswaal L. Mathers. Living there, Subaru meets the other residents and, for the first time, finds friends and allies he never had before. He decides to use his newfound ability to protect the ones closest to him and help Emilia in her ambition to become the next queen, but suffering the pain inflicted on him every time he dies and being the only one to remember everything from his former lives.

Transfer to another world: The narrative formula

The central plot element that appears to be a given in all contemporary isekai stories and that comprises the core of their narrative formula, is the transfer to another world that exists in parallel (and is similar) to ours. The transfer can occur through different means: a magical portal; reincarnation; or the power of a godly entity. These setups already offer clues about the narrative logic of an isekai text and raise questions about greater cultural concerns. In general, isekai stories can be categorized by three ways in which the character moves to the other world: transfer (*tenii*); summoning (*shōkan*); or reincarnation (*tensei*). *Tenii*, which simply describes a movement from one place to another and *tensei*, the reincarnation, are the two main categories in isekai, according to *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. A prerequisite for reincarnation is evidently the protagonist getting killed, either by accident or on purpose. The reasons for their death, including that of Satoru, tend to be the consequences of a malfunctioning society, and

15 "Acute social withdrawal" has been recognized as a social problem among youth since the 1990s (Saitō 2013).

include variants of murder, death from overwork (*karōshi*),[16] or the recurring trope of a truck hitting the main character.[17] *Shōkan*, strictly speaking, is a form of *tenii,* but implies a more specific plot device: the interaction between the protagonist and their summoners. This can often include a *call to action* from the protagonist's summoners, as they might need their help to defeat a greater evil threatening the world. In *Re:Zero*, Subaru suddenly appears in the other world, and who has summoned him and for what reason becomes an underlying question.

Regarding the main characters, both analysed anime omit an initial exposition of their protagonists' backgrounds and only provide a few clues to the viewer about their characteristics. In the case of Satoru and Subaru, these are reminiscent of otaku stereotypes. Satoru laments about "dying as a virgin"[18] as he was approaching his forties and asks his friend to destroy his hard drive, implying it contains media or a browser history he does not want other people to see, even after his death. Subaru is first shown in a convenience store, browsing through a manga magazine, sighing at the sight of two high schoolers passing by outside. In both cases, the protagonists are depicted as social rejects, struggling with the society they live in and with a hint towards a connection to anime and manga. As for their appearances, they join the ranks of young male protagonists with short, black hair appearing in most of these texts. The light novel even describes Subaru, whose signature attire is a track suit, as "so ordinary that he could be lost instantly in a crowd of people."[19] These characteristics make the protagonists replaceable in a way and, as a consequence, more available for character identification.[20] Both protagonists, through whose perspective the audience explores the story world, are part of the subcultural group of otaku, which is affirmed as both stories progress.

As the transfer to the other world occurs, the protagonist usually undergoes a transformation that places them in a position of enormous power within

16 Death from overwork is a phenomenon observed in Japanese work culture with reasons being long work hours and heavy workloads (Kanai 2009).

17 These scenes are oftentimes said to be references to incidents like the 2008 Akihabara massacre, where a man drove a truck into a crowd and went on to stab bystanders on the street (Kyodo News 2008).

18 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:05:05).

19 *Gunshū ni magirereba isshun de miushinaisō na hodo bonyōna mitame da* (Fuse 2013–2016).

20 Identification with a media character can be thought of as a feeling of psychological connection to the character while maintaining a sense of distinction. It may include temporarily becoming the character, experienced as a sort of perspective-taking activity (Reysen et al. 2020).

the other world and affirms their nature of a player/reader/consumer. There are generally two ways of this happening in the plot: the first is the protagonist gaining a skill or power that is outstanding according to the rules of the other world. The second is a set of skills, bits of knowledge, or sometimes a piece of technology that they bring over to the new world that will become immensely useful. In the latter case, it is not the transformation of the character, but the change of circumstances that makes them powerful. In *TenSura*, Satoru gains two unique skills as a slime that repeatedly act as dei ex machina to solve any problem or conflict the protagonist is faced with. The first, "great sage" (*dai kenja*), is an internal advisor that provides explanations to each of the world's phenomena and aspects. The second, "predator" (*hoshokusha*), comprises several skills allowing Rimuru to absorb any kind of material that he can store indefinitely, analyse, and craft items with. He can also absorb and analyse living beings, which lets him take over their skills or mimic them. In addition, he can live without food or sleep and does not experience pain. Altogether, this results in a ludicrous plot device that constantly evolves and inhibits serious conflicts or challenges for the protagonist, which stands in contrast to the power Subaru gains in *Re:Zero*. "Return by death" is no equivalent of immortality but only gives him the opportunity to try again from a certain point in time with the knowledge of everything that has happened before each of his deaths. Subaru has to utilize his average abilities, which stay unchanged after he is summoned again and are often emphasized for humorous purposes. When the events are unfolding once more, he has to find a way to succeed and to keep the ones closest to him alive. In comparison to Rimuru, he certainly has to struggle more through trial and error, which for him means to die over and over again and to suffer both physically and mentally in the process.

TenSura and *Re:Zero* both show different approaches to the ritualistic function of generic repetitions. First, they thematize the protagonists as otaku characters and the social problems they have to struggle with in modern Japanese society. They are either missing a partner or social bonds. Second, they provide a resolution to these struggles throughout the story. *TenSura* provides more of a "wishful identification"[21] through a protagonist who can effortlessly solve any of the world's problems with his disproportionate abilities (not to mention him being a shapeshifting slime that, in terms of character identification, is adaptable to the audience's ideas). When it comes to power structures, *Re:Zero* utilizes more balanced plot devices and also portrays Subaru's ambivalent emotions

21 "Wishful identification" describes the longing of being or acting like a fictional character. It is associated with parasocial interactions and other fan behaviour (Reysen et al. 2020, 75).

and struggles: these traits did not suddenly disappear with his transfer to the other world. He still has to overcome his social problems after being summoned to the other world. Together, both texts offer a flexible range of modes for exploring the underlying social problems that sustain them, explaining one of the genre's appeals for the target audience (Grindon 2012).

Supporting characters and the sociality in isekai

Based on the observations of Azuma (2009), the cast of characters within a story, their aesthetics and how their dialogues are written, play an important role when it comes to the fascination of manga and anime. The same should be true for isekai texts. Examining characters in both texts with regard to their designs, which, as Azuma (2009) argues, are simulacra consisting of many different appealing elements from the database, I will also illustrate how they are portrayed from the audience's point of view and identify their role within the character constellation.

Azuma (Ibid., 47) states that the "importance of the narrative has declined" in favour of characters becoming more important to the point of "character supremacy" in the context of otaku culture, in which fans are even engaged in parasocial relationships with characters of the texts they perceive.[22] As a result, a database of *moe*-elements[23] comprising these character representations has been established, entailing recurring aesthetics like costumes, hairstyles, or accessories, but also personality traits or patterns of speech. These elements, which are inestimable and each with its own history, have been created to "stimulate the interest of the consumers" (Ibid., 42), its function lying in the visual pleasure it provides, which is observable in many different kinds of media. Both analysed texts contain a multitude of character elements fitting these patterns.

TenSura, in general, features a colourful arrangement of different character designs and costumes, including occasional anachronisms. The childish, overly cute demon lord Milim provides an example visualizing how character designs

22 In contrast to parasocial interactions that are more temporary in nature, parasocial relationships are considered more continuous and have been observed to include sentiments such as "companionship, perceived similarity, empathy, identification, and attraction" (Giles 2002; Tsay and Bodine 2012, as cited in Reysen et al., 73).

23 *Moe* is a slang term coming from the verb *moeru* (萌える), meaning "to sprout" (Shinmura 2018, 2900). It describes attachment, or "budding" emotions of affection that people can feel towards fictional characters, resulting in a parasocial relationship.

seem to be paramount in these texts. Despite being introduced as one of the most powerful beings in this world, her appearance and personality stand in humorous contrast to this: she acts in both a passionate and simple-minded way and is constantly distracted by small things like food or sweets. Rimuru utilizes this, gaining her friendship in the process. Her standard attire consists of ludicrously revealing clothing that alternate in subsequent episodes: in one episode she receives a sailor uniform, reminiscent of Japanese high-school attire, in another she is seen in a cute dress.[24] Here, the "*moe*-aesthetics" of an individual character take priority over any consideration of consistency. This also applies to the two, demon-like characters, Shion and Shuna, who demonstrate unwavering loyalty towards Rimuru throughout the series. Shion is portrayed as a modern iteration of the "beautiful fighting girl."[25] While being a fierce combatant with a short temper, she also works as Rimuru's secretary, receiving a business suit with a revealing, low-cut neckline later in the series. In contrast to this stands the quieter and more caring Shuna. Her attire represents the traditional robes of Japanese shrine maidens. As different as all these characters are, they serve the same purpose: they provide a wide range of different character archetypes that add to the visual pleasure of the recipient and validate the viewer through the protagonist. In general, male characters revere Rimuru with utmost loyalty, whereas female characters express their affection and try winning his favour.[26]

Overall, the plot of *TenSura* progresses around Rimuru establishing his own nation and expanding his social circle of supporters who endorse him. They adore and respect him, always addressing him with hierarchical titles like "great" (*sama*) and "master" (*aruji*) and follow his every command. On the other hand, Rimuru is portrayed as a humble, benevolent, and charismatic regent. While being an idealized leader figure, he is also written as the only one who can provide a home to his allies and friends and enable them to achieve greater deeds. This is mainly accomplished through the concept of giving names to other monsters and thus causing them to evolve. As Rimuru's capital city develops, it soon becomes one of the most progressive places in the other world with many elements of Japanese convenience and tradition, introduced by Rimuru, but without the social problems of contemporary Japan. Different groups of monsters, skills, technology, and knowledge converge in this peaceful

24 (*TenSura*, S01E16, 00:07:55; S01E17, 00:06:22; S01E18, 0014:59).

25 The archetype's lineage of the "beautiful fighting girl" is discussed at length in the book of the same name by Tamaki Saitō (2011).

26 At one point, Shion and Shuna fight over who should assist and take care of Rimuru (*TenSura*, S1E11, 00:01:57).

city, which becomes a sort of "fantastical Akihabara" where an idealized form of living is made possible. It reflects what Azuma denotes as "alternative values and standards" that are preferred over the "social reality" (2009, 27). Altogether, these observations constitute *TenSura* as a series of wish fulfilment, where the protagonist is granted immense power, validation, and a place with a found family to belong to.

In *Re:Zero*, most of the cast are female characters comprised of *moe*-elements. Emilia, the first character Subaru directly falls for based on her appearance, is a silver-haired half-elf girl wearing a delicate short dress that reveals only certain parts and does not consider practicality. The depiction of the twin maids running the household of the margrave's mansion, Rem and Ram, clearly refer to staff of maid cafés in Akihabara.[27] They wear the same black-and-white uniforms and humbly address Subaru with the honorific "guest" (*okyakusama*),[28] as is common in such spaces. These character aesthetics are frequently highlighted throughout the series. For example, the opening sequence of *Re:Zero*'s first season[29] puts a clear emphasis on the female cast, which is presented before Subaru in a bright light, contrasting his dark and painful experience in the other world, and functions as his main motivation in the plot. There are also instances of both anime taking their time with slow-paced tracking shots to highlight designs or costumes of supporting characters, often as a form of introduction.[30] As a result, like *TenSura*, *Re:Zero* emphasizes individual characters, specifically their aesthetics. But where Rimuru gains friends and allies as a matter of course, the social relations in *Re:Zero* play out more mutually, with Subaru developing affection for other characters and actively trying to befriend them. While doing so, he often exhibits stereotypical otaku behaviour, like feeling "*moe*" towards fictional characters (Azuma 2009, 53). He comments on their appearances and gives most of them nicknames while identifying them as familiar character tropes from the database.[31] However, unlike Rimuru, Subaru has to work hard to overcome his profound loneliness and gaining the trust and loyalty from the supporting characters around him. In most instances, he is initially met with distrust and suspicion and must convince others of his good intentions, especially because he often seems out

27 The phenomenon and appeal of this trope is explored in Patrick W. Galbraith's *Maid Cafés: The Affect of Fictional Characters in Akihabara, Japan* (2013).

28 (*Re:Zero*, S01E06, 00:00:28).

29 (*Re:Zero*, S01E03, 00:01:15–00:02:45).

30 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:04:37; 00:05:29; *TenSura*, S01E16, 00:07:55).

31 At one point, he starts adding the cute, affectionate suffix *-tan* to Emilia's name; a habit that remains foreign to her throughout the series.

of place in the other world. This also gets complicated by Subaru's ability to be able to remember every single interaction with others after his death, but other characters cannot recall them.[32]

The supporting characters in both texts provide part of the solution to both protagonists in the form of a social circle that validates them. They are highly fictional characters from the database and their attractiveness is often emphasized before other elements within the individual works, in order to appeal to the viewer. Within isekai texts, they become more reachable through the audience's perspective-taking, which is provided by protagonists who transferred from a contemporary Japan. This point of view also contains voyeuristic potential (Mulvey 1988) with examples of erotically charged scenes that can be denoted as *fan service*, which exemplifies the attractiveness of individual characters as objects of desire and rarely serves the plot in a meaningful way.

Story world: Game-like realism and self-reference

A predominant number ofisekai texts, including the ones examined, shy away from settings like science fiction and tend to play out in a world with a "Western fantasy style" (*seiyō fantajii fuku*)[33] with architecture, clothing, and social order reminiscent of mediaeval Europe. This is also reflected in the naming conventions, with characters having English, French, German, or Italian names. The fantastical elements are the existence of magic, ancestries like elves, dwarves, orcs, and a variety of different human-animal hybrids, which provide means to frequently create exotic *moe*-characters.

In general, these texts follow the world-building of Japanese role-playing games like *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*. This results in a template that is used by many authors for their stories and reappears, only slightly adjusted, in the most successful instalments (Ōhashi 2019). In pop cultural discourse, it has been coined as "*naroppa*,"[34] a portmanteau of the words *narō-kei* and *yōroppa*

32 As an otaku character in relation to the supporting cast, Subaru is depicted as a flawed individual who is given the opportunity, much like in novel games, to "replay" interactions with other characters. Without going into detail, I argue that this is a deconstruction of otaku, with Subaru experiencing a sort of redemption as the story progresses.

33 As described by literary critic Ōhashi Takayuki (2019).

34 The word has an ambivalent nature similar to *narō-kei* and can be used derogatorily (Ōhashi 2019, 3).

(Europe). But these worlds not only take over the surface-level aesthetics of games, but also some of the mechanics intrinsic to many of them. Some stories, like *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*, go as far as employing actual graphical user interfaces that the characters can see and interact with, a system of gaining experience in levelling up and skill trees with specific abilities that can be acquired. These elements, which are also part of the database and familiar to recipients engaged in the media mix, illustrate the story worlds of isekai texts as being highly metafictional in nature.

In *TenSura*, this is observable in the system of available skills that is explained by the "great sage"[35] and the "game-like" dialogue graphics. As a background, this is occasionally provided with music reminiscent of retro games. On the surface, such game elements are not so present in *Re:Zero* but, upon closer inspection, there is one integral gaming element. Subaru's "return to death" ability is a direct implementation of the common game mechanic of "save points." When players reach a save point, usually between different levels, their progress is saved to that point and lets them "respawn" there in the case of failure. Similar to games, the anime utilizes a signature sound every time this happens to Subaru. The protagonists of these texts often seem to be aware of the story world's conditions, as described above. The way isekai-textsintegrate these fan characters as protagonists, as well as other narrative strategies, connects to Azuma's idea of "game-like realism" (2007) or even represents its contemporary continuation. Azuma developed the term alongside an observation of Japanese light novels that gained popularity during the nineties (Ibid., 27). In *Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō*, Azuma specifically analysed light novels and games that blur the medial boundaries as "game-like novels" and "novel-like games." Once more referring to the "character database" (Ibid., 45), he identifies their peculiarity in the interrelations of those fictional works instead of production, circulation, or the texts themselves. This can not only be applied to light novels, but all media consumed and produced by otaku, which are "meta-narratives" (*meta monogatari*) without single starting or end points (Ibid., 142) and whose characters can be transposed across works, displaying a game-like existence. For Azuma, these narratives do not focus on representing reality, but the fictional worlds of anime and manga (Ibid., 56) and can display self-awareness of their structure and form, namely, the database behind them. I find these ideas especially true for many isekai texts, that provide a deconstruction of the boundaries between reality and fiction or even aim at the "realization of fiction."

35 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:09:23).

When it comes to the audience's experience of reading those texts, which are metafictional in nature, it invokes the image of a player operating a character, a duality that moves the recipient's engagement from story to metafiction, and from character to player, respectively. Isekai texts, through game-like realism, specifically represent and address the non-fictional "I" as a character. Through their protagonists, they implement the player/reader/consumer within the fictional narrative or meta-narrative. The transfer of fan protagonists from a contemporary Japan to a game-like fantasy world, which is built from the database, allows the non-fictional "I" to become a character and the non-fictional life a story. This quality can be seen as a possible appeal of isekai texts, but also stories like *Sword Art Online*, which utilize an even more explicit, but simulated game world. In the case of the analysed texts, this metafictionality is paired with moments of self-awareness, which are oftentimes humorous in nature.

In *Re:Zero* for example, the moment Subaru realizes that he is no longer in modern-day Japan, he is expressively excited and accepts the fact that he has just "been summoned into a different world" Rather well.[36] He then monologues about it being a "fantasy world complete with the typical medieval culture,"[37] setting the stage with its conventional nature for the viewer. Going forward, the audience learns that Subaru has knowledge about common isekai tropes, which he expects to be also true within this world: When a townsperson is about to get run over by a carriage, Subaru strikes a pose and extends his hand, thinking he will become the cliché magic-casting hero of this world.[38] Nothing happens and it becomes evident that he has no supernatural powers whatsoever; at least "yet," is what he thinks. Subaru keeps running into struggles within this new world that make him wonder about where his "protagonist status" or "the cute girl"[39] who summoned him are. He also continuously uses vocabulary derived from pop culture and treats the other world like a game, calling other characters "NPCs"[40] or identifying them as anime character tropes with their database *moe*-elements, like "maid" (*meido*)[41] or "loli."[42]

36 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:02:01–00:02:23).

37 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:03:00).

38 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:03:13).

39 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:04:36).

40 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:01:17).

41 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:04:51).

42 In this case, Beatrice even responds, assuming the word probably "means nothing good." (*Re:Zero*, E05, 00:08:43).

Similar notions can also be found in *TenSura*: after Veldora introduces himself as one of the legendary "four true dragons of the world," he suddenly acts in contrast to his menacing nature. Identifying this behaviour as conforming to the trope of *tsundere* (a character who initially appears hostile, but is later revealed to be friendly), Rimuru states that he would have expected this more from a "cute girl," rather than a dragon.[43]

In other scenes, Rimuru makes a direct game reference to *Dragon Quest*. His catchphrase "I'm not a bad slime!" (*Boku wa warui suraimu janai yo!*) is recognized by Shizue as a pop-cultural reference, which makes both of them realize the other person's Japanese origin.[44] He later uses the same phrase to calm down Kagurazaka after a little misunderstanding.[45] While the two converse about recent trends in Japanese popular culture, establishing both of them as otaku characters, Rimuru states that he had "finished about all the manga and anime" Kagurazaka knows.[46] He then uses his memories and skills to create an actual manga volume from a stack of paper, thus introducing a pop cultural artefact from Japan to the other world. The volume's name, "Sirius" (*shiriusu*), refers to Kodansha's *Monthly Shōnen Sirius* (*Gekkan Shōnen Shiriusu*), the magazine featuring the manga adaption of *TenSura*, which visualizes the anime media mix going full circle within this text.

While these self-referential moments are utilized by both texts for humorous purposes, they make clear how interconnected the narratives, characters, and worlds are within these texts when considering both the anime media mix and the database. This also implies that an audience that is more active, more involved in the database, i.e. otaku, can take more pleasure in these texts. All these elements taken from other media forms as well as their continuous narrative references from the media mix result in explicit depictions of the database, which is readable by the otaku audience, participating in this cross-media pop culture. Isekai worlds unite countless elements from it and draw from manga, games, and other anime on each narrative level. They give medial form to the database and make it accessible to the viewer through protagonists the audience can relate to. The experience in these texts can be described with "game-like realism" and the plot, in case of the analysed examples, revolves around surviving, improving, and winning in the other world.

43 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:18:12, 00:20:33; E02, 00:01:42).

44 (*TenSura*, S01E06, 00:13:54).

45 (*TenSura*, S01E20, 00:12:09).

46 (*TenSura*, S01E20, 00:12:41).

Conclusion: New, yet familiar worlds

The analysed texts depict worlds that, in a very immanent way, provide different solutions for social concerns through relatable protagonists. In *TenSura*, the audience is provided with fantastical escapism and wish fulfilment in the form of validation, power, success, and companionship that might be unavailable to them otherwise. *Re:Zero* takes a more nuanced approach and explores the protagonist's emotional struggle and search for identity in more detail. It shows how effort can be rewarded and, ultimately, can lead to strong social bonds. Both solutions are realized within another world featuring themes, characters, and rules more familiar to the protagonist and, through perspective-taking, to the target audience.

Admittedly, many of the elements observed in the analysis can be found in anime of other genres as well and represent a general trend within the media mix: archetypal character designs created from *moe*-elements, fantastical themes, references across different works. These certainly indicate the underlying database in many texts. However, isekai stories display an accumulation of these elements and, first and foremost, provide direct access to them through a relatable protagonist who comes from a contemporary Japanese society, depicted with its explicit problems. With the perspective of a player/reader playing a character as part of a "game-like realism," these texts provide the experience of a transition from the "real" world to the other, fictional world. This is one integral element to their ritualistic function as a genre. Even if both portrayed worlds are fictional in the story, isekai fulfils the "realization of fiction" by mediating a disappearance of the boundary between "reality" and "fiction." Here, fiction means Japanese popular culture in the form of the database, which contains characters, worlds, themes, tropes, and more. This fiction, well-known and appealing to otaku, becomes attainable by entering the other world. By extension, isekai can be understood metaphorically for the social practices of otaku employed to "enter" other, fictional worlds, as is observable in spaces like Akihabara. The act of viewing isekai stories becomes a parallel to other modes of engagement with Japanese popular culture, which are all observable within a larger media trend described by different theories. Therefore, it is the familiarity of isekai worlds that constitutes one of their main appeals. Similar to the experience of *sekai* in the context of kabuki, the isekai audience knows, for the most part, what to expect from any given text. Isekai could therefore be understood not as "another" world (an unexplored realm), but "the" other world (a familiar imaginationscape), which appears in many iterations and is built from the entirety of otaku media, presupposing and validating the extensive knowledge thereof. As a genre, it mediates the "realization of fiction" and a space of comfort as an alternative to "social reality." It functions as a direct

entry to the character database, oftentimes deconstructing otaku activity in the process.

This familiarity, in turn, can be attributed to an audience that is actively involved in its formulation. Through fan culture, represented by communities like those on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, the audience can reveal its preferences and beliefs, deciding what their favoured mode of storytelling is. In a simplified way, isekai stories can be understood as fictional works within different types of media about otaku that are created by otaku to be consumed by otaku. While reality is evidently more complex than this, the audience continues to consider isekai stories best in fulfilling the ritualistic function of alleviating their problems. Possible motivations can be escapism into wish fulfilling fiction, a validation of otaku tastes and hobbies, exploring and providing alternatives to a malfunctioning society, or something entirely different. After the analysis of two texts these options can only be discerned as possibilities and empirical data is needed to give definite answers to these observations. The analysis showed clearly, however, that these two texts utilized very similar elements, drawn from the pop cultural database, to appeal to their audiences. However, they also represent notable variations of the isekai genre's narrative formula and provide different approaches to character development, dramatization, and the story's overall mood. As an instance of repetition and difference, the isekai genre evidently found a successful formula to keep its audience interested in its texts. The isekai genre has no conclusion yet, which is why I consider this article a means of introduction to its texts. Their sheer multitude, as well as the complex media systems surrounding them, warrant further research in the future.

Appendix

Table 1. Kono light novel ga sugoi! 2020 top ten light novels of the 2010s.

Rank	Title	Points
1	*Sword Art Online*	1728.95
2	*Toaru Majutsu no Index* [A Certain Magical Index]	1503.41
3	*Ryūō no Oshigoto!* [The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!]	1452.75
4	*Dungeon ni Deai wo Motomeru no wa Machigatteiru Darō ka* [Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?]	816.67
5	*Nejimaki Seirei Senki: Tenkyō no Alderamin* [Alderamin on the Sky]	718.67
6	*No Game No Life*	702.90
7	*Honzuki no Gekokujō: Shisho ni Naru Tame ni wa Shudan wo Erandeiraremasen* [Ascendance of a Bookworm]	690.14
8	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	682.83
9	*Jaku-Chara Tomozaki-kun* [Bottom-tier Character Tomozaki]	674.01
10	*Monogatari Series*	660.69

Note: The method used for calculating points varies in each issue, but the rankings take into account "web" poll results (conducted in September every year) and votes from "collaborators" including "reviewers, writers, bookstore employees, librarians, event coordinators, university club members, internet bloggers, internet news reporters, etc." Adapted from *Kono light novel ga sugoi!* 2020, Takarajimasha.

Table 2. Shōsetsuka ni narō! top ten light novels.

Rank	Title	Points
1	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	697,638
2	*Mushoku Tensei: Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu* [Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation]	674,309
3	*Tondemo Skill de Isekai Hōrō Meshi* [Regarding the Display of an Outrageous Skill Which Has Incredible Powers]	649,292
4	*Arifureta Shokugyou de Sekai Saikyou* [Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest]	603,547
5	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	553,373
6	*Death March kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyōsōkyoku* [Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody]	532,764
7	*Hellmode ~Yarikomi Suki no Gamer wa Haisettei no Isekai de Musō Suru~* [Hellmode ~Gamer Who Likes to Speedrun Becomes Peerless in a Parallel World with Obsolete Setting~]	531,390
8	*Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* [So I'm a Spider, So What?]	529,038
9	*Kage no Jitsuryokusha ni Naritakute!* [The Eminence in Shadow]	503,798
10	*Hachi-nan tte, Sore wa Nai deshō!* [The 8th son? Are you kidding me?]	483,768

Note: This statistic includes all works of all categories since the foundation of the webpage. Still, each entry of the top ten is an isekaistory.
Adapted 14 March 2021, from https://yomou.syosetu.com/rank/list/type/total_total

Table 3. Akiba Sōken 2019 top ten isekai anime poll.

Rank	Title	Votes
1	*Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* [Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!]	1473
2	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	1447
3	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	990
4	*Isekai wa Smartphone to Tomo ni* [In Another World With My Smartphone]	913
5	*Tate no Yūsha no Nariagari* [The Rising of the Shield Hero]	507
6	*No Game No Life*	456
7	*Isekai Shokudō* [Restaurant to Another World]	440
8	*Death March kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyōsōkyoku* [Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody]	425
9	*Overlord*	342
10	*Yōjo Senki* [The Saga of Tanya the Evil]	259

Note: Top ten of 37 total ranks. Users of the fan community Akiba Sōken could distribute seven votes among 37 preselected isekai anime. 9356 votes were cast in total between 1 March 2019 and 30 March 2019. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://akiba-souken.com/vote/v_2377/

Table 4. Oricon News 2020 light novel sales top five.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Kimetsu no Yaiba* [Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba]	2,752,593
2	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	732,314
3	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	606,700
4	*Sword Art Online*	564,235
5	*Kusuriya no Hitorigoto* [The Pharmacist's Monologue]	527,950

Note: Study period: 2 December 2019 to 30 November 2020. Actual tally period: 18 November 2019 to 22 November 2020. 3975 bookstores participated in the survey. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/special/55505/9/

Table 5. Oricon News 2019 light novel sales top ten.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	879,734
2	*Tenki no Ko* [Weathering With You]	634,151
3	*Sword Art Online*	615,363
4	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	550,202
5	*Seishun Buta Yarō Series* [Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai]	536,494
6	*Kusuriya no Hitorigoto* [The Pharmacist's Monologue]	461,024
7	*Dungeon ni Deai wo Motomeru no wa Machigatteiru Darō ka* [Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?]	434,034
8	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	429,217
9	*Yōkoso Jitsuryoku Shijō Shugi no Kyōshitsu e* [Classroom of the Elite]	420,573
10	*Kimetsu no Yaiba* [Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba]	407,640

Note: Study period: 3 December 2018 to 25 November 2019. Actual tally period: 19 November 2018 to 17 November 2019. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/confidence/special/53961/12/

Table 6. Oricon News 2018 light novel sales top ten.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Overlord*	807,693
2	*Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* [Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!]	630,889
3	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	626,952
4	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	619,031
5	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	539,277
6	*Ryūō no Oshigoto!* [The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!]	478,242
7	*Sword Art Online: Progressive*	426,794
8	*Yōkoso Jitsuryoku Shijō Shugi no Kyōshitsu e* [Classroom of the Elite]	393,949
9	*Sword Art Online*	371,626
10	*No Game No Life*	350,960

Note: Study period: 4 December 2017 to 26 November 2018. Actual tally period: 20 November 2017 to 18 November 2018. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/confidence/special/52166/12/

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Comment by Masako Hashimoto

Tani Levy points out that *isekai* in light novels reflects our real world and that *isekai* has its own authenticity, attracting readers and authors. Traditionally, fantasy stories have served a cathartic and unifying function for people everywhere; however, in the context of otaku, the *isekai* discourse circulates self-sufficiently as an approach to a common desire to transform into someone else in a new world. In Japan today, it is clear that many people are experiencing problems that are trivial but non-negligible. *isekai* stories could provide healing in their intolerable daily lives filled with small doses of creation and consumption. *Shosetsuka ni Naro* seems to function to repeatedly produce *moe* (萌え) representations based on what Azuma calls the database of character elements. At same time, it proliferates its own contents infinitely, creating a much stronger database. Interestingly, however, growing databases does not mean producing diverse outcomes; rather, both creation and consumption tend to be limited and homogeneous. One of this reason is that cliché and fanon are more important for entertainment in light novels. The similitude results in a low evaluation that light novels are inferior literature for kids. Considering

its huge markets and successful expansion into *media mix*, we must reimagine the "creativity" that humans are now instinctively drawn towards. Indeed, can novelty, originality, or uniqueness alone fulfill our reading pleasure?

Comment by Yasuo Kawasaki

This study is an analysis of the *isekai* genre of novels that have become popular in Japan since the 2010s and are now being exported worldwide. In light of the rise of this genre, which even the Japanese consider a special fad, Tani Levy analyses the textual and social characteristics of *isekai* novels, after sorting out the social background of readers and authors. This survey provides new insights into the unique aspects of *isekai* novels brought about by Japan's unique participatory *dōjin* culture.

In Japan, *isekai* novels are often treated with ridicule because of their narrative form and the peculiarity of their fashion. However, this analysis brings new and interesting insights into view. This chapter will almost certainly lead to more in-depth research on *isekai* novels in the future. In particular, I am looking forward to more in-depth analysis of the concept of reincarnation, which is a common feature of *isekai* genre, as well as comparative analysis with similar genres from other countries.

Zoltan Kacsuk

Using Fan-Compiled Metadata for Anime, Manga and Video Game Research

Revisiting Azuma's "Otaku: Japan's Database Animals" Twenty Years On[1]

Wikipedia is perhaps the most well-known testament to the efficacy of volunteer contributions adding up to creating a truly robust and powerful resource. Beyond such general projects like Wikipedia, there are a vast number of specialized communities that have compiled all kinds of wikis and databases on their foci of interest. The metadata databases[2] compiled by fan or enthusiast communities[3] represent a so far mostly untapped source of high-quality granular data for researchers to work on. The present chapter aims to both showcase the possibilities opened up by utilizing such databases for academic research, while at the same time addressing one of the key questions in relation to the validity of research conducted on such resources, namely that of data incompleteness. Data on characters from mainly Japanese anime and visual novel games[4] are employed in a case study examining one of the claims from Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009 [2001]) to unpack these points.

1 The present chapter incorporates materials from blogposts the author has written for the Japanese Visual Media Graph Project Website (https://jvmg.iuk.hdm-stuttgart.de/), and also builds on the presentation and feedback from the JADH2020 conference "A New Decade in Digital Scholarship: Microcosms and Hubs" (20–22 November 2020).

2 Although these databases often also contain summaries, pictures, reviews and so on, they are primarily made up of descriptive metadata relating to, for example, studios, franchises, individual works, and characters. For the purpose of the present discussion, these databases will be referred to as metadata databases to emphasize this aspect.

3 The expressions "fan community" and "enthusiast community" are used as synonyms in the present chapter. For a detailed elaboration on the ways finer distinctions can be drawn between these concepts, see for example Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) or Kacsuk (2016).

4 Visual novel is a predominantly PC game genre originating in Japan and oriented towards mostly telling stories of love and sexuality – although works with other foci, like horror, have also achieved prominence – featuring still images and written text and involving little or no choice on the part of the players.

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Metadata from enthusiast communities among the data sources in video game studies

Video game studies, in the narrow sense, is the field defined by the humanities- and social-science-informed questions related to video games, their creators, publishers, and players, and their impact on culture and society. However, there is also a wider field of video games research, a large part of which is actively concerned with the understanding of player behaviour and game design from the perspective of monetizing video games and game play experiences. There is no clear boundary between the more academic research of video game studies defined in the narrow sense, and the research on games and players conducted from a business and industry perspective. Indeed, there are large areas of overlapping interest between the two,[5] albeit certain frameworks and methods can be more readily associated with the one or the other approach.

One distinguishing feature of the business side of video games research is the access it enjoys to in-game generated server-side data, which is a key input for many game analytics (El-Nasr, Drachen, and Canossa 2013), but which is not often made available to researchers external to the companies concerned (for an example of this, see Bonenfant, Richert, and Deslauriers 2017). There is, however, one special subfield of academic inquiry that also builds heavily on processing in-game data, namely the research on games and education – referred to as edugames, serious games, or game science – where the games and game play themselves are often experiments, with researchers thus having full access to all in-game data (see De Freitas 2018).

There are, of course, various ways to capture in-game data, for example, researchers can take advantage of "open client-side user interface[s]" that "allow customizations and modifications by the user community" (Lukacs 2014, 408). Furthermore, quite a few games offer a range of summary statistics for players to be able to track their own progress and to compare it to others', which can then be used for research purposes as well. Some publishers and games go even further, and have extensive application programming interfaces (APIs) providing a wealth of mineable data that services and researchers can actively build on. Just playing a game can also be a way of accessing a host of in-game data, not to mention the experience of the gameplay itself, and for game-centric research this is often a key ingredient (Aarseth 2004; Myers 2014).

Traditional data collection methods and sources are typically more prominent in academic research (Lankoski and Björk 2015; Lukacs 2014; Myers 2014),

5 In Japan, for example, there is a particularly strong connection between the games industry and academic research (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015).

although surveys, interviews, and focus groups can play a significant part in business-side research as well (El-Nasr, Drachen, and Canossa 2013). Industry data can also be an important source of quantitative information, not only on distribution and sales figures, but also player demographics (Lukacs 2014). Experimental setups are a common feature – beyond the already mentioned domain of games and education – of the wide-ranging research on the impact of video games on social behaviour (cf. Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014). Capturing user experience research-type biometric data, such as eye movement or pulse information, also occurs in a range of video game research contexts (see for example Bamparopoulos et al. 2016; De Freitas 2018; El-Nasr, Drachen, and Canossa 2013).

Another important group of materials employed in video game studies research are the various documents generated around the games by a host of different actors spanning professional journalists and media content creators to player communities. Documents, here, refer to all forms of data recorded on forums, blogs, videos, podcasts, discussion and comment threads, reviews, articles, how-to guides, wikis, game information databases, and so on (cf. Sköld et al. 2015). Among these, the archival and database-building work of enthusiast communities or dedicated individuals merits special attention for the way it can provide access to both source materials and well-structured, granular metadata (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015).[6]

This type of archival and database-building work is, of course, not unique to video games. Media fans were compiling data on their favourite works long before the internet became the most important channel for communication (Jenkins 1992; Okada 1996; Yoshimoto 2009). Naturally, with the advent of the internet, this process of collecting and cataloguing information by individual fans and enthusiast communities has only become easier and amplified in its scale. The level of detail afforded by these fan-compiled data sources has also not gone unnoticed in academic research (Hills 2002; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015). Although various online databases created by enthusiast communities have become the go-to resource for checking information on hard-to-find media texts and artefacts, their use for large-scale quantitative research has

6 Some databases also act as repositories for hard-to-find works, while others only record the descriptive metadata used to identify, find, and describe them. For simple search and retrieval functionality very rudimentary cataloguing systems could suffice. Nevertheless, a large number of these projects demonstrate elaborate and well-structured ontologies (in the information science sense of the word) mirroring professional cataloguing and classification systems.

yet to become widespread (for an excellent example, however, see Utsch et al. 2017).

A number of researchers have already started the work of creating robust metadata ontologies and infrastructures for facilitating research on various aspects of video games (e.g. Bamparopoulos et al. 2016; Fukuda, Mihara, and Oishi 2020; Lee, Clarke, and Perti 2015). In line with this research direction, the diggr (Databased Infrastructure for Global Games Culture Research) research project has been a pioneer in incorporating data compiled by enthusiast communities (Hoffmann, Freybe, and Mühleder 2017) in its work on building "a data driven research infrastructure" for researchers working on Japanese video games (Freybe, Rämisch, and Hoffmann 2019, 14). Continuing in the same direction, harnessing the power of fan-created databases for academic research is precisely the aim of the Japanese Visual Media Graph (JVMG) project.[7] By learning from and building on the experiences and content produced and aggregated by various enthusiast communities, the project aims to create an integrated database and query tools primarily for academic researchers working on Japanese visual media. The research project showcased in the present chapter is one of the first experimental use-cases aimed at demonstrating the way this type of data can be utilized for academic research.

Has there been a shift in the way characters in Japanese manga, anime, and video games are produced?

Hiroki Azuma's *Dōbutsu ka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai* (Animalizing postmodern: Japanese society as seen from otaku), published in 2001, has been one of the most influential treatises not only on Japanese otaku, but also on the production and consumption paradigm defining Japanese anime, manga, light novels, and video games in late modernity. The book's impact on the discourse around otaku and the domains just enumerated is truly international, thanks, in part, to the English translation, which was published in 2009 as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.[8] With almost twenty years since the original publication in Japanese, and more than ten years since the English translation was released, the concepts and frameworks outlined by Azuma have become cornerstones of this scholarly discourse (see for example

7 Both the diggr project and the JVMG project have been funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation). The author of the present chapter is a member of the JVMG project.

8 All quotes in the following are from this English edition.

Itō 2005; Lamarre 2009; Suan 2017). However, even though the book's line of argument contains a number of potentially testable statements, to date these have not been subjected to any large-scale empirical test. This is probably due, in part, to the inclination towards case-study-based research approaches in the concerned fields; however, the lack of available data that is both large and granular enough to use for such an analysis has also not been conducive to the emergence of quantitative examinations of this sort.

In his book, Azuma positions otaku culture as originating in Japan's post-war reception (or, more precisely, "domestication") of subcultural works from the United States; as such, it represents a move towards the postmodernization of culture. In this sense, the sensibilities and production/consumption patterns found in otaku culture foreshadow changes beyond the realm of the subcultural. He goes on to point out that two of the hallmarks of postmodernization found in otaku culture are its embracing of derivative works on the one hand, and the substitution with fiction (for an earlier generation) or the complete letting go of *grand narratives*[9] (for a newer generation) on the other hand.

This generational shift is exemplified by the emergence of *chara-moe*, an emotional reaction felt by the consumers to characters and/or their specific elements, such as cat ears, glasses, and so on. As a result, "a database for *moe*-elements that generates the characters has been established" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 47). For Azuma, the metaphor of the database[10] captures the space of imagination shared by creators and consumers – the lines between the two already blurred by the prominence given to derivative works – that gives rise to new works, settings, and, most importantly, characters, but which is devoid of any structuring grand narrative.

> As a result, many of the otaku characters created in recent years are connected to many characters across individual works, rather than emerging from a single author or a work. (Ibid., 49)

9 The term "grand narrative" was most famously used by Jean-François Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 1984 [1979], in which he pointed out that the major driving conceptual frameworks – the grand narratives – of modernity (e.g. Enlightenment, Marxism, etc.) have started to lose their appeal.

10 For a discussion of the significance of the database in Azuma's work, see Schäfer and Roth (2012). Furthermore, it is worth noting here that among the various works discussed in Azuma's book, he also brings up the example of the Japanese website TINAMI (the name originally stands for "The Information NAvigator of Manga Artists on the Internet"), which at the time served as a sort of search engine for illustrators, manga artists, and similar creators active on the internet (from the Japanese Wikipedia article: https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/TINAMI).

Although Azuma's arguments in the book go far beyond a simple description of the changes characterizing consumption/production patterns in otaku culture with the emergence of database consumption, this point, in relation to its impact on the way characters become increasingly derivative of each other, is one of the most well defined and potentially testable in relation to the central notion of the database. The following quote illustrates what characters being increasingly connected to other characters across works actually means in Azuma's view.

> I believe that it is more appropriate to use the image of the database to grasp this current situation. The emergence of Ayanami Rei did not influence many authors so much as change the rules of the *moe*-elements sustaining otaku culture. As a result, even those authors who were not deliberately thinking of *Evangelion* unconsciously began to produce characters closely resembling Rei, using newly registered *moe*-elements (quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power). Such a model is close to the reality of the late 1990s. Beyond Rei, characters emerging in otaku works were not unique to individual works but were immediately broken into *moe*-elements and recorded by consumers, and then the elements reemerged later as material for creating new characters. Therefore, each time a popular character appeared, the *moe*-element database changed accordingly, and as a result, in the next season there were heated battles among the new generation of characters featuring new *moe*-elements. (Ibid., 51–52)

Let us then formulate a testable hypothesis based on this idea of how characters become increasingly connected as they draw on each other, or rather the database elements into which they are broken down into. If Azuma is correct in that such a shift did take place in the way characters become more dependent on characters that came before them, as opposed to the potentially more diverse creative input of creators that supposedly characterized previous eras, then we should find that the portion of new characters with shared traits should increase over time especially in the case of works aimed at the otaku market.[11]

11 The original analysis had two hypotheses, see the blog-posts for details: https://jvmg.iuk.hdm-stuttgart.de/2020/10/28/tiny-use-case-2-can-we-test-one-of-the-points-from-hiroki-azumas-otaku-japans-database-animals-with-the-jvmg-database-part-5-summary-and-lessons-learned/.

Data sources and operationalization of the hypothesis

To try and test this hypothesis, data from The Visual Novel Database[12] (VNDB) and Anime Characters Database[13] (ACDB) was employed,[14] as these databases both have a significant number of characters listed (over 79,000 and 100,000, respectively) and a relatively large number of traits describing them. There are, however, important differences between the two datasets. VNDB only focuses on visual novels, whereas ACDB collects data on a wide range of characters from various media (although predominantly focusing on visual novels and anime). Furthermore, VNDB has a very rich and rigorously structured ontology of traits, which, however, lacks a core set of featured traits that would be expected to be available in relation to all characters. In contrast, ACDB features a hybrid system for describing characters, which, on the one hand, supports a closed ontology for eight flagship traits (e.g. hair and eye colour) that are part of each character's factsheet, and, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for free-form tagging of characters with user-created labels.[15] For the purpose of this study, traits relating to sexual activity were excluded from the VNDB dataset, as those would have unnecessarily inflated shared trait counts. Gender was also excluded for technical reasons from both data sources.

Considering the structure of the data, the concepts from the hypothesis were operationalized in the following ways. First, to define characters with shared traits, it is important to consider what Azuma and, by extension, the hypothesis is referring to. Instead of taking any two characters that share at least one trait, it is better to set some kind of minimum threshold for characters to be considered characters with shared traits, in order to capture the change in character creation/consumption practices described by Azuma. We can think

12 https://vndb.org/.

13 https://www.animecharactersdatabase.com/.

14 Both of these database projects were started in 2007 by their respective lead developers, and both have grown a community of contributors around themselves. VNDB is strictly non-commercial, while ACDB features advertising on its website to cover operational costs. VNDB is exclusively focused on providing information about visual novels. ACDB is centred around characters, mostly from Japanese visual media, and also features small games and interactive features for its users. The data in both databases is added to and edited by the users.

15 The differences between the two databases also become apparent when trying to assign a date of first appearance to the characters featured in them. For further details, see https://jvmg.iuk.hdm-stuttgart.de/2020/09/16/tiny-use-case-2-can-we-test-one-of-the-points-from-hiroki-azumas-otaku-japans-database-animals-with-the-jvmg-database-part-2-descriptive-statistics/.

of the increase in the number of characters with shared traits as a result of some popular trait combination appearing – as in the Ayanami Rei example above – and that group of traits being replicated in other subsequent works. The possibility exists, of course, that such correspondences happen by chance, but those should be uniformly present throughout the data and should not have an impact on longitudinal trends. The cut-off point of a minimum number of five shared traits was selected for characters to be considered characters with shared traits. Second, to operationalize change over time, and to try and capture the phenomenon of certain templates becoming suddenly popular, the data was segmented – for ease of analysis – according to calendar years. Thus, characters with shared traits were counted only among characters with shared first appearance dates.

Furthermore, in order to allow for a better comparison between the VNDB and ACDB data, the latter was separated into two datasets for visual novels and other works, resulting in a relatively even split (see Figure 1 below), which were treated as independent datasets for this analysis (even though creative influence can and those travel between the realms of visual novels and other types of works). Since Azuma's book is about Japanese works, characters in the ACDB dataset that belong to media types that are clearly non-Japanese (e.g. "Western animation") or have no media type information were also disregarded for this analysis.

A first look at the data: Descriptive statistics

Beyond the differences in the temporal range of the three datasets (1: VNDB characters, 2: ACDB visual novel characters, and 3: ACDB other characters) the distributions of the *number of characters* by year, in Figure 1, below, all follow a similar trend. The number of characters recorded for each year demonstrates a mostly growing tendency, which then plateaus before going into a steady decline. Since it is highly unlikely that such a drop should have occurred in the number of new characters appearing per year in the second half of the 2010s, these distributions clearly signal that the datasets are not complete.[16]

16 The snapshots of the data used in the present analysis are from early 2020, thus it would seem logical that information on 2020 and potentially also on 2019 are not yet as complete as for earlier years. There is no available explanation for the drop in numbers of recorded characters prior to 2019. It could be due to a temporal lag in the works making their way to the non-Japanese audiences responsible for these databases, or it could be a general decreasing interest in these types of databases, or some other reason.

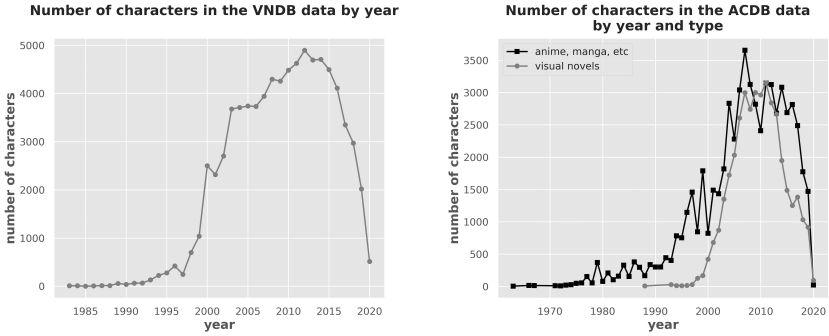

Figure 1. Number of characters in the datasets by year.

Examining the distribution of *average number of traits* per character by years, in Figure 2, below, for the two ACDB datasets, there is a somewhat similar trend to the preceding one in Figure 1. A mostly upward climb is followed by a clear drop in the average number of traits recorded per character after 2012, mirroring – although not exactly overlapping with – the drop in the number of characters. The decline in the VNDB data is less pronounced, and disregarding 2019–2020 could be seen as merely a plateauing around twenty traits per character on average.

The larger number of average number of traits per character in the VNDB data is a result of the difference between the ontologies and trait structures in the two databases. The difference in numbers between the two ACDB datasets, however, clearly signals that visual novels for the most part (all the way up till 2015) receive more attention when it comes to adding character traits to the database. This fact, along with the uneven completion of the datasets in relation to character trait information, both point towards the significance of the focus of attention of contributors in building these types of databases and their records.

Figure 3, below, showing the distribution of the *average number of characters traits are shared with*, once again follows the trend seen in the above figures. This is most likely a result of the way both the number of characters and the average number of traits per character potentially impact the number of characters with shared traits per year. The more characters there are in a given year the higher the number of potential characters with shared traits, and the higher the average number of traits per year the easier it becomes to reach the threshold of five shared traits between pairs of characters set in this analysis.

To see whether one or both of these two values do indeed, in some way, determine the changes in the *average number of characters traits are shared with*, or whether there is an element of temporal change as predicted by the

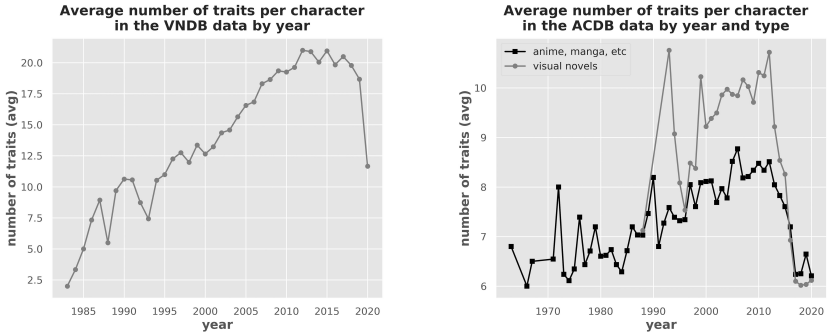

Figure 2. Average number of traits in the datasets by year.

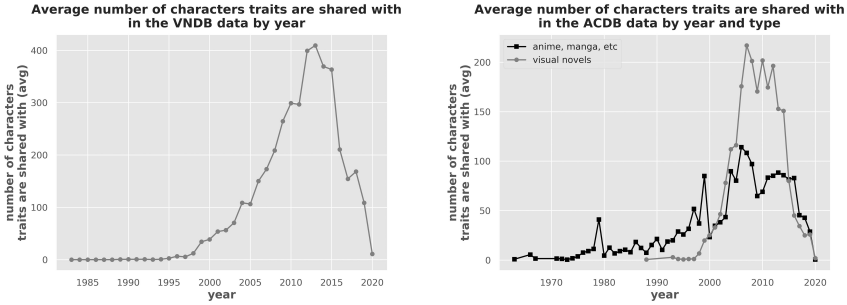

Figure 3. Average number of characters traits are shared with in the datasets by year.

hypothesis, regression analysis was conducted on the three datasets. Before discussing the results of the regression analysis, however, the central problem of working with incomplete data needs to be addressed.

Working with incomplete data

Incomplete or missing data is an almost pervasive characteristic of most empirical research in the humanities and social sciences. As such, it is a very common approach to just ignore its presence, as it goes without saying that the data is incomplete. A more reflexive stance is to explicitly draw attention to the problems that the incompleteness of the data presents. In some cases, there is no immediate way to handle the missing data; nevertheless, analysing the available data can still yield new insights, and is therefore deemed a better option than discarding the data altogether, while acknowledging the limitations of this approach (cf. Roth forthcoming). Wherever possible, addressing the missing data problem with various tools in one or more phases of the research

process, from research design through data gathering and processing to data analysis, is, of course, the preferred approach from a methodological perspective.

Using metadata for the type of research presented in this chapter comes with its own set of special challenges in handling missing data. Crucially, some of the common ways of dealing with missing data, such as imputation and weighting, cannot be employed. Using only complete items is also problematic since there is no way of defining completeness. How many traits should a character have to be considered satisfactorily described? Of course, if only considering a closed set of given traits, such as that found in ACDB without the tag information, then completeness could be defined. Nevertheless, the approach of fixing the number of traits employed in the regression analysis below, can be seen as potentially analogous to working with only complete cases.

When working with statistical models, for example in regression analysis in this case, the distribution of the missing data is also a key factor in relation to the potential validity and bias of the results. Looking at the data in the present analysis, the *average number of traits* can be thought of as a proxy for attention being paid to the completion of the database, since it is probably safe to assume that the level of detail in describing characters is less a function of the characters themselves and has more to do with the interest that builders of the databases have in them. As we saw above, examining the data from this angle, it is very plausible that these datasets have been completed unevenly with regards to the publication years of the characters. And, as already noted above, visual novel characters on average receive more attention than other characters in the ACDB database for the majority of publication years. Based on these two points, it is already certain that the incompleteness of the data is not random in any of the three datasets. There are statistical tools for addressing missing data, and even non-random missing data (Little and Rubin 2020), especially for survey data, however, their complexity is mostly beyond the scope of specialist researchers.

One further possibility for dealing with non-randomly incomplete data that is not necessarily discussed as part of standard solutions, most likely because it is more reliant on innovative approaches to the question being studied[17] rather than generalizable rules and guidelines, is the incorporation

17 This approach is not specific to dealing with incomplete data, but is rather employed more generally to solve the problem of researching social phenomena, which are often hard to observe directly. One of the most famous examples of this type of thinking is found in Durkheim's *Suicide* (2002 [1897]).

of assumptions that can help reposition the results in a way that allows for conclusions even in the face of potential bias.[18] The present problem will serve as an example to illustrate this approach. In the section discussing the formulation of the hypothesis to be tested, the quote from Azuma's book ended with:

> [E]ach time a **popular** character appeared, the *moe*-element database changed accordingly, and as a result, in the next season there were heated battles among the new generation of characters featuring new *moe*-elements (Ibid., 52, my emphasis added in bold)

Thus, if we expect to see an increase in the portion of characters with shared traits over time in line with Azuma's proposition, we can also take on board this point about the mechanism behind the proliferation of certain character templates, namely popularity. Researching Wikipedia, Royal and Kapila found that it "reflects the viewpoints, *interests*, and emphases of the people who use it" (2008, 146, my emphasis). It is probably safe to assume that this finding generalizes over to other online resources, such as our datasets, compiled by communities on a voluntary basis. Thus, unless we have a strong reason to believe that characters conforming to popular templates are shunned for some reason among the users who compiled the data, then if popularity is a driving factor for the phenomenon described by Azuma, we can also expect a higher level of interest directed at these very characters (even though, most likely, not all of the newer versions of the same template will enjoy identical levels of success). This would imply that (1) these types of characters should be more prevalent among characters with higher recorded trait counts, and (2) that they should also be more likely to be in the database in the first place. We will return to these two assumptions in our interpretation of the regression analyses' results in the following section.

Finally, although this technique is again not specific to the problem of incomplete data, by examining multiple sources, in our case two different databases and three different datasets, we can increase the validity of our findings. Although there is no guarantee for the same bias not being present across all three datasets, its likelihood is definitely smaller than there being some form of bias due to missing data in just one of the datasets.

18 It is important that the bias inherent in our models to be discussed in the next section cannot be overcome purely by adding assumptions. Nevertheless, we are not interested in the exact figures, but rather the existence or lack of certain trends, and this approach can help increase our confidence in interpreting our results.

A deeper dive into the data: Regression analysis

Regression analysis revolves around trying to estimate the relationship between the dependent variable (for which the observed changes in its values are to be explained) and the independent variables (also called explanatory variables, since they are used to explain the changes in the dependent variable's values). In this case, the *average number of characters traits are shared with* is the dependent variable, and the *number of characters*, the *average number of traits* and the publication *year*[19] (as a proxy for temporal change) serve as possible explanatory independent variables. If there are multiple possible relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable, for example due to the large number of possible explanatory variables that can be included in the model, the process of regression analysis involves comparing the different possible models and selecting the best performing one.

In order to capture potential non-linear relationships between the dependent variable and the independent variables, squared terms of the *number of characters* and *average number of traits* variables were also included in the regression model building process. Furthermore, to account for potential interactions between the independent variables, interaction terms were also created between them,[20] and introduced in the model selection process. For each dataset, only years with at least thirty characters were used and continuous ranges of years were selected in every case. The Python statsmodels package was employed to build and evaluate the regression models. Figures 4–5 and Tables 1–3, below, contain the results for the best performing models for each dataset examined.

Based on the regression analyses for both ACDB datasets the interaction term between the *number of characters* and the *average number of traits*, and for the VNDB dataset the interaction term between the squared versions of these variables proved to be the single best explanatory variable for the changes in the values of the *average number of characters traits are shared with* variable. This result points to there being no actual temporal effect at play in the observed changes in the number of characters with shared traits, they are merely a function of the number of new characters and the average number of traits recorded for those characters. Thus, based on these results the hypothesis being tested was found to be unsubstantiated.

19 Transformed for ease of interpretation to integers, starting from one for the first year in the range and then incrementally growing by one for each year.

20 Below interaction terms are written with a capital "X" between the names of the two interacting variables.

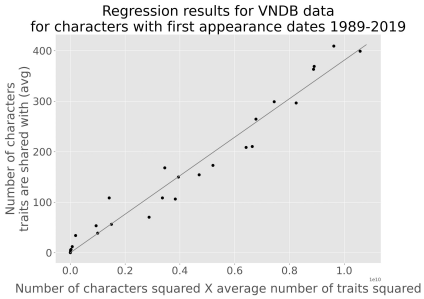

Figure 4. Best regression model for characters in the VNDB data.

Figure 5. Best regression models for visual novel characters (left) and other characters (right) in the ACDB data.

Table 1. Regression results for best model for characters in the VNDB data for 1989–2019.

OLS regression results for best model for characters in the VNDB data for 1989–2019					
Regression model					
Variables		**Coefficient**	**Standard error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
number of characters squared X average number of traits squared		3.813e-08	1.11e-09	34.271	0.000
Goodness of fit					
Adjusted R-squared:		0.983			
Error terms					
Skew:	0.049	**Kurtosis:**	2.754	**Durbin-Watson:**	1.196
Heteroscedasticity robust covariance employed:			HC3		

Table 2. Regression results for best model for visual novel characters in ACDB data for 1998–2019.

OLS regression results for best model for visual novel characters in ACDB data for 1998–2019					
Regression model					
Variables		**Coefficient**	**Standard error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
number of characters X average number of traits		0.0058	0.000	27.940	0.000
Goodness of fit					
Adjusted R-squared:		0.982			
Error terms					
Skew:	0.742	**Kurtosis:**	3.699	**Durbin-Watson:**	1.793
Heteroscedasticity robust covariance employed:			HC3		

Table 3. Regression results for best model for other characters in ACDB data for 1975–2019.

OLS regression results for best model for other characters in ACDB data for 1975–2019					
Regression model					
Variables		**Coefficient**	**Standard error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
number of characters X average number of traits		0.0033	0.000	28.952	0.000
Goodness of fit					
Adjusted R-squared:		0.961			
Error terms					
Skew:	0.235	**Kurtosis:**	4.623	**Durbin-Watson:**	1.289
Heteroscedasticity robust covariance employed:			HC3		

As tempting as it would be, finishing the analysis at this point would unfortunately be premature for two main reasons. On the one hand, as already explained in the previous section (see the second assumption there), one of our expectations is that characters that are created based on popular templates are more likely to be included in these databases compiled by enthusiast communities. It is, however, crucial to our analysis whether this effect has some kind of temporal bias to it or not. If this increased likelihood of these types of characters appearing in the data is uniform across all publication years then it is potentially not a problem. In this case, if the temporal change we are looking

Table 4. Correlation between base explanatory variables for the VNDB data.

	Year	***Number of characters***	***Average number of traits***
Year	1.00	0.83	**0.95**
Number of characters	0.83	1.00	0.91
Average number of traits	**0.95**	0.91	1.00

for exists, we should find its presence regardless of the level of attention being paid to different years of publication by the community, since within each cohort of characters the over-representation of these characters should follow the same degree, and thus not impact their relative proportion vis-à-vis the proportions found for other years. If, however, this effect of popular template derived characters having a higher chance of being included in the data is not constant over time, then all sorts of problems can arise. One potential concern might be that perhaps the earlier years suffer from an over-representation of these types of characters in the data. This would make detecting a temporal trend of increasing proportions highly problematic.

On the other hand, there is another reason why it would be perhaps too early to accept the findings as is at this point. Namely, there is a high level of correlation between the independent variables *average number of traits* and *year* in the VNDB dataset (see Table 4), thus it is hard to ascertain how much of the relationship between the *average number of characters traits are shared with* and the composite independent variable (the interaction term between the squared value of the *number of characters* and the squared value of the *average number of traits*) is a result of the change in the *average number of traits* or due to a potential temporal effect.

Fortunately, we can employ the same decomposition method to address both of these problems. To solve the problem of the high correlation between the temporal variable and that of *average number of traits,* we can fix the latter variable at given levels and thereby eliminate its effect from the subsets of data to be analysed, since it becomes a constant value in each case. To approach the problem of the impact of the higher likelihood of popular template following characters being included in the data potentially not being constant over time we can leverage our first assumption, that these types of characters should be more prevalent among characters with higher recorded trait counts. Assuming that the level of attention indicated by the number of traits is more or less constant over publication years, we can again compare the subsets of the data formed by fixing the value of the *average number of traits* variable at different levels.

Table 5, below, summarizes the regression analysis results for each subset of data pertaining to various levels of number of traits for the three datasets.

For each subset to be analysed only characters with the corresponding number of traits were included from their respective datasets. Table 5 only contains information on the single best performing explanatory variables[21] for each data subset to keep the discussion concise as much as possible. Due to the reduced number of characters in each data subset the temporal ranges of these subsets differ from the ranges indicated for the original regression results on the full datasets. For the VNDB subsets, the temporal range varies between 1998–2019 and 2000–2019. In the case of ACDB visual novel characters, the range narrows from 2000–2016 to 2003–2014 with the increasing of the number of traits. The range for ACDB other characters changes in a similar fashion from 1992–2018 towards 2005–2014. The reason for the lower number of subsets analysed for the ACDB data is due to the lower average number of traits contained in those datasets (see Figure 2, above). Data subsets, where a temporal effect (which is positive in each case) is part of the best performing variable, are indicated by the grey background of the cells.

Interpreting results for the ACDB datasets is more straightforward. There is only one subset (corresponding to nine traits) for both datasets where the best performing variable was the interaction term between the *number of characters* and the *year* variables. Other than that, it is basically the *number of characters* variable – which in all cases except for one (see table footnotes) was also the best performing model – for every subset of data. Considering the fact that the regression results for the analyses conducted on the whole datasets yielded the best explanatory variables *number of characters* X *average number of traits* in both of these cases, it seems quite persuasive that the decomposition of the datasets into their subsets according to numbers of traits simply led to the *average number of traits* variable's effect being controlled for, and thus left the *number of characters* as the sole explanatory variable in the relationship. In other words, there was no temporal effect being covered up by the interaction term in these datasets.

The results of the VNDB data are slightly more ambiguous. For number of traits equal to eight through thirteen, an interaction term including the temporal variable *year* proved to be the best performing variable and model for these data subsets. This would seem to confirm the suspicion that the effect of the *average number of traits* variable in the interaction term of the best performing model for the whole VNDB dataset had indeed covered up the presence of a temporal effect at play in the data.

21 In almost every case the single best explanatory variable is also the only variable in the best performing model, due to the high level of multicollinearity between the different explanatory variables.

Table 5. Single best explanatory variables for subsets of the data according to number of traits.

Number of traits	VNDB characters	ACDB visual novel characters	ACDB other characters
5	No model*	-	-
6	number of characters squared**	number of characters	number of characters
7	number of characters squared**	number of characters	number of characters
8	number of characters squared X year	number of characters†	number of characters
9	number of characters squared X year	number of characters X year††	number of characters X year
10	number of characters squared X year	number of characters	number of characters
11	number of characters squared X year	number of characters OR no model†††	number of characters‡
12	number of characters squared X year	number of characters	number of characters
13	number of characters squared X year	number of characters OR number of characters squared	number of characters
14	number of characters squared	number of characters	number of characters
15	number of characters	-	-
16	number of characters	-	-
17	number of characters OR number of characters squared	-	-
18	number of characters OR number of characters squared	-	-

* No model provided satisfactory values to be accepted, due to the large number of years with zero characters with shared traits.
** Only slightly better model results than for the variable *number of characters squared X year*.
† *Number of characters* is the best explanatory variable, but the normality of error terms is violated to such a degree that *number of characters X year* is perhaps a better explanatory variable in this case. There is, however, one obvious outlier year (2014), which if removed *number of characters* becomes the clearly best performing single explanatory variable.
†† There is one obvious outlier year (2014), which if removed *number of characters* becomes the clearly best performing single explanatory variable.
††† All possible models indicate the presence of strong autocorrelation among the error terms.
‡ The actual best performing model features two explanatory variables: *number of characters* and *year*.

Table 5. Single best explanatory variables for subsets of the data according to number of traits *(cont.)*.

Number of traits	VNDB characters	ACDB visual novel characters	ACDB other characters
19	number of characters	-	-
20	number of characters	-	-
21	number of characters	-	-
22	number of characters	-	-
23	number of characters	-	-

On the other hand, moving upwards from fourteen in the number of traits *number of characters* becomes the dominant explanatory variable. Since the temporal range of the data subsets shrinks from 1998–2019 to 2000–2019 as the number of traits increases, one possible explanation might be that for the shorter range of years the temporal effect can no longer be identified. To check for this, the regression analyses were also performed for the lower number of traits data subsets with the years 1998–1999 removed, which yielded the same results as those indicated in the table above. Thus, it is less likely that the lack of a temporal effect in the range of data subsets with higher number of traits is due only to the lack of information for the years 1998–1999 in those subsets.[22]

Recalling the first assumption that characters based on popular templates have a higher propensity to receive a more detailed treatment in the data we can offer the following interpretation of the results. The higher up we are in the number of traits the more likely we are to encounter these type of characters, and so the more plausible it is that we are indeed checking for the actual phenomenon described by Azuma. In this way, the presence of the temporal effect in the lower range of numbers of character traits versus its disappearance in the higher range of trait numbers points to the hypothesis being tested not holding up for the VNDB dataset either. The presence of the temporal effect in the lower range of number of traits data subsets is, however, consistent enough to warrant further investigation in the future.[23]

22 Another possible question is whether this pattern is just a result of the cut-off point being set at five shared traits between two characters for them to be considered characters with shared traits. To control for this, the VNDB data was also analysed according to this decomposition by number of traits for a higher threshold of seven shared traits needed to consider two characters to be characters with shared traits. The resulting pattern again followed the one in Table 5, thus the results do not seem to be specific to the threshold of five shared traits.

23 One could even argue that the presence of the temporal effect in the lower range of number of character traits is precisely the evidence confirming Azuma's claim, since

What if character production in Japanese manga, anime, and video games has been database-like all along?

Based on the results from the regression analysis, it seems that the hypothesis we started out from has not been substantiated. Before continuing to the theoretical implications of these results, let us first consider some of the potential limits to the findings. First, and most importantly, although the regression analysis on the whole VNDB data had a temporal range of 1989–2019, the regression analyses on the data decomposed by number of traits only had a publication year range of 1998–2019 at the most. Since Azuma is talking about a change that had occurred in recent years, from the point of view of 2001, when the book was originally published, it would be quite acceptable to argue that the decomposed data only captures the state of affairs after the shift had happened. Therefore, if it did not find anything it is perhaps due to this limited temporal range in the analysis. The same argument could be leveraged against all of the analyses conducted on the ACDB visual novel characters dataset as well. As for the ACDB other characters dataset, although it does indeed span a potentially long enough timeframe for at least the overall dataset and a number of the data subsets, it is mostly made up of data on anime characters, and thus does not fit Azuma's argument completely, as that concerns otaku specific media, such as visual novels.

Having established some of the potential limitations to the validity of the findings it is time to examine what all of this means for reconsidering Azuma's work and the way characters are produced. Azuma is mostly concerned with practices of consumption and the way those are changing in late modernity, but he nevertheless addresses the production side as well. Depending on our reading he is either implying a corresponding paradigm shift happening on the side of production, or at the very least points out the emergence of the proliferation of templated character creation.

One of the implications of the present analysis is that there was maybe no paradigm shift going on on the production side of character creation (either for otaku-like characters or characters in more general, as demonstrated by the results of the ACDB other characters dataset), or to address the narrower

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it could be taken to imply that the effect of replicating templates, which based on our results has always been present for the more popular characters, has over time become increasingly present for less popular characters as well. This interpretation, however, would overlook the fact that Azuma never states that this effect has always been present for the more popular characters. Thus, we would once again end up with an argument, where Azuma's point about the temporal change in relation to character production practices would prove to be at least partially unsubstantiated.

interpretation, that the templated creation of characters is far less of a new phenomenon. Changing the optics through which we look at this question, it suddenly becomes more than obvious that an equally strong argument could be made for why the production side has always operated in the manner Azuma describes. We could, of course, argue that inspiration is always part influence, and character creation has always drawn on preceding works, but we can make an even stronger case for the tendency to draw on a pool of available character templates in the case of Japanese manga and anime. Going back to the fountainhead of both modern story manga and limited animation (or television anime) in Japan, Osamu Tezuka, we find that it would not be hard to put forth an argument that this mode of production, namely relying on the elements of "the database," is how things were set up to be done from the very beginning. Firstly, Tezuka is famous for starring the same cast of characters in various works as different characters, which as far as templates go is the end point along the continuum from original to copy in the direction of re-use. Secondly, the limited animation techniques adopted by Tezuka for *Astro Boy*, which set the model for most television anime to follow, also heavily rely on the re-use of character elements.

> When it comes to animating characters, it is true that limited animation tends to move as little of the figure as possible and to reuse as much of the figure as possible. With faces, for instance, the eyebrows, eyes, or the mouth may move but nothing else; and drawings of the face seen from a couple different angles are used again and again. Likewise with the animation of bodies, the legs and arms may move, but nothing else. Limited animation tends toward the production a series of cel copies of the same body or face, and minor additions are made to them as you use them. The best way to assure maximum reuse of figures and bits of figures is to develop a cel bank, so you can piece together different scenes and different movements by assembling elements already drawn. The cel bank prepares the way for a relation to characters based on assembly—it forms the basis for the overlap between animation and garage kits and models (self-assembled characters) as well as an overlap between cel animation and the customizable characters of many videos games. […] The cel bank provides the assembly diagrams for taking apart and piecing together animated life forms. (Lamarre 2009, 192)

Following on from Lamarre's description of the cel bank, it is quite easy to imagine how the materiality of the animation process would inspire a similar approach in the act of character creation both as a matter of economic necessity (saving money by using already available elements from the cel bank) and as a model for creativity. Although I will not attempt to provide a well-researched argument that this approach to character creation in Japanese anime and manga has, indeed, been the dominant form throughout their history, I hope to

have provided a few convincing pointers for how such a position would be quite plausible to consider.

However, the fact that Azuma might have only projected the changes he discusses in relation to consumption practices on to the production side without there being any substantial changes there in reality, in no way poses a significant challenge to his book's overall argument, as it hinges on his discussion of consumption practices. Nevertheless, potentially amending his argument in this way helps better draw out its connections and indebtedness to Toshio Okada's 1996 book *Otaku-gaku Nyumon* (Introduction to Otakuology), which is conspicuously absent from Azuma's book's references, even though it is highly unlikely that he did not read it, especially in light of his explicit use of the generational model of otaku introduced by Okada.

In *Otaku-gaku Nyumon* Okada, also focusing on the consumption side, explained how early otaku would take note of and catalog the differences in the television anime series they enjoyed, in a way attempting to reverse engineer the production process. They started to understand the connections between the end credits and the changes in the looks of the characters, the animation style, or the structure of the story. To rephrase this, in Azuma's vocabulary these early otaku were invested in understanding the underlying structure of the "database" that underpinned their favourite shows.

Thus, by positing that the production side has to a certain degree always followed this model of relying on the "database" of character elements, the corresponding argument would be that it is only now that the consumption side has caught up to it,[24] and thereby also made these tendencies more explicit on the production side as well. This might seem like a minor shift in emphasis, but it would definitely require a stronger acknowledgement of Okada's work in relation to highlighting the way otaku have from the start been engaged with the database aspect of the production side of anime. Which is very much in line with the way Lamarre treats the question of the connection between Okada's and Azuma's work, through the image of the exploded projection, which serves as a central metaphor in his book, *The Anime Machine* for the way Okada and studio GAINAX approach anime:

24 At least for a wider audience since Okada's argument is precisely about how this form of knowledge accumulation and sharing has been going on for a long time within the circles of the most dedicated fans. Similar to Jenkins (1992), he points out how the home video recorder greatly catalyzed this process of close reading of favourite media texts. And the mass adoption of internet use, of course, made the sharing and accessibility of these types of information for increasingly wider audiences even easier.

> In fact, I would go so far as to say that the underlying structure in Azuma, which he calls database structure, is actually exploded projection. (Lamarre 2009, 260)

Furthermore, this would also mean that the relevance of the ACDB other characters dataset for evaluating the initial hypothesis should be reevaluated. If otaku have been working on deciphering the "database" behind their favourite anime even before the rise of so-called otaku specific media products, then it seems quite relevant to also consider the lack or existence of the temporal trend we were looking for in the ACDB other characters dataset as well. Thus, the fact that there was no temporal effect to be found in that dataset either, further strengthens the argument in relation to this proposed amendment to Azuma's argument. This last point is also a testament to the way theoretical and empirical investigations mutually rely on each other to make sense of the phenomena in question.

Summary

The metadata databases compiled by fan or enthusiast communities, while holding certain challenges, such as the incompleteness of their data, are a rich and granular resource that can be harnessed for academic research. The present chapter has demonstrated this applicability by testing one of the points from Azuma's book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009 [2001]) on two of the databases processed within the framework of the Japanese Visual Media Graph project. By having found no strong evidence in the data to support the hypothesis that the creation of new characters has become increasingly reliant on popular templates, we have stumbled upon an equally interesting position. Namely, the possibility that the production side of Japanese anime and manga has always operated in a manner congruent with Azuma's database description. Should this indeed be the case, it would mean only a minor adjustment to the book's overall argument. However, it would help bring to the fore Azuma's indebtedness to Okada's work (1996), further substantiating the connection between the two authors' positions already highlighted by researchers like Lamarre (2009).

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Comment by Shunsuke Mukae

The academic use of fan community works is often criticized. Some say it is a form of exploitation or treating them with a lack of respect. The uproar

over the analysis of pixiv submissions in 2017 is a typical example. But it is also unavoidable in the current data-driven climate. This essay tries to show a way forward for such future development, using Azuma's famous thesis as an auxiliary line. The careful explanation of the deficiencies and biases in the data shows the author's sincerity and makes the essay more credible.

Yet, is it appropriate to reinterpret Azuma's argument, which is limited to the Japanese situation, using the English-based Visual Novel Database (VNDB) where even characters in non-Japanese games are registered?

And does Tezuka's reuse of characters in his works and the example of cell banks in the anime production support the author's claim that the anime industry has been using character templates? In this case, it seems more appropriate to compare this with another medium, such as film.

Thus, there are questions in this essay that remain unsolved. Despite this, the author's attempt to bridge Azuma's theory of consumption with that of production is fascinating. Regardless of the validity of the conclusions, the essay is worth referring to as a case study of the academic use of fan community works.

Comment by Peter Mühleder

This chapter provides valuable insights into the possibilities and problems that arise when working with fan-created digital resources. In terms of the study of pop culture, these resources can provide important insight into fan practices, but – as the author shows – also facilitate a "distant reading" of trends and developments in a specific cultural field. But these opportunities do come with a price. Online data, even structured data from databases like that used in this case, is often incomplete, messy, and incompatible. Data cleaning, integration, and linking are laborious and difficult tasks that rarely get the attention they deserve. Therefore, the technical and methodological rigour that the author openly describes and employs to deal with these issues is impressive and acts as a great example of how to tackle such matters.

Luca Bruno

A Glimpse of the Imaginative Environment

Exploring the Potential of Data-driven Examinations of Visual Novel Characters

The following chapter describes a data-driven approach to visual novel game[1] production in Japan through the usage of fan-curated data gathered as part of the Japanese Visual Media Graph (JVMG hereafter) project. The JVMG project is a digital infrastructure project funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG).[2] Its goal is the development of a research database on Japanese visual media such as anime, manga, visual novels, and Japanese videogames for researchers in Japanese studies and media studies. It is envisioned as a highly interconnected structure, gathering, and correlating multiple data sources with its own research interface and array of data tools.

1 Introduction

The juxtaposition of manga/anime visual and narrative aesthetics with eroticism and pornography contiguous with *eromanga* has invited generalization of visual novel games as "interactive anime/manga with erotic content" (Taylor 2007, 198). Other examples of conflation include Forrest Greenwood, which subsumes *bishōjo* games – visual novel games featuring romantic and sexual interactions with cute girl characters, intended for a male heterosexual audience – into the "anime/manga media sphere" (2014, 238–239), or Jonathan

1 The usage of "visual novel game" within this chapter is done out of the necessity to employ a unified descriptor for Japanese visual novel game production at large. It does not seek to address specific game peculiarities such as the type of romanceable characters (*bishōjo* game, *otome* game, BL game) or the combination of more properly gamic segments with the textual-based framework of visual novel games. Specific discussion of sub-genres and their relative (dis)similarities is beyond the scope of this chapter.

2 The author of the chapter is a project member working on the JVMG project and the present chapter incorporates materials from blogposts the author has written for the Japanese Visual Media Graph Project Website (https://jvmg.iuk.hdm-stuttgart.de/).

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Clements, which collocates *bishōjo* games as limited animation (2013, 194). While these approaches do not fully account for the playful nature of visual novel games, it is also necessary to note that the predominantly non-interactive nature of this class of interactive software offers easy collocation into non-game media forms.

On the other hand, aesthetic continuity with anime/manga belies the peculiar position of visual novel game production in the wider Japanese visual media ecology. Visual novel games represent the majority of personal computer videogames produced and sold in Japan, with circa 500 titles released each year, by virtue of low entry to market requirements and low cost-recoup threshold (Koyama, Kobayashi [Hichibe] and Nakamura 2019, n.p.; Koyama 2020 [2016], 210). Production is scattered, with an average sales volume counted at 2000 units sold for each title (Kagami 2010, 136), with cost-recouping generally positioning itself at 3000 units sold (Koyama, Kobayashi [Hichibe] and Nakamura 2019, n.p.). It is a production niche positioned in an intermedia layer between hobbyist/semi-professional production (*dōjin*) and the generalist media industry (Hichibe and Tanaka 2016; Picard 2013).

The scale, scatteredness, and zoning of visual novel game production make conventional approaches difficult. If isolated cases of pornographic games such as *Rapelay* (Galbraith 2017; Pellettier-Gagnon and Picard 2015) have emerged due to their legal notoriety, their emergence obscures the hundreds of other titles released every year and provide a skewed perspective into the field. On the other hand, the production and circulation of Japanese visual novel games is excessively vast and too dispersed for isolated research attempts to return results on a comprehensive scale.

At the same time, the efforts at database building and data curation by enthusiast communities are still a mostly untapped source of information. In the case of a production niche such as visual novel games, it might be one of the few ways to access descriptive metadata at a level of granularity (see Kacsuk in this volume; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, n.p.) eschewed by institutional sources.[3] More specifically, it allows access to a perspective that only enthusiast communities may consider, such as character engagement in visual novel games. Usage of fan-curated data for a comprehensive approach

3 One example is the Media Arts Database sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Agency for Cultural Affairs. The database gathers data from print sources, internal archives from producers and institutional actors such as the National Diet Library, whose focus is on traditional media archival practices (Media Arts Database 2021).

can open the way to new understanding of niche media, beyond traditional research approaches.

2 Visual novel games: An overview

The term "visual novel game" points to mostly text-based interactive software where the focus of the gamic experience is on the establishment of intimate bonds with one or more characters. "Visual novel," in its original usage within Japan, referred to a series of software works developed by Leaf, the eponymous Leaf Visual Novel Series. In its usage within English-speaking contexts, it refers to interactive software works that privilege prose reading over interactivity, juxtaposed with visual and sound design in continuity with anime/manga aesthetics. Azuma Hiroki offers a similar definition, grouping a series of male-oriented software works featuring romance with anime/manga characters (cf. Azuma 2007, 193–194). Hichibe Nobushige (2006, 70, see also Koyama 2020 [2016], 218–219) identifies visual novel games as interactive software rooted in a system of six elements:

1) The presence of multiple, branching storylines that can be read through, and the possibility for the player to reach different outcomes in the narrative through decisions made at key points during the game.
2) The presence of full-screen illustrations (CGs) depicting the locale in which the narrative is taking place or specific events in the game's narrative.
3) The presence of character sprites (*tachi-e*), which can be superimposed over locale CGs.
4) Prose text, either displayed in a box in the bottom of the game window or superimposed over the CGs.
5) Aural performances (*BGM ya kōkaon*) matching character's current emotions and the state of the narrative.
6) The presence of visual effects interacting with the illustrations on screen (*gamen effekuto*).

However, this definition does not account for the focus on intimacy that can be found in a vast majority of such titles (cf. Azuma 2007, 193–194). The player reads prose text, enjoys illustrative artworks, and listens to aural performances detailing a story of budding intimacy. The decisions that the player is called to make to traverse the game are made in order to achieve a state of total intimacy with one or more characters from the game's cast.

Playing a visual novel game is a continuous multimodal parsing of information distributed across three channels, linguistic (prose text), visual (charac-

ter and locale illustration), and aural (soundtrack and vocal performance). Prose text is generally written in the first person, but resembles a script, rather than prose fiction. Character sprites and locale illustrations depict essential states, devoid of connection to the narrative, specific camera angles, or perspective foci. Aural performances do not cover the entirety of the game's narration, and the player's avatar is generally left completely unvoiced to improve player identification and immersion.

Players are elicited to "fill the blanks" (Galbraith 2017, 158) between these three channels, and in doing so, imagine a personal take on the game's narration. Progress through the game's narrative is marked by the encounter with "reward images" (*gohobi-e*) (Miyamoto 2013, 24), special, full-screen illustrative artworks depicting one of game's characters in a specific, plot-relevant situation. Differently from ordinary gameplay, a reward image is usually employed only once in the game and does not rely on the player's imaginative capability to produce the scene depicted through the text. Narrative scenes marked by a reward image articulate specific portions of a character's design and serve as a signal that the intimate bond with the character is deepening.

Physical intimacy in visual novel games is depicted in highly stylized ways contiguous with *eromanga*, with a focus on emotional engagement followed by erotic and pornographic depiction of sexual intercourse. However, the focus is generally away from mere sexual conquest, and rather seeks to contextualize pornography in a crescendo of mutual trust and reciprocity. As emphasized by critic Sasakibara Gō, the focus is on responding to the other's (character) actions and bear the responsibility for her emotional responses, ultimately influencing their life in a variety of ways (2004, 164–166). Unsuccessful navigation through the game may lead to the player being spurned or to the player character's demise, depending on the setting of the story. It is the player who bears the emotional consequences of their actions.

Visual novel games possess their own industry censorship and regulating body, *Sofurin* (Pelletier-Gagnon and Picard 2015, 34–35), along with specific circuits of content circulation and reception. Examples of these circuits include specialty stores such as Melonbooks and Toranoana, online shops such as dlsite.com, fan conventions such as Komiket, and historical examples of urban districts such as Akihabara and East Ikebukuro (cf. Morikawa 2012, 139–141, 2008 [2003], 81–101). Circuits such as these crystallize visual novel games as being part of a "culture of free imagination and creation" (Galbraith 2017, 42–43; Azuma 2007, 39), a semi-commercial space where free self-expression is the guiding value (Tamagawa 2012, 125–127).

Circulation of ideas in visual novel game production, especially in those works that reach market distribution, is one step removed from hobbyist production, still allowing great creative freedom with few gatekeepers beyond

their zoning as adults-only media. Content producers operating in this liminal space can oscillate between hobbyist production and professional activity, serving as a "talent pool" and "upstream source" of ideas for generalist media industries (Koyama, Kobayashi [Hichibe] and Nakamura 2019, n.p.). Examples of the liminal position occupied by visual novel games include the *Fate* (Type-Moon 2003–2021) transmedia franchise, whose initial release was the 2003 visual novel *Fate/Stay Night*. Creators whose careers originated in visual novel game production include novelist and screenwriter Urobuchi Gen, who debuted with *Phantom – PHANTOM OF INFERNO* (Nitroplus 2000) and director Shinkai Makoto, whose early directing career included introduction movies for *Bittersweet Fools, Wind: A Breath of Heart, Haru no Ashioto and Ef: A Fairy Tale for the Two* (Minori 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006).

Preceding individual authorial voices, visual novel game production is characterized by its reliance on a semi-formal, peer-learned (cf. Galbraith 2017, 71) system of conventional modes of content reception and production. This tendency has been metaphorized as the so-called "database" of character design element delineated by Azuma Hiroki (2009 [2001]. 42; 2007, 41–46). It is a system centred on character creation, composed on hundreds of possible combinations of distinct elements of character designs. Character designs are divided into abstractable elements, ranging from single portions of visual designs such as glasses or ribbons, to archetypal plot seeds regulating a character's personal narrative and identity. Production is done via recurring and self-referencing distinct elements spanning visual design, idiolect, and personal narratives (Bruno 2019, 40; Galbraith 2017, 152, 159). Elements of character design can be as limited as components of a character's appearance (hairstyle, clothes, accessories) or all-encompassing as their demeanour towards the player and other characters.

> Different colors of hair and hairstyles might suggest character, for example "blond with pigtails" (*kinpatsu tsuin tēru*), which I was consistently told referred to characters with a bad attitude and a soft heart. There are hundreds of these combinations. A strand of hair sticking up, which is called "stupid hair" (*ahoge*), suggests a character that is energic but not too bright. Glasses may convey intelligence or shyness and a girl with glasses becomes a character type, "glasses girl" (*meganekko*) (Galbraith 2017, 150–151).[4]

4 Galbraith's research concerns visual novel games targeted towards a male audience. However, female-targeted visual novel games have a similar system of character design elements, with many specular examples. For specific discussions on visual novel games directed at female audiences, see Okabe and Pellettier-Gagnon 2019. For a discussion about female fans practices connected with the wider media environment of visual novel games from the perspective of female fans, see Galbraith 2011.

Character designs encode specific cues that pre-empts arrays of possible interactions within a visual novel game, while also allowing character recognizability across media and stylistic alterations (cf. Iwashita 2016, 166–167). They generate an interplay of anticipation, confirmation, and subversion of expectation that concurs in creating the overall experience of character-based intimacy. Parsing and decoding embedded cues and understanding invoked codes is a specific and emergent form of media literacy (Galbraith 2017, 151–152; Kacsuk 2016, 277; Kagami 2010, 131). Such a literacy points not just to conventional templates, but also to their various actualizations across time and media.

On the other hand, content production that sets itself outside of the visual novel niche tends to reject its conventions. Certain instances of content production may even crystallize character and stories inspired by the visual novel production niche in a way that is accessible for more generalist audiences. This can arguably cause a return to primacy of authorial intentions and media affordances (cf. Suan 2017, 71). Examples of deliberate rejection of conventional system in favour of authorial primacy lies in the works of Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli (cf. Lamarre 2009, 186). Less radical examples of removal of invoked codes include the later works of Shinkai Makoto, especially *Kumo no Mukō, Yakusoku no Basho* (CoMix Wave Films 2004), *Kimi No Na Wa* (CoMix Wave Films 2016), *Tenki no Ko* (CoMix Wave Films 2019), and the *Violet Evergarden* transmedia franchise (Kyoto Animation 2015–2020).

The embedding of cues into character design and the reliance on the system of design elements make visual novel games particularly reflective of a tendency cultural critic Azuma Hiroki defines as "database consumption" (*dētabēsu shōhi*) (Azuma 2009 [2001], 47–53). Database consumption is a descriptor for a variety of tendencies in character-centric media production and reception that emerged in Japan at the turn of the twenty-first century. It highlights the tendency for modes of content consumption to locate themselves not at the level of fiction (overarching plots, narratives, etc.), but rather to the level of metafiction. It is reflective of a tendency towards abstraction, (re)production, (re)iteration, and (re)circulation of content, without apparent regard for established traditions or overarching narratives (Ibid., 53–58).

Azuma analyses the proliferation of characters composed of elements abstracted from other characters in an endless cycle of parody, quotation, and iteration, bringing the characters referencing Ayanami Rei from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Gainax 1994) as an example. He argues that, as it is apparently no longer possible to identify an origin point or regulating entities for tendencies in character production, the notion of original work, with its definitional power over characters, is no longer useful or important. However, while there might indeed be a decline of regulating elements such as identifiable authorial figures, design elements abstracted from the character can still arguably be traced to its

original template (cf. Bruno 2019: 47–48). At the same time, the proliferation of such characters still points to a kind of shared trajectory within wider content production, implicit as it may be:

> The emergence of Ayanami Rei did not influence many authors so much as change the rules of the moe-elements sustaining otaku culture. As a result, even those authors who were not deliberately thinking of Evangelion unconsciously began to produce characters closely resembling Rei, using newly registered moe-elements (quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power). Such a model is close to the reality of the late 1990s. (Azuma 2009 [2001], 51–52).

Azuma's work detailing database consumption and its implications, *Otaku: Database Animals,* has stimulated discussion both within Japan and abroad, leading to a constellation of theoretical contributions in studies of Japanese pop culture, touching animation (Lamarre 2018, 2009; Suan 2017; Condry 2013), sequential art (Nagayama 2014; Itō 2014 [2005]), psychology-grounded examinations (Saitō 2011 [2001]), media histories (Ōtsuka 2014, 2004; Yoshimoto 2009; Uno 2008), urban and virtual space (Morikawa 2012, 2008 [2003]) and production paradigms (Steinberg 2015a, 2015b, 2012; Ōtsuka 2010 [1989]).

Azuma would later further explore this shift in sensibilities in the 2007 follow-up to *Database Animals*, *The Birth of Game-Like Realism* (*Gēmutekina Riarizumu no Tanjō. Dōbutsukasuru Posutomodān 2*). Therein, Azuma changes focus from content consumption to pop literature. However, as argued by Zoltan Kacsuk (2016, 276), the book also reveals further engagement with the effects of the transformation detailed in *Database Animals*. Through *Game-like Realism*, Azuma exposes the how sensibilities move away from linear modes of reception proper of traditional representational-realist literature, especially within select areas of Japanese visual media. The shift in sensibilities proceeds towards an awareness of the increasing encroaching of non-interactive works by interactive media such as video games and their surrounding contexts (2007, 193–197).

3 Towards an environment-based approach

Within *The Birth of Game-Like Realism*, Azuma shifts his examination from practices of content reception to the analysis of new modes of content production. He builds on existing discourse on media production in Japan, highlighting the shift in focus from fiction to meta-fiction. While he already highlighted such a shift in *Database Animals*, in *Game-Like Realism* Azuma examines its implication in pop culture production. Even though the focus of the book is on

the literary media of light novels, Azuma makes ample use of visual novel game case studies, juxtaposing them with light novels to highlight the influence of metafictional affordances across media.[5]

The shift to metafictional affordances is represented by tendencies such as the database of character design elements. More generally, it is the emergence of characters who are not specifically tied to one work or one story, but rather can exist within, without, and in-between narratives and media (Azuma 2007, 133–134). A character can have multiple lives and multiple stories, but remains, for all intents and purposes, the same character. To reconcile the discrepancy, Azuma expands manga critic Itō Gō's (2014 [2005]) framework for manga analysis, which distinguishes between a character's nature as an identifiable, namable visual sign, the *proto-character*, and the character as entity possessing a distinct identity and traceable existence, the *dramatis personae* (*tōjō jinbutsu*) (Itō 2014 [2005], 109–120; Itō, Natsume and Azuma 2007, 132; Azuma 2007, 133–136).

Itō highlights that characters possess a double nature, one that is strictly visual and can be consumed as a simple illustration (proto-character), and another one which references a fictional existence that makes the character more akin as a person (dramatis personae) (cf. Itō 2014 [2005], 115). The former is tied to the character's visual recognizability and consistency, and the bedrock upon which all modes in which the character is received must ultimately uphold (Nozawa 2013, n.p.; Itō 2014 [2005], 116–117). The latter dimension is tied to specific stories or works (Itō 2014 [2005], 120–121) and is identified with the potential for literary value in manga and anime works argued by media critic and historian Ōtsuka Eiji (Itō 2014 [2005], 131–141; Azuma 2007, 88–92; 136–138). The re-emergence of multiplicity in manga narratives, both on the side of reception and on the side of production, is seen by the existing manga critical discourse as a regression to earlier forms of manga with inferior artistic value (Azuma 2007, 88–92).

More specifically, it is identified with a negation of the definitional power of narratives over character identity, which Ōtsuka exemplifies as the capability of depicting character death. Emphasizing death as the ultimate depiction of tangible reality, Ōtsuka places the culmination of Japanese post-war manga history as the capability to employ the descriptive affordances of manga to depict reality, in what he defines as anime/manga-like realism. If character death can be rendered non-definitive, as just one of many narrative possibilities, the expressive potential of anime/manga-like realism is lost.

5 This section will privilege Azuma's approaches to visual novel games, rather than light novel pop literature acknowledging the latter when necessary.

Itō argues that Ōtsuka's position, which echoes through Japanese manga criticism, is just one position that became dominant amongst manga criticism. The critical discourse is now dysfunctional and refuses to engage with manga originating in sensibilities different than those circulating amongst critics (Itō 2014 [2005], 2–8). Itō posits a double nature of characters to develop a new framework capable of approaching the multiplicities in modes of reception and production that are now circulating.

Azuma substitutes Itō's division between line drawing and narrative identity with a focus on character design elements, beyond the visual aspect emphasized by Itō (cf. Itō, Natsume and Azuma 2007, 132). The database is envisioned as a shared set of practices of both reception and production, employed in content production and parsed in content reception. In particular, he emphasizes the continued influence of digital media upon analogue media, and its encroaching of the modes by which audiences relate to fiction. Azuma acknowledges the potential for imagining alternative paths, the returning to a previous state to undo one's mistakes (videogame-like "save and loading") and a different focus of character empathy located in the ability to make choices as a player-controlled character (Kacsuk 2016, 281; Azuma 2007, 140–142).

Azuma envisions a shift away from anime/manga like realism, with its ultimate goal of using the affordances of anime to reproduce reality, to what he calls "game-like realism" (Azuma 2007, 120–123). Game-like realism shifts the focus away from reality and highlights the ever-growing familiarity of audiences not just with video games, but with the wider digital environment, in which alternative readings of fiction, non-linear information gathering and interaction for the sake of interaction exist side by side (Ibid., 127–130).

Azuma describes this phenomenon as an "imaginative environment" (*sōzōryoku no kankyō*) (Azuma 2007, 36–41, 196). Generally described, an imaginative environment is a recognizable context of media production and consumption that is highly aware of its internal production and reception affordances. Such awareness is explicated in content production practices such as so-called database/*moe* elements (Azuma 2009 [2001], 39–42 and 2007, 41–45) and the capability to decode the cues embedded in their assemblage (Galbraith 2017, 150) required of users in content reception. Successfully decoding the cues produces an emphatic response articulated in affective-performative fashion which is ironic and self-reflective (cf. Sone 2014, 199). In the case of visual novel games or light novel works, such affordances are articulated through the character, under the system of character design elements and database consumption. In fact, characters constitute a "basic unit of narrative" (Azuma 2007, 45), with its own array of potential narrative situations and inter-character interactions.

One example of this tendency in action, within the imaginative environment pointed by Azuma, can be found in characters with animal ears (*kemonomimi*). The presence of this design element calls to animal-like mannerisms: it may call forward to interactions of a comical nature based on the predatory attitudes of animals the ears are modelled after, such as a character sporting dog ears being in contrast with a character whose ears are feline in shape. It can also direct towards the presence of specific idiolects, such as the employment of *-nya* (Japanese for *meow*) as an affix for words. In turn, this exert influences on the narrative's tone and genre, before authorial intention can be deployed (Bruno 2019, 42). In other words, authorial intention and media affordances exert their influence *after* the affordances of imaginative environment have been articulated through characters, which represent a kind of "metagenre," or "genre zero" (Azuma 2007, 48).

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Furthermore, the usage of media descriptors such as "visual novel game" and "light novel" or character descriptors such as "*bishōjo*" and "*bishōnen*," points not so much to the media itself, but rather to the content within, regardless of host media specificities (Ibid., 49). More specifically, it points to the content being connected to and expressing the underlying imaginative environment, calling to specific practices of production and reception. It is the connection with and acknowledegment of the wider imaginative environment that allows the mobility across media, with characters serving as its primary marker.

To take such environment-based influences into account, Azuma invites to forego traditional methods of analysis. Constructing his approach from observations of the similarity in structure, conventions and affordances across disparate and unconnected authors, Azuma delineates an "environmental" approach that takes the imaginative environment's non-transparent language

into account while bypassing the authorial figure as traditionally intended. He defines this process as "environment analysis" (*kankyō bunseki*) (Ibid., 156–157).

"Environment analysis" is an effort towards the understanding of shifts not just on the side of content producers, but also on the side of consumers, whose reception of content is no longer done in a transparent way, but rather through an opaque language. Understanding the invoked codes of imaginative environments is therefore an operation that requires to acknowledge both sides. To do so in the case of the imaginative environment of characters, Azuma cites texts such as Shinjō Kazuma's *Light Novels: "Super" Introduction* (*Raito Noberu "Chō" Nyūmon*) (2006), emphasizing the predominance of character types over plots, the possibilities that come with it and the shift to a gamic worldview (Ibid., 40–41, 128–130).

Azuma focuses on the ever-increasing influence of digital media to highlight the need to acknowledge the presence of multiple avenues by which media can be experienced. In actual interactive media, such as visual novel games, interactivity is present and emphasized through multiple possible character-based finales. In the case of media that do not offer the possibility of interaction, such as light novels, multiplicity is referenced through production of side stories or alternative narratives, or by explicating the possibility of alternative paths akin to save and loading visible in the narrative.

Both interactive and non-interactive media, reference such a multiplicity in articulating the system of character design elements. Even the many character-based finales – with their definitional potential – available to the player in a visual novel game still set the stage for re-contextualizing characters in other contexts. On the other hand, while characters reference arrays of possibilities rather than one single overarching plot, the array of possibilities is not limitless, and in fact suggest specific trajectories, as the focus on character-based intimacy can attest.

Examining the wider imaginative environment to ascertain the existence of specific trajectories is, however, problematic from a case study-based approach. While Azuma decided to resort to guidebooks rooted in the imaginative environment itself, the dispersiveness of visual novel production across companies, individuals and groups of individuals calls for a more granular approach independent of single perspectives. Vivacity of production and the implications that stem from low average sales must be considered when making approaches to visual novel game production. To these challenges, one also needs to consider the potential for internal divisions within the player base and distinctive self-positioning of player identity (cf. Tosca and Klastrup 2019, 189–190; Au Yeung 2008, 149–151).

Beyond wide-ranging approaches, it is also noteworthy that playing through a visual novel game can take up to 50 hours of game time, a task

that makes close reading approaches also problematic. This is especially evident in visual novel games where the completion of multiple character storylines can be necessary to fully comprehend the game's metaplot and subsequent relationships with the imaginative environment. Finally, individual creators or constellations thereof can command their own distinct audiences (cf. Galbraith 2017, 204–212), which adds yet another layer of complexity to prospective approaches.

The imaginative environment of visual novel games and other media such as light novels present a double challenge: it is necessary to account for both the vastness and scattered nature of visual novel game production along with a superficial tendency towards reproduction by imitation, rather than explicitly signals of the presence of shared design principles. One answer to the above conundrum is represented by fan-curated data, gathered in internet databases. Fan-curated databases offer a window into audience reception of media, and in the case of visual novel games, they have the potential to offer enough data to map the imaginative environment. Through such a map, the possibility for gaining new insights into visual novel game production from an "environmental" perspective becomes apparent. Continuous data input by fans allows for access to developing views, and most importantly, given an influential enough repository, exposes the consensus views around specific objects. In the case of visual novels, it allows us to gauge the usage and reception of character design elements on a large-scale, providing a glimpse of the contours of visual novel game production and its internal tendencies and trajectories.

4 Environmental Mapping: The imaginative environment through fan-curated data

This chapter's attempt at mapping the imaginative environment of visual novel game production will employ data gathered through collaboration between the JVMG project and The Visual Novel Database (VNDB and vndb.org hereafter). Differently from fan-curated repositories dedicated to both anime and manga, VNDB is exclusively dedicated to visual novel games. It is an English-speaking database whose efforts have led to a nearly comprehensive survey of visual novel game production, with a focus on Japanese-originated works. Beyond its stated goal of "becoming the largest, most accurate and most up-to-date visual novel database on the web" (Heling, 14 June 2021), vndb.org offers extensive data collection on visual novel games, their characters, and the visual novel industry. It catalogues characters, companies, creators, and voice actors, with a system of tags for game descriptions and a system of traits for description of characters.

VNDB also features relational diagrams of visual novel titles, detailing sequential relationships (sequel, prequel, fandisks, expansions) and commonality of fictional universe. Such a database does not exist in a vacuum and offers in-data entry connections to other fan-curated databases, especially in cases where a visual novel title possesses animated adaptations or is an adaptation of an existing franchise, featuring connections to other fan-curated databases such as *MyAnimeList* or the Japan-based *Erogescape*. As of 10 June 2021, vndb.org has over 29,962 entries for visual novel games and over 94,432 entries on visual novel game characters.

Visual novel game titles are described via a system of tags, grouped into the five categories of Theme, Style, Character, Plot, and Setting. Characters are described via a system of eleven trait trees: Hair, Eyes, Body, Clothes, Items, Personality, Role, Engages in, Subject of, Engages in (Sexual), and Subject of (Sexual) and whenever they are a protagonist (player character), a main character (a character which can be romanced in a narrative that leads to one of the game's finales) or a side character (a character which cannot be romanced).[6] The system is extremely granular and allows for an accurate description of both the plot of a specific visual novel game and the characters it features. The breadth and width of available data offers a potentially comprehensive mapping of visual novel game production and reception, as compiled by the enthusiast community of vndb.org.

Before any meaningful examination of the dataset can be made, however, it is necessary to acknowledge two corollaries, especially in the case of character data entries. First, character traits, especially those offering a very high level of granularity, tend to occur together with other traits, rather than in isolation. A character entry on VNDB tends to feature multiple traits from several trait trees. Specific traits implicitly or explicitly call for the presence of other traits. One example is the "Ahoge" trait, which describes a strand of hair that acts differently from the rest of the character's hairstyle. It implies the presence of hair on the character, and therefore of traits describing what is not an "Ahoge" on the character's head.

At the same time, an approach that merely counts a trait's incidence, how many times a trait occur across characters, can be misleading. A single trait might possess high incidence, but only be found in a minority of character

6 This approach does not deal with Protagonist characters, which are player-controlled avatars, are generally not seen for most of the gameplay experience and are usually not an object of interaction for the player. To facilitate data integration and disambiguation with other data sources in the JVMG infrastructure, the "main" character role has been renamed as "primary" character and will be referred to as such hereafter.

data entries. An example of such a trait is "Childhood Friend": of the 94,432 character entries on vndb.org, only 4765 possess the trait, circa 5.045 per cent. While this result can be meaningful, it is not productive to investigate the design makeup of "Childhood Friend" characters. It is not possible to understand where "Childhood Friend" occurs in relation to the traits that occur in connection with it. Any approach to character data in VNDB must therefore account for the interconnected nature of character traits.

To include such nuances in the examination of vndb.org's dataset, it is necessary to devise an appropriate approach, taking the corollaries listed above into account. One way to do so is to focus on the co-occurrence of character traits: the count of how many times traits occur together with one another. As traits in vndb.org character entries tend to occur together, employing co-occurrence allows us to visualize a clearer picture of the vndb.org dataset. In fact, the character trait dataset can be represented as a graph, a set of objects (traits) related with each other by how much they occur together (co-occurrence) on characters. By using network visualization software such as Gephi, it is possible to visualize the dataset as a network diagram, turning character traits into nodes and trait co-occurrence into the edges that connect nodes to other nodes. While visualizing the entire dataset is not productive (see Figure 1) due to its size, isolating a small sample of traits reveals the potential of this method, which can be repeated on a vast scale (see Figures 2 and 3).

Beyond visualization, Gephi provides an array of data analysis tools that allow further investigation into visual novel game production. A graph can be measured in several ways, all of them providing potentially productive perspective on the structure of a dataset. In the case of vndb.org, one particularly useful measure is modularity. Modularity is the measure of how many communities of nodes can be derived from a graph on the basis of connection strength between nodes. Modularity allows us to structure the connections existing between groups of traits in a given dataset as subnetworks. Which nodes compose each subnetwork become a window into visual novel game character design practices, as catalogued on vndb.org.

Another group of measures that provides useful insights is centrality. Centrality refers to the measure of a node's importance within a network on the basis of a given attribute. It can be used to measure which nodes act as intermediate points between two other nodes (betweenness centrality), which nodes possess the highest number of connections (degree centrality), which nodes possess less degrees of separation from all other nodes (closeness centrality), which nodes are most connected to other highly connected nodes (eigenvector centrality or prestige score). In the context of the present analysis of the VNDB dataset, eigenvector centrality allows us to measure which traits provide the most insights on each subnetwork.

By measuring which nodes are the most connected to other highly connected nodes, it is possible to gain a very specific insight into vndb.org's dataset, namely, which nodes constitute the cores of our networks. In other words, it is possible to further map the internal connections of the dataset and highlight the potential presence of traits that could be considered archetypical in character creation or recognized as such during data compilation. Should these traits also share other commonalities, such as descriptive themes or trait trees, it would further suggest the presence of shared character archetypes, or the recognition of such ensembles by VNDB users. If this assumption proves correct, it becomes possible to observe trajectories and internal tendencies of visual novel game production through fan-curated character data. On the other hand, a network "core" of traits lacking commonality would elicit different considerations and would ultimately suggest against the presence of such archetypes in visual novel game character creation.

VNDB's dataset was subjected to Gephi's modularity algorithm at default settings, which derived a total of three subnetworks. Gephi's modularity algorithm derives a network's modularity via Blondel et al. (2008)'s modularity optimization-based heuristic method. Blondel's approach derives subnetworks in the dataset on the basis of potential increase in internodal connection. The process is split into two phases. The first places each node in its own sub-network and then checking for increase in connection strength by moving nodes into the same sub-network. The operation is repeated until increase in internodal connection strength can no longer be obtained. At this stage, the algorithm moves to phase two, which creates a network of the networks that emerged during phase one. The entire process is repeated for a set number of times (Gephi's standard is one-hundred iterations). On the basis of this process, it is reasonable to expect subnetworks emerging from the VNDB dataset to be composed of traits which co-occur the most among themselves.

After modularity, each of the three subnetworks was subjected to eigenvector centrality algorithm, which allowed us to rank each subnetwork's nodes. The results are listed in Table 1, detailing number of sub-networks derived, their eccentricity, the relative size of each subnetwork (percentage), its top ten nodes by eigenvector centrality, along with a brief description. VNDB's character trait dataset appears to possess a maximum eccentricity of 3.0. In other words, every node is at a maximum of two degrees of separation from every other node. From the perspective of character traits in VNDB, it means that even if two traits do not co-occur together, they both co-occur with a third common trait. The majority (69.59 per cent) of character traits possess an eccentricity of two. The remainder (30.41 per cent) possess an eccentricity of three.

In other words, vndb.org's character traits dataset is tightly interconnected: the majority of traits can be found either co-occurring with every other trait in the database or co-occurring with a trait that co-occurs with a third trait. This arguably can be seen as a reflection of the tendency towards following the same aesthetic practices across visual novel game production at large. The results strongly suggest a non-random distribution of traits in the VNDB dataset. The emerging node communities differ significantly in terms of size, their share in the overall dataset and even the themes of the nodes that compose the subnetworks. This is very evident upon examination of the second subnetwork of the dataset. This subnetwork clusters traits which pertain to the description of a character's sexual activity and pornographic depiction in a visual novel game. If overall distribution followed a random pattern, it is likely that this clustering pattern would not occur in favour of a distribution of sexual traits across the three derived subnetworks.

Regarding eigenvector centrality, observation of the three subnetworks reveals a prevalence of nondescript traits in subnetwork one and three. Within the first subnetwork, the highest scoring traits describe a character's hairstyle ("Short Hair," "Parted to Side"), hair colour ("Brown Hair," "Black Hair"), an age group ("Young Adult (Apparent Age)"), eye colours ("Amber Eyes," "Brown Eyes," "Red Eyes"), two pieces of clothing ("Shirt," "Necktie"). Within the third subnetwork, the highest-ranking traits describe a character's skin colour ("Pale Skin"), an age group ("Teen (Apparent age)"), a character eye colour ("Blue Eyes"), four hair styles ("Long Hair," "Waist Length + (Hair)," "Straight Hair," "Sidehair (Hair Tail)") and one hair colour ("Blond Hair").

Employing eigenvector centrality, in this case, was ultimately not as productive as anticipated, especially in light of the highest-ranking traits in subnetworks one and three. No traits or ensembles thereof that could clearly suggest the presence of shared character archetypes in visual novel design practice could be observed. From these results, it is only possible to surmise that hair styles and body types are important in character design, and that traits describing sexual activity mainly recur with each other in their own subnetwork.

On the other hand, subnetwork two becomes more interesting when juxtaposed with the gendered specificities of visual novel game production. Pornography in the field of visual novel game tends to follow a gendered distribution. Visual novel games intended for a male audience generally feature explicit depiction of sexual intercourse between the (male) player character and the game's romanceable (female) characters (Azuma 2007, 193–196) Visual novel games intended for a female audience present different nuances. Visual novel games intended for female audiences and featuring experience involving heterosexual relationships will generally not depict sexual intercourse between the

(female) player avatar and romanceable (male) characters (Tosca and Klastrup 2019, 191). Visual novel games directed at female audiences that feature homosexual relationships will tend to be much more explicit in showing intercourse between the (male) player avatar and romanceable (male) characters (Okabe and Pelletier-Gagnon 2019, 41).

Therefore, subnetwork two is not representative of the nuances concerning the distribution of pornography within Japanese visual novel game production, as usage and distribution of character pornography vary widely on the basis of the game's intended audience. A stratification of the dataset to account for these nuances is therefore warranted, in order to account for a character's intended audience. The combination of character gender and the status of a character as a possible target of romantic interaction – the character possessing a storyline leading into one of the game's endings – were selected as marker for the intended audience for the character's host game.

The stratified data results in four sub-datasets, each grouping characters according to a combination of gender and character role: primary female characters; side female characters; primary male characters; and side male characters. Performing a new analysis of modularity and eigenvector centrality score on each of the four sub-datasets reveals a significant numerical disparity between female and male. There are many more female characters and games directed at a male audience than characters and games directed at a female audience. The high number of female characters allows us to create a very clear picture of visual novel games intended for male audiences. The relatively low number of male characters implies a fuzzier picture of visual novel games intended for female audiences. The results of calculating each sub-dataset's modularity and eigenvector centrality scores for their respective subnetworks are listed in Tables 2.1 through 2.4.

While it is possible to observe a continued strong tendency for sexual/pornographic traits to cluster together, other subnetworks across the four sub-datasets present interesting differences. The presence of sexual/pornographic traits in other communities suggests that, when character gender and role are taken into account, the number of depictions of character sexual activity changes across different character populations. At the same time, a higher degree of thematic commonality – traits pointing at specific situations, social and family status and more – could be seen in each subnetwork's highest eigenvector centrality traits. The increasing thematic commonality in high eigenvector centrality traits in our stratified datasets indicate select groups of character traits might possess an "archetypal" function. These archetypes – a model for characters described with the traits grouped within a subnetwork – vary on the basis of the character's intended audience, and do not apply to visual novel game production in its entirety.

For example, the first subnetwork of the female main characters datasets, numbering 60.38 per cent of all nodes in the network, suggests a high prevalence of characters that attend high school. Amidst the subnetwork's highest-ranking trait by eigenvector centrality, there are traits describing specific pieces of clothes ("School Uniform" and "Thigh-high Stockings") and social statuses ("High-School Student") rather than a sequence of nondescript visual traits. While high eigenvector centrality in a group of traits does not guarantee that these traits will co-occur together all the time, it offers a reasonable assurance that these traits co-occur frequently with themselves and across their sub-network.

Similar archetypal ensembles can be seen in other datasets such as the subnetwork of the male main characters dataset. This subnetwork is much more limited in scale and comprises only 12.87 per cent of all traits in its dataset. "Childhood Friend," "Classmate," and "Friend," along with "Teen (Apparent Age)" and "School Uniform," outline an even stronger archetype of a high-school student, which is a childhood friend of the protagonist character. In the context of male main characters, these traits ranking high in eigenvector centrality point to narratives, social status and settings connected with school life, in a stronger fashion than their female counterparts. On the other hand, the percentage of characters actually featuring in high school settings in visual novel games directed at female audiences is certainly lower, as the fourth subnetwork in the male main characters dataset comprises of a much smaller percentage of all traits.

Beyond high school student characters, it is possible to observe different distributions of traits describing character sexual activity and pornographic depictions across different character roles. In male main characters, it is possible to observe that, among traits pointing to character sexual activity, traits connected with homosexual intercourse such as "Male-on-Male Sex" or practices that can be related to homosexual erotic activity such as "Anal Sex (Subject of)" and "Blowjob (Engages in)" possess high eigenvector centrality. If this sub-network is contrasted with sub-network number four, it is possible to surmise that pornography in the male main characters dataset possess a specific trajectory towards depictions of homosexual intercourse.

A similar division, albeit not as clear cut, can be observed in female main characters. While traits describing character sexual activity cluster together, this time pointing at heterosexual intercourse, there is one trait found outside their subnetwork, "Virgin Sex." The presence of "Virgin Sex" outside of the second, pornography-centred subnetwork allows us to envision a dividing line amongst visual novel games directed at a male audience. Visual novel games offering a variety of pornographic and sexual depiction of characters, rather than a focus on one specific depiction might offer a different type of experience

than visual novel games where character pornography is present but not at the forefront of the game's experience. In this specific case, it suggests that there is a set of recurring practices in designing female characters who attend high school with a related conception of intimacy. More importantly, such a conception of intimacy is recognized as such by VNDB users.

It is also necessary to specify that depictions of characters performing sexual intercourse with characters of the same sex does not necessarily imply non-heteronormative identity. Pornography in visual novel games is still mostly intended for heterosexual audiences of both genders. However, looking at data like the VNDB dataset allows us to highlight the fault lines in a production niche featuring a tendency towards similarity in design practices and apparent imitation. Observing the different distributions of sexual/pornographic traits in visual novel game characters allows us to draw a very significant division in visual novel games directed at different audiences.

Beyond distribution of pornographic traits, subnetworks such as the first subnetwork in the female primary character dataset and the fifth subnetwork in the male primary dataset provide important insights in visual novel game character creation practices. This offers a glimpse into some of the tendencies within visual novel game production and consumption. In particular, examining the most important traits by eigenvector centrality in each sub-network highlights recurring patterns of character creation and recognition by users, which indicates the development of specific character archetypes. This further suggests that visual novel game production might not be as flat or indistinct as Hiroki Azuma's discussion of imaginative environment might suggest.

5 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has juxtaposed selected portion of the Japanese critical discourse pertaining to Japanese visual novel games and their characters. In particular, it has juxtaposed the shift towards Azuma's environment-based approach with an actual approach grounded in fan-curated data. This process was able to provide an exploration of the imaginative environment of Japanese visual novel games and their characters at a metaphorical ground level, less removed than metatext such as *Raito Noberu "Chō" Nyūmon.* It offers the possibility to critically engage theoretical concepts which, by way of the scatteredness and scale of visual novel game production, cannot be verified by traditional research.

Beyond the immediate advantages of being able to test general concepts such as Azuma's imaginative environment at their scale – a possibility not offered by traditional approaches – it represents a first effort towards the mapping of production niches such as Japanese visual novel games. Such a

mapping effort has both confirmed and contrasted Azuma's positions regarding visual novel games and their characters: while the character can be indeed envisioned as a "basic unit of narrative," the envisioning of database/*moe* elements as consumable in isolation is not reflected within the *vndb.org*'s dataset. Fan-curated data has shown that there are traits which call for the presence of other traits, hinting at underlying structures in visual novel game character design, production, and reception.

This development might be in fact closer to tendencies highlighted in BL sequential art by Kristine Santos (2020): an intertextual database of narrative and visual tropes which readers draw upon (3). "While Azuma argues that fans of anime and manga use this database in isolation, I argue that within BL culture this 'database' is deeply intertextual – a place where fans find pleasure in compounding and transforming layers of meaning into different media elements." (5). In fact, the developments outlined in this chapter also echo Sone Yuji's position on database/*moe* elements: "[Reinterpretation and re-appropriation of anime/manga works and subsequent reproduction as new or derivative material] cannot be characterized by free association, because there are particular codes and styles through which the otaku feels '*moe*', an intense excitement and desire that, in this context, drive otaku [fans] to consume these images" (Sone 2014, 209, bracketed addictions by the author).

While there is an inherent risk of a database's own data model occluding the "actual" imaginative environment, the shared nature of fan-curated repositories arguably mitigates such a risk. In fact, a further mitigation of such tendencies might be achieved by the employment of multiple datasets originating from multiple fan-curated sources. From a methodological standpoint, the employment of data analysis tools offers an increased level of possibilities than limiting one's approach to close examination of fan-curated repositories as they are: beyond individual affordances – different repositories offer different ways of delivering data to their users – the steps required to visualize data into a graph have the potential to unearth the underlying structures inherent in the dataset. Future approaches employing fan-curated data may include the juxtaposition of different datasets dealing with a common subject, comparative examinations and, more generally, the potential for tackling an entire context of cultural production at once.

Appendix 1. Data visualization

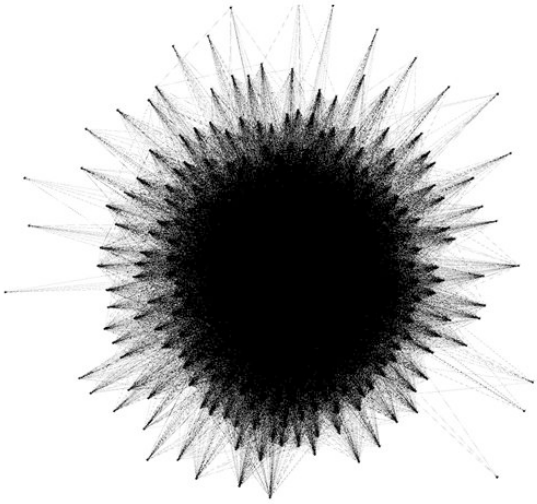

Figure 1. A visualization of the entire VNDB character trait dataset.

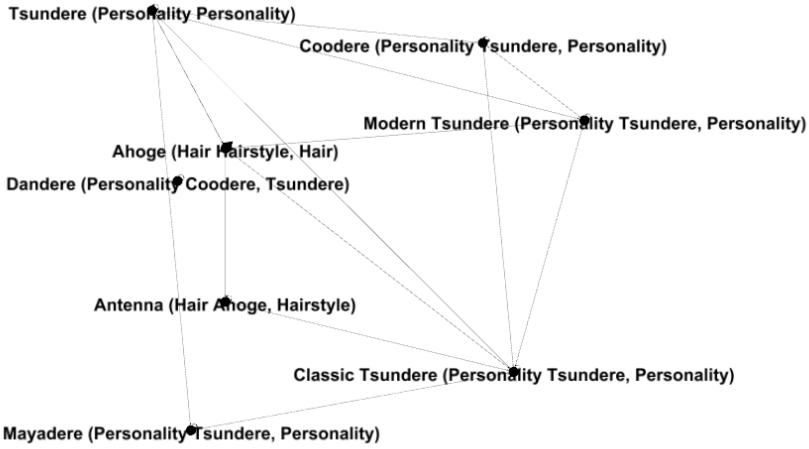

Figure 2. A visualization of a selection of traits from the VNDB character trait dataset (before and after).

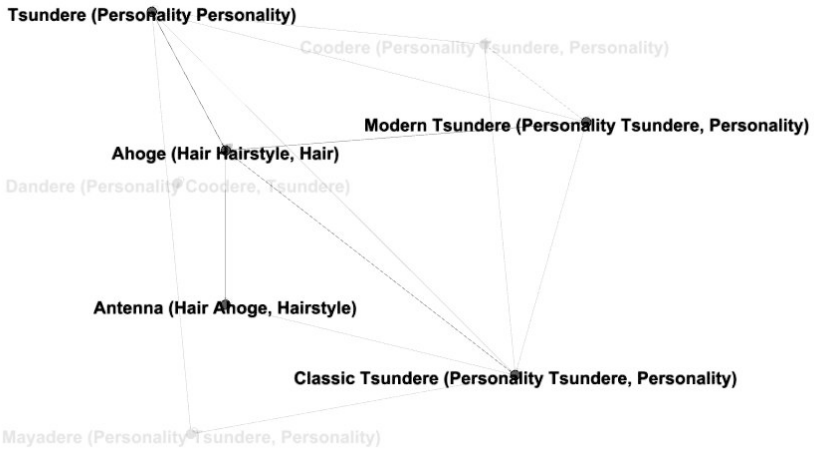

Figure 3.
Trait co-occurrence visualized as a graph. Figure 1 shows the entire VNDB dataset visualization. The number of nodes and connections is too big for to be viable. Figures 2 and 3 display a limited selection of the graph shown in figure 1, focused on the "Ahoge" character trait and traits which are either directly co-occurring with "Ahoge" or co-occurring with a third, common trait. Figure 2 shows all traits within the selection, while Figure 3 highlights all traits directly connected (co-occuring in the same character entry) with "Ahoge" in black. While all these traits are connected in some way, there is a clearly identifiable "inner core" of traits which is worthy of examination: are characters with an "Ahoge" hair more likely to have a "Tsundere" personality?

Appendix 2. Character Data Distribution and Sub-Networks

Table 1. Comprehensive Dataset.
Modularity distribution: 3 Communities
Eccentricity: 69.59% of traits have an eccentricity of 2.0; 30.41% of traits have an eccentricity of 3.0.

Sub-Network	10 most representative traits (Eigenvector Centrality)	Percentage
1	'Short Hair', 'Brown Hair', 'Young Adult', 'Black Hair', 'Amber Eyes', 'Parted to Side', 'Brown Eyes', 'Shirt', 'Red Eyes', 'Necktie'	47.57%
2	'Blowjob', 'Doggy Style', Cowgirl, Missionary, Sitting Sex, Outdoor Sex, Handjob, Anal Sex, Quickie Fix, Group Sex	27.3%
3	'Pale Skin', 'Slim Body', Teen (Apparent age), 'Blue Eyes', 'Long Hair', 'Average Height', 'Waist Length+ (Hair)', 'Straight Hair, 'Blond Hair', 'Sidehair (Hair Tail),	25.13%

Table 2.1. Female Primary Characters Dataset.
Modularity distribution: 3 Communities.
Eccentricity: 39.75% of traits have an eccentricity of 2.0; 60.95% of traits have an eccentricity of 3.0.

Sub-Network	10 most representative traits by eigenvector centrality	Percentage
'1'	'Pale Skin', 'Slim Body', Teen (Apparent age), 'Virgin Sex, Waist Length+ (Hair), Sidehair (Hair Tail), School Uniform, Straight Hair, Average Height, Thigh-high stockings'	60.38%
2	'Blowjob', 'Doggy Style', Anal Sex, Cowgirl, Handjob, Long (Hair), Ahegao, Sitting Sex, Boobjob, Butterfly (Sexual Position)	35.73%
3	Thigh-High Boots, Corset, 'Pointed ears', Princess (Role), Olive (Skin tone), Sword, Crown, Rape (Subject of), Tattoo, Plate Armour	3.89%

Table 2.2. Female Side Characters Dataset.[7]
Modularity distribution: 7 Communities (5 and 6 insignificant at only one trait each).
Eccentricity: 0.09% of traits have an eccentricity of 0; 0.32%of traits have an eccentricity of 2.0; 96.98% of traits have an eccentricity of 3.0.; 2.6% of traits have an eccentricity of 4.0.

Sub-Network	10 most representative traits by eigenvector centrality	Percentage
1	'Pale Skin,' 'Slim', 'Average Height', 'Blue eyes', 'Young-adult', 'Tareme', Violet Eyes, Green, Watashi, Kind	37.35%
2	'Virgin Sex', 'Blowjob', 'Doggy Style', 'Cowgirl', 'Missionary', 'Vaginal Fingering', 'Sitting Sex', 'Boobjob', 'Group Sex'	26.73%
3	'Amber Eyes', 'Thigh-high Stockings', 'Tsurime', 'Big Breast Sizes', 'Red Eyes', 'Fighting', 'Headband', 'Bracelet', 'Gloves', 'Necklace'	23.39%
4	'Teen', 'School Uniform', 'Miniskirt', High School Student, Ribbon Hair Tie, Ribbon Tie, Hairpin, Knee-High Socks, Necktie, Pleaded Skirt	12.2%
5	'Maid's Dress', 'Maid's Headdress', Maid (Role), 'Sash', 'Comedian'	0.23%

Table 2.3. Male Primary Characters Dataset.
Modularity distribution: 6 Communities.
Eccentricity: 6.95% of traits have an eccentricity of 2.0. 92.95% have an eccentricity of 3.0. 0.1% have an eccentricity of 0.0.

Sub-Network	10 most representative traits by eigenvector centrality	Percentage
1	'Anal Sex (Subject of)', 'Blowjob (Engages in), 'Blowjob (Subject of)', 'Handjob', 'Male on Male Sex', 'Group Sex', 'Anal Sex', 'Sixty-Nine', 'Doggy Style', 'Outdoor Sex'.	32.74%
2	'Fighting (Engages in)', 'Death', 'Confinement', 'Murder (Engages in)', 'Avoidable Death', 'Teasing', 'Planning', 'Smart', 'Arrogant', 'Unarmed Fighting'.	28.86%
3	'Young Adult', 'Pale Skin', 'Trousers', 'Tall', 'Hosome', 'Slim', 'Blue Eyes', 'Amber Eyes', 'Belt'	25.43%
4	'Teen', School Uniform, High School Student, Ore, Average Height, 'Brown eyes, 'Childhood Friend', 'Classmate', 'Friendly', 'Friend'.	12.87%

7 Note: there are actually seven communities, but two of them have been omitted from this table due to them being formed by only one trait each: 'Tone Deafness (Subject of Disability, Health Related)' and 'Amphibian (Role Animal, Nature)'.

Table 2.4. Male Side Characters Dataset.
Modularity distribution: 3 Communities.
Eccentricity: 5.32% of traits have an eccentricity of 2.0. 94.48% have an eccentricity of 3.0. 0.21% have an eccentricity of 4.0.

Sub-Network	10 most representative traits by eigenvector centrality	Percentage
1	'Rape (Engages in)', 'Blowjob (Subject of), 'Male on Male sex', 'Cross-dressing', 'Bracelet', 'Anal Sex', 'Doggy Style', 'Sitting Sex', 'Missionary', 'Not a Virgin'	22,67%
2	'Tall', 'Fighting (Engages in)', 'Adult Body', Muscular, 'Grey hair', Suit, Death (Subject of), 'Black Eyes', 'Long Hair', 'Red Eyes'.	47.94%
3	'Short Hair', 'Pale Skin', 'Slim Body', 'Brown Hair', 'Trousers', 'Young Adult', 'Black Hair', 'Hosome', 'Brown eyes', 'Teen'	29.39%

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Comment by Cäcilia Sauer

Fan communities are all too often neglected as scientific source material. Be it a fan forum or a YouTube comment – they are frequently deemed not credible enough and, at best, are used to examine a particular social atmosphere.

Luca Bruno tries to show that fan pages and fan data can indeed be helpful when it comes to collecting data. In his article, he presents fan-curated data gathered as part of the Japanese Visual Media Graph (JVMG) research project, which he uses for a data-driven approach to visual novel games. Bruno posits that it is quite difficult to use conventional approaches to visual novel games, due to them being a production niche positioned in an intermedia layer between hobbyist/semi-professional production and the generalist media industry. On the other hand, visual novel games are extremely popular in Japan and, therefore, a huge amount of data can be collected through fan pages and forum, and, indeed, Bruno uses this as a basis for his research.

Despite focusing on a production niche such as visual novel games, Bruno's article successfully proves the potential of fan-curated data. This approach can certainly be beneficial to other research projects, specifically those lacking more "conventional" data.

Transnational spaces

Kyohei Ito

Mystery of Plane Symmetry

A Philosophical Approach to Mirror Image and Shadow

1 Introduction

E.T.A. Hoffmann's "A New Year's Eve Adventure" (1815) is the story of a man who has sold his mirror image to a demonic woman. This work is not only an homage to Albert von Chamisso's "The Curious Tale of Peter Schlemihl" (1814), but also features Peter Schlemihl, the man who sold his shadow to the devil. Both men are ostracized by the secular world and set out on a meandering journey in search of lost mirror images or shadows. There is no shortage of literary works whose subject is mirror image or shadow, and such works are often linked to self-identity. It has been pointed out that paintings have their origins in mirror images and shadows (Okada 2010, 17). Seen from this perspective, they can be interpreted as the inception of human desire to copy and preserve the identity of objects. René Magritte's "Not to Be Reproduced" (1937) might depict a mirror reflecting his ironic criticism against such a tendency (see Fig. 1).

If we could see our own face directly, what would be the difference between that face and the one reflected in the mirror? When we face a plane mirror placed vertically on the ground, the mirror image is horizontally reversed. If we raise our right hand, the mirror image will raise its left hand. However, this "left-right reversal" is a misleading expression. For example, when you are driving a car and the car behind tries to overtake you from the right, the car you see in your rearview mirror gradually disappears to the right. In this case, we do not think that the following car is moving to the left. In other words, our sense of left-right reversal is lost. Suppose the vehicle behind is an ambulance. In the rearview mirror, you will see the word "ambulance" painted on its hood. If you look directly behind you, you will see that the letters are reversed left and right (see Fig. 2). Thus, the mirror image is indeed reversed, but there is a problem that cannot be explained by geometrical optics. The correct answer to mirror reversal is quite simple: "Sign

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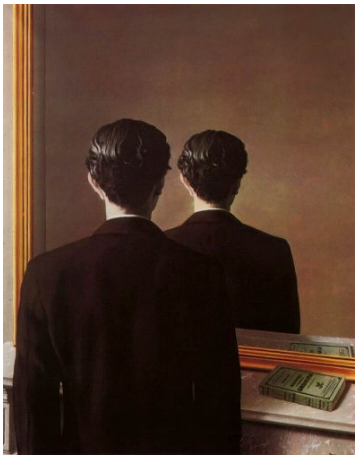

Figure 1. Magritte, René, *Not to Be Reproduced,* 1937, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, https://www.renemagritte.org/not-to-be-reproduced.jsp.

Figure 2. Mirror Writing (AMBULANCE).

inversion of the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface" or "Plane symmetric transformation on the mirror surface as the symmetry plane" (Yoshimura 2004, 10). Nevertheless, mirror reversal is known to be a controversial topic. This is partly because it allows room for psychological and philosophical interventions beyond the geometrical answers mentioned above, but I suspect that one of the main reasons is that it has been involved in a kind of interdisciplinary struggle before that.

What follows can be separated into two parts. First, I critically examine the theories of several researchers who have tackled the mystery of mirror reversal, and make remarks on applying frame of reference (from the intrinsic frame of reference and the common frame of reference) to mirror image. Second, I propose a hypothesis that mirror image and shadow have a commonality in applying frame of reference. Throughout this chapter, I analyse the plane symmetry of them and its attribution to the self.

2 Mirror image

2.1 Multiple frames of reference

Mirror reversal is a topic that has long attracted attention. Indeed, it is mentioned in Plato's "Timaeus", but here I will first quote an explanation by Richard Feynman, a famous theoretical physicist:

> We think of our image as another person. We cannot imagine ourselves 'squashed' back to front, so we imagine ourselves turned left and right, as if we had walked around a pane of glass to face the other way. It is in this psychological turnabout that left and right are switched. (Gleick 1992, 332)

To rephrase Feynman's explanation with some interpretation, the left-right reversal of the mirror image is caused by the difference between the mirror image and internal representation of our own body when we mentally rotate it 180° around an axis parallel to the mirror surface. At the same time, Feynman pointed out that the orientation other than the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface does not change (Ibid., 332). For example, if we raise our right hand in front of a mirror and it points to the west, the left hand of the mirror image also points to the west. In contrast, the direction of our face would be reversed. From this, we see that left and right in the subjective frame of reference are different from east and west in the objective frame of reference – orientation. This may be one of the reasons why the mirror image inversion problem is so complicated. In other words, we usually choose the internal frame of reference centered on the self, the external frame of reference centered on the environment, and the orientation, which is a more global and objective frame of reference, without being particularly conscious of them, but the mirror image — especially the mirror image of one's own body – is special, and it is possible to presume what can be called the internal frame of reference from the mirror image viewpoint. Therefore, multiple frames of reference are expected to appear in the explanation of mirror reversal. In the following, I will discuss the theories of a psychologist and a physicist who are at the centre of the controversy, and give consideration to the complicated problem of mirror reversal.

2.2 Multi-process theory

According to psychologist Yotaro Takano, mirror-image reversal can be explained by optic reversal, representational reversal, and viewpoint reversal, all of which are phenomena produced by any of the three processes of optic

Figure 3. Examples of Representational Reversal. If you are familiar with Japanese Kanji characters, you will recognize the letter on the left side is reversed.

transformation, representational transformation, and viewpoint transformation, or a combination thereof (Takano 1998, 2015). Takano calls it multi-process theory, and he asserts that the mirror reversal when an observer looks at his or her own body in a mirror and the mirror reversal of letters are the products of different processes. The following details the specifics of the multi-process theory.

(i) Optic reversal
Optic reversal refers to the reversal in the direction perpendicular to the mirror surface. For example, when the mirror surface and the real object are facing each other, the depth – the front and back – of the mirror image and the real object will be reversed. This optic reversal is based on the basic laws of geometrical optics (the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection, and straightness of light). The above-mentioned process that causes reversal is optical transformation.

(ii) Representational reversal
Representation reversal refers to the reversal that occurs when the shape of an object in memory is different from its mirror image. For example, when an asymmetrical character in the language used by the observer is placed face to face with a mirror, the mirror reversal can be seen without checking the actual character (see Fig. 3). The above process of comparing memory and mirror image is representational transformation.

(iii) Viewpoint reversal
Viewpoint reversal refers to the reversal of the frame of reference to the mirror-image viewpoint, and its tendency is particularly evident with the mirror reversal of the observer's own body. Takano suggests that mental rotation as described by Feynman is not necessarily required, and that when left and right are determined from the observer's viewpoint, the left and right of the

mirror-image viewpoint can also be determined immediately. The process of reversing the frame of reference in this way is called viewpoint transformation.

According to Takano's explanation, frame of reference is reversed only in (iii), and the frame of reference centered on the observer is used in (i) and (ii). In addition, optic transformation is required for mirror reversal in ii) and iii). This rather complicated and confusing description is a characteristic of multi-process theory, which mixes up the issues of "geometrical-optical left-right reversal" with "presence/absence of left-right reversal recognition," which strictly speaking should be distinct. For example, if we see only the mirror image of mirror writing, we may not feel any sense of left-right reversal if the letters are familiar to us; or, if the letters are unfamiliar, then we may not be able to determine whether the letter is reversed or not. In both cases, however, geometrical-optical left-right reversal is occurring.

2.3 Geometrical-optical approach

According to the physicist Tatsuo Tabata, "left and right" are properties that depend on "up and down" or "front and back" in three-dimensional space (Tabata and Okuda 2000). This means that if either the up-down axis or the front-back axis is reversed, the left-right axis will be reversed subordinately. For example, when an observer faces a mirror, A) the up-down axis of the real object and the mirror image remain unchanged, and B) the front-back axis is reversed. In this case, the left-right reversal is derived a posteriori from the facts A) and B). Similarly, if the observer stands on a mirror placed horizontally on the floor, C) the up-down axis of the real object and the mirror image will be reversed, and D) the front-back axis will remain unchanged. In this case, the left-right reversal also occurs in C) and D). The geometrical-optical approach appears to be quite clear, but there is a blind spot. It can be seen in the case where the object is facing sideways to the mirror surface. In this case, the up-down and front-back axis of the object and the mirror image do not change, but the left-right axis is reversed. In geometrical-optical approach, the case where the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface coincides with the left-right direction is treated as an exception. This is also the case in the multi-process theory, where the explanation is based on a switch from viewpoint reversal to optic reversal (Takano 2015, 124).

Tabata's theory does not include psychological processes. It is a genuinely geometrical-optical explanation of mirror reversal. The question that arises in response to this explanation is, "Why do the up-down and front-back axis take precedence over the left-right axis"? Tabata asserts that the reason is that many

people and objects are left-right symmetrical. In other words, the left-right direction is decided subordinately because, generally, left and right are similar, while there are clear differences up and down, or front and back. I will not go into more detailed criticism in this chapter, but suffice to say that it is presumed that there is no case in which the up-down axis and the front-back axis are both reversed in the relationship between the real object and its mirror image. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the previous section, mirror reversal is "reversing the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface." Therefore, the reason why the up-down axis and the front-back axis are given priority can be restated as follows:

> When the observer or the object and the mirror are placed face to face, the front-back direction, which coincides with the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface, is reversed first. Similarly, when the observer or the object is on a mirror placed horizontally on the floor, the up-down direction, which coincides with the axis perpendicular to the mirror surface, is reversed first.

This means that, with the exception of the case where the observer or the object faces sideways to the mirror surface – the left-right direction coincides with the axes perpendicular to the mirror surface – it is still true that the reversal of the front-back and up-down axis takes precedence over the left-right axis. Furthermore, when the left-right axis reverses, the front-back and up-down axis do not reverse along with it, providing evidence to support the priority of the front-back and up-down axis. However, since the priority of the front-back and up-down axis is based on the asymmetry of the observer or the object, the fact that the front-back and up-down axis are generally indistinguishable does not apply to spheres.

If there are phenomena that cannot be covered by geometrical-optical approach, what are they? According to Tabata, "psychology is concerned with the motivation for choosing the intrinsic frame of reference or common frame of reference, the mechanism of selection and conversion of them, and the cognitive process in the selected frame of reference" (Tabata 2008, 515). Here, the intrinsic frame of reference refers to one that is applied separately to the observer or the object and the mirror image, while the common frame of reference refers to one that is applied to the observer or the object and the mirror image. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the selection of frame of reference is something that we do in our daily lives automatically, without thinking about it. However, the choice of frame of reference is one of the factors that complicate the mirror image problem, namely, the presence or absence of the sense of left-right reversal.

2.4 Focusing on controversial points

Comparing the theories discussed in Section 2.2 and 2.3, a discrepancy becomes apparent in their definitions of "mirror reversal." In particular, there is a major difference in how the mirror reversal of letters is explained. According to the multi-process theory, mirror reversal of letters can be confirmed by optic reversal or representational reversal. Since optic reversal is based on geometrical optics, it is not considered to be the cause of discrepancies with other theories – given that it is obvious that there is no theory that denies geometrical-optical facts. However, there is a dissonance of opinion among theorists as to whether or not representational reversal can be included in mirror reversal. The reason is that representational reversal can be regarded as the recognition of differences through pattern matching. Representational transformation refers to the process of comparing the shape of a character in memory with a mirror image, but even if it is mirror writing on paper, the sense of left-right reversal can still occur. Since we usually do not have a sense of left-right reversal to the mirror image of mirror writing, we cannot apply the representational transformation to the mirror image. In other words, the representational transformation explains the process of causing the sense of left-right reversal beyond the simple geometrical-optical reversal, and it is questionable to treat representational reversal as mirror reversal.

It is assumed that we do not usually take the viewpoint of the letter. This means that we do not generally apply the viewpoint transformation of multi-process theory, or the intrinsic frame of reference of geometrical-optical approach to letters. According to Thomas Nagel, we cannot have the phenomenal experience of being a bat (Nagel 1974), but we cannot even begin to imagine what it means to be a letter. It can be assumed that we usually do not have a sense of left-right reversal to mirror image of objects, but letters are exceptions. Therefore, it is possible to understand the intention to treat letters as a special case of mirror reversal. From a geometrical-optical point of view, however, there is no difference between the case of the observer and that of other objects.

2.5 Applying a frame of reference

We can apply frames of reference to more than just the mirror image in our everyday lives. For example, suppose we have a cup and a plate on a table. Then we can assume the internal frame of reference – an absolute positional relationship between them and us, and the external frame of reference – is a relative positional relationship between the items. However, the expression "a

cup is on the right side of a plate" clearly relies on the viewpoint of a specific observer, albeit a relative positional relationship. Therefore, in everyday life, the external frame of reference that is applied to objects, such as dishes, with generally unspecified front-back and left-right positions, is often a copy of the internal frame of reference. It is clear from the previous discussion that the mirror image has a special meaning when choosing a frame of reference. This is because we can adopt the viewpoint of a mirror image using viewpoint transformation in multi-process theory, or choosing the intrinsic frame of reference in the geometrical-optical approach. This process is different from the usual choice of internal frame of reference or external frame of reference. In other words, it is like transferring ourselves to others' point of view.

If we use the terms "the intrinsic frame of reference" and "the common frame of reference" in accordance with the geometrical-optical approach, the choice of these frames of reference causes the mirror image to be reversed, or not. Are there objects, then, to which we tend to apply the intrinsic frame of reference to their mirror images? James Gibson, an ecological psychologist, uses the terms "detached object" and "attached object" in his classification of the things that make up the environment (Gibson 1979). Simply put, a detached object is an object that moves, a person being a typical example. On the other hand, an attached object is an object connected to the ground in most cases, such as a house or a tree. It is assumed that we tend to apply the intrinsic frame of reference to detached objects, especially those that are asymmetrical and can be defined in regard to their up and down, front and back. Therefore, it is relatively easy to apply the intrinsic frame of reference not only to people but also to animals and vehicles. In other words, we can draw a boundary between objects whether or not we can take the viewpoint of the object to which we are transferring.

I would now like to return to the highway referred to in the Introduction. What you see in the rearview mirror are, roughly speaking, the ambulance behind, the letters its hood, and the driver's face. If the driver of your car is you, you must apply the common frame of reference to all the objects. Otherwise, we might recognize the direction of the ambulance in the opposite. Even when we face a mirror in our everyday lives, we are barely aware of the fact that the left and right sides are reversed. Ultimately, therefore, the application of the intrinsic frame of reference to mirror images is extremely limited, and the common frame of reference is chosen in most cases. Why is that?

3 Shadow

"There is strong shadow where there is much light," is an impressive phrase that appears in Goethe's play "Götz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand" (1773), and if we accept that the sun has existed for nearly 4.6 billion years, we should assume that shadows have an equivalent history. A shadow created by the sun and our body can be regarded as our most familiar avatar. Plato left an interesting trail of thoughts about shadows by Socrates in *Republic*:

> Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets [...] and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave [...] To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. (Plato 2017, 2–3)

Plato's allegory of the cave has captured the attention of many researchers. Thomas Metzinger uses this metaphor in the context of arguing that the self is like a shadow reflected in a cave (Metzinger 2009). According to Richard Gregory, visual perception is like picking up a shadow, and our eyes are like the cave (Gregory 1997). Metzinger and Gregory argue that "the self" or "perception through the visual system" is a virtual product, where the shadow represents the virtuality. However, the shadow actually affects our visual system beyond the dimension of representation. For example, even in a neutral form with respect to depth, the appearance of depth is reversed when the lighting angle is changed from the top to the bottom (see Fig. 4). This is considered as an illusion caused by the fact that sunlight is emitted from above and the light emitted from below basically did not exist in nature.

The connection between vision and shadow has been suggested, but how can shadow be connected to mirror image? Let us reflect on Feynman's statement, mentioned at the beginning of section 2.1. According to Feynman: "We cannot imagine ourselves 'squashed' back to front". Now, let us imagine a situation where the light source is behind you and a shadow is cast in front of you. This kind of situation is often experienced in daily life, and is not unique in any way. In this case, the silhouette of the back of the body should be projected on the wall or ground in front of you, but is this really an accurate explanation? Rather, is the silhouette more like the back and front overlapped

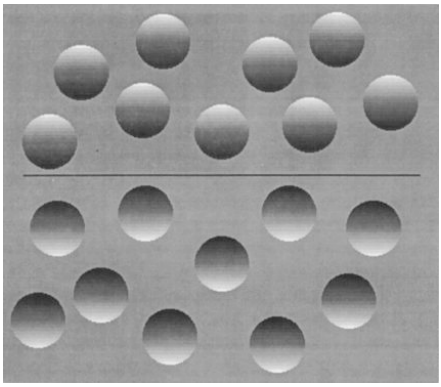

Figure 4. The depth in these displays is conveyed exclusively through shading (Kleffner and Ramachandran 1992, 20).

with each other? If it is true, in a sense we are virtually seeing "ourselves 'squashed' back to front.". Let us check the situation in more detail. In the above case, if we raise our right hand, we watch our shadow raise the hand on the right side. When we raise our left hand, our shadow raises the hand on the left side. Therefore, it means that this type of shadow also has plane symmetry – more precisely, "quasi plane symmetry" – and depending on the choice of frame of reference, the shadow would raise its right hand or its left hand. However, we rarely apply the intrinsic frame of reference to shadows. It is not possible to discuss the reasons for that in detail in this paper, but it would be disadvantageous for animal survival to apply the common frame of reference to a shadow immediately while there is a possibility that it is a sign of a predator or enemy. Hence, it is surprising that we tend to apply the common frame of reference to our shadows, even though it might be disadvantageous to our survival. Perhaps we do not have an innate preference for a certain frame of reference, but rather we learn to apply the common frame of reference to objects that are symmetrical to us, and recognize them as part of ourselves.

4 Conclusion

I conclude that we tend to apply the common frame of reference to shadows, but, in some specific cases, we can also apply the intrinsic frame of reference to them. This is consistent with our tendency towards mirror images.

What can be inferred from this chapter is summarized as the proposition that there is a commonality between shadow and mirror image with respect to the choice of the frame of the reference. If this proposition is true, then we may be able to make sense of an almost idealistic statement such as "the

shadow anchors the mirror image to the self." However, when mirror image and shadow are connected in both the idealistic and phenomenal dimensions, it is very interesting to us and seems to pose a fundamental question.

There is a phenomenon called the chameleon effect. It indicates our tendency to mimic others unconsciously, and to feel an affinity with others who mimic us, unless we notice them doing it (Chartrand and Bargh 1999). This phenomenon is also known as mirroring. In the above sections, I clarified that we generally make our mirror images and shadows belong to ourselves. Is there then a possibility in mirroring that we recognize others who act like us as a virtual mirror image or a shadow of ourselves? It is a mystery.

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Comment by Shunsuke Mukae

Ever since Socrates, there have been various disciplinary approaches to the phenomenon of mirror reversal. This essay starts with an overview of the results of recent optical and psychological approaches. It then attempts to develop (or revisit) a more speculative stage by connecting it to the discussion of the vision of shadows.

The key to this is the frame of reference and mirroring, both of which are related to cognition. Based on previous research, the author shows that left-right reversal is a phenomenon associated with front-back and up-down reversal, both in terms of subjective and objective frames of reference. Interestingly, in connecting this to the discussion of shadows, he uses the phenomenon of mirroring as an interface. This is the feeling of closeness to others who behave in the same way as oneself, including one's mirror image or shadow.

Ito's argument concludes here, but an extension to digital space would add valuable "depth" to the speculative argument. In the world of video games, we often see ourselves in a different way, as avatars. We see ourselves through the eyes of a third person. The hacking of surveillance cameras in *Watch Dogs* (2014) and the sight-jacking in *Siren: Blood Curse* (2008) do not involve a left-right reversal. In the former, only the avatar is mosaicked, and in the latter, the ability is a cursed power that is only given to those who come close to non-human beings. With this in mind, there would certainly be value in extending and exploring Ito's argument in the digital space.

Comment by Konstantin Freybe

Ito approaches plane symmetry as a mystery that he attempts to discuss from a philosophical perspective. He draws knowledge from multiple disciplines: Fine Arts; Physics; Psychology; and Philosophy. His empirical subject area is quite condensed, since mirrors and shadows are commonly known phenomena. His discussion, however, moves on to approach the concept of self on a theoretical level. He shows convincingly that there are multiple frames of reference at play when confronted with mirror images and shadows, and that the philosophical dimension of this requires more than geometrical optics to grasp it appropriately. While the condensed writing progresses in broad strokes, it provides a diverse pallet of impulses that force readers to reconsider what they are talking about when "reflecting" on issues or "mirroring" actions of others. Providing a fresh take on subject-object relations is perhaps the main achievement of Ito's article. Sustaining the relation between rather basic phenomena and elaborate

philosophical concepts, such as “self,” is challenging. However, his attempt to provide diverse theoretical approaches is, in my opinion, best understood as (re-)opening a conversation rather than a conclusive discussion.

Stevie Suan

Performing Virtual YouTubers

Acting Across Borders in the Platform Society

Virtual Youtubers and Anime-esque Acting

Recently, Virtual YouTubers (henceforth Vtubers) have become a popular and profitable type of internet content production and consumption. In fact, many Vtubers are the top earning super chat users on the YouTube platform (as of December, 2020) (Morrissy 2020). Vtubers, as defined by Hirota Minoru, managing director of the Panora news site that focuses on Vtubers, are productions that utilize motion capture technology to animate 2D/3D characters and that use livestream and videos to distribute their content (2018, 45). Gaining in popularity on YouTube in Japan around early 2017, Japanese Vtubers now have fans around the world who watch them with subtitles, and there are Vtubers who perform in various different languages. Described by popular anime YouTuber Gigguk as "a genre comprised of real people using normally anime themed virtual avatars to create content online," Vtubers are "anime avatars" that do indeed present the same character designs and modes of expression that are commonly found in anime, except they are acted out in YouTube videos (Gigguk 2020). In some sense, Vtubers might be conceived of as "improv" acting as an anime-esque character (especially in the livestream versions).

Indeed, although Vtubers tend to feature content similar to other YouTube personalities, much of their means of expression is similar to anime. While each Vtuber uses different technologies, in general, the digital avatar replicates the movements of the person performing the character (with varying degrees of complexity, from basic movements to full-body motion capture), and facial recognition technology that translates the human facial expression to one of the many codified facial expressions commonly found in anime (e.g. arched eyes for smiling). Interestingly, many of these technologies are even used in the anime (and game) animation industry, which now regularly features motion capture (e.g. 2019's *Ultraman* and 2020's *Ghost in the Shell: SAC_2045*) to animate the character acting. Utilized outside of anime narratives and franchises

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by Vtubers, these methods are now employed to present a certain character (and/or brand) on YouTube, often in real time. The focus of this chapter will be on this type of acting, which merges motion capture and anime's codified expressions and designs, as employed by Vtubers. I will examine the operations of this new type of performance as a means to unpack the various dynamics implicit in Vtubers as their performances intersect with issues of selfhood expressed through media technologies, and how this connects to contemporary modes of transnationality.

In order to do so, I will focus on Vtuber pioneer, Kizuna AI and her YouTube channel, A.I. Channel and the "multiplication/duplication controversy" that occurred on her channel in 2019. Kizuna AI, who portends to be a "super-AI" with the figure of an anime character, was/is not only the most popular Vtuber (based on the number of subscribers), but also one of the most sophisticated in terms of expression. Kizuna AI features a complex 3D model of her character utilizing (almost) full-body motion capture, facial recognition technology, and with a presence across multiple different platforms (e.g. Twitter, Niconico, Bilibili). Starting in November of 2016, Kizuna AI quickly skyrocketed to success, with nearly three million subscribers on YouTube. This popularity is not isolated to Japan, as evinced by subtitles and official messages regularly appearing in multiple languages, with many fans in Japan, Korea, the US, UK, the Philippines, and China (she has one million subscribers on her Bilibili channel), among other countries. Her popularity even grew to the point that she was named an ambassador for the Japan National Tourism Organization. Along with short YouTube content videos performing skits, playing games, and/or making light commentary on a particular topic, she also releases music videos and livestreams (responding to fans in the chat, playing games, and concerts), and collaborates with other Vtubers. Initially managed and owned by the company Activ8 and their in-house agency upd8, Kizuna AI was later moved to her own company Kizuna AI Inc. in 2020, where they officially acknowledged the role of Kizuna AI's central actress Kasuga Nozomi, who is now also an advisor to the company.

The reasons for these shifts were partly due to the complex reaction by fans to the sudden (literal) multiplication of her character, and the consequently precarious role of Kasuga, whose involvement was, at the time, never officially confirmed by the secretive Activ8/upd8 company. It is this controversy that will be the focus of this chapter. To give an overview of the event that led to the scandal, beginning in March 2019, the A.I. Channel released a series of ten videos entitled "Kizuna AI's Everyday," which multiplied Kizuna AI to pro-

duce four different versions of her.[1] Ostensibly, as the narrative goes, because Kizuna AI is a virtual character, she considers it beneficial to have herself replicated (like other digital media). Over the course of the series, the videos that introduced the initial versions went through a process of inquiry regarding what specifically makes a character unique, as they attempt to differentiate these new versions of AI. Although much of the content is silly, it does openly engage with certain inquiries, such as "how does one perform a character?" and "what are their limits in regard to producing an individual?"

Implicitly, however, other questions about selfhood, agency, and expression in the digital age come to the fore. While the above-noted inquiries are played out for comedic effect, they also explain the introduction and development of the three new characters to A.I. Channel. These new characters were portrayed as new additions to the "A.I. Party" but effectively seemed to leave Kasuga out and/or replace her appearances entirely. Fans began to become concerned for Kasuga and felt betrayed that she was getting pushed to the side now that Kizuna AI had become so popular on the back of her efforts. In some senses, the video series can be seen as anticipating such a reaction, as much of the narrative across the short series concentrates on the changing voices of the new replicas and their new "personalities," so to speak.

Part of the reason for the negative response by fans was the way that Kizuna AI was duplicated. Though the voices changed, the character design of the Kizuna AIs was kept largely the same throughout the series. It was also discovered that the company (at the time, Activ8) fully owns the character rights. This drew attention to the fact that, whatever Kizuna AI's character is, it is a composite of technologies and designs and voice actress (as well as Activ8's direction) that is not owned by the lead performer Kasuga. As such, all profits are kept by the company, and this multiplication meant a further reduction of the role of Kasuga (perhaps against her wishes).

This situation was further complicated by the fourth version of Kizuna AI introduced at the end of the series, who is not only voiced by a Chinese voice actress in Chinese, but is mainly active on Bilibili. This brings attention to important transnational and transplatform currents, as Kizuna AI is an "official cultural diplomat" for Japan, but now also has an official Chinese "version" of herself on Bilibili. Her movement across platforms, nations, and languages thus raises questions about the contemporary intersection between digital, national, and cultural boundaries. Building on recent research in Asian Studies and

1 Much of this timeline is a summary of having watched the events unfold on various platforms (YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, and various blogs), but user posted summaries can be found (fakcheater 2019; Harmonyano 2019; Kanrinin 2019).

Media Studies, on how the transnational and transmedia intersect in the digital age, this chapter will explore how the assemblage of Kizuna AI's character performance operates across technologies and platforms. This Vtuber performance brings into relief a certain tension and convergence across individual, digital, and national borders, in what has been called by Marc Steinberg and others the "platform society" (2019).

In order to explore this line of inquiry, I will first analyse the mechanics of Vtuber performance, detailing how the technologies and techniques intersect with different modes of performance and the resultant configuration of dispersed agency. With these mechanics in mind, I will then examine the specific videos of the multiplication scandal and the subsequent fan reactions. Subsequently, I will detail how this series of events exposed some of the contemporary tensions regarding the performance of selfhood, which is now reliant on digital platforms. Here, the relationship to (neoliberal) individualism is revealed to be in tension with a more contemporary mode of existence that might be called "dividuality," in part facilitated by transnational digital technologies. On the one hand, the modern notion of the individual overlaps with the "container model" of the nation state, presenting a mode of existence that meshes with the "walled garden" of the platform. On the other hand, the dividuality of the Kizuna AI duplicates brings into focus the transnational and transplatform, a different mode of existence on both the micro (the self) and macro scales (the regional) that is beginning to take shape.

Mechanics of Vtuber Performance

Embodied and Figurative Performance

Before examining the multiplication of Kizuna AI, I would like to analyse the enactment of the Vtuber character itself and the technologies utilized in the performance. Although there is little official information on the specifics of the technologies used to perform Kizuna AI, there are certain conjectures that can be confidently made. There are definitely motion capture technologies, 3D modelling, and facial recognition, all of which is utilized with Kasuga as the central performer. That said, she is not performing alone. It is very conceivable that Kizuna AI's performance involves some animators or animation supervisors that adjust the motion capture and the other supposedly automated systems to produce a certain aesthetic. At the minimum, there are surely editors for most videos (except, in cases of live streaming, though animation supervisors are probably on stand-by, or were already involved in tweaking the system before hand).

In any case, what is an important element here is the supposedly automated element that translates the movements into the animated model seen as Kizuna AI. This itself is a change, even if subtle, as the 3D anime-avatar-body cannot directly reproduce all the same movements as the human body can (or even other motion capture technologies). The specific anime-avatar-body of Kizuna AI enables some movements over others (for instance, her specific hairstyle with longer hair will move differently than the avatar-body with shorter hair). There is also the apparently automated "shifting" of the facial expressions, read through the facial-recognition technology, which "translates" the actor's facial expression to certain codified expressions, often taken from the repertoire commonly utilized in anime. As Vtubers are often seen as "anime characters" performed through the use of the above-mentioned technologies by people, I would like to bring in concepts I have developed elsewhere in regard to anime character performance – namely embodied and figurative acting – to further explore how there are clashing and coinciding notions of selfhood implicit in the techniques of these modes of acting. Both of these modes of performance I have conceptualized in relation to anime, building on and deviating from the ideas of animation scholar Donald Crafton (Crafton 2013; Suan 2017a).

I will begin with embodied acting. This type of performance is perhaps best known for producing a sense of "realism" that appears to originate from some interior space and externalized in the unique, gestures, movements, and facial expressions of the actor playing the character. Much of this is developed from Stanislavskian acting from the theatre and the related Method acting from film, and is effectively implemented in animation by Disney's animators from the 1930s onwards (Crafton 2013, 37–41). In animation, the performance of embodied acting is revealed in the subtleties of the movement of the character, whose tiny tweaks of facial expressions, the manner of walking, the speed of their gesticulations, all appear internally driven, and ultimately individualize that character (Suan 2017a).

The ability to accurately "capture" such expressive, unique movements of individuals is part of the appeal of motion capture technologies, building from the tradition of embodied acting of stage, film, and animation. Interestingly, motion capture technologies have also been associated with Method acting, which, according to Mihaela Mihailova is "effectively drawing a historical lineage to Stanislavski's system" and linking this to classical conceptions of cinematic performance. In fact, Mihailova notes how such an emphasis is actually at the exclusion and expense of the animators who are integral to the final performance product, with this view of motion capture focusing on the singular, individual performer whose motion is "captured" (2016, 44).

This relationship to the presence of an individual actor is also observed by Tom Gunning, who notes the importance of the voice in presenting "the

authenticity of physical presence" of actor Andy Serkis in the motion capture animation for Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* (2006, 333). Likewise, for Kizuna AI, the voice helps tie the motion captured image to the figure of the human celebrity performing. Though Kasuga had a minor career as a TV anime voice actress, she did not receive much recognition until her role as Kizuna AI. Seen as the main figure behind Kizuna AI, Kasuga rose in prominence in conjunction with the Vtuber. Similar to Serkis, Kasuga is not just performing the voice of Kizuna AI, she also enacts the movement. But it is the voice that is seen as most important to fans, and Kasuga is still referred to primarily as a "voice actress" rather than actress. The voice can thus be seen as central to individualizing the character as well as Kasuga herself. This may be seen as connecting to the individualizing tendencies of embodied acting, the motion of which motion capture purports to capture. Because of this, there is a presumed correlation of the individualized motion that is captured with a celebrity figure (a real-world individual) that supposedly produces those unique motions. As the voice actress is also doing the gesturing, the merging of the embodied acting with the voice acting results in what might initially be perceived as a highly individualized performance for the character of Kizuna AI who is identified with Kasuga the voice actress.

Yet, Gunning asserts that while the voice may imply a physical presence, the animated image "shows a greater degree of independence" (Ibid., 334). Motion capture, as Gunning describes, "involve[s] technology intervening on the human body in action and breaking it down into visual units," the body's movements are processed into data, resulting in "the creation of an artificial mobile human figure" (Ibid., 332–333). Referring to precursors of cinema and motion capture technology in the kinetoscope and chronophotography, Gunning notes how the images of human figures in motion against black backgrounds (and in chronophotography, white buttons and lines on a black figure to "map out" the elements necessary for the "essential plotting of motion"), there is a sense of independence of those figures from the place where they were filmed; distinct from other approaches to cinema, which presented spaces of depth and environment, these early precursors to motion capture allow the human figure to be disassociated from their direct surroundings (Ibid., 331–332). Similarly, the captured movement as well as the anime-avatar itself seem to have an inbuild divisibility: the movement is mapped out and dissociated from the performer onto the anime-avatar, which itself can be displaced onto any background.

This leads into the second type of acting in figurative performance, which relies on pre-existing codes that are reiterated in combination to create the sense of a character's selfhood. This should not be seen as the opposite or entirely dissociated from embodied performance. In fact, the two types of per-

Figure 1. Various versions of Kizuna AI performing, the two on the right enacting the same anime-esque figurative acting code of arched-eyes for smiling (A.I.Channel, 2019d).

formance are mutually implicated in one another, even if certain techniques of performance tend to gravitate to one tendency over the other. This is certainly the case for anime, where the character acting tends towards figurative acting in the nearly ubiquitous usage of a repertoire of conventionalized codes for expression. Instead of the individualized, unique motions of embodied acting, figurative acting tends to favour the reiteration of certain codified expressions, such as the arched-eyes for smiling, making the iris and pupils of the eye smaller to express fear and/or shock, or turning the eyes into > < marks to (often comically) express certain types of sadness or pain. Although I have focused on facial expressions here, figurative acting codes in anime include types of walking, running, and a whole variety of gestures, many of which are cited in the performance of Vtuber characters. While only some anime-esque bodily gestures are repeated by Vtubers by reproducing the movements via motion capture, the majority of facial expressions are directly cited from anime by Vtubers via facial recognition technology.

This process of citation is actually fundamental to figurative acting in general, as each code is only legible in relation to prior iterations of that code, making each enactment forced to stay within a certain range of expression in order to be understood. As such, each iteration of a figurative acting code is always in some relationship to prior examples, and appear less as if they are from "in" the character, and more like citations "on" the character. Moreover, the codes are not individual and unique to that character, but come from outside of them, not isolated to the bodies that enact them, enabling very different spatial dynamics than the internal/external expositions of embodied

acting. Because of this reliance on prior iterations, there is the sense that the characters are drawing from a repertoire or "database" (Azuma 2009) of such conventionalized expressive codes.

In the case of Vtubers, this is somewhat literal, as the facial recognition technology reads the facial expression of the human actor and then "translates" that into the figurative code from anime. When figurative acting codes are used in established performing arts (such as Noh or Topeng), the human actor goes through vigorous training to learn the repertoire of codes and reperform them, gaining some sense of proficiency for the codes (which they must succumb to in order to learn), then becoming the arbiters of their proper execution (i.e. judging what is and is not "proper form," and serving as examples to be reiterated) (Suan 2017a, 9–10). But for Vtubers, the animators who initially create the expressions refine the codified movements (themselves from anime), and keep them in a literal database to be recalled. Afterwards, the software reperforms the codes based off of the actor's expressions. In some sense, then, the facial recognition (a combination of the technological apparatus and the algorithms mapping the human facial expression to a decided upon codified expression for the avatar) takes over control from the actor in favour of the limited range of the figurative codes that are decided upon by the facial recognition software – that is to say, while the human actor can learn to manipulate the software to produce certain expressions, which human facial expression is mapped onto the Vtuber character model and when precisely that switch occurs is at least partially done by the software.

The switching between codes is also important to anime's particular brand of figurative acting. Characters are built by switching between various different codes, with certain codes (e.g. smiling, or grimacing) utilized more frequently. In addition, this switching is afforded by certain types of animation. While embodied acting tends to rely on minor movements with smooth transitions between them, often exploiting the lush, full movements of full animation (even with motion capture), anime's figurative acting developed from limited, cel animation. In anime, swift, jerky cuts between different image compositions dominate the type of animation in anime (even with the usage of computers), and this enables the sudden switches between codified expressions, allowing sometimes jarring jumps between emotional registers (from euphoria, to sobbing, to violent anger all in a few frames).

The rapid switches between emotional registers enabled by the quick cuts are something shared both by limited animation in anime and YouTuber editing across the world, whether Virtual or not. In many YouTube videos, the image compositions do not change to the extremes that anime often does, but there are sudden jump cuts to different expressions and images that regularly appear. In this sense, there is a visual format that provides an easy acceptance of ani-

me's conventions of rapid switching of codified (facial) expressions, allowing for a relatively smooth remediating of anime's figurative acting performance in the YouTuber format.

Youtube editing tends to have its own rhythm distinct from anime, guided by a different logic, not necessarily based on visuality, as the voice is so important to maintaining a flow. Here once more the importance of the individual (voice) actor comes to the fore. Indeed, the idiosyncrasies of individuals becomes part of the appeal of many YouTube personalities, and Vtubers are no different. However, it is not simply that the facial expressions are figurative acting codes and the bodily gestures in motion capture are embodied acting – the relationship is slightly more complex than that division. While the facial expressions are almost always those done by anime characters, some of the hand gestures (re-animated by motion capture) appear to be the movements commonly enacted by female *geinōjin* (celebrity) actors seen on Japanese TV. There is also the influence of musical idols, like when playing the part of a curious and cute character, including certain head tilts, hand gestures, or the manner in which the characters lean in towards the camera. These also become part of a figurative acting repertoire because they are not to be considered unique to the character, but rather codes that signal they are a certain type of character, regardless of whether it is based on a human celebrity or anime character. Furthermore, although the voice tends to tie the character to the human voice actor, there is an element of figurative performance involved, as the type of vocal performance is within the range of anime-esque voices (*animegoe*), a way of speaking and inflecting the voice that must be trained for and practiced. Indeed, as noted above, Kasuga herself has performed in different anime TV series. What gives the anime-esque voices an element of figurative acting is that they are highly stylized modes of vocal performance commonly employed in TV anime. Though each voice actor has their own "grain of the voice" (c.f. Barthes 1978), there is certainly overlap in the timbre, tones, and ranges of expression that are recognizably distinct from everyday speech in Japanese.

In sum, in the performance of Vtubers, there is a tension in the production of individualism under the combination of embodied acting's motion capture and figurative acting's infinite reproducibility of (data-fied) expressive codes. With the various modes of division and disassociation at play in Vtuber performance mechanics, it is not necessarily strange to see the splitting of Kizuna AI into multiple different characters. For the utilization of motion capture already presumes a "transference" of movement from Kasuga to the avatar. This process of transferring embodied movement meshes well with the iterative enactments of figurative acting codes, which are themselves already multiples of prior instances of those codes. Furthermore, Kizuna AI was also already

repeated across media before the duplication scandal hit, as there are many viewers who would make illustrations of the character and posts them on the various other platforms Kizuna AI utilizes. In this sense, Kizuna AI was already split into different versions of herself before she officially multiplied, a topic I will touch on below.

Dispersal of Agency

Partly because of the sensitivity of the motion capture technology, even in these figurative movements by the actor, there is a sense of uniqueness that is foregrounded in the resulting performance. Even the figurative expressions become utilized at certain moments that appear somewhat specific to Kizuna AI, due to the "stutters" of the facial recognition software, not always effectively switching to the next expression. Broadly, the stutters are highlighted when the facial recognition is slightly too slow, when what is said does not quite align with the facial expression, or when the movement of the body (often the hands) are not fully articulated, and it comes across as disjointed or awkwardly placed. Often, these different types of stutters can occur at the same time.

As Hirota notes, it is frequently such stutters or "gaps" between the various elements that constitute a character that provides much of the allure of Vtubers (2018, 50). These gaps make it difficult to conceive of Vtubers as a seamless individualized character in the modern sense: a self-contained, human individual who is indivisible, internally consistent, and whose interior intentions allow them to operate on the external world (the conceptual backbone for embodied acting). Against such an individual character, the Vtuber is visibly composited from different technologies working with (and against) the human agent, the gap coming into view when the technologies stutter, or purposefully exposed by the human to create an "interesting" (*omoshiroi* in Hirota's words) juxtaposition.

Such "gaps" invite questions about location of character and agency: Where is the actual locus of character creation? Is it the software: the rendering software or the facial recognition software? Or is it really the character designer who made the designs? Or is it the character actor? What about the voice actor (who could, theoretically, be distinct from the motion captured actor, or animator, as in the case of anime itself)? Or is it the people directing the whole process? Upon closer analysis, such "gaps" reveal that the Vtuber character is not just an avatar, but a composite of all the human and non-human actants involved (actors, character models, motion capture, facial recognition technolo-

Figure 2. Ai-Ge, the Chinese Kizuna AI version, posing with various illustrations made by fans in Japan and China, part of the ecology of appreciation (A.I.Channel, 2019m).

gy, figurative acting codes, etc.).[2] As such, there is a dispersal of agency in the very enactment of the character, despite the focus on the individual human actor.

Perhaps part of the appeal of Vtubers is that this dispersal of agency in the performance of character is not isolated to them. Indeed, one can see similar issues in daily communication practices with the use of filters in common SNS imaging applications, whereby someone films or photographs themselves but the software's filters apply shifts to colour, facial shape and expression, as well as overlaying dynamic imagery on the video or photo of the person. All of these elements are interacting to produce the final product, but the effect of the filter is so apparent that it is hard not to at least consider that the filtering software is a significant actant in the final process, perhaps over that of the human subject in the photo. In fact, this very dynamic is engaged with in a video by Kizuna AI, playing with different layers of agency, acting, and imagery. A rare live-action video, it features the point-of-view of a woman using a cellphone in an office, utilizing an SNS application filter to capture the real-time acting of the Kizuna AI character on a tablet, which is supposed to turn her face into a baby or an elderly person (A.I.Channel 2019n). In this video, the gaps are once more highlighted, as the software appears to have

2 Although I generally prefer the word "actor" to consider the agency of non-humans, I use the word "actant" here, drawing from the theories of Bruno Latour, for ease of explanation, as I refer to the human actor Kasuga so often (Latour 2005).

trouble properly "reading" the Vtuber, bringing to the viewer's attention to the importance of the software in the performance.

The dispersal of agency in the performance of the character also spreads beyond the Activ8/Kizuna AI Inc. production room and YouTube channel into the fandom. In fact, there are direct ways that fans participate in the production of the character. Nanba Yūki describes how fans produce an "ecology of appreciation" (*kanshō no kankyō*) via creating a network of inter-referenced fan "products" (*purodakuto*). These include animated videos, manga, and illustrations, among other products. Although fans often reference these works to create further works (such as a popular illustration that is used to create an animated video), these fan works are also remarked on by the actual Vtuber who is the central subject of these products. For Nanba, each of these fan creations are specific interpretations (and/or criticisms) that become shared among fans, many of them becoming quite widely circulated, and over time this accumulated recognition becomes an "interpretive convention" (*kaishaku-tekina kanshū*) of that Vtuber. Though these interpretations do compound over time, they also change as new interpretations and re-interpretations enter into this network of fan products. All of this is shared between fans and the Vtuber and is the process through which the "persona image" of the Vtuber is constituted. Because of this fan participation in the persona image of the Vtuber, these changing interpretive conventions via the ecology of appreciation becomes an important lens through which all the Vtuber's behaviours, actions, and speech is understood by these fans (Nanba 2018, 122–123). As such, in many ways the means by which fans interpret and produce this persona image is central to the performance of the Vtuber, and is subsequently another actant in the operations of Vtuber performance, beyond the control of the actresses and Activ8 (or any other owners).

This, in practice, crosses platforms and national boundaries. For example, in one of Kizuna AI's videos on YouTube, AI is shown reacting to a number of videos made by fans that depict her in various media, performing various actions and scenarios. For instance, there is a short animation video of her acting in a common anime scenario of a schoolgirl getting angry at someone for making her wait. There is also a short computer animated *chibi*-version of a Kizuna AI figurine dancing to energetic music – to which AI even remarks that she would like such a product of her (as merchandise). While the first appears to be from Twitter and posted by Japanese fans, the last one is actually from Bilibili by a Chinese fan (A.I.Channel 2019l). In such videos and interactions with fans, the ecology of appreciation operates across media platforms and across national boundaries, even directly affecting Kizuna AI herself. Beyond Kizuna AI, these cross-platform, transnational "meme reviews" of fan produced images and videos are common practices by other Vtubers.

Multiplying Kizuna AI

Switching Characters

With this understanding of Vtuber performance mechanics, from the complex engagement with embodied and figurative acting through the technologies and techniques utilized, to the resultant dispersal of agency involved in the constitution of Vtuber characters, it is worthwhile examining how these operate in the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" video series and consequent multiplication of Kizuna AIs. Usually, Kizuna AI's videos are short one-shots filled will jokes, clips of her playing games, or singing songs (both covers and originals). However, the "Everyday" videos were a relatively rare string of ten short videos that directly built off of each previous video. However, it is hard to state that the narrative was cohesive. Instead, the series is filled with silly gags and appears not to be aimed as serious explorations of the notion of character. That said, there are events that occur in the videos that help illuminate certain elements of the performance of character for Vtubers and how characters themselves "diversify" through such techniques, which will in turn reveal the operations of contemporary modes of existence in the platform society (to be taken up in the following section).

The first video (#1), "Would you believe me if I said there were 4 Kizuna AIs?," has Kizuna AI take the stationary camera, which she usually speaks into, and "detaches" it, turning it into a selfie-like video that she holds with one hand as she moves around the blank expanse within which she usually talks (A.I.Channel 2019b). This move mimics many of the human YouTubers who move around their homes or the world, filming as they talk to the camera – the camera even artificially distorts her face with a slight "fisheye" curve like similar cameras used by YouTubers. As she moves around, she introduces 3 other versions of herself, each doing a different activity (e.g. one playing games, the other dancing).

At this point in time, all the voices appear to be performed by Kasuga, whose higher pitched voice sounds vaguely like Mickey Mouse (a description used to tease her in some videos). In the next episode (#2), these AI's wonder if "(n)Kizuna AI's= 1 Kizuna AI?" and question if they can evolve beyond a "split" of the one character (A.I.Channel 2019c). Over the course of later episodes, they begin to ask if she changed form if she would still be Kizuna AI, turning into various 2D versions of the character, including a "cel-anime" 2D version of AI (#3) (A.I.Channel 2019d). Later, they ask what "elements" (*yōso*) are shared by all the Kizuna AI, referring to a number of screenshots from previous videos. Ultimately, they mention certain catch phrases and her "cuteness" but focus on the character design element of her *pyoko* ribbon (#4) (A.I.Channel 2019e). They

all then shift their modes of speaking (different types of formality and tone), mimicking the gestures and the iconic voices and speech patterns of characters like Furuhata Ninzaburō and Ikari Gendō (#5) (A.I.Channel 2019f). This continues into the next episode (#6), where the four of them switch between different anime-esque voices, such as a more serious female character, an adult female newscaster, an "*ikebo*" deep, sultry male voice, a female vocaloid, and finally a childish girl's voice (A.I.Channel 2019g). Along with the voice actress changes (but perhaps not the body of the person in the motion capture suit), the gestures also change to correspond to the new voice and content of the speech which correlates to that character type.

This focus on switching roles is not necessarily unique to these videos, as the first Kizuna AI often performs various skits and parts (such as working at a snack-bar in Kansai, speaking in the Kansai dialect) (A.I.Channel 2020b), or parody scenes from anime (such as an advertisement for earphones that parodies the final episode of the *Evangelion* TV series) (A.I.Channel 2019a). In many of these examples, AI also acts as a different character, sometimes with new voices inserted, or a different set of gestures. In this sense, just like the interchangeable figurative acting codes used to visualize expressions and the mapping of the motion captured actor's movement onto the character avatar, other parts of Kizuna AI were switched in and out for comedic or dramatic effect. In the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" videos, this is all just dramatized and somewhat narrativized across the series of videos, with some sort of direct inquiry about these operations, drawing attention to the act of their divisible elements.

This is addressed in the next episode (#7), where the adult female voice-AI notes that "when there are a number differences [like this], it is called 'diversity" (*Kōiu fū ni iroirona chigai ga aru jōtai wo 'tayō-sei' tte iu ndesu ne*), continuing with "[i]f humans all have various differences, if I want to connect with many people, I should acquire more diversity" (A.I.Channel 2019h). They all agree, one even stating that she wants to "become an anime (series)" (*animeka shitai*), and want to explore their various possibilities. In the following episode (#8), the random generator box (a large pink box sometimes used in various episodes to provide various prompts) scolds the four Kizuna AIs (each apparently voiced by Kasuga once more), stating: "Can you stop using 4 people for one person's statement?" (A.I.Channel 2019i). Afterwards, they all decide that they want to "acquire diversity" and one decides to "install" something to achieve that goal.

In the next video (#9), one of the AI's has a new anime-esque female voice (sounding more mature than Kasuga), and they all compete with who can say something in the most "sexy" voice, resulting in a tie between the first and new voice (A.I.Channel 2019j). At the end, two of the AI's want to "install" a new

voice. Consequently, in the final video a third voice appears, this one with an anime-esque, still youthful, but less high-pitched voice than Kasuga's. This final episode (#10) includes skit performances where there are mini-narratives which re-perform some common tropes of romance and *moe* anime, visual novels, and dating simulation games, all performed by the new "youthful" voice: a high-school student having waited for a crush, asks to walk home with them from school; calling a love interest on the phone as they are picking up this friend/love interest for school but the friend overslept (A.I.Channel 2019k). At the end of the episode, the last Kizuna AI without a new voice is shown still installing, frozen in place.

Taken together, these episodes evince a number of operations in the performance of Vtuber characters. Firstly, the reliance on "otaku media," in particular anime, as sources for citations of character types, facial and bodily expressions (anime's figurative acting codes), voice acting and speech patterns (for certain anime character types and the recognizable "anime voice"), as well as for various situations and jokes. Because the characters' costume, "database" of facial expressions, and character avatar did not change (except when they became 2D), the result was 4 different versions of the same character where the differences emphasized were the gestures and the voices that the characters have that creates the "diversity" they sought to acquire. Furthermore, just like the combinatory switching of figurative acting, all of these elements appear to be able to be switched in and out to create another "version" of Kizuna AI. Moreover, there is an emphasis on performance itself, in that the characters seemed to enjoy (especially in the final episodes) the act of directly performing various skits, acting out different types of characters.

Individualization

Eventually, in later videos outside of the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" series, each of the versions of Kizuna AI get their own nicknames: "Ai-chan" for the first Kizuna AI (Kasuga) and "Love-chan" and "Aipii" for the two later versions. The third version is eventually revealed to be "Ai-Ge" in another video, introducing her as a Chinese version of Kizuna AI who speaks with a similar inflection as Ai-chan but entirely in Chinese (A.I.Channel 2019m). The backstory is that Ai-Ge has installed the Chinese language pack (and it is implied that this is the fourth Kizuna AI from the final episode). Ai-Ge also has a distinctive costume, which has various traditional knot patterns that imply certain stereotypes of Chinese clothing, and the character features a lot of red, making her costume easily stand out from the other characters as clearly culturally marked.

Figure 3. Love-chan (left, with the # mark), Ai-chan (middle), and Ai-pii (right, with the * mark) all in the same basic 3D model for Kizuna AI (A.I.Channel, 2019o).

There is also the "gamer Kizuna AI" (which has a separate costume) as well as another AI version named "Black-Ai," which appears in an all-black costume and speaks in a lower octave, both played by Kasuga (although it seems the other voice actresses each switch into "gamer Ai" occasionally). However, though "gamer Ai" is just a version of Kizuna AI that focuses on gaming, the Black-Ai character's persona is not like the first Ai-chan. Instead of a bubbly persona, Black-Ai is overly realistic and blunt. She is a "darker," haughtier version of Kizuna AI, playing on tropes from anime characters of a similar type. Black-Ai's performance is also accompanied by a different set of repeated facial expressions and bodily movements. Instead of Kizuna AI's resting pose of a wide-eyed look of interest and a minimal smile, she has on a slight smirk and a sceptical look most of the time; rather than Ai-chan's exuberant gestures (e.g. waving her arms wildly), Black-Ai is much slower moving, as if she is bored by the conversation she is having. Additionally, Black-Ai's performance is very different to that of the other AI versions, as Love-chan and Aipii try to keep the same type of facial expressions and movements as the original Kizuna AI. Even the Chinese Ai-Ge attempts to do the same, but in the Chinese language and new character avatar. Though the character designs and voices are distinct, the overall impression attempts to assert that these newly multiplied versions are all simply different versions of the original Kizuna AI.

All of this seems to gravitate around the affordances of the modes of acting and the technologies drawn upon to perform Kizuna AI, but in contradistinction to earlier modes of conceptualizing human performance. Put

differently, many of the "gaps" of the conception of a modern performance of character – that is, the human actor, enacting a unified, rational character, the modern individual who is not permeable, with agency and autonomy – are brought to the fore. In effect, this reveals how different Kizuna AI is from such a character, while also highlighting the modern individualistic view in relief. Indeed, the very idea of splitting Kizuna AI and differentiating the new versions from the first versions seems to paradoxically support the notion of an "original" and "lesser copies" – which is precisely the reactions the fans had. In other words, on the surface this duplication event would appear to reaffirm the oft-remarked rise of the derivative, the negative fan response reveals a lingering (if not favouring) of the modern individual. Indeed, it is very hard not to compare the newer versions to the original Kizuna AI, which has become all too apparent to me as I have been writing this article. Though I want to stress the potential of the various versions of Kizuna AI, in the process of writing I have to resort to labelling the "first" and multiplied "versions" to make the explanation of this complex dynamic easier to parse for unfamiliar readers.

In any event, what occurs is a constant swaying between these two poles: the individualistic character and this dispersed character now multiplied, just as the technologies of motion capture and facial recognition (which are made to capture and produce individualism) become overlaid with figurative codes (which tend to reliably (re)produce certain patterns). Even as the individualistic elements are violated (e.g. a different voice actress speaking through AI's mouth), their violation tends to provide some sort of affective response only in relation to the individualism it is disturbing. The result is that the individualism is always a ghost in the background, there but not there, unshakeable. For instance, when Kizuna AI acts through figurative acting "normally" – without different voices, for example – she has to constantly reinforce that she is a singular character. Indeed, she almost compulsively repeats her name and personality qualities, as if there is some anxiety over her not being actually her.

The multiplication of Kizuna AI also highlighted the importance of the central voice actress Kasuga. Fans were upset because Kasuga was seen as getting pushed out of the franchise. In this way, the focus on the individual was not just Kizuna AI, but the human central in the performance. The fact that in later videos Love-chan and Aipii did not have newly designed avatars was not received favourably. For fans in multiple places and languages, it was seen as if the individual Kasuga was positioned to be replaced, resulting in much discussion on the internet and a significant dip in popularity as many fans actively unsubscribed. In response, a # and * marks were placed on the head of Love-chan and Aipii respectively to differentiate them (A.I.Channel 2019o), and later they received costumes that were similar to but distinct from that of Ai-chan. Eventually, Love-chan and Ai-pii were given entirely new

character designs that do not resemble Ai-chan and put onto their own channel with a different set of Vtuber technologies that make them more 2D with less complex motion capture capabilities. Gamer Ai was given her own channel that focuses on games, Black-Ai makes the occasional appearance, and Ai-Ge still persists relatively unchanged from her initial form, but operating mainly on Bilibili (a topic I will address more later). After all of these changes, the company Kizuna AI Inc was formed with Kasuga officially recognized as the central voice-actress. When these changes settled in, the negative fan reactions effectively died down.

(Ir)replaceable

I raise all this here because the entire "Kizuna AI's Everyday" "episode" in the history of Kizuna AI reveals certain underlying dynamics. The fact that the human component of the voice actress can be replaced by another voice actress brings the Kizuna AI character to a realm of performance distinct from other, human YouTubers. Usually, YouTubers sell their individuality, their personal quirks, style, mannerisms, knowledge, etc., and cannot be replaced because of that (only fall into unpopularity or quit). But for Kizuna AI, the individualism-as-product that sustains many YouTube personas, becomes replaceable – a concept anathema to the notion of individualism itself: by definition, an individual is unique and irreplaceable. Yet here the distinctiveness of the character is able to be replicated, the original replaced and even multiplied, enabled by the technologies that afford this performance. As such, the tensions between individualism and replication echo those in the modes of the performance, whereby the embodied acting of the human movements (themselves riddled with conventional modes of idol and *geinōjin* gestures) and the figurative acting of the anime-esque facial expressions.

Consider the differences between the personalities: the first voice actress, though very similar in timbre of the voice to the second voice actress (Love-chan), is identifiably distinct from Kasuga, and eventually gets a different stylization than the voice used in "Kizuna AI's Everyday" final videos (#9 and #10). Though hard to pin down or specify, the first voice actress (Kasuga, for Ai-chan) felt a bit sillier, more spontaneous and dynamic, as if she fully embraced the ridiculousness and absurdity of her performance as Kizuna AI, obviously pretending to ignore the façade of her character as an actual AI. The second still retains many of the character attributes of silliness and delighting in ridiculousness played for laughs, but has a bubbliness that seems a bit forced, as if she is quite cognizant of the role she is playing, a second level of performance that is, in Richard Schechner's words "showing doing" of the character (2013,

28). This same issue is replicated across all the different versions of Kizuna AI, from those that sound similar to the third (Ai-pii), who sounds more like a "younger sister" (*imōto*) anime character type, and the fourth (Ai-Ge), who speaks in Chinese. In each case the issue of reenacting Kizuna AI as the same yet distinct is evident in these newer versions, constantly "showing doing" as they perform towards a certain "model" of Kizuna AI.

Here, it is apparent that the replacement voice actress also loses some agency, as the character, although always in process of constitution in each video installment, must retain some degree of consistency to earlier video instalments. Because of this, the actor must stay within the previously established boundaries of that character, a specific field of expression within which she must enact Kizuna AI to be recognizable to earlier performances. Maintaining such a relation to the earlier iteration of the character is in some ways built into the technologies that enable the performance: the facial expressions are pre-determined, as is the avatar design itself. But the vocal range of the voice, as well as the particulars of the bodily gestures must also be recognizable. The vocabulary, scripts, and/or scenarios used in the videos must also be similar to previous iterations (or change slowly enough over time to provide some sense of "character development"). In this sense, even the directors and owners of the Kizuna AI character (at the time, Activ8/upd8) are actually constrained by the previous iterations of the character and cannot freely act. Indeed, they must walk a tightrope because fan reactions could be adverse if they deviate too far from the established parameters.

In fact, such occurrences have happened in relation to the duplication controversy. Fan reactions were so disapproving that Activ8 actively censored the comments that reacted negatively to the multiplication of AIs. This censorship can be seen as an attempt to control the ecology of appreciation of the character, but ultimately resulted in further negative reactions. In one case, Chinese fans boycotted the character, with 100,000 fans unsubscribing in one week (Morrissy 2019). Broadly, the fans were upset at the treatment of Kasuga in particular, whose performance was viewed as central to not only building the character but the Kizuna AI brand itself. There were speculations from fans that, due to the surge in popularity of Ai-chan, Kasuga was exhausted by overextending herself and these newer versions were created to help ease the burden off of Kasuga. This was partly based on Kasuga's somewhat cryptic messages on her personal social media voicing her frustrations and stress about the events. But the fact that Aipii and Love-chan were simply "duplications" or "multiplications" of Ai-chan, often performing in place of Kasuga and not seen as completely separate characters, was a point of contention. Fans felt that they were not receiving the actual Ai-chan when Love-chan or Ai-pii were the performers at events they paid for. It was as if fans were not receiving the

same product because Kasuga was not herself always performing, giving the impression that Kasuga in particular was getting betrayed by the company that owned Kizuna AI, despite her integral role in its development and performance.

What I would like to point to here is the issue of transference of what was initially seen as an individual quality. Specifically, the first Kizuna AI was seen as a unique individual, a character that could not be replaced, and the core of that character was seen to be the first voice actress (Kasuga). However, as noted prior, so much of the Kizuna AI character relies directly beyond any one person's control: character designs and facial expressions from anime and manga, which are forcibly enacted reliably through 3D modelling and facial recognition technologies, gestures that mimic Japanese TV celebrities and idols, and the interaction between a complex fan base and a directorial and animation team/company, which all plays out across multiple different media platforms.

In a sense, the reliance on figurative acting and motion capture helps ensure that transference is possible at all. This includes the facial expressions and character avatar most apparently, but the bodily gestures of the various human actors who now appear on screen acting together, can maintain a sense of uniformity and similarity via the characteristic gestures of Kizuna AI. Effectively, the mimicking of Ai-chan, which was produced largely through the individualized movements of Kasuga's through motion capture (embodied performance), becomes the subject of repetition, attempting to turn those movements into figurative acting codes. That said, it is also clear that the gestures of the other characters are not always the same, the individualizing tendencies of embodied acting still seeping through. Though Love-chan will attempt to stand like the first Ai-chan – leaning slightly forward and to the side, hands extended outwards slightly – occasionally a momentary distinction in the subtleties of the stance will arise as she moves to the next gesture, such as a unique hair flick or hand movements for explaining something.

This also appears in the performance of the voice actresses themselves. The first Kizuna AI reveled in the silliness of her character and played the part of the spacy, naïve heroine from anime and manga in real time. But despite carefully enacted gaffs, moments of performing goofiness, and a general sense of childish playfulness, she would occasionally get the upper-hand, especially in interactions with people online with witty comebacks, clever lines, self-deprecating humour, or an impressive display of knowledge. In fact, she was often sharp or snarky. For example, when performing a livestream during the COVID pandemic in Japan, a user requested to "Please wash my (male) hands" (*boku no te wo aratte kudasai*), and upon reading it out loud, immediately responds with "You wash your own hands!" (*jibun no te wo aratte kudasai*) in a playfully scolding voice (A.I.Channel 2020a, 15:38). Immediately afterwards, she returns to a softer tone and explains the importance of washing hands, performing in

a cuter tone. The chauvinistic comment was immediately disarmed through her tone in a comedic manner and her response was reacted to positively by the fans in the super chat. Such instances display Kasuga's quick wit and impressive control of her voice and ability to effectively utilize the limited facial gestures by working with the motion capture and facial recognition software (this time, without any "gaps"). Here, Ai-chan was able to effectively move between emotional registers (as her facial expressions did, matching her vocal and facial tone), expressing the complexity of the performance of the Kizuna AI character: spacy but sharp, playful but forceful. This is, in many ways, an effect of the improvisational acting skills of Kasuga, and reveals part of the sense of personality of the Kizuna AI character through her acting. The other Kizuna AI versions attempt to recreate a similar characterization, and the scripted skits as well as edits on games do evince a degree of sustaining that character across the various people and technologies. But none of them seem to have the same punchiness as the first Kizuna AI.

It is also worth noting that around the time of the controversy, Kasuga made her own YouTube channel by appearing live on camera, and while fans did support her, it was clear that Kasuga alone was not Kizuna AI, even though she was a fundamental part of Ai-chan's performance – the dressings of the motion capture, character avatar, facial recognition technology and anime-esque expressions (as well as all the other animators, editors, and script writers) are all part and parcel of the Kizuna AI performance. Unfortunately, it is not the case that Kasuga owns those necessary technological apparatuses, nor the broader Kizuna AI character itself, even though she is an integral part of that assemblage. Here, once more, there is an underlying current of the tensions between individualism and this more divisible sense of self in the character, which I will address below.

Platformativity and the Vectorialist class

Character, Platform, Self

Not isolated to the performance of Vtubers, the intersection of individualism and a more divisible conception of self seems endemic to the contemporary era, a time where the platform is all-pervasive in our daily lives and expression of self. As Steinberg asserts, "the rise of the conceptual model of platform as universal mediation device within management theory and its effectuation in actual platform practice marks the infiltration of managerial logics more fully into the social body, producing what we now call the platform society" (2019, 9). For Steinberg, the "platformization" of our world is so deep that

nearly everything becomes a platform of sorts, from YouTube to characters (cf. Condry 2013) to brick-and-mortar stores, leading us into an era of the "platform society."

To further explore how the performance of Vtuber characters relates to the enactment selfhood in the platform society, I would like to bring in Thomas Lamarre's notion of platformativity:

> To embark on an analytics of the infraindividual intra-actions between self, character, and platform, we might think in terms of platformativity, which is say [*sic*], a sort of performativity related to platforms. Judith Butler's now-classic articulation of performativity concerned the human individual reiterating itself, with iterations bringing an affective infraindividual potentiality to the surface, enabling repetition with difference. In platformativity, both characters (or media content more broadly) and platforms (and thus infrastructures) actively exert pressure and play an active role, or more precisely an intra-active role. Platformativity, then, concerns the iteration of selves, characters, and platforms that generates the compositional plane underlying their interactions, thus giving a compositional force to them (Lamarre 2018, 206).

For Lamarre, the platform, character, and self begin to take on "degrees of semblance" with one another: "As the platform becomes both character-like and selflike, so the character becomes platformlike and selflike, and the self becomes platformlike and character-like" (2018, 208). Here, "from the depths of the farseeing platform, the character reaches out. In the intimacy of the character, the platform pushes back" (Ibid., 210). However, Lamarre is not just discussing platforms like YouTube, but television and anime specifically, revealing how supposedly new media are actually already implicated in prior media and technologies, and vice versa.

Specifically, Lamarre notes how TV's broadcasting flows are segmented (e.g. opening, commercial, story A, commercial, story B, commercial, ending, preview). Consequently, "as the anime character makes its appearances in segments with different codes, such as songs, stories, and commercials, it oscillates between discrete and nondiscrete existence in a specific manner" (Ibid., 215). Moreover, "because the different segments by design entail different audiovisual codes, as the anime character crops up in different kinds of segments, it comes to incorporate the nondiscreteness of anime and to embody it within what appears to be a discrete body. There are different ways of assessing this combination of discreteness and nondiscreteness within the anime character" (Ibid., 213). For instance, a character from an anime about saving a spaceship in another galaxy from invading aliens may show up in a commercial set in contemporary Japan to advertise insurance. In this sense, the character exists in startlingly different contexts, but each instance (anime and insurance commer-

cial) will show them acting in the mannerisms proper to that context. As such, the character appears to break beyond the bounds of the anime series, but at the same time appears as a singular character that is somewhat consistent.

With this in mind, Kizuna AI constantly has to oscillate between her discrete and nondiscrete properties. In some senses, the repetition of the character in various new situations in each Kizuna AI video implies that she is a discrete character. She maintains a consistency of character design, voice, and general personality. Here the assemblage of the various performance modes and technologies align with the acting of Kasuga to point towards a sense of individualism. But the fact that the character is a Virtual YouTuber, implies that her discreteness is thus dependent on the platform itself. Indeed, as noted above, the anime acting of figurative performance developed from limited animation meshes well with the established conventions of YouTube editing (e.g., rapid cuts eschewing visual continuity for jerky movement across different image compositions). In this sense, her very modes of expression of self and character are dependent on the conventions established on the YouTube platform and anime.

At the same time, Kizuna AI's performance as an anime-esque character is precisely what forces her beyond the singular platform into other media and platforms. In order to sustain the performance, there needs to be a reliance on other codes that extend beyond YouTube into the anime media-form. Here she intersects with broader anime-fan cultures, such as the derivate works culture (*nijisōsaku*) where fans illustrate characters they like. This is the ecology of appreciation whereby Kizuna AI's extended performance is dependent on those fan activities, which are far better served on other platforms like Twitter, where images can be posted.

Subsequently, the character of Kizuna AI herself becomes platform-like, operating as a means to generate further products and commerce. As if both evidence of and reaction to the platform-like character, Activ8 forms the new company Kizuna AI Inc for Kizuna AI herself to focus on this character for monetization (character as a platform) but also to contain her (forcing a discreteness upon her). It is this later point that becomes important, as Kasuga was an integral part of the performance but did not necessarily have any ownership or control of the character to profit off AI's proliferation. Consequently, the important point to raise about such performances are both implicit and explicit in the "Kizuna AI's Everyday" videos: What is the actual limit of the character? Who controls the differences and semblances of the character? Is it the company that owns that character? Is it the actress Kasuga? Is it beyond the platform of YouTube?

These ambiguities between a sense of the discrete and nondiscrete are mirrored in the mechanics of her performance: in the embodied acting and motion

capture technology, translating the movements of the actor onto the character model, the facial recognition technology switching between figurative acting codes in response to facial expressions, as well as the specifics of the timbre of the voice, the mode and manner of speaking, and the quick wit of Kasuga. All of these are implicated in the very enactment of the seemingly discrete character, while evincing her nondiscrete existence, as the above elements are all necessary for the performance. A case in point, the iterative operations of figurative acting already implies that specific expressive codes can be switched in and out in performance to actually produce a sense of personality; or how the motion captured is separated from the body and context of its enactment and transferred into a separate 3D avatar-body. As such, that simply switching in and out an actor for the motion capture and/or voice actor is a possibility is built into the performance mechanics of a Vtuber. Consequently, it would also imply that the selfhood of the character could multiply, as was the case with Love-chan, Aipii, and Ai-Ge.

While this all may appear specific to Vtubers at first, I would suggest that this is actually a common mode of existence in our platform society. Many of us depend on platforms to present a personal brand, to advertise ourselves to potential employers or customers, or simply to interact with friends and family. The media we post is often filtered through some software (such as the literal filters on platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) that present our images, and auto-correct software, along with emoji, GIFs, LINE stamps/stickers, and memes, which become elements we not only share but utilize as fundamental blocks of communication. In some senses, we perform with various technological apparatuses, "citing" many codified images (from memes to LINE stickers) to express ourselves on platforms (and in the case of LINE stickers, many of these are literally cited from anime). While the visual techniques and some of the technologies are different from that of Vtubers, the broader operations of the performance bear resemblance to our performances of selfhood in everyday life: the platform becomes a necessary place to present your self, and the self becomes something like a character, a role that you play across platforms.

As Steinberg asserts, contemporary platform capitalism involves "the total mediation of life by platforms, via intimate devices such as mobile phones and the ecosystems they bind us into" (2019, 207). We rely on platforms to present this selfhood, and the data we produce through this process becomes part of the larger information economy, data that we do not necessarily own. With this in mind, it is worth considering how this connects to aggregates of data points becoming what is digitally defined as my "self" and how the self itself is constantly spread out across different media platforms. Indeed, the self is literally performed across multiple platforms, where the same person (often with their full name as their moniker) has a Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and

more, each platform having their own restrictions and media filters, their own ways of constraining (and enabling) expression which the user/self has little control over, but can utilize to perform a character/self on the platform.

Vectors of Information and Selfhood

For Steinberg, the current era of platform capitalism involves the extension of "a logic of flexibility and just-in-time and precarity that were already part of articulations of post-Fordism, this time refigured under the total managerial logic of the mediatory platform [...] the expansion of the management of mediation in the foundation of the platform economy" (Ibid., 206). Indeed, as will be shown below, the "management of mediation" is part of the operations of performing selfhood by both Vtubers and human individuals in this platform society that occurs through a similar combination of embodied and figurative acting modes of performance.

Steinberg's notions of platform pervasiveness and its shifts in contemporary capitalism broadly can be seen as meshing well with the conception of technologically induced changes in capitalism by Mackenzie Wark (2019). For Wark, the new information economy (which is very dependent on platforms), has resulted in the creation of two new class formations: the "vectorialist class" (who control the vector of information) and the "hacker class" (who constantly create information to be monetized – I will be employing the term "user class" instead here). There is a profound asymmetry between these classes, as the information produced by the user class is funnelled entirely to the vectorialists who own and manage the platforms.

Importantly, there is very little that a user can do that does not produce more information to be monetized by vectorialists. Every post, every click, every search is all producing information, more data to be collected, analysed, organized, and sold for profit by the vectorialists. Furthermore, as noted above, platforms are now unavoidable in our daily lives. Not operating on them can mean invisibility on the internet and have detrimental effects to our personal lives and livelihoods. In this sense, we are forced to participate in platform production. Martin Roth discusses this very dynamic and builds off of the work of Ōtsuka Eiji, who sees a broader compulsion to express ourselves online as a new form of labour (which is largely uncompensated) (Roth 2019, 119–20). Indeed, in some senses the platform "outsources" the work of content creation to the users (cf. Steinberg 2019, 206).

What is crucial for the topic at hand is that much of the usage of the platforms through which the data is extracted from is often seen as an expression of selfhood. We post about our commonplace interactions, upload pictures

of our friends and family, search and purchase goods for daily life, watch videos that entertain us—all actions which produce further information that is profited on by vectorialists. Consequently, the general idea is to keep users on the platform to continue to mine their actions for further profit. Moreover, these data points can, through sophisticated tracking and analysis present a general "image" of a single user and with shocking accuracy make predictions and suggestions for anything from entertainment content to products to news articles. The cycle then repeats: more information, better predictions, more time spend on the platform, more information, etc. This presents a feedback loop that Roth notes is part of the modes of exchange in digital space: users provide information for the convenience (e.g. better suggestions) the platform provides (2019, 112).

All that said, these platforms also provide the ability to project oneself out into the world with relative ease. Any video uploaded may suddenly go viral and spark a potential success for the user. Much of the appeal of YouTube and other user created content platforms is the accessible ability for self-expression that was not available before the advent of internet technologies. As such, becoming a YouTuber, one can produce almost any type of media content they are capable of and express themselves to the world; YouTubers can then become individualized creators who receive some degree of success for their content production, especially as the platform (among others) provides various avenues to monetize the content produced.

But the picture is not so rosy as individual freedom made manifest through proper engagement with the platform. Content producers are themselves under the sway of the vectorialists who own the platform and control how information is extracted and what is done with it. The result, for Wark, is that users become less like individuals in the modern sense and more like "dividuals," "units of being smaller than an individual" (Ibid., 98). Indeed, as one becomes data-ified, one is split into different qualifying data-points, spread out across platforms. The resultant "dividuality" is part of the transformations that were discussed by Gilles Deleuze in the early 1990s as a shift towards "control societies," where there is a general sense of "freedom of movement" from place to place, but access is governed and limited in practice through various technologies of control (1992). Gerald Raunig further develops the conception of "dividuality" from a variety of sources, and sees both a potential for an alternative mode of existence from modern individualism, and the distressing features of contemporary life under current modes of capitalism where one is forced to participate. For Raunig, the potential of dividuality lies in a sense of selfhood that can include others, involving a dividing that links as it splits (2016).

In consideration of all of this, in my view, as the contemporary performance of selfhood is spread out across platforms, as our data-points begin not just to define us but to present commodities for purchase, news and entertainment for consumption that are further pulled into our sense of selfhood, what strings us together is a semblance of individualism that sustains this assemblage. However, the dividuated information that helps comprise the self is not just external to the individual, but also beyond their control. As a result, there is a fundamental tension between these two differing modes of existence.

To put this in terms of the performance mechanisms discussed here, much of the practice of expression of selfhood on platforms engages with the same dynamics of embodied acting and the production of individuals. In some senses there is a notion of confession involved in personal expression online. What is posted on Twitter is supposed to be your internal opinions, an admittance to the world of your thoughts; the videos by YouTubers a type of revelation, or an expression of personality and individually acquired knowledge, technique, and expressive style. The shift towards verifying Twitter accounts or utilizing your real name on YouTube displays how there is a sense that it is a specific individual self making those statements. Viewers peer into the inner lives of peers, professionals, and businesses, but there is something personal about their expressions, otherwise parasocial relationships would not develop. At the same time, many Twitter accounts and YouTubers openly appear to be playing a role, a character that is performed on those platforms. Sometimes, this is for comedy, sometimes for political presence, and people are both hired and fired for the stances they take on these platforms (in particular Twitter). This is where the self-character-platform dynamic comes into play, as the self plays a character on the platform which is then capitalized upon by an individual (selling ads, products, or moving towards celebrity and/or politics). Interestingly, the character-self on the platform then begins to function like a micro-platform as they attempt to monetize their role, following some of the general business strategies that platforms do: create a niche, provide a service to that niche, acquire a large enough following/user base, which is then utilized to provide ads or sell products to.

It is also important to note that the data collected from the actions done on these platforms is not owned by the performer, but by the platform. However, the performer has access to certain degrees of data to optimize a sense of return on investment for the actions on these platforms. Even on a rudimentary level, one can see how many viewers saw the video on YouTube or which comments received the most likes, and respond to making more content in a similar vein to build the brand. One can even compare yourself to others who are in a similar niche via their visible metrics. In other words, one can manage the responses to the content and actions posted online to optimize the

character presented. This facilitates a sense of (neoliberal) individualism in the very enactment of selfhood as character on platforms: the self is turned into an individual character that is meant to optimize economic production as they compete with other characters on platforms – what Jason Read calls "homo economicus," but here as selfhood enacted as character on platforms (2009).

Perhaps a more salient example than those above is the actual utilization of these platforms to consume the content posted on them. The user generates different types of data depending on what they select, subscribe/follow, and how long they spend viewing each piece of content. On the platform side, this data (among other pieces of information) is then used to generate a profile for that user, construct groups of users with similar actions, and to assign each user to a specific group to not only serve that user better ads and products, but also suggest content that is specifically tailored to that user's data set. What holds the external data produced by the many choices of consumption that we enact online is the idea that it is an individual user making those choices, to better target that specific consumer or allow for the creation of further group profiles. Even though some of these data sets are used to create various group profiles (themselves a combination of external data points from various users) to predict behaviour, their value is premised on accurate application of a group profile to an individual user who would then purchase (or sell) targeted products. Indeed, much of the sense of convenience of platforms is that their suggestions/content is tailored specifically to the user individually. These operations are premised on the idea that the user's actions are specific to their personal (internal) interests and/or needs, and that they externalize that through their actions on the platform. Broadly, then, there is a sense of interiority that is externalized like the individuals produced by embodied acting.

In sum, on any one platform, the data points users create can be seen as utilized to constitute a single individual who can be targeted for various ads and products. Importantly, the very externality of these posts and data (which are presumed to come from us individually) are important for sustaining the notion of such an individual to be monetized as data for analysis, advertising, and profit. In other words, there is a presumption of an individual created from these data components by platforms, but the reality is these are dividual, external elements that are strung together to produce a sense of a whole individual. Every action done is in some sense dividing that user up, creating a profile that is created by all the various data points. In fact, the self that is constituted by this data can be seen as a type of character made up entirely of these external data points. That is to say, there is no inside or outside to this platform data-character-self as individuals supposedly possess. Instead, they are simply an aggregate of all that data. In this way, the operations of constituting a data-self

are far closer to that of figurative acting. The fact that users are usually spread out across various different platforms further shows the dividuality of users: as data points may not string together across platforms (although data can be sold across companies), a supposedly single self is actually divided across various platforms each with their own data-set-self for that user.

It is this particular combination of embodied and figurative acting tendencies (of which, there could be many others) that underlies the operations of performing the self as character on platforms in the contemporary world. In some senses, Vtubers performances can be seen as visualizing this particular interrelation between embodied acting and individualism on the one hand, and the operations of figurative acting and dividuality on the other. Here the individual comes to the fore in the embodied performance of motion capture and the voice actor. At the same time, the Vtuber character performance is visually composed of information, an avatar that utilizes codified, anime-esque elements, all of which are beyond the performer's direct control. Indeed, the character itself is not owned by the central human performer.

As such, Kizuna AI's performance mechanics mirror what Wark describes as the status of platform users (or rather, the user class broadly): whereby the information she produces, and the apparatuses that constitute her are not owned by her. Although Kizuna AI is distinct from the average user in that, from the onset she is a commercial entity, the potential to monetize oneself and your posts are ever-present on platforms. Continually posting on platforms, often with usernames that align across platforms (sometimes using actual names) creates a sense that any post that goes viral on any of those platforms can be traced back to one user. Sometimes, those accounts themselves become something to be bought and sold. In any case, the self here is multiplied and divided across different accounts and platforms (even if the usernames are the same, the user still operates as different data-set-selves across platforms). Similarly, as the dividual tendencies come into conflict with individualizing tendencies, it is no wonder that Kizuna AI would be conceivable as a character that would multiply, that the parts of her performance would split, and ultimately result in new characters. It also makes sense that this duplication was reacted to so negatively, as the individual has not vanished entirely, and the potential to replace Kasuga was astutely critiqued by fans. In response, the solution selected by the vectorialists was to further individualize all the new characters. What is even more intriguing about the specific case of Kizuna AI, is that this multiplication and individualization of the newer versions of the character are not isolated to one person, platform, or country. Consequently, considering Raunig's sense of linkage in dividuality, beyond the individual, there is also a constructive potential for creating connections across borders, both national and platform.

Figure 4. Ai-chan and Ai-Ge noting how they want to "connect with everyone in China" and reach the top of Bilibili in the video introducing Ai-Ge on YouTube (A.I.Channel, 2019m).

Platform Diplomacy

As noted above, Kizuna AI is dependent on her platform of YouTube (as a Virtual YouTuber) but also extends far beyond that. It should be stressed that platforms are not universal, not available everywhere, and do have operations that align with the borders of nation states even in the supposedly "stateless" internet. Indeed, the "walled gardens" of platforms can smoothly align with the "container model" of the nation state. There is also the issue of the nation within which the platforms are managed from and whose interests sometimes align. In order to address this, Steinberg takes up Dal Yong Jin's conception of platform imperialism in which "the overwhelming global dominance of US operating systems and web platforms on the global internet landscape and on the power over the distribution of cultural goods requires a resuscitation of the 'cultural imperialism' debates of the 1980s and 1990s" (Jin 2013; Steinberg 2019, 17). With the overlap of the national and the digital platform, platform imperialism raises the point of the national border crossing through the platform from one nation into another. Consequently, it might also be worthwhile considering the crossing of borders not just of states but of platforms themselves, in a type of "platform diplomacy." This is precisely what happens with Kizuna AI and her Chinese version Ai-Ge, a crossing of borders that is both transnational and cross-platform.

Although Kizuna AI is in some ways the "flagship" Virtual YouTuber, she does operate across platforms. Yet the very name of the type of character

(Virtual YouTuber) implies a deep relationship to the platform of YouTube. It is also important to note that in the PRC, YouTube and other platforms popular in the US and Japan are ostensibly not accessible, and so Chinese platforms, such as Bilibili for video streaming, are popularly used. As such, if Kizuna AI is to be an "ambassador" of sorts from Japan, is she from Japan the nation state or from YouTube (or YouTube Japan)? Furthermore, as Ai-Ge focuses on Bilibili, are these versions of Kizuna AI ambassadors to/from China or from the platform Bilibili? There is thus a type of ambivalence at play here between digital and national spaces in this cross-platform, cross-border interaction as they operate on platforms that seem to align with US interests (YouTube) and Chinese interests (Bilibili).

However, the situation is not a neat overlap between one nation and platform (e.g. the PRC and Bilibili) that interacts with another nation and platform (the US and YouTube) – these are all run through with transnationality. Indeed, as Steinberg notes "analyses of both platforms and the contents market must shift from a national to a transnational perspective" (2019, 212). For instance, Kizuna AI is supposed to represent Japan, but is "from" a US-based platform. Moreover, Bilibili itself has a transnational dynamic as it began as a place for Chinese viewers to engage with what is often seen as "Japanese media," in particular anime, and adapts Niconico's (a Japanese website) *danmaku* overlays of text. In any case, the point here is that Japan does not neatly fall between these platforms nor align with them (which both overlap and diverge from their respective nation states of the US and PRC), but "Japan" is articulated through and across them via Kizuna AI. For instance, Ai-chan only speaks in Japanese and in one of her ambassador videos teaches about bowing, which is also mirrored on the Bilibili site (A.I.Channel 2018; AIChannel 官方 n.d.).

One can see these transnational tensions in the different versions of Ai. For instance, the Chinese and Japanese AI talk to each other, but in separate languages. There are Japanese subtitles underneath Ai-Ge on YouTube, but on Bilibili there are Chinese subtitles for Ai-chan. In this sense, there are still barriers at play, and a hierarchy whereby the Japanese language is still primary for the YouTube audience, Chinese for the Bilibili audience (though Chinese subtitles are shown in the mirrored Kizuna AI Bilibili channel on YouTube). Broadly, Kizuna AI still seems to be an ambassador for Japan (despite infrequent cultural tourism videos), and the Chinese Ai-Ge was introduced as to be engaging with events occurring in China. In some ways, the Chinese Ai-Ge is also an ambassador of sorts, but it is, as noted above, unclear from where and to what, especially as she is positioned as a "multiplication," a version of AI.

This question becomes complicated in videos on the Chinese Kizuna AI Bilibili channel, where the Chinese Kizuna AI has some videos showing support for those in Wuhan during the Covid-19 isolation and the later release

of the lockdown. In this case, is it the character of Kizuna AI making this gesture of solidarity or is Ai-Ge entirely distinct? In either case, who does she represent? Japan, China, YouTube, Bilibili, and/or Activ8/Kizuna AI Inc? Is it all of them, none of them, or some combination of them? In some ways, this ambiguity makes her a complex transnational, transplatform, transcorporate character. Focusing more on the transnational, what I specifically mean by "transnational" is that she is not operating within the bounds of a single nation, that there is something that is operating across borders, but the national has not dissolved completely, as "China" and "Japan" are still at play as important coordinates for Kizuna AI. This is all the more complex when the Vtuber performance as "anime avatar" itself maintains a strong relationship to anime, which, despite its transnational elements on multiple levels, is often seen as a representation of "Japanese culture" (Suan 2017b, 2018, 2020).

In addition, in alignment with the observations of Marc Steinberg, Jinying Li, and Thomas Lamarre, the transnational overlaps with transmedia interactions, all of which occurs across media platforms (Lamarre 2015; Steinberg and Li 2017). Something is strung together here across these national and platform boundaries which exists as Kizuna AI, an aggregate which almost neatly aligns with the same formal operations in the specific acting performances of the character in YouTube/Bilibili videos: Kizuna AI is performed via a compound of various technologies and expressions with differing degrees of restrictions around the agency of the individual actants – human actress, motion capture and facial recognition technologies, and anime-esque patterns, all of which assemble to enact the character of Kizuna AI. Furthermore, the gaps and stutters between these actants seem to be generative, part of the appeal of the character, a necessary part of how she is constituted as a character as such. This also corresponds with the transnational/transmedia components of her character: she exists not in spite of, but across those gaps between the nations and platforms via the ecology of appreciation. Here, similar restrictions and affordances of agency in the character acting re-emerge on the "regional" scale. Kizuna AI is not necessarily beholden to any of those nations or platforms, and at the same time her very existence depends on them (as ambassador and Vtuber). This is a bind, because received coordinates and conceptions of place, person, and technology do not necessarily apply, but are concurrently required to sustain any activity at all.

This is the stalemate of the contemporary moment, whereby all the platform and national apparatuses continue to operate, but we are also operating across them. Agency is enabled in some ways and restricted in others via those same apparatuses, as well as across them. Although gaining a degree of celebrity, many of the workers (in particular the actresses) bear the burden of the lack of agency, and those at the top of the vector own this character, reap-

ing the rewards as they propagate and work across the platforms they utilize, framing the relations across them in terms of the national. But strung together across these complexities the entity that is Kizuna AI seems to act out all those tensions in a form that operates by traversing those borders. Importantly, the transnational fan reaction that shifted the ecology of appreciation seems to have been the key that pushed back against the multiplication of Kizuna AI in favour of Kasuga, evincing how crucial collective action is, even across borders and platforms. Indeed, it was many Bilibili fans (who are ostensibly located mainly in China) whose large-scale unsubscribing brought attention to the matter, supporting Kasuga in Japan, who operates mainly on US-based YouTube (though the channel is mirrored on Bilibili). But ownership of Kizuna AI, wherever she is, still seems to be in the corporation with her namesake – while Kasuga is recognized as integral to her character, she does not have full control, evincing the fault lines in (neoliberal) individualist notions of selfhood in the platform society. The irony here is that the technologies and platforms portrayed as giving a voice to individuals is ultimately what denies that autonomy as the information produced through expressing that selfhood is not owned by the person creating it. There is an important distinction between those who have explicit commercial aims and those who do not when performing online, but as noted above, part of the draw of platforms is that our public personas may lead to wealth generation (e.g. going viral, selling some products to your fans). Indeed, on YouTube, it is very easy to monetize any of the videos uploaded online. In the case of Vtubers, who are explicitly commercial in most instances, the great misfortune of Kizuna AI's character is that this bubbly self has so much potential to multiply across borders, but is caught in and dependent on the information vectors of her existence which she lacks the ability to control.

This situation is not unique to Vtubers. Perhaps the sudden rise in the popularity of Vtubers is precisely because of how effectively this type of online performance of self actually aligns with the contemporary mode of existence in the platform society, but presented in a deceivingly playful manner. This may also be why the multiplication of Kizuna AI struck such a nerve with fans, as it revealed how powerless Kasuga herself was in this system, shattering the illusion of playfulness and bringing the actual operations into relief. While Kizuna AI could be potentially multiplied, Kasuga could not. The dismissal of her integral role in the performance exposed how she does not own Kizuna AI, and that it is all too easy to replace her and still perform the character – a potential built into the mechanics of Vtubers themselves. As more Vtubers rise in popularity beyond Japan and YouTube itself, it is all the more imperative that we keep in mind these performance dynamics, and how we, as platform users, are caught in the same system.

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Comment by Tani Levy

Stevie Suan's chapter provides a much-needed and multifaceted observation on virtual YouTubers (Vtubers) who represent a mode of online entertainment within the platform society that has gained immense popularity in recent years with fanbases all over the world. Serving as a comprehensible consequence of Suan's sound insights on performativity in anime, the chapter takes Kizuna AI, the Vtuber who started the trend in 2016, as an example in order to explore the interconnected, sometimes conflicting conditions that create the image of a Vtuber: the individual and their acting, which is determined by technological possibilities; corporate agencies that own the means of expression and direct their content creators for commercial aims; the appeal of anime-esque characters who make fanbases engage in an "ecology of appreciation" beyond national borders. Based on these observations, Suan identifies Kizuna AI as

a complex entity that transcends nations, media, corporations, and platforms, but that maintains a strong connection to Japanese anime. Consequently, the chapter invites profound discussions about agency, selfhood, and its online performance that are made visible by, but go beyond the Vtuber phenomenon and address the modus operandi within our platform society, making this chapter a welcome addition to contemporary media studies.

Comment by Juhyung Shin

Permit me to initiate a brief discussion with the author on the ideas presented in this chapter.

I agree with your suggestion that any media related to the concept of V-tubers serves a critical role within platform diplomacy. But what will the next generation of platform diplomacy consist of? Taking different forms of reality into consideration, what will replace V-tubers for our future selves?

The ongoing COVID-19 catastrophe has led to the Metaverse being deemed a new, alternative utopia, the ultimate space for human connection. I would like to know how you think the "new normal" has impacted V-tubers and other forms of hyper-content. With this in mind, we can easily expect this burgeoning phenomenon to dramatically shift the platforms we currently use to interact, express, create, and deliver our messages and thoughts. Thanks to the heightened rise of accessible technologies, any individual who craves this impending form of immersive communication has the ability to create original content, which includes media within the V-tuber platform.

I am curious about how you expect future renditions of V-tubers to emerge and develop? Do you expect these types to become more globalized while simultaneously maintaining their innate characteristics? Will these virtual formations resemble reality or reflect more exaggerated, fantasy-like aesthetics that only exist within a fictional world?

Truly, I would love to hear your thoughts.

Melanie Fritsch

Ludomusicology meets Japanese Game Studies

An experience report

Introduction

When starting out in the field of ludomusicology, the study of games and (game) music, it does not take long before the researcher is tripping over Japanese names such as Hirokazu Tanaka (*Tetris*, *Super Mario Land*), Junko Ozawa (*The Tower of Druaga*, *Donkey Konga*), Koichi Sugiyama (*Dragon Quest*/*Dragon Warrior* series), Manami Matsumae (*Mega Man*, *Shovel Knight*), Koji Kondo (*Super Mario Bros.*, *The Legend of Zelda*), Yoko Shimomura (*Street Fighter II*, *Kingdom Hearts*), Nobuo Uematsu (*Final Fantasy* series), and many others. As Matthew Belinkie, an early historian of game music, has put it:

> Japanese composers were the first game music pioneers, and defined what sound players came to associate with games. Although composers of other nationalities have since joined the industry, nearly all of the most popular games still come from Japan, and the Japanese composers remain the most well-known and popular. Fans seem to agree that Japanese scores are still the best. (Belinkie 1999)

Much has changed since this statement, both in the worlds of game and game music production as well as research. Today, renowned game music composers can be found all over the world.[1] Moreover, game music reaches a much broader international audience than it did in the late 1990s. Separate from the games themselves, its distribution happens via multifarious channels, for example through (orchestral) live performances (see e.g. Böcker 2021), album releases, specialized podcasts, radio stations, or fan cultural practices, such as

1 Furthermore, Belinkie's observation is based on a specific perspective that is rooted in his own cultural background and mostly describes the situation in the US at that time. This matter will be taken up later in this report.

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the production of cover versions. Nevertheless, the special status of Japanese game music and its composers remains discernable: A look at the annual Game Music Awards, for example, reveals that the category "Artist of the Year" is explicitly split between "Japanese Composer" and "Western Composer" (see Kotowski 2021).

From very early on, the academic study of digital games, as conducted within the frame of societies such as DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) or published in dedicated journals such as *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, has included internationally successful Japanese games such as *Space Invaders* (see e.g. Juul 2001). Subsequently, the study of Japanese games, game culture, education, and industry has grown as a specific subfield within game studies and is e.g. prominently represented by the annual "Replaying Japan" conferences or the Japanese DiGRA chapter.

During the last decade, the specialized subfield of ludomusicology has also emerged. Unfortunately, contact between the two fields has been limited to date. This can primarily be explained by two factors: Firstly, while a broader investigation of game music by Japanese composers is and has been at the core of the ludomusicological discourse from the outset, with papers being presented at ludomusicology conferences and the first books on game soundtracks being published, an investigation of, for example, composer biographies, of the type conducted in other fields of musicological research, remains rudimentary. Secondly, there is a notable dearth of studies that take into account the broader cultural context, both in terms of game music's impact in Japan and culturally influenced contexts such as processes of production.

This personal experience report is a reflection on this situation from my perspective as a ludomusicologist. I begin with a brief overview of the ludomusicology field, as I assume (and hope) most readers of this report are based in other subfields of game studies or even other disciplines. This is followed by an outline of the current state of research with regard to the above-mentioned topics within ludomusicology. And in a last step, I sketch some of my own experiences regarding the obstacles that I have encountered during my ludomusicological forays into the world of Japanese game music, its composers, and history so far. My aim is to call fellow game researchers from other fields to action, in the hope that their expertise and perspectives will collaboratively fill in the many blanks that remain in the ludomusicology discourse until the time of writing.

What is Ludomusicology?

While the term ludomusicology emerged from nascent and mostly musicological investigations into game sound and music (see Fritsch and Summers 2021a, 1–4), it is nowadays considered as a subfield of game studies. Some early scholarly publications from the 1980s can be found alongside handbooks and articles for programming and designing game music. But it took until the late 2000s for the field to gain traction and for the publication of an increasing number of papers, talks, and articles examining the manifold interrelationships and practical questions of games, music, and sound (for a bibliographical overview, see Kamp 2016). Beyond musicology, scholars mostly from fields such as psychology, computer science, or education have made contributions, but we are delighted to see colleagues from other disciplinary backgrounds start to develop an interest in the topic as well.

In 2011, the first academic group was founded, in the form of the Ludomusicology Research Group. This group became the driving force behind the annual European Conferences of Video Game Music and Sound, which have been held since 2012. It did not take long for other groups to pop up, including the North American Conference of Video Game Music (founded 2014, see Park 2021), the Ludomusicological Society of Australia (founded 2017, see Smith 2020), and the LUDUM group in Chile (founded 2018, see Grez 2019).[2] In 2016, some of these local groups founded the Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games (SSSMG) as an umbrella organization and established a subject-specific journal, the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* (published in collaboration with the University of California Press since 2020).

Looking at this development of the field it is unsurprising that the ludomusicological discourse is currently dominated by publications written by researchers (oftentimes with a background in musicology) from the Anglo-American and European communities (see Park 2020).[3] Indeed, this is already sparking critical discussions within the field. One aspect of such conversations concerns the name of the field: Some researchers prefer the term "game music studies" over "ludomusicology" as they feel that the word "musicology" does

2 There are also ludomusicologists in other countries, including France (see Rebillard and Morisset 2019), Spain, or in German-speaking countries (such as myself), who publish in other languages as well. However, local organizational structures similar to those mentioned in the main text have yet to be founded at the time of writing.

3 Regarding the topic discussed in this report, it is worth mentioning that despite having such a rich game music history and culture, as well as there being many big-name composers from Japan, there is currently no Japanese ludomusicology group that I know of.

not properly reflect the broad, interdisciplinary spectrum and potential perspectives from which the subject could and should be addressed.

Personally, I prefer the term ludomusicology as it includes all three core areas of current ludomusicological investigation: Firstly, the study of music as a design element in games and music games as a specific genre (with respect to topics such as the history, design strategies, or compositional practices) as well as the development of subject-specific approaches and methodologies for study. As indicated above, this was also the starting point from which ludomusicology fanned out into the other two areas and started to be investigated as a broader phenomenon. Secondly, ludomusicology is interested in the study of cultural and fan cultural practices that have evolved around the games and their music, cultural interrelations with other media forms and musical genres, and the use of games and music games in educational contexts. And thirdly, ludomusicology reflects on the ways in which games and music can be studied as playful practices in and of themselves. This last-mentioned perspective has the potential to open up interesting new directions and approaches, including, for example, the study of musics that are not Western Art music, forms of improvised musics, or music that is procedurally generated live by a computer system. I would argue, therefore, that the term game music studies would unnecessarily limit the field to a specific research object. That said, having originally trained in another field myself (namely, Performance Studies),[4] I acknowledge that the indirect claim to musicology and its specific set of methods (as useful as these are) implied by the term ludomusicology is problematic.[5]

4 For example, in my 2018 book, I have developed a theoretical framework that is rooted in performance theory to investigate all the above-mentioned ludomusicological areas and broaden the scope from an investigation of the music itself using traditional musicological approaches to games and their music as cultural phenomena (an English-language summary of the framework can be found in Fritsch and Summers 2021, 238–261).

5 On an even more anecdotal note: When speaking to colleagues from other fields about the desiderata described in this report, I frequently get the response that there is indeed an interest in these topics, but it is immediately followed by remarks such as, “but I am not a musicologist” or “but I have no idea about music” to explain why they have not been working on them. It could be worthwhile reflecting on the potential invisible barriers that the field of musicology and, subsequently, ludomusicology may have built or inherited from their own history, which make researchers from other fields shy away from engaging with music as the subject of research (see also Park 2020).

State of research

The music for games and game series produced by Japanese companies not only had a major influence on the development of game music itself, its topoi, aesthetics, and implementation, but also on music history in general, as composer interviews and journalistic investigations and recent research indicates. As, for example, music producer Just Blaze put it in Nick Dwyer's *Diggin' in the Carts* (2014) video documentary: "You have these guys, literally on the other side of the world, directly influencing an entire generation of American kids and music nerds[.]" Musicians and groups such as Jesse Saunders ("On & On", 1984), Buckner & Garcia ("Pac-Man Fever", 1981), Ambassadors of Funk ("Super Mario Land", 1992), amongst many others, have incorporated game music by Japanese composers either in their work or at least referred to it, for example by sampling or borrowing melodies, sounds, or the 8-bit sound aesthetic of early game music. Hence, this music found its way into wider pop culture very early on (see Fritsch 2018, 2020; Fritsch and Summers 2021b, 389–394).

As outlined in the previous sections, these scores, as well as their implementation in the games, have been the subject of ludomusicological investigations since the very beginning, in the form of articles and single book chapters. However, while the first dedicated ludomusicological studies of a specific game or game series are being published (e.g. Schartmann 2015 on *Super Mario Bros.*; Summers 2021 on *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*), extensive monographs or anthologies on the works of a specific Japanese composer as well as biographical and historiographical studies dealing with, for example, local game music cultures, of the kind common to other areas of music research, are yet to be published. In that regard, the current predominance in ludomusicological research of papers and articles investigating the work of male composers such as Koji Kondo, Nobuo Uematsu, Motoi Sakuraba, or Koichi Sugiyama, is striking. It is only since the mid-to-late 2010s that scholarly work has started to recognize the tremendous influence female composers and sound designers had on game music, especially in the 1980s Japanese games industry (see e.g. Rietveld and Lemon 2018, 2021; Cook 2020; Ozawa 2021; Fritsch 2021). Major contributions in that area have been made by Karen Collins and Chris Greening (2016) with their documentary and interview collection *Beep*, as well as Nick Dwyer's aforementioned documentary and interview series. Both projects have collected highly valuable biographical and historical first-hand information and testimonies from Japanese game music composers of all genders, but they also shed initial light on the contributions women composers have made to the genre.

Additionally, general questions on the influence of musics other than Western Art Music and, specifically, the use of traditional Japanese tonalities

in games have been the subject of more recent conference papers and articles on, for example, the use of Gagaku and Zokugaku, as discussed in Liam Hynes-Tawa's paper "Traditional Japanese Modes in Video Game Soundtracks" (2020). Furthermore, the practice of localization and the implications regarding game music attracts interest (see e.g. Gibbons 2021). As, for example, Tim Summers (2016, p. 26) has demonstrated, some game soundtracks differ remarkably from the original to a localized version. A similar issue can be found regarding game versions that have been ported from one platform to another. These branches of ludomusicological research are also yet to be expanded.

Besides the music *in* games, music games produced by Japanese companies have also been investigated (e.g. Kaneda 2014; Shultz 2016). In particular, the first boom of music games in Japan, in the mid-to-late 1990s, which saw the release of titles such as *Beatmania* or *PaRappa The Rapper*, illustrates the need to include aspects of cultural background (e.g. regarding specific markets and their audiences, interrelationships with other local markets, such as the music market) and the history and specificities of the Japanese game industry in any reflection (e.g. in the form of specific, culturally influenced approaches towards the implementation of work flows, corporate culture, or crediting).

The study of these contexts and how they might influence games and their music, as well as the perception of game music in broader culture, has started to attract attention itself, albeit only recently. This is rather astonishing given that game music was already a cultural phenomenon in its own right in Japan during the 1980s, with recording releases since 1984, orchestral concerts since 1987, coverage in fan magazines, and even entire game music festivals since 1990.[6] Nevertheless, a look at the body of research documented in the

6 The first game music album that we know of was simply entitled "Video Game Music" and was published by Yen Records, a sublabel of Alfa Records, in 1984. It featured original music for Namco games, such as "Xevious", "Phozon", or "Pac-Man". The producer was Haroumi Hosono, a member of the world-famous computer music group Yellow Magic Orchestra. The success of the album sparked two more releases in 1984 and 1985, namely, "Super Xevious" and "The Return of Video Game Music", also produced by Hosono (see Ozawa 2021). These albums were followed by a series of further releases with music from all major game manufacturers and publishers (such as Namco, Nintendo, Nihon Falcom, and many others) and arranged into musical styles from orchestral to rock (see Kohler 2004, 134). Game companies further expanded into the live music market with the so-called Sound Teams, flanked by composer interviews and special issues dedicated to music in major game journals, including *Beep*, *Gamest*, or company-owned fan magazines such as *NG*, the Namco Community Magazine (1983–1993). Additionally, the first-ever orchestral live music performance of game music had also taken place in Japan on August 20th 1987, namely, the *Dragon Quest* concert conducted by the composer, Koichi Sugiyama, at Tokyo's Suntory Hall. For more details

SSSMG bibliography reveals only a few articles and book chapters that have this topic as their focus. Of course, there were some early approaches, most prominently but not exclusively Belinkie's above-quoted article, or Chris Kohler's "Power-Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life" (2004). Yôhei Yamakami's and Mathieu Barbosa's article on the geemu ongaku culture (2015) explicitly dealt with the theme of game music beyond the games themselves in Japan. At the time of writing, however, this corpus remains limited.

My ludomusicological journey to Japan… and where I hit brick walls

My ludomusicological journey started when I first held an NES controller in my hands in the mid-1980s.[7] As per the story recounted repeatedly in earlier game history writing, the company had taken advantage of the US game industry crash of 1983 by applying a cleverly orchestrated marketing strategy when introducing their NES console in 1985 (see e.g. Ryan 2012, 64–65; Schartman, 2015, 13–15). It is nevertheless worthwhile mentioning that this history of Nintendo in "the Western hemisphere" is actually a history of Nintendo in the US. One of the consequences of this particular view has been pointed out by John Szczepaniak et al.:

> Japan has long been viewed by the West as a console-centric country, ever since Nintendo and the NES. But there is another, mostly forgotten world of Japanese gaming history, in which thousands of games were developed for various Japanese computers over an 18-year period that stretches from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. For all that Nintendo started, it was the open hardware of NEC and other companies that allowed small groups to form and become giants. […] The early Japanese computing scene was an intense flurry of creativity that launched the careers of many prominent figures in

on these topics, see e.g. Kohler 2004; Yamakami and Barbosa 2015; Ozawa 2021; Fritsch 2021.

7 Like many other kids of my generation in the US and Western Europe, I was raised on the game music of Nintendo machines such as the NES, the Super NES, or the Game Boy. It needs to be underlined that this reflects my own personal experience. Recent investigations into the histories of local game markets and cultures in Europe, however, have indicated that gaming culture was much more multifaceted than only such personal experiences may indicate or even early writing on game history suggests. Besides consoles, home computers such as the C64, the Amiga series, or the ZX Spectrum were major gaming platforms. Future investigations will certainly help to diversify the picture even more. For the UK as one example, see Kirkpatrick 2015.

> the video game industry, while also establishing some of the most famous video game companies, such as Square, Enix, Falcom, and Koei. (Szczepaniak et al. 2009)

Thankfully, this situation is starting to change, also thanks to increasing studies looking explicitly at the history of games and game development in Japan, as outlined above (see e.g. Fuji 2006). Nevertheless, both the actual dominance of Nintendo machines, especially in the US market, as well as this game historical narrative, have inevitably impacted early ludomusicological investigations in general. Nintendo games, such as the Mario, Zelda, or Final Fantasy series, have long dominated research in ludomusicological studies, for example. This canon-building and all its implications are currently the subject of critical debate within the ludomusicological discourse.[8]

Subsequently, when I started working in the field of game music in early 2009, these circumstances as well as my aforementioned personal experience also formatted my perspective. While writing my PhD thesis, which included case studies on the work of Japanese composers Koji Kondo and Nobuo Uematsu, as well as music game designer Tetsuya Mizuguchi, I drew on the existing body of literature at the time (predominantly written in English and from an Anglo-American or European perspective) and materials such as interviews that were available in a language I was proficient in. I assumed that research on game music in Japanese was certainly out there, but as I do not speak the language this research was beyond my reach.

Having read Yamakami and Barbosa's aforementioned article (2015), my ludomusicological path led me, in late 2015 and early 2016, more directly towards the history of Japanese game music fan culture. While Belinkie and Kohler had already mentioned the specific development of game music culture in Japan with live concerts, album releases, features in fan magazines, or even Game Music Festivals, this was a rare treatment of the topic in an article dedicated exclusively to the issue, and, moreover, one that was not written from an external perspective. I gave a talk at the "Replaying Japan" conference in 2016 in which I pointed out the traces that Japanese game music has left in other music genres and media forms, in the hope of teasing out additional hints from fellow ludomusicologists in Japan and/or the Japanese game studies community working on these music-related topics. I was, therefore, astonished to learn from colleagues that neither group existed, at least as far as they were aware. In 2017, I participated in the 2nd International Workshop "Japanese

8 The winter issue of the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, for example, presents several articles discussing this matter under the theme "Colloquy: Canons of Game Music and Sound". See https://online.ucpress.edu/jsmg/issue/1/1 (accessed 15 June 2021).

Videogames Between the Local and the Global", at Leipzig University, where I presented a "Project draft. Japanese game music culture in the 1980s and its connections to local and global popular music". Again, I was hoping to glean information or hints on or from a Japanese-language discourse on such topics that I was unable to access due to my lack of language skills. But again, colleagues corroborated the impression that no research in the Japanese language or in Japanese game studies discourses beyond ludomusicology were available.[9]

In summer 2019, I was dumbstruck for the third time by this apparently ongoing situation, when I planned to work on a chapter on female Japanese composers, who were pioneering in the Japanese industry in the 1980s and doing groundbreaking work that would strongly influence the history of game music (see Fritsch 2021). Again, when looking into the existing body of ludomusicological literature and asking colleagues in both the ludomusicology and Japanese game studies communities, only one paper came to light (Rietveld and Lemon 2018), plus the interviews conducted by Dwyer as well as Collins and Greening. So, instead of conducting the originally planned case studies on female composers from this era, the chapter became rather a compilation of possible reasons for this situation and a pointer towards the manifold blank spaces that are encountered when trying to write about such topics.[10]

The most obvious problem for many ludomusicologists, such as myself, wanting to work on these topics, is the lack of Japanese language proficiency.[11] What Szczepaniak et al. have described for Japanese PC games produced for platforms[12] popular in Japan during the formative 8-bit era also holds true in general for Japanese games exclusively produced for the Japanese market:

9 Except for a chiptunes book by Haruhisa "hally" Tanaka (2017), I am still not aware of any, but that does not mean that there is nothing out there.

10 Working on that chapter also became the initial spark for writing this experience report as a means to reach out to other communities proficient in the areas that we ourselves apparently cannot yet cover. Furthermore, as Tim Summers and I were working on the "Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music" at that time, this desideratum sparked the idea of reaching out to Lemon and Rietveld and asking them to convert their 2018 talk into a book chapter, and Junko Ozawa, who kindly gave us insights into her work and composer biography for the book (see Lemon and Rietveld 2021; Ozawa 2021). Without the outstanding help and translations (Japanese-English) of Lyman Gamberton, though, we would have not been able to contact her and conduct the interview.

11 Fortunately, colleagues such as Brooke McCorkle, who have these skills, are starting to enter our field, and I am very much looking forward to seeing their future contributions.

12 "Three companies eventually shared the 8-bit crown: NEC, with its PC-8800 series; Fujitsu, with the popular FM-7; and Sharp, with the X1. NEC would later come to dominate the Japanese computing scene for over 10 years with another computer, the

> Unfortunately, this important part of gaming history has been largely obscured by time and language barriers. If you want to play these games you have to work at it, since they're not easy to find, and rarely described in languages other than Japanese. […] Even downloading complete file archives, which are always missing titles due to a lack of definitive listings, will often present you with folders in Japanese characters (assuming your computer can even display them). (Szczepaniak et al. 2009)

Beyond in-game texts, Japanese language skills are mandatory in order to read the game menus, to follow instructions, game credits, access additional material such as interviews or articles, or just successfully play the original versions of usually text-heavy game titles from genres such as RPGs or adventures. The problem of language skills could, of course, be resolved by learning Japanese, but this is certainly not a trivial task, and, I assume, a rather time-consuming one, especially for those striving to achieve a level of fluency that unlocks innuendos and other linguistic nuances.

In that regard, a proficiency in the manifold cultural areas influencing games and their music, such as Japanese history, mythology, pop culture, and traditional as well as Japanese pop music, is also helpful, in order to, for example, identify references to or the inclusion of traditional Japanese music or pop music, or to spot compositional allusions to narrative motifs. Collaborative play with colleagues proficient in these areas and the language, who can not only add a mere translation of in-game text or credits, but also identify specific cultural concepts expressed that potentially also relate to the music, could yield some fascinating results.

While, at first glance, the problem of displaying Japanese characters, as described by Szczepaniak et al., is not that much of an issue on standardized console systems, the (frequent non-)availability of the original versions of these systems outside Japan and games produced only for the Japanese market for hands-on research can be a major hindrance. The costs of acquiring the original systems needed to play such games can be high. In some cases (particularly with respect to arcade machines) travelling to Japan can be the only option. As ludomusicology is a nascent field, many researchers are still in an early phase of their career and therefore lack the funding to invest in a collection of original Japanese gaming systems and games or to travel abroad. It is only in recent years that the first ludomusicologists have been appointed to academic positions that allow them to apply for such funding and game archives and

16-bit PC-9801, but Fujitsu and Sharp were able to maintain a small but loyal following by staying competitive and eventually releasing two incredible 16-bit machines of their own: the Fujitsu FM Towns, and the Sharp X68000." (Szczepaniak et al. 2009)

collections such as the Japanese games collection in Leipzig have appeared on the map and were made accessible.[13] Subsequently, many of us (including myself) work with the material we can get our hands on and which is available in a language we are proficient in.

The practice of localizing both games and technology[14] can assist our work, but it can also be problematic, for example when major differences are found between the original and the localized version. This can concern a game's music itself, as already mentioned, or when technology has been localized, as in the case of the Famicom and the NES, which use other sound chips or sound chip versions, which can alter the aesthetic experience of sound and music, in some cases quite profoundly.

Further obstacles relate to local and historical practices of game production, as indicated above. For example, when I tried to track a composer's work, particularly during the formative decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the practice of summarizing composers and sound designers under group monikers, crediting them under different pseudonyms, or not crediting them at all, is a major issue. In addition, localized as well as versions ported to other systems often credit the arranger, whereas the name of the original composer does not appear, as Rietveld and Lemon (2018 and 2021) have found. Again, the investigation of first-hand material such as game credits, Japanese gaming magazines, liner notes in album releases, as well as composer interviews, could help decisively to add to the picture, as the first approaches by Collins and Greening and Dwyer have demonstrated. Furthermore, a dive into company archives (which apparently exist, as Nihon Falcom or Namco reveal on their respective webpages) could unearth information yet unknown. It is questionable, though, whether companies would permit such investigations due to considerations of proprietary data, and, indeed, composer interviews can be restricted by NDAs.

A final issue concerns cultural contexts. While current scholarly investigations of game music are frequently concerned with the games and their musics (the works themselves so-to-speak) aspects of the cultural context, such as the situation in the game industry in Japan, corporate culture, as well as doujin games and fan culture, touchpoints between game music and other dominant trends on the Japanese music market at the time, among other topics, are also yet to be more thoroughly investigated and added to the landscape.[15]

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13 See https://home.uni-leipzig.de/jgames/en/jgames-lab/ (accessed 15 June 2021).

14 The NES, as released in the US in 1985 and a year later on the European market, for example, was a redesigned version of the Famicom released in 1983.

15 Lasse Lehtonen's recent talk on Koichi Sugyjama's role in establishing orchestral game music live concerts in Japan, for example, has demonstrated how composer biog-

Of course, this list is not exhaustive and written from my personal experience. Nevertheless, I hope it helps to outline the problems ludomusicologists currently encounter and the gaps in the discourse that colleagues from other cultural and disciplinary backgrounds could fill with their much-needed perspectives and expertise.

Conclusion: An invitation

Repeatedly confronted with the above-mentioned issues since I started working in the field of ludomusicology, I have come to the conclusion that a more intensive exchange between the ludomusicology and Japanese game studies communities as well as Japanese colleagues with a background either in game studies or other fields regarding such topics is long overdue. While this is one of the wonderful aspects of games and also their study, i.e. that they invite investigations from so many perspectives and multifarious angles, this also bears the risk that specific interest groups tend to be detached from each other, thus missing out on opportunities to exchange perspectives and spark necessary debates.

My aim in writing this personal research report has been, therefore, to encourage further collaboration and exchanges within the several subfields of same studies, and to invite scholars from other fields to include Japanese game music, game music culture, and the interrelationships with broader culture into their studies. Similar to the study of games themselves, the study of game music in all its facets and manifestations, as well as its connections to the cultural contexts in which it was produced and received, offers an opportunity to include diverse voices and perspectives and will help to complete the picture of this important part of game music history and culture.

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raphies can help to further contextualize not just their work for games themselves, but also the cultural impact it has. Therefore, he highlighted the need for Japanese game music history to be contextualized "in the broader trajectory of modern Japanese music", as he stated in the talk's abstract. See https://www.ludomusicology.org/calendar/ludo2021-programme/ (accessed 15 June 2021).

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Comment by Taeko Edaki

This chapter is a good guide for newcomers to Ludomusicology. It also describes the author's own experience. Indeed, in my opinion, it will become the primary source for learning about the birth of Ludomusicology. In Japan, this study will encourage the conservation of materials and data that can also be shared with foreign researchers. Currently, many digital materials, not just games, are poorly preserved. Storing digital materials – games or otherwise – for a long period of time is problematic. This study opens the way for a discussion of conservation methods and Ludomusicology.

Comment by Cäcilia Sauer

Melanie Fritsch's experience report perfectly summarizes the difficulties confronting researchers in the field of Ludomusicology. Reporting about her own experience when researching video game music, she also gives a short overview of the relatively young research field, which has only been established in recent years.

While reading, I was constantly reminded of my own research problems. Just like Fritsch describes it, it is very challenging to find reliable source material given the limited amount of academic work that has been done to date in general – let alone more detailed work on Japanese game music. Japan has made a huge impact on video game music, yet most of the publications in the area of Ludomusicology are Western-centered and language barriers make it difficult for non-Japanese speakers like Fritsch and myself to analyse Japanese content.

Hopefully, Fritsch's chapter will inspire Japanese-speaking academics to become interested in video game music. There is much research to be done and globally exchanging our ideas will certainly make things easier. In the meantime, I probably have to work on my Japanese language skills.

Juhyung Shin

Gaming Places

Where We Play, Where We Learn (Column)

Gaming places are not simply a space for playing games, they are meaningful spaces where learning occurs and where players interact. We are not only playing in these gaming places, we are also learning. This column takes gaming places as its focus, developing ideas about such spaces, specifically as a venue for playing serious games, in order to better understand gaming culture in general. Through this lens, we can explore the constantly changing nature of gaming places and their meaning for gaming culture. In this context, "gaming places" are primarily defined as physical gaming places, for example PC bangs[1] (Korean-style internet cafés), board game bangs (board game cafés, or places for playing board games), *Jeonja-olagsil* (arcade-game centers), VR bangs (Virtual Reality (VR) gaming cafés), and PlayStation bangs as opposed to virtual gaming places.

Figure 1. Various gaming places (December 2019, Seoul, South Korea, taken by the author)

1 "Bang" means room in Korean.

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Gaming Places

Every gaming place has its own distinct characteristics. These gaming environments affect players' experiences as at each location players interact in different ways. For some games, gaming environments are virtual spaces that do not necessarily exist at all in the physical world. For other games, physical gaming environments, for example PC bangs, VR bangs, board game cafés, *Jeonja-olagsil*, and other real-world gaming locations, become integral to players' lifestyles. In South Korea, players visit such places, especially PC bangs, often on a daily basis and they have important meaning to players and for understanding game culture, as some researchers have pointed out (see e.g. Lee et al. 2018).

Previous research has focused primarily on other aspects of games and has excluded consideration of gaming places. While some researchers have occasionally mentioned the impact of gaming environments (places) on digital game culture (Chee 2006; Jin 2010), physical gaming places have often been regarded as a trivial factor that has little bearing on shaping gaming culture, be it digital or physical.

However, gaming places such as *Jeonja-olagsil* and PC bangs have long played a significant role in South Korean gaming culture. I remember, for example, that arcade game centers were places crowded with people, a flourishing social scene. At the local arcade game center, we would watch the remarkable performance a *gosu*.[2] The strongest player of the time, the *gosu* was always surrounded by other children like us. They seemed to be able to play infinitely with only one coin, while for the rest of us arcade games were great money eaters as we played or competed for the highest score or the record for longest play.

Later, the younger generation's loyalties shifted to MMORPGs. When hanging out with friends, we would go to PC bangs to play together; we would even go to PC bangs near the university campus while waiting for our next class. PC bangs were cheap, open 24 hours, customers could order food (not only snacks), and they had wide screens with up-to-date computers that allowed us to immerse ourselves in the games. Each seat created a private space but was not so enclosed that we could not talk to each other whenever needed during gameplay. These spaces were simultaneously personal but public.

The most commonly played games in arcades and PC bangs are digital games. In East Asian countries and especially in South Korea, but also else-

2 In South Korea a *gosu* is an expert, superior, or highly skilled person; the term usually describes a person who has great skill in gaming.

where, these gaming spaces have a negative social image. They are seen as dangerous, violent places that lead gamers astray, resulting in poor school performance and social isolation. Due to this general negative perspective, games played at gaming places are often considered "bad games", in contrast to the "serious games" that are dealt with in the next section.

However, it is certainly not true that children who use these gaming places are necessarily troubled, despite the common perception that arcades and PC bangs are "bad" and "unhealthy" for the adolescents that make up the majority of their target population.

Serious games

Serious games (SGs) are games that are not solely designed for entertainment. Rather, these games have specific aims, such as education, training, healthcare, military training, or social change. The term "serious game" was introduced in 1970 by Abt, in his book *Serious Games*. According to Abt, we should understand the term "serious games in the sense that these games have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement" (Abt [1970] 1987, 9). While this definition of SGs is the most well-known and influential, other researchers offer different definitions (e.g. Michael and Chen 2006; Susi et al. 2007; Zyda 2005). Some researchers consider SGs to be any commercial off-the-shelf games that are used in educational contexts rather than for the simple fun of playing or entertainment (e.g. Gee 2003, 2005; Squire 2011; Prensky 2001). According to this definition, therefore, there is no significant distinction between entertainment games used as SGs and games that are specifically developed to change or influence players' knowledge, skills, or perspectives on real-world problems.

Some researchers criticize the term serious game. For example, Bogost (2007) claims that the term is misleading, since the two aspects, "serious" and "game" are not necessarily exclusive. Other researchers use the terms "serious play" or "serious gaming" instead of serious games. Issues surrounding defining, classifying, and categorizing SGs remain open, and, consequently, the term remains somewhat vague.

In South Korea, SGs are mostly used for education and the category includes so-called *ki-neung-seung* games, i.e. games that have a function and a positive effect. The typical image of an SG in South Korea is that of a single-player game that is no fun and that is used in educational contexts such as (cram) schools, in other words, outside the usual gaming places. On the other hand, in South Korea, games that are played at gaming places are, as previously mentioned, usually considered unhealthy and far removed from

educational SGs. It should be noted here that game addiction critics consider that all games are inherently bad. As touched upon earlier, digital games and gaming places are associated with issues of crimes and violence and digital games are often seen as being the source of these problems. Consequently, there has always been a social reason in Korean society to distinguish SGs from Commercial-Off-the-Shelf (COTS) games.

Changing SG gaming spaces

Recently, gaming places for SGs have been changing, due to the rising popularity of so-called Big Games. There are many descriptions of Big Games. According to Lee (2010), for example, Big Games includes both "real" experiences and digital technologies, and they are also known as "Urban Games," "Street Games," "Ubiquitous Games" or "mixed-reality games." Such games are often used to address local and regional social issues (Stokes 2020). The Korea Game Society defines Big Games as "[g]ames played in an alternative reality according to a complex program that intertwines both digital and virtual characteristics." Generally, MMORPGs allow more than 100 players to play simultaneously, but, in this case, playing includes physical places and actions.

The Big Game "The Code name, So-won" (*So-won* means "wish" or "hope" in Korean) was designed by UNIQUE GOOD COMPANY in 2019, as a project of the South Korean government to celebrate the "100th Anniversary of Korea's Provisional Government." The game was supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and released as a free-to-play game. The player takes on the role of a secret agent working for the Korean independence movement in February 1919. Players download the app REALWORLD on their smartphone or mobile device before starting the game. They then go to the indicated real places and follow on-screen instructions. Most of the gameplay takes place in the Jeong-dong area in the center of Seoul. The uniqueness of this game is that players move around from place to place and are not limited to virtual spaces or to a single gaming area. During gameplay, as they cross back and forth between the digital and analog worlds (the in-game and real worlds), players visit actual historical sites. This format allows players to engage and immerse themselves in the game, learning and memorizing the history presented on screen. The gaming place of this SG therefore takes on an important role both in terms of gameplay and the learning process.

Although games like "The Code name, So-won," which bring together fictional stories and historical facts, can make SGs more fun and entertaining, in some cases this overlap has been the subject of controversy. These games purport to be based on "facts," so if they offer inaccurate knowledge, this may lead

Figure 2. Depiction of a game in the real world (Left: people trying to find a clue in a church using a toolkit and their smartphones; Center: the symbols within the toolkits; Right: the mission is to compare the palace with symbols by using the toolkit. June 2019, Seoul, South Korea, taken by the author).

to misunderstanding and confusion among players. This concern highlights the inherent conflict between the "serious" (education-related) and "fun" elements of SGs. Especially in serious games used for education, presenting an accurate reality inside games has become an important issue (Kwan 2014; Yang and Lim 2018). Indeed, "The Code name, So-won" was criticized by some players for its lack of accuracy, that is, the discrepancy between the game and historical truth. For example, the route that players visit during the game was not arranged in chronological order. Furthermore, while the person who provides the main clue that helps players to complete the mission was a real person, he was not actually someone who supported Korea's independence movement. Even if these imaginary or fantasy elements are necessary to keep players engaged, and make such games more interesting, there is a chance of players becoming confused about what does or does not correspond with the real history. I suggest, therefore, that serious games dealing with real-life issues related to real-world places have a greater responsibility to present real-life issues more accurately and sensitively than other game genres. As Jeon states, "serious games need to be based on players' real-life performance or truth and thus it is important to simulate historical truth accurately to achieve the purpose of the serious game" (Jeon 2012, 168).

The COVID-19 Experience in Gaming Places and SGs

COVID-19 has changed not only our lives but also the way we play games. Many gaming places have been closed or had their business hours restricted by

regulations. These changes have compelled individuals to find different ways to interact and connecting with one another.

New types of SGs, such as Big Games, have become more mainstream and more accessible than games traditionally played in closed gaming places. Playing board games via the internet, meeting friends virtually, and having in-game conversations online have all become common experiences.

Playing serious games is not just playing. Players learn how to play and learn how to learn. Players gain skills, knowledge, and are empowered to embrace new experiences. We play and we learn, not only directly, by playing the game itself, but also by playing in gaming places where players and physical environment intermingle and interactions are continuous, both inside and outside of the games.

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Transregional spaces

Fanny Barnabé

The Transformative Power of Speedrun

Deconstruction and Recodification of *Pokémon* Games' Communicative Structures

Introduction

This chapter proposes to study the video game practice of speedrun, which consists of going through a game from beginning to end as fast as possible and documenting the performance through a video recording. Specifically, I focus on speedruns of *Pokémon* games, in order to determine how this form of "transformative play"[1] (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 41) reinvents a given fictional universe and how it alters the messages of the works it uses.

To do this, I will use the perspective of rhetoric and try to formalize what the "rhetorical figures" of speedrun can be. According to Bonhomme, figures are defined by the "salience" effects they produce in a particular discursive context: "figurative constructions manifest themselves through markings that detach them from their discursive framework"[2] (Bonhomme 2014, 31). In addition, far from being mere ornaments, figures perform different communication functions (expressiveness, performance, meta-communication, etc.). Based on this definition, I will try to identify the "salient" features in the speedrun videos and the communicative functions that they exercise, focusing in particular on the relationship they build between the original games and the derivative works produced by speedrunners. What is left of *Pokémon* games in speedruns? How does the speedrun work relate to its original support? How does speedrun redefine the boundaries of games and play?

1 "Transformative play is a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 305).

2 My translation of: « les constructions figurales se manifestent par des marquages qui les détachent de leur cadre de discours ».

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Following an introduction that resituates the particularities of speedrun as a playful and creative practice, I will detail the rhetorical figures observed in two speedrun videos of *Pokémon* games. These form two main categories, defined by their functions: the figures of deconstruction (resemantization, anti-model play, exposure, deconstruction of auctoriality) and the figures of formalization (analogy, codification, over-compliance). Through the examination of these figures, we will see that speedrun invites us to reconsider the boundaries of the concepts of *game* and of *work*. On the one hand, the rules formalized by speedrunners and the different media they mobilize in their practice have the effect of extending the playing field beyond the strict boundaries of the game and of constructing what I call a "game apparatus". On the other hand, speedrun is particular in that it is both an athletic and a creative performance. However, the speedrun "product" is not limited to the video recording (which serves as a trace and proof of the performance): it also creates an abstract (and collective) score or script, of which each performance is an actualization and a renegotiation.

Deconstruction of the game's structure and codification of a new game apparatus

Despite its status as a gaming practice, speedrun is a form of performance that does not quite "play the game". It differs from other competitive uses of video games (such as e-sport or scoring), which are executed within the system of rules provided by the game. Unlike these, speedrun regularly moves away from the "model play"[3] constructed by the ludic work: speedrunners not only exploit games that offer speed challenges (such as racing games), but apply their activity to all types of video game titles. In this context, the speed objective takes precedence over other aspects of the gameplay: it is no longer a question of unlocking the entire content, of getting a high score, or beating an adversary, but rather of going through the game as quick as possible. Stops, detours, or side quests are forbidden in these performances, so the videos do not reflect

3 The notion of "model play" is an adaptation of the concept of "model reader" developed by Eco (1985). It designates a representation produced by the text of the competence that is expected of the reader; a representation of the success conditions "that need to be satisfied for a text's potential content to be fully actualized" (my translation of: « qui doivent être satisfaites pour qu'un texte soit pleinement actualisé dans son contenu potentiel », Eco 1985, 77).

the difficulties of the title, its rhythm, the hesitations or frustrations sometimes caused by the level design, but only a generalized sense of urgency.

Moreover, speedrunners are not obliged to submit to the "implicit rules" of games (that is, according to Parker: "rules which are suggested or indicated by the game, and are understood by the players, but are not made rigid by code", Parker 2008, 3–4). In order to optimize their trajectory, they can exploit glitches and programming flaws (indeed, this is an important dimension of the practice).

Because of the shifts it operates, speedrun is a form of transformative play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 41) or ludic *détournement* (Barnabé 2017[4]), since it is characterized by a "double movement of recuperation and transformation"[5] of a pre-existing work (Dupont and Trudel 2012, 5). The transformations that this practice conducts in games can be qualified as deconstructive: it deconstructs the model play of the original title; its complexity; its meanings and value system; and its coherence.

However, speedrun is also based on the formalization of a new system of rules, which it superimposes on the original title. Indeed, although speedrunners do not modify the code of the game they are playing with (because such an act would be considered cheating), their activity does not leave the game apparatus – in the broad sense of the term – completely intact: they add various "extensions" to the game-object.

In the first place, the game device is extended by the addition of a video recording as a new component. Capturing the performance becomes an integral part of the speedrun's "rules", since it serves as evidence to establish the record. The video acts simultaneously as a testimony, a demonstration, documentation, and a standard meter for speedrunners. As proof, it is usually the duration of the video that is favoured by the community for reasons of fairness, even when players tackle games that have an internal timer (see the website *SpeedRunsLive*[6] for an illustration).

In other words, speedrun is a gaming practice oriented towards the creation of a product, namely, a video. Performance is defined not only by the record it sets, but also by the path that led to it:

4 This chapter is adapted from my Ph.D. dissertation dedicated to video game *détournement* and entitled "Rhetoric of Video Game Détournement: The Case of Pokémon" ("Rhétorique du détournement vidéoludique. Le cas de *Pokémon*").

5 My translation of: « double mouvement de reprise et de transformation ».

6 *SpeedRunsLive*. "Frequently Asked Questions". https://www.speedrunslive.com/faq/, accessed on 19 December 2020.

> In order to appreciate the full significance of the practice, it is essential to understand that unlike online leaderboards or Coin-Op cabinet high scores that simply record the outcome of the achievement which disappears into the ether to be replaced only by three initials and the score, speedrunning does not only concern itself with the end result. The document of the journey is a vital element of the speedrunning endeavor. While the final time is of undoubted importance, and competitions abound, speedruns are captured on video and distributed in their entirety either on DVD or more usually as downloads or streaming video on the Web [...]. As such, where Twin Galaxies protects the strategies of its champions, the culture of speedrunning is oriented around the public exhibition of these performances in their entirety (Newman 2008, 132).

The integration of tools for capturing and broadcasting videos within the gaming experience therefore superimposes an external framework on the game device. In doing so, it extends and restructures the support of the playing activity – support that is no longer limited to the boundaries of the game-object, but that encompasses different media. Nevertheless, this transformation alone does not yet really distinguish speedrun from other emergent practices, such as Let's Play.

To this first "extension" of the game, speedrun adds a second one: the implementation of new objectives (speed and other constraints) and new rules. Whereas scoring in arcade games, confrontations in competitive games, or "time attack" in racing games, follow the goals defined by the game itself, speedrun overwrites its own imperatives onto titles that do not necessarily value them at the outset. The openings present in game systems, the indecision they contain, the "play" in their mechanisms, form many grips for speedrunners, who take advantage of them to implement rules of their own making. As such, their activity is both a gaming performance and an act of (meta) game design, since the run implements a system of rules different from the original game.

Nevertheless, the creators of speedrun videos do not lose their status as players (unlike modders or hackers, for example, who explicitly swap their position as players for that of authors, since they modify the game software without using it, Parker 2008, 3). Speedrun, in other words, is a case of "expansive gameplay", as defined by Parker (2008): performers make additional rules manifest by playing, but do so within the framework of the game as it exists. It is here that the dividing line between speedrun and modding is drawn: while modders create new rules by writing them into the code, thus making them "fixed rules" that the future player cannot refuse (Ibid., 3), the self-imposed constraints of speedrunners are purely social; they are not made rigid in the code.

However, this superimposition of several systems of rules is not enough to differentiate speedrun from a simple subjective gaming practice, since playing

always presupposes some negotiation of the rules: "playing with the rules is inherent to many forms of play" (Frissen, Lammes, De Lange, De Mul and Raessens 2015, 20). What makes speedrun different is that the "extensions" it applies to games are not individual and variable interpretations, but rather are established as collective norms. Speedrunners take great care when codifying their activity: each site precisely defines the conditions to be met in order to submit a video, as well as the steps of the evaluation process it will go through.[7] Moreover, these regulations are the subject of constant discussion within the community, through arguments that are sometimes very detailed and that can lead to changes in the definition of the practice (*Speed Demos Archive*, for instance, devotes a page to the inventory of changes in the rules of the site over time[8]). In fact, the members of *Quake done Quick* (a founding community in the field) expressly affirm this collective dimension of the practice at the top of their regulation page: "here at QdQ, we attempt to draw a clear line between altering your Quake configurations to suit your style, and altering it to play a different game altogether."[9] Although speedrun involves deconstructing or twisting the game system, performers agree to carry out these transformations according to common guidelines.

In short, speedrunners are indeed playing, but they are playing a different game than the one they are using as a support. Or rather: speedrunners are playing the same game, but it is transported in another *apparatus* – a term designating the transmedia set of works, objects, and structures that serve as a support for the playing activity (games, websites, videos, streaming platforms, etc.). The game-object, in the strict sense, is not transformed by the performative act of speedrun, but the *apparatus* in which this game is embedded is modified: external rules and structures are aggregated to it, which are not rigidified by the code, but which exist for the performers.

As such, speedrun is as much a competitive gaming practice as it is a creative act, close to a form of (meta and collective) game design, since each performer manifests new constraints through play (and through the video that embodies it). The resulting work is profoundly "palimpsestuous" (Genette 1982, 557), because the transformations operated through the performance do not

7 For an illustration, see *SDA Knowledge Base* "Rules". https://kb.speeddemosarchive.com/Rules, accessedon 19 December 2020.

8 *SDA Knowledge Base*. "Rule history". https://kb.speeddemosarchive.com/Rule_history, accessed on 19 December 2020.

9 *Quake done Quick*. "Quake Done Quick: allowable console changes". http://quake.speeddemosarchive.com/quake/qdq/articles/console.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

make the initial game disappear: on the contrary, the video allows us to read this original (its model play, its level design, its fictional universe) through the deforming filter of speedrun.

Several degrees of deviation: Presentation of the two videos

Contrary to what the above introductory remarks may suggest, it should be noted that speedrun is not a uniform genre of performances: there is a great diversity of sub-categories, defined according to the different constraints that players self-impose. These distinctions are summarized by Scully-Blaker (2014) in an opposition between two major categories: "finesse runs" and "deconstructive runs". The first designates efficient courses "in which the narrative architecture of the gamespace is largely left intact," while the second are performances employing glitches in order to pass most of the game and abruptly reconfigure its structure.

To account for this variety, the rest of this paper will analyse two videos, each belonging to one of these categories but both dealing with the *Pokémon* licence: a glitchless run broadcast live (representative of the "finesse runs") and a pre-recorded video with a heavy use of glitches (as a case of "deconstructive run"). Through their analysis, I will show that, beyond their formal differences, these two performances produce a set of similar figures, symptomatic of the double movement of deconstruction and codification peculiar to speedrun and definitive of its rhetoric. This analysis will also show the extent to which and by what means speedrun reconfigures the meanings of games – in this case, that of *Pokémon*. For the sake of clarity, before exposing the figures that emerge from these two works, I will first describe their development and main specificities.

Pokémon Snap 100% finished in 23:40 minutes: Speedrun as live performance

The first video is a speedrun of the Japanese version of the Nintendo 64 game *Pokémon Snap*, which was realized in a live-stream by the speedrunner Drogie.[10] The video holds[11] the third place in the world record for the "100%"

10 *Speedrun.com*. "Pokémon Snap – 100% – N64 in 23m 40s by Drogie". http://www.speedrun.com/run/wzpko2vy, accessed on 19 December 2020.

11 As of 10 December 2020.

Figure 1. Speedrun of *Pokémon Snap* (all rights reserved).

category on the website *Speedrun.com*; it was chosen for its formal interest and, in particular, because it shows the speedrunner in the video's frame.

Pokémon Snap is an unusual form of first-person rail shooter, where players navigate through different levels guided by a vehicle they do not control. They must take pictures of the Pokémon they encounter, knowing that a well-framed photo, or one that shows the creature in an interesting pose, will earn them more points. The selected speedrun has the particularity of finishing (in 23:40 minutes) the title "at 100%," that is by taking a photo of all the (63) Pokémon that can be chanced upon. Since the game is a rail shooter, speed cannot be optimized by the avatar's movements in the levels (over which the player has no control), but only by the efficiency of the camera's movements and by the elaboration, beforehand, of a trajectory that unlocks all of the game's options as quickly as possible (some Pokémon can only be photographed using objects that must be unlocked by earning enough points).

The performance was broadcast live on Twitch.tv – although it is now available on YouTube. This mode of production leaves its mark on the video, notably through the presence of a frame displaying not only a timer and a comparative table (which shows, for each stage of the speedrun, the time to be beaten in order to set a world record), but also a video capture of the speedrunner playing, and a reproduction of his joystick (see Figure 1).

Pokémon Green finished in less than five minutes: A radical deconstruction

The second video is a run of *Pokémon Green*, which is completed in just over four minutes using important glitches, so that the game's internal timer only counts 00:03 seconds. The performance is published on *Speed Demos Archive*, which – this time – takes into account the record displayed by the internal timer.[12]

The use of "uber-large-skip glitches" takes this speedrun far away from the *Pokémon Snap* video presented above. The beginning of the video is relatively respectful of *Pokémon Green*'s model play: the avatar meets Professor Oak, who gives him his first Pokémon; he then confronts his rival (and loses the fight), then travels to the game's second village, where he receives a package for Professor Oak. In order to continue the adventure, the player is then expected to return to the protagonist's home village to deliver the package.

During this first phase of the performance, the video remains readable as a gameplay capture: the movements and choices made by the player are consistent with the coherence of *Pokémon Green*. A few salient features are certainly noticeable: for example, at the beginning of the game, the speedrunner renames the protagonist and his rival with a single Japanese letter (the first one in the syllabary: ア, "A") in order to save time later in the display of the dialogues. This choice is salient from a semantic point of view, since it is not really a character's name and does not even differentiate between the two rivals. Likewise, the fluidity of the avatar's movements (who always opts for the optimal trajectory to get from one place to another) and the absence of pause or hesitation also present a strong visual discrepancy: they produce an effect of automatism, which contradicts the contingency proper to the playing activity (Malaby 2007, 106) and rather recalls the regulated nature of choreography. Lastly, the speed at which the player scrolls through the dialogues denies any possibility of reading them.

Nevertheless, it is especially in the last minute (from 03:30 onwards) that the video concentrates the most numerous rhetorical figures. The speedrunner exploits a glitch that is specific to the early Japanese versions of *Pokémon*, known as the *Dokokashira Door Glitch*. It is based on the game's functionality, which allows a player to change the location of items in the inventory and the order of the Pokémon in the player's team. A programming error makes it possible to select an item in the inventory, to exit the menu, and then, during the next Pokémon battle that is triggered, to exchange that item with a creature

12 *Speed Demos Archive*. "Pokémon Green". http://speeddemosarchive.com/PokemonGreen.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

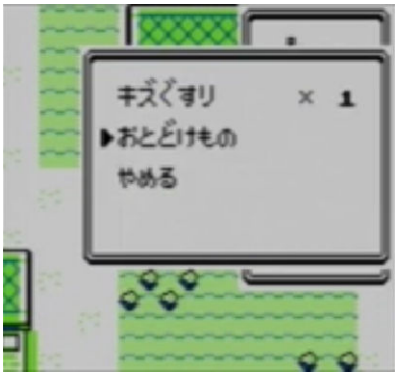

Figure 2. The *Dokokashira Door Glitch* involves exchanging an item from the inventory for one of the team's Pokémon, thus disrupting the functioning of the game software (all rights reserved).

in the player's team. This forces the game to switch the only Pokémon the player owns for a non-existent second creature, effectively moving the menu marker indicating the end of the list of Pokémon carried by the avatar. These manipulations disrupt the software and, in short,[13] allow a player to change the destination of the game's doors according to the number of steps the avatar walks[14] (in other words: they make it possible to "teleport" into any level of the game).

Concretely, in the speedrun, we see the player opening the inventory, selecting the package for Professor Oak, then closing the menu. This action already constitutes a deviation, both in relation to the context of a "standard" play session – since it does not serve the progress of the game in any way – and in relation to the context of the speedrun, since it appears, at first glance, as a waste of time.

Subsequently, the speedrunner returns to the first village and takes a detour to trigger a Pokémon battle. Since the fluidity of the avatar's movements was established as an isotopy[15] from the beginning of the video, this detour

13 For an in-depth description and technical explanation of how this glitch works, see: *Bulbapedia, the community-driven Pokémon encyclopedia.* "Dokokashira door glitch". https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Dokokashira_door_glitch, accessed on 19 December 2020.

14 All objects, creatures, attacks, or places in early versions of *Pokémon* games are associated in the code with values that serve as their identifiers. Glitch hunters have carefully identified and listed these values so that they can manipulate them at will.

15 Isotopy is an internal regularity produced by a repetition of meaning, structures, or processes (see Klinkenberg 1996, 344–345).

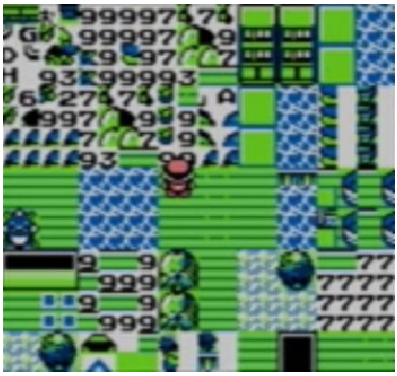

Figure 3. As a result of using the *Dokokashira Door Glitch*, the last room of *Pokémon Green* shows some display bugs (all rights reserved).

(while being part of the choreography) creates a rupture in the former visual continuity. After selecting a Pokémon from his team to trigger the glitch – so quickly that the image becomes temporarily unreadable – he flees the fight and makes the avatar travel back and forth in the village. These movements (whose purpose is to manipulate the game data in order to change the destination of the houses' doors) are incomprehensible within the logic of *Pokémon Green* (whether in narrative terms or in terms of gameplay) and only make sense if they are linked to the paratext of the video, where the speedrunner comments on the functioning of the glitch. Next, the avatar enters the door of a house, which transports him to an environment much further in the game. The avatar then moves through several levels, "teleporting" several times through doors, finally ending up in the last room of the game and triggering the credits – albeit causing a few display bugs (see Figure 3). A summary screen appears, which reveals that the timer only counted three seconds of playing time and that the protagonist only caught one Pokémon.

This finale is particularly salient from a semantic point of view. In the speedrun video, except for the initial battle with the rival, the game is "finished" without showing any of the recurring milestones that make up the identity of the *Pokémon* series: the speedrunner captures no creatures; fights (and loses) only one battle; enters no Gyms; and wins no badges (whereas, in normal conditions, eight badges must be retrieved to enter the Pokémon League and finish the game). Through this radical ellipsis, the speedrun deconstructs the coherence of the gameplay and of the fictional universe, but it reveals another dimension of the videogame work: the logic and structure of its code.

Simply by describing the two videos, as above, a number of recurrent rhetorical features are already visible. Below, I will classify the rhetorical fig-

ures of speedrun in two categories, according to the main function they serve: dismantling the game coherence, or codifying the speedrun apparatus.

Figures of Deconstruction

Resemantization

The first recurring figure contributing to the decomposition of the game's structure involves both the morphology of the game (because it modifies its "lexicon", i.e. characters, objects, places…) and its semantics (because it consists of attributing new meanings and functions to these different units, without changing their signifier). I therefore simply call this process: *resemantization*.

This formal mechanism is a direct consequence of the new layer of rules applied by speedrunners and leads to a rereading of the game elements through this filter. The addition of a different interpretative context transforms the mechanical function of the games' lexical units (in other words: it transforms the mechanical part of the "ludemes", Hansen 2019[16]), which has an effect on the meanings and representations they convey. For example, in the speedrun of *Pokémon Green*, the use of the *Dokokashira Door Glitch* results in a resemantization of the game's environments: the houses' doors no longer function as doors, but as "teleportation portals" granting access to virtually any level; walls or trees are no longer physical obstacles, since the glitch occasionally allows the avatar to walk over them as if they were non-existent. In the same way, levels no longer represent only geographical areas organized following a linear and thematic logic (Pallet Town leads to Route 1, which leads to Viridian City, then to Route 2, then to Viridian Forest, etc.), but appear as values that can be controlled and loaded by players in any order they wish. In this context, roads thus lose their role as guidelines, since speedrunners no longer make their way through the game environments, but through its code.

In the speedrun of *Pokémon Snap*, the imperative of speed leads to other forms of resemantization. For instance, one can see the speedrunner ostensibly leaning over the controller and hammering the keys to scroll through the dialogue at full speed. In the video, the narrative or informative function of

16 The ludeme is the minimal functional unit of a game, which is "manifested as the combination of a grapheme (a graphic unit), of a sound, […] and of mechanical properties or mechanemes" (Hansen 2019, 51). My translation of: « qui se manifeste ainsi comme la combinaison d'un graphème (une unité graphique), d'un son, […] et de propriétés mécaniques ou mécanèmes ».

Figure 4. Some walls or trees lose their function as obstacles (all rights reserved).

these texts is denied (the speedrunner does not even look at them) in favour of their temporal properties. Moreover, unlike in other forms of play where dialogues can be perceived as empty moments to be spent mechanically, in the context of speedrun, they become obstacles to be overcome as efficiently as possible and the operators of a new gameplay mechanic, since they require the keys be pressed with a certain rhythm.

More generally, in this performance, the fictional universe of Pokémon is hardly visible: the narrative mini-sequences are eclipsed; the player's camera never stops on landscapes; and the creatures are only interpreted as functions and parameters of the run. Here, Pokémon are no longer characters or aesthetic objects to be photographed; rather, they represent a certain number of points and serve as tools to progress from level to level (between 09:24 and 11:00, for example, the speedrunner talks about the Pokémon Cloyster as a condition to be validated in order to set a record). This form of reinterpretation may be present in other forms of play than speedrun, but it appears here in a particularly exacerbated way, especially since *Pokémon Snap* originally invites players to cast an aesthetic glance on the fictional universe. In the speedrun, photos are poorly framed and rushed, as they are taken quickly, only to complete the list of Pokémon photographed, thus contributing to a general "de-aesthetization" of the game.

These remarks can be extended to other speedrun videos than those considered here. Indeed, whether in platform, action, or shooting games, the objective of speed redefines many of the game components: one will often see the avatar carefully avoiding bonuses or allied characters because they are a waste of time, and therefore obstacles.

Figure 5. The speedrunner pays no attention to his photos or frames (all rights reserved).

Anti-Model Play

The mechanisms involved in the resemantization sometimes simultaneously serve another deconstructive function: *anti-model play*. Speedrun videos regularly contain salient actions that contradict the model play, reconfigure the level design, or make the gameplay falter. These figures are not specific to speedrun and are present in all forms of play, provided that play is always a transformative activity (Salen 2011, 4). Nevertheless, they are salient in that the speedrunner's actions brutally contradict or elude an instruction given or valued by the game. In other words, these actions do not make the speedrun a "deviant" form of play, but they mark the production by generating an *effect of deviation*: the video contains an internal contradiction (the game asks the player to do something and the speedrunner does not comply), which contributes to identifying it as a *détournement*.[17]

I have already mentioned, for example, that the absence of pauses in speedrunners' movements distinguishes speedrun videos per se from other types of gameplay capture. Speedrun performances, in fact, do not show the difficulty of the game, its rhythm, the player's hesitations, the frustrations, or successes.

17 It is important to emphasize here that I do not consider *détournement* or remix practices as a deviation from the norm of play, but as a marked actualization of the ordinary play (see Barnabé 2019, 11 for a detailed presentation of the concept of video game détournement).

Secondly, the description of the two videos showed that they regularly deviate from the model play of the game they capture: the speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap* messes up his photos, while the speedrun of *Pokémon Green* shows no Pokémon catching, few fights, and only reveals a few of the game's environments. Nevertheless, ruptures in the play syntax become even more apparent when the level design is no longer simply eluded, but completely reconfigured.

The fracture is all the more visible in the speedrun of *Pokémon Green* as, initially, the video complies to an extent with the implicit rules (Parker 2008, 3–4). However, the use of the *Dokokashira Door Glitch* literally redraws the game map, by moving environments that are supposed to be far away from each other and by removing the requirements to access to the last room. In this performance, the game ends before it really begins, as the speedrunner achieves goals that the game has not even had time to reveal to him yet: the avatar is nominated "Pokémon Master", even though he has not won any battles.

While the reconfiguration of the level design is not as obvious in the speedrun of *Pokémon Snap*, the way the speedrunner exploits openings in the game still produces disruptive effects. *Pokémon Snap* is indeed divided into seven levels: the player initially has access to only the first one and must unlock the others by accumulating points. In addition, once a certain score is attained, the player will also unlock items needed to reveal some Pokémon hidden in the environments (apples to attract them, for instance). Therefore, in order to make the entire content of the title available as quickly as possible, the speedrunner initially takes only a few photos and instantly leaves each level once the score needed to progress has been reached. In the first level, the speedrunner captures the image of eight creatures before returning to the main menu and starting the next level, which is now accessible; in the second level, he only takes a single picture before leaving the level, which allows him to use the apples, and so on. Such a way of playing is not exclusive to speedrun, but the specificity of the practice comes here from the degree of optimization that is achieved. Indeed, while the game does not prohibit these early departures, its implicit rules (Ibid.) do not encourage them, since each level is written as a route with a predetermined pace, during which various Pokémon are encountered, all of which bring points. These exits from the game via the menu therefore bypass its syntax, which is otherwise very rigid.

This detachment from the model play is also evident in the movements of the camera directed by the player. Indeed, he optimizes these movements in order to always be ideally positioned for the next photo, which leads him to rarely aim at spots that are visually interesting. From the beginning of the first level (00:16), for example, he photographs three Pokémon birds and then immediately lowers the camera to the ground. This action denies the visual

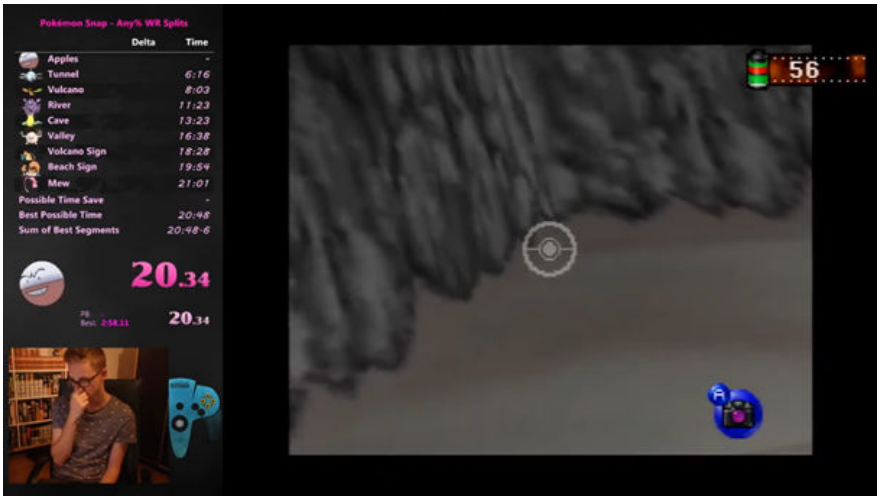

Figure 6. Between each photo, the speedrunner generally directs the viewfinder towards surfaces of little visual interest (all rights reserved).

interest of the bucolic and rich environment, but places him in an ideal position to capture the photo of a Pikachu a little further away. Similarly, once the creature is photographed, he then turns his viewfinder towards the sky, which he will fix for nearly ten seconds, before a Butterfree crosses his path. These gestures, which anticipate the course of the level, can be described as "ludic prolepses,"[18] because they create a space in the image for points of interest before they even exist.

Such a process is salient in that it disrupts the linearity of the playing experience, but it is also deviant in relation to the context of enunciation specific to streaming: the speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap* broadcasts his game live on Twitch.tv and, in doing so, presupposes that it is a worthy spectacle. However, the economy of camera movement produces an "anti-spectacular" effect by rendering visually monotonous a game whose gameplay is based on the visual exploration of lively scenery.

Anti-model play can therefore be achieved through *ellipses* or *reconfigurations* (spatial or temporal, in the case of ludic prolepses), but a speedrun can also involve more direct ruptures. The enunciative context of *Pokémon Snap*'s speedrun implies that the speedrunner simultaneously engages in two activities that sometimes collide: on the one hand, he plays and tries to set a speed

18 The prolepsis is a "narrative operation consisting in recounting or evoking in advance a later event" (my translation of: « manœuvre narrative consistant à raconter ou évoquer d'avance un événement ultérieur », Genette 1972, 82).

record; on the other hand, he manages and discusses with his community of viewers. Concretely, in the video, we regularly see the speedrunner simply letting go of his controller (during the waiting moments imposed by the game) to consult his computer, to write on his keyboard, to read and respond to his viewers' comments. Between 00:49 and 01:15, for example, we see him using his mouse distractedly; similarly, at 11:42, he obviously checks some information on his computer and nearly forgets to take an important photo. These shifts operated by the speedrunner from one enunciative posture to another contribute to the deconstruction of the game because they simply interrupt the performance and contradict the conception of play as an immersive experience. Even when caught up in a competitive activity, the speedrunner is constantly distancing himself from what he is accomplishing: by doing something else; but also by being ironical about the poor quality of the photos he takes (00: 49); by regularly criticizing his performance (08:12); or by complaining and showing signs of frustration, as if he were forced to continue but was not satisfied (between 06:51 and 07:12, he says explicitly, holding his face: "I can't play this game… I lost all my consistency… All of it! It makes me really sad").

Anti-model play therefore also involves a reversal of the value systems constructed by the games. For instance, the quality of the photos in *Pokémon Snap* or the victory in the battles of *Pokémon Green* no longer matter in the videos, because they are part of a new value system. Incidentally, the speedrunner of *Pokémon Green* explains in his commentary that it is more useful to *lose* the first fight against the rival, because defeat is faster than victory: "it should also be noted that losing to your rival is slightly faster than winning because the animations and sounds for levelling up and listening to the loser's speech are long."[19]

The inversion is yet achieved by revaluing design errors, namely, glitches. While they could appear as obstacles or problems, in the videos, they are represented as tools, opportunities, or even as signs of the aesthetics of speedrun. The place given to these dysfunctions – in the videos as well as in the discourses – is perhaps what most clearly manifests the deconstructive dimension of speedrun, in the sense that their use sometimes brings games to the limits of their destruction (Newman 2008, 114). For illustration, the ironic presentation of *Pokémon Green* by its speedrunner can be read in two ways: "The Green version is roughly equivalent to the American Blue version, but

19 *Speed Demos Archive*. "Pokémon Green". http://speeddemosarchive.com/PokemonGreen.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

does have several small differences. It is also features the absolute best coding in any game ever. No bugs to exploit here. Not a [single] one."[20]

The irony comes, of course, from the contradiction between the assertion of the absence of bugs and their radical exploitation in the video. However, the humoristic tone allows the author to gently mock the clumsy programming, while, at the same time, highlighting the importance of these mistakes for his practice. The figure plays here the role of junction operator between several paradigms, several value systems (in this case: that of the model play, where glitches are annoying, and that of *détournement*, where they are desirable opportunities).

Exhibition of the creation processes and exposition of the game system

Speedrun, like any form of *détournement*, is not only a form of play, it is also a discourse about play. Through their performances, speedrunners say something about the playing activity and about the works they take over. As such, speedrun has a revealing function: it uncovers the possibilities embedded in the original game – *exposure*, which is another mechanism of its deconstruction.

It is rare that speedrun videos are not accompanied by an extensive escort speech (either in the form of an oral commentary embedded in the performance or in a paratext accompanying the video), in which the speedrunners explain all the details of their performance: the motivations that drove them; the difficulties they encountered; the strategies they adopted; the glitches they took advantage of; and the people who assisted them. In these comments, they often give explanations about the intimate logic of the game, proceeding with a kind of reverse engineering. The paratext of *Pokémon Green*'s speedrun is an example of this:

> First, the run starts before the game even boots up. The ingame timer starts when you appear in your room, as long as you don't have a save file on the cart. If you do, the timer starts earlier, which is undesirable in such a tight time constraint. Therefore, you must delete your save before beginning.[21]

In the speedrun of *Pokémon Snap*, this analytical dimension is even present within the video, as the speedrunner realizes his performance while commenting on it live. The addition of this reflexive layer is salient in relation to the context of enunciation of the game: players are not expected to explain

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

verbally all their actions during a game. The presence of comments (internal to the video or paratextual) therefore gives the activity a meta-communicative dimension.

In addition to uncovering the inner functioning of the game, these meta-discourses also reveal the inner workings of the speedruns themselves, by constantly exhibiting the creation processes of the videos. In *Pokémon Green*'s speedrun, this *mise en abyme* is achieved through the systematic explanation of the strategies employed and the glitches exploited. It also involves revealing the production conditions of the video and the meticulous inventory of the material used by the speedrunner. In the paratextual commentary, the author points out, for instance, that he plays version 1.1 of the Game Boy game, whose Japanese title is *Pocket Monsters Midori*; but also that he plays it with a Game Boy Player,[22] using a Game Boy Advance SP console as a controller, and that he does not resort to save file corruption, but uses "large skip glitches."[23] In the speedrun of *Pokémon Snap*, the apparatus is even more revealing, since the frame of the video contains a representation of a Nintendo 64 controller on which the viewer can observe, in real time, the keys that are pressed by the speedrunner.

Through the presence of this *meta-discursive framework* (the controller and the player's video capture), all the components of the experience are exhibited simultaneously and on the same plane (reminiscent of Azuma's notion of hyperflatness[24]): the game; the play; and the act of creation – since the production of the speedrun itself becomes the object of the spectacle.

Deconstructing auctoriality: Speedrun as dialogical performance

Simultaneously a playful feat and a creative act leading to an observable production (the video), the practice of speedrun is a performance both in the athletic sense of the term and in the cultural, interpretative sense (the player must find new solutions to the problems encountered and represent them in a video worthy of interest). The creative dimension of the practice is manifested, in particular, in the tendency of authors to use certain techniques with the

22 An accessory for the GameCube console that allows Game Boy games to be displayed on the television.

23 *Speed Demos Archive*. "Pokémon Green". http://speeddemosarchive.com/PokemonGreen.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

24 "The hyperflat world, represented by the computer screen, is flat and at the same timelines up what exists beyond it in a parallel layer" (Azuma 2009, 102).

Figure 7. The video includes a reproduction of the joystick used by the speedrunner, which allows the audience to observe in real time the keys that are pressed (all rights reserved).

sole aim of entertaining their audience or of being visually interesting, without these tricks implying any real time saving. Nevertheless, while being creators, speedrunners do not cease to be players, and thus construct an ambiguous status of author/performer.

The expressive significance[25] of the activity is especially blurred by the fact that speedrun has the particularity of being deeply collective. From the outset, these videos were conceived as a way for expert players to disseminate advanced techniques and as support for a community practice (world-record directories made it possible to make races "multi-player," even when they were carried out in solo titles). The singularity of speedrun comes from the fact that it is part of several discourse registers that are generally opposed: that of competitive gaming; that of creation; and that of collaborative gaming.

This collective dimension is visible in the organization of the activity in general (in the fact that the strategies are listed and disseminated in participatory encyclopedias, for example), but it also leaves its mark on the videos and their paratexts. Although these videos, in certain aspects, are the rigid versions

25 Or even the artistic dimension of speedrun, as claimed by some communities (see Barnabé 2016).

of a subjective play performance, they contain various processes that tend to open up their own boundaries (towards the spectator) and deconstruct the figure of the author (in favour of collegiality). Unlike the previous ones, the figures discussed below no longer serve to deconstruct the original game, but rather to dismantle the speedrun work.

First, speedrun videos rarely include a strong representation of auctoriality. On the contrary, the figure of the creator tends to be diluted in them. For example, despite the fact that each video is clearly attributed to a defined individual, the ephemeral nature of the performances (always susceptible to being superseded) makes this "intellectual property" a temporary state. The author, actually, is never the full owner of the performance, since it is only one step leading to the next record: "there is a clear sense in which the products and processes of speedrunning are owned by the community rather than any particular individual" (Newman 2008, 130). Besides, the dilution of an author's subjectivity is due to the importance, in the comments, of technical and quantified considerations, leaving little room for the speedrunner's personal expression.

Auctoriality is further distorted by the recognition of the role played by collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006, 139), which is attested in the paratext of the runs. Speedrunners rarely fail to warmly thank the players who helped them dissect the game system, or to acknowledge the merit of previous record holders. The speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap*, for instance, refers to some of his peers' strategies during his performance (17:58) and takes the time to thank all those who assisted him during the game credits (24:05), thus recognizing that his record is the result of a collective effort.

The dilution of auctoriality also affects the content of the videos themselves. Indeed, unlike Let's Play videos, which stage an individual experience of the game and emphasize the player's subjectivity, speedruns tend rather towards the standardization of performances: speedrunners collectively develop an ideal trajectory, then compete to achieve it as perfectly as possible. The videos do not retrace the player's personal interpretations or choices, but instead an over-codified choreography in which the speedrunner is only a performer, an instrument.[26]

Finally, speedrun deconstructs the figure of the author and the boundaries of the work in that the performance is part of a profoundly dialogical dynamic. The videos and their paratext are indeed characterized by a constant solicitation and consideration of the audience. This inclusion of the public in

26 This depersonalization is completed in the case of "tool-assisted speedruns," where the script is not even played by the speedrunner anymore, but by an emulator.

the creation is marked in the didactic concern omnipresent in speedrunners' discourses: the *Speed Demos Archive* website, for example, dedicates a forum to the introduction of beginners and another to the archiving of knowledge.[27] Presentations of speedruns are also guided by this didactic logic, given the thoroughness with which speedrunners detail how to reproduce their tricks – sometimes going so far as to provide the reader with "pedagogical material," such as annotated maps (see Barnabé 2014 for more examples on this subject). The speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap* has also produced a tutorial video in conjunction with his speedrun,[28] for those who would like to achieve the same feat.

Because of this concern for popularization, speedrun offers a form of openness to interactivity: not only the meta-discourse gives spectators all the cards to make a run themselves, but they frequently also contain explicit invitations to the audience to intervene. This incitement manifests itself in the form of the run's presentations: they are generally addressed to the reader in the second person, like textbooks, and are written as if the reader were in the middle of a playing activity. For instance, the commentary about *Pokémon Green*'sspeedrun literally dictates instructions to the reader: "first, the run starts before the game even boots up. The ingame timer starts when you appear in your room, as long as you don't have a save file on the cart. If you do, the timer starts earlier […]. Therefore, you must delete your save before beginning."[29] While the speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap* is less explicitly prescriptive, the comments he superimposes on his performance are no less didactic, and the audience's inscription in his video also passes, more directly, through the dialogue he maintains with his viewers (see, for example, between 18:41 and 19:28).

Furthermore, speedrun presentations almost always include mention of the points in the video that can be improved. The speedrunner of *Pokémon Green* reports as follows: "at most, one second was lost to execution, owing to small errors in text mashing and a slight hesitation during the trip back to Pallet Town. The route lost five seconds but gave the run a vastly higher chance

27 *Speed Demos Archive*. "New Users". https://forum.speeddemosarchive.com/board/new_users.html, accessed on 19 December 2020; and *Speed Demos Archive*. "Knowledge Base". https://forum.speeddemosarchive.com/board/knowledge_base2.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

28 *Speedrun.com*. "Pokémon Snap – 100% Speedrun Tutorial – by Drogeriehund". http://www.speedrun.com/pkmnsnap/guide/08yk7, accessed on 19 December 2020.

29 *Speed Demos Archive*. "Pokémon Green". http://speeddemosarchive.com/PokemonGreen.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

of finishing."[30] These mechanisms make the speedrun video appear less a finite object with a fixed form and more a work in progress, a step in an ongoing process: as an illustration, *Pokémon Snap*'s speedrunner has barely finished his run when he is already announcing his next performances (25:14).

In short, the inclusion of the playing activity in a dialogic dynamic and the dilution of the author's figure do not really contribute to making the speedrun appear as an autonomous work, but rather re-inscribe the video in a playful register. The deconstruction of the original game's aesthetics in these videos also heads in this direction. However, as we will see below, other formal mechanisms, by contrast, contribute to formalizing the speedrun as a work that exists outside of the speedrunner's playing performance.

Figures of formalization

Analogy

I previously emphasized that speedrun is not without an impact on the game it diverts, since it superimposes another layer of rules and objectives onto it. I should add that, by defining its own ludic apparatus, speedrunning also necessarily defines a new model play. If the videos regularly produce deviation effects from the model play of the original game (by short-circuiting its level design or ignoring its gameplay, for example), they tend, on the contrary, to merge completely into the second model play. Indeed, the optimization specific to the practice induces the standardization of trajectories, techniques, and courses used by the players, since the objective is to get as close as possible to an ideal performance. Thus, through their play, speedrunners do not just produce a video or a spectacular performance, they also write a *score*, a script, a model run that each of their performances will try to reproduce, but from which they will always be separated by a few execution errors. In other words, the work produced through speedrun is not limited to the video, since it is only a step, an attempt to perform the model play.[31]

30 Ibid.

31 Without totally assimilating with them, this point brings speedrun closer to the performance arts, or Goodman's "allographic arts" (where a score allows the work to be performed an infinite number of times and each manifestation retains the status of original), as opposed to the "autographic arts," where the material support of the work makes sense and invites us to distinguish the original work from its reproductions, as in the case of painting (Goodman 1990, 147–148).

What Pinchbeck and Gras say about machinima seems to apply even more aptly to the case of speedrun: "machinima is the process of rendering a linear artifact from a nonlinear system, of reducing the field of affordances within this system to an individualized stream" (Pinchbeck and Gras 2011, 144). Speedrun takes this process one step further, since it not only produces a fixed interpretation from an infinite number of possibilities, but also a model to imitate precisely, a template towards which all singular interpretations aspire. This closure and standardization of playing performances that is visible within the videos is salient, as it calls into question the definition of play as a contingent activity (Malaby 2007, 106) or as an opening of possibilities. According to Genvo, the existence of indeterminacy in a situation is indeed a condition for the emergence of play:

> Since playing is doing (Winnicott 1971), it is necessary, in our opinion, to add that playing is also making a decision and "exercising what is possible". If playing consists only of a succession of single decisions, then the player has no "latitude" in his choices; he simply actualizes a proposition held to be true, which does not depend on his particular play[32] (Genvo 2011, 72).

However, while speedrun opens up the possibilities of the original game (in particular thanks to the use of glitches), it closes them just as quickly by codifying an optimal interpretation.

Concretely, the existence of this secondary model play manifests itself within the productions through *analogies*. Performances are regularly compared with other records achieved in the same game (in order to show the progress made by each one) or are compared with the "tool-assisted speedrun,"[33] which often serves as a model, since emulators make it possible to get closer to a theoretically perfect time. The speedrunner of *Pokémon Green* is actually very excited about the record he has set, for the very reason that he has almost equalled the tool-assisted speedrun of the same game: "this is my speedrun of the Japan-exclusive Pokémon Green in 0:03 by the ingame timer, which is

32 My translation of: « Puisque jouer c'est faire (Winnicott, 1971), il est selon nous nécessaire d'ajouter que jouer c'est aussi prendre une décision et "faire l'exercice du possible". Si le jeu ne consiste que dans la succession de décisions uniques, alors le joueur n'a aucune "latitude" dans ses choix ; il se contente d'actualiser une proposition tenue pour vraie, qui ne dépend pas de son jeu particulier ».

33 Tool-assisted speedrun is a form derived from speedrun in which speedrunners use the functionalities of emulators to remove the limitations due to human errors and establish a theoretically ideal time. Tool-assisted speedrunners slow down the progress of the game and record, at each frame, the combination of keys that should ideally be pressed. This sequence of commands can then be read by the emulator.

literally unbeatable. Even the hyper-optimized TAS gets 0:03, so expect this run to stand for eternity."[34]

The speedrun of *Pokémon Snap* formalizes the model play that it tries to approach through its frame. Indeed, the frame of the video contains a table showing, for each stage of the speedrun, the time to beat (that of the world record) as well as the relationship between the latter and the current performance. In Figure 8, for example, we see that the run is 1.62 seconds behind the ideal time at the Tunnel, but 1.61 seconds ahead of the time at the River. This comparison in the speedrun's "interface" opens the video to intertextuality and functions as a constant reminder of the existence of a shared script behind the individual performance. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the division of the different stages of the race does not really correspond to the original division of the game into levels: rather, it represents the route that speedrunners have established as the most efficient (the first title, "Apples," does not refer to a level, but rather to the route that leads to the apples, etc.). This division and the naming of each stage of the run graphically signal, in the video, both the rupture of the game's model play (whose levels are reconfigured) and the existence of a secondary model play whose main prescription – time – is constantly repeated.

The speedrunner's spoken comments double the analogy with the model play, because he regularly reaffirms that his performance is still in the wake of the world record, which he follows scrupulously: "I still have a world-record pace" (13:47), "we're ahead of a world record by… six seconds for undo" (14:44) "seven seconds ahead… no ten seconds actually. Ten seconds ahead of world record" (18:33),[35] etc.

Codification

Far from being only deconstructive, speedrun performances are also subject to an important *codification*. Firstly, the format of the videos is characterized by a strong uniformity, generally imposed by the reference site around which the community is organized. On *Speed Demos Archive*, for instance, videos cannot have been edited and they begin with a launch image containing the game time, the author's references, and the reference to the host site. Besides, as we

34 *Speed Demos Archive*. "Pokémon Green". http://speeddemosarchive.com/PokemonGreen.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

35 *Speedrun.com*. "Pokémon Snap – 100% – N64 in 23m 40s by Drogie". http://www.speedrun.com/run/wzpko2vy, accessed on 19 December 2020.

Figure 8. The frame formalizes a model play through a table that shows, for each step, the time to beat (all rights reserved).

have seen, the recordings are accompanied by an extensive paratextual commentary, in which speedrunners explain all the details of their performance.

The ambition of codification is also evident in a speedrunner tradition to give a name to the strategies they use. For example, the sequence of manipulations carried out in the speedrun of *Pokémon Green* has been formalized as a technique in its own right, known to all under the label of *Dokokashira Door Glitch*. The consequence of these titles is to make some course choices official and to give them a collective dimension. The itineraries and playing techniques – both integral parts of the playing experience – are thus subject to a form of "lexicalization": by becoming formalized, these ways of playing become part of the game's lexicon and form a shared code.

Additionally, the establishment of rules for the activity, the definition of standards, and the classification of the videos into categories require an important collective work of theorization. For example: under what conditions can a speedrun be qualified as "100%" or "low%"? What does it mean to finish *Pokémon Snap* at 100%? What about *Super Mario Bros* or *Metroid*? The criteria cannot be identical, so *Speed Demos Archive* reserves a forum topic for the

establishment of these definitions for each video game title.[36] All these formalization processes are an integral part of speedrun as a creative activity: the planning of a model play; the standardization of play performance and the production of a shared code constitute a framework that contributes to giving speedrun the status of *détournement*.

Over-compliance

Finally, the definition of a model play specific to speedrun and the codification of trajectories and techniques make the videos salient because they *over-comply* with these models. The unusual precision of certain movements (the avatar's movements in the speedrun of *Pokémon Green*, for example, which anticipate obstacles and always follow the shortest path) and their mechanical optimization (such as when the speedrunner of *Pokémon Snap*, at 16:00, throws a ball at one Pokémon, but does not even take the time to look at the result of his action, because he is already completing the next task in his program) depart from the game as an exploratory, variable, and subjective activity because of their smoothness and perfection. While such optimized gestures appear regularly in competitive gaming practices (or in what Roth has described as the "analytical" posture sometimes adopted by players to satisfy the requirements of game systems, Roth 2017, 75), they characterize speedrun by their omnipresence: optimized trajectories or actions do not simply emerge occasionally, constituting a moment of intensity, as they would in other forms of play, but constitute a norm in these videos, an isotopy.

In short, speedrun differs from play because it has the effect of suppressing the low-intensity moments of videogame activity: moments of waiting, searching, trial-and-error or less commitment disappear from videos, whereas they represent the main part of daily play experiences (see Boutet, Colón de Carvajal, Ter Minassian and Triclot 2014).

Conclusion: Artwork, game and apparatus

By analysing two very different runs of *Pokémon* games, a number of rhetorical figures of speedrun as transformative play were identified. These analyses showed that speedrun is a highly ambiguous creative activity: it mixes process-

36 *SDA Forum*. "low%/100% definitions". https://forum.speeddemosarchive.com/post/low100_definitions.html, accessed on 19 December 2020.

es of deconstruction (of the game and its codes) with processes of formalization (of a new apparatus and of a new model play); it is primarily a play performance, but it nonetheless alters games by superimposing an external framework on them; in doing so, it is both a playing practice and an act of "meta-game design." Moreover, the reflexive dimension of speedrun (as a form of reverse engineering) makes it a powerful tool for analysing the game-objects that serve as its support.

Its specificities invite us to, in particular, rethink the notions of *work* and *game*. Indeed, in this chapter, we have seen that, in the field of speedrun, what is produced through play is not limited to a trace of a performance (the video), because this video only makes sense by being linked to a metadiscourse defining the rules of the practice (through websites, distribution platforms, etc.), to a paratext that makes the production readable, and to a planning through which an abstract "score" or script is drawn up. The speedrun product is therefore plural, transmediatic, and, above all, collective: it gives access to a play performance whose script was written by the community, so that each individual game session is integrated into a whole formed by the trajectories of other speedrunners.

On the other hand, this playing activity highlights the need to clarify the definition of what the "game-object" actually is. I have thus proposed to distinguish the *game* from the *game apparatus*: the first term designates the game-object in the strict sense (its code, its image and sound directories, its materiality), while the second refers to the transmediatic network of supports mobilized within the framework of the play experience (the paratext, the websites, forums and communities, the extensions or derived products, etc.). The distinction shows the essential role of those peripheral elements in the gaming experience.

As Després has said with respect to the field of dance, the work can only be defined as a virtuality, "as an abstract compound that suddenly emerges in current interpretive precipitates, the thousand and one interpretations or readings that manufacture and re-fabricate it"[37] (Després 2016). While I hope that the above analyses provide tools to qualify more precisely the rhetoric and aesthetics of transformative play, the analysis of speedrun also concerns broader issues in game theory: it invites us to re-examine video game materialities.

37 My translation of: « comme un *composé abstrait* qui surgirait soudain en des précipités interprétatifs actuels, les mille et une interprétations ou lectures qui la fabriquent et la re-fabriquent ».

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Comment By Taeko Edaki

This is a meaningful paper that clarifies the peculiarity of speedrun. It is interesting that the rules that the creator gives to the player are changed by the player and the community. Research into speedrun is also considered a significant area of study with respect to clarifying the process of community formation. Games that are not necessarily new or hit titles are played in speedrun. Despite being a community that requires difficult gameplay, many people with different characteristics are interacting online. Moreover, Real-Time Attack (RTA) festivals are held all over the world and RTA in Japan continues to expand every year. I hope that research into this field will be conducted from various perspectives, not merely from a game research perspective.

Comment By Melanie Fritsch

In her chapter, Fanny Barnabé offers an in-depth discussion of the game-cultural practice of speedrunning. Speedrunners play in an optimized way; optimized here means that they finish either a full game or part of it (e.g. one level) as quickly as possible by exploiting every opportunity the game system offers them in order to speed up. Barnabé describes this as a form of meta-gaming that is constructed according to the rules negotiated in and with the community.

The chapter is thought-provoking on many levels, though I found the discussion of speedrunning as a creative act and thinking about speedruns as a socially negotiated form of game-cultural performance particularly intriguing. This sparked a question about whether we can describe such gameplaying in a similar vein to Christopher Small's (1998) description of the act of music-making with the term "musicking," i.e. as a social practice whose rules are constantly (re-)negotiated within a community of participants. In this regard, participants can be the performers (players, speedrunners) themselves, but also anyone else participating in setting the stage for gameplay performances (e.g. by providing the material) as well as evaluating them through online discussions and comments.

Konstantin Freybe

How *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* Obscures Moral Ambiguities

Introduction

This study critically examines how *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (hereafter, MGS3) represents the historic relation between military and weapons engineering in the Cold War, the space race, and the arms race. I argue that, while conveying a strong and commendable anti-war message, MGS3 for various reasons also relies on simplified representations that sometimes conflict with its persuasive aims. One might argue that MGS3 is a work of fiction and therefore, by design, never set out to produce factual accounts of history. This is true to a certain extent because MGS3 taps into the supernatural – be it ghostly apparitions, soldiers metabolizing via photosynthesis, or being able to control lightning or animals – indicating that the game openly embraces fantasy tropes. Then again, MGS3 grounds its narrative in twentieth-century history and displays ambitions to persuade its players into thinking critically about war, be it the Cold War or war in general. I do not argue that historic accuracy is the main problem here. However, my suspicions were raised by the fact that this well-researched, carefully designed, and ambitious game manages to make rocket science one of the main pillars of its spy-action narrative while also removing the origins of that very field of engineering from its discourse.

Having been released almost two decades ago, MGS3 itself is a cultural artefact of gaming culture around the turn of the millennium. While being openly fictional and fantastic, the game evokes memories not only of Cold War history, but also memories of popular culture of the 1960s through its spy-movie aesthetics, as well as reminiscences of previous titles in the series. Conventional history is not removed from the game world. It is rather used as a foundation for the fictional events of the game. In doing so, MGS3 also touches upon sensitive issues like political instrumentalization of the military and sciences, patriotism, physical abuse, and more. MGS3's use of pointed and simplified representations of history may well constitute concessions to

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the competitive market situation of the computer games and entertainment industry. However, MGS3 still manages to convey thoughtful messages through its computer game experience. Yet, MGS3's being geared towards anti-war sentiments seems to come at the price of glossing over the historic roots of rocket science. This is a somewhat bitter pill to swallow considering that there is definitely something to see.

In this study, I take a close look at MGS3's rocket scientist "Dr. Nikolai Stepanovich Sokolov." What aspect of Cold War history is represented through him and how is it represented? The short answer: MGS3 is committed to a trope of weapons engineers that can be frequently encountered in Metal Gear games, depicting Sokolov as the definitive victim of oppression and abuse, leaving little room to reflect on the Faustian bargain that he – and weapons scientists more generally – made with politics and the military. It also – and somewhat astonishingly – manages to make strong references to rocket science as one of the paradigmatic technologies of the Cold War without ever referencing Wernher von Braun – despite his critical importance for the development of rockets and missiles even before the Cold War. By comparing MGS3's Sokolov against excerpts of von Braun's biography, I intend to show the extent to which MGS3 obscures the moral ambiguities of rocket science and explore the consequences.

Due to the complexity of computer games as research objects, a historically interested perspective is necessarily only one of many equally valid perspectives. In order to discuss this subject in a nuanced manner, I will start by investigating the relations between MGS3 and history, drawing from Adam Chapman's thoughts on *historical game studies* (2016a and b). A review of research related to Metal Gear games offers various approaches that will help characterize and contextualize the research material further. In this study, I intend to examine MGS3's relation to history by investigating a specific aspect of the game. How is Cold War rocket science represented through Sokolov in MGS3 and how does this constitute obscuring moral ambiguities of weapons engineering? In order to provide context and communicate the reasoning behind my choice for MGS3 as a case study, I will continue with an introduction to the game. This will unfold in three steps: First, I describe the empirical basis for this study by indicating the releases of MGS3 used during research. Second, I attempt an overview of MGS3's plot. Third, I contextualize MGS3 within the franchise. This brief bird's-eye view on the series allows us to take a look at Metal Gear's weapons scientist trope and contextualize Sokolov among other weapons scientists in the series.

A comparative discussion of Sokolov against the backdrop of Wernher von Braun's career will show the shortcomings of a strict victim/perpetrator dichotomy. In his capacity as chief engineer for the Nazi regime, von Braun

designed the "Aggregat 4" or "V-2" missiles that killed about 8,000 people during attacks in the last years of World Ware II. But the emphasis on the man, who would go on to greatly contribute to the first manned space flight to the moon, blocks the view on the forced labourers in concentration camps like Mittelbau Dora (Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, 2021) in the German Harz Mountains region, where the weapons were assembled. In the approximately eighteen months between 1943 and 1945 in which Mittelbau Dora operated, 20,000 people died under hellish conditions. From this perspective, the V-2 rockets, a jealously guarded, proud achievement of the Nazis, claimed around 28,000 lives. None of them should be forgotten. Von Braun himself continued his work within the US's National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), where perhaps his most famous project was the Apollo missions, which culminated in the first landing of humans on the moon in 1969. He had strong competition from the USSR's Sergei Korolev and his colleagues, who helped bring a human into space for the first time in 1961. Both technological achievements, however, stemmed from von Braun's early research for the Nazis. So, when faced with such complex and frequently unresolvable moral ambiguities of historical reality, it seems worth investigating how and why MGS3 entirely divorces its rocket science fiction from these issues.

1 Approaching historical representation in MGS

1.1 Computer games are complex phenomena

Researching computer games in general is highly complex, as is the task of this study's historically motivated analysis of MGS3. Aarseth and Möhring address the specificity of computer games within their discussion of ludo-hermeneutics as "media technologies and as technological practice" (2020, 9) at the same time. My study may be less invested in a fundamentally theoretical discussion of games research than the authors when they propose "a proper ontology of computer games" as a precondition for "ludo-hermeneutic" (Ibid.) approaches to computer games research. Still, characterizing computer games through this immanent tension is convincing and fruitful for this research because it raises awareness about the relation of objects and practices. Aarseth and Möhring account for the systemic character of such multifaceted phenomena and their relations, formulating the "fundamental challenge to establishing a ludo-hermeneutics that games are not one type of phenomenon" (Ibid., 10).

The main takeaway from this insight in the context of this study is that MGS3 is not a singular object (of research), for two reasons. Firstly, MGS3 is manifested in many different types of media objects with regard to its different

releases and their platforms. Secondly, researching MGS3 also entails engaging related cultural practice. Aside from physical copies of MGS3, this study utilizes several resources that originated from fan contexts. Community-built and curated databases will be consulted in order to navigate the Metal Gear Solid franchise (MGS).

Transcriptions of dialogue sequences and character descriptions will be cited from GameFAQs and Fan Wikis (MG-Wiki). Given sufficient accuracy or fidelity, these transcriptions are a convenient way to review conversations that take place in MGS3. Furthermore, this study will make reference to audiovisual resources made available online on YouTube. Recordings of gameplay as well as cut-scenes help illustrate the experience of MGS3. They are, however, in no way a substitute for actually running the software on compatible hardware and playing the game. These resources exist mainly thanks to the efforts of fan communities. This adds weight to Aarseth and Möhring's notion that computer games are "not one type of phenomenon" (see above). It indicates that cultural practices in relation to MGS3 extend beyond the game's concrete technological manifestations. Unfortunately, questions regarding the relation between the cultural practices that yielded the aforementioned resources and Aarseth and Möhring's "technological practices" are outside the scope of this study.

1.2 Historical game studies

A central element in my examination of MGS3's relation to twentieth-century history is the exploration of Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History* (2016a) applied to MGS3. This contributes two things to the discussion: First, it helps focus on history related topics from the multitude of possible research perspectives. Second, it provides analytic terminology that helps describe and analyse MGS3's relation to history.

Adam Chapman suggested an understanding of scholarly interests in the relation between games and history as "the study of games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it, the potential applications of such games to different domains of activity and knowledge, and the practices, motivations and interpretations of players of these games and other stakeholders in their production and consumption" (2016b, 5). While this definition is still rather broad, it manages to outline several possible constellations in which games and history can be researched.

Chapman views "history as a shared cultural process spread across multiple forms, practices, social domains, and stakeholders" (Ibid., 4). This research perspective has seemingly shaped the landscape of historical game studies into "a series of distinct but overlapping areas of interest and strands of investiga-

tion" (Ibid.). Chapman introduces two such central strands. First, he states that "close readings of historical representations" are endeavours frequently undertaken in historical game studies. The second strand consists of formal analyses that aim to describe the properties of the historical game form" (Ibid.). In short, according to Chapman, historical game studies envelope a multitude of perspectives on and approaches to games and history, with two popular questions being frequently pursued by scholars: How is history being represented in games? And, how are games structured to be able to convey such representations?

Chapman's approach embraces popular culture with all its artefacts and practices as being "capable of meaningful engagements with the past and have the potential to both determine and reflect on how we both collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate and talk about the past in the present" (Ibid., 3). In *Digital Games as History*, Chapman (2016a) states with regard to the relation between narrative and gameplay: "History is always narrative, but this narrative does not necessarily have to detail the exact sequence of events that is understood to have taken place in the past in order to be historical" (Ibid., 10). Chapman's open and inclusive concept of history was developed with emphasis on popular culture. He partly argues against assigning unquestioned authority to professional historians as the only ones qualified to negotiate history. "[T]he rejection of popular history is often not only based on the idea of the primacy of the written word but also the sole primacy of the academic word" (Ibid., 8). Chapman "propose[s] that fantastical settings and narratives […] could still be used metaphorically to argue about the past, offering particular notions of causality or exploring key ideas or concerns by mixing fantastical elements with those that are more conventionally historical" (Ibid., 10).

1.3 Framework for formal analysis

The following paragraphs introduce key concepts for the formal analysis of historical games developed by Chapman (2016a). Chapman's examination of "the stylistic variations in the ludic aesthetics of historical description of digital historical games" (Ibid., 59) begins with the introduction of a spectrum of simulation styles that ranges from "realist simulation[s]" (Ibid., 61) to "conceptual simulations" (Ibid., 69). With regard to realist simulations, Chapman states: "When we speak of a realist simulation, we do not refer to the game's historical accuracy. Some games that use realist simulation styles, […] also contain fantasy elements." Realist simulations may still utilize fiction. Chapman moves on to specify that, "when we talk of a realist simulation, we are referring

to its stylistic approach to representation rather than evaluating its historical content" (Ibid., 61). This entails a high level of audiovisual detail in elements that "feature little overt metaphorisation" (Ibid.).

In contrast, conceptual simulations are "[m]uch less visually 'literal' simulations characterised by abstract audio-visual representations" (Ibid., 70). Given the visual prowess of MGS3 for its time, the game clearly uses elements of realist-style simulations. Facial expressions, three-dimensionally modelled items, environments, or even animals inhabiting the game world are presented with attention to detail. However, it also engages players with several abstract representations that are sometimes of critical importance for the game. MGS3's player character has needs that players are encouraged to satisfy. Treating wounds, selecting equipment, or eating provisions is handled via menu screens, which is far closer to a conceptual style of representation. While I will return to this in later sections, I find it safe to assume that MGS3 does not fully match either of the two types of representation styles.

Temporal structure is another analytic dimension that Chapman introduces to his framework of formal analysis. He further differentiates between "real-time," "play time," and "fictive time" (Ibid., 91). Play time refers to the time spent by players playing a game, while fictive time refers to the passing of time in the fictional game space. An examination of the ratios between the three is one way to approach temporal structures. Another way is termed "discrete temporal structure" by Chapman (Ibid., 94). MGS3's temporal structure is a far cry from turned-based discrete temporal structures and shows a strong inclination towards a realist-style representation of time as it attempts to evoke a "sense of present, tangible action and challenge that the realist time structure offers" (Ibid., 98). However, it is full of jumps or skips in fictive time, which is partly due to its orientation on the conventions of Hollywood cinema and movies in general. Furthermore, MGS3 employs mechanics that are tied to the internal clock of a PlayStation 2. Food supplies spoil over time when players are not actively playing, and a boss fight against a sniper soldier called "The End" can be won simply by waiting two weeks once players reach that point of the game: the enemy will have died of old age. This brief excursion already shows that matters of temporal structure can be quite complex and multifaceted, too.

Chapman proposes the utilization of four concepts for the formal analysis of narrative structures: "framing narrative"; "ludonarrative"; "lexia"; and "framing controls." Framing narrative refers to the aspect of a game's narrative structure that is mostly controlled by game developers via assemblage of "framing narrative fragments" (Ibid., 121). "By comparison, the formation of the ludonarrative is an active collaboration between developer and player" (Ibid., 122). Chapman proposes to understand lexia "as the most basic narratively charged

units that players can combine with other lexia to produce ludonarrative" (Ibid., 123). Lexia are "combinable ludic representations of agents, objects, social structures, architecture, processes, actions and concepts."' Chapman metaphorically illustrates the relation of lexia to narrative fragments as analogous to "an actor's use of a prop [...]" that is "subject to a sequence of events in the script" (Ibid.). Lastly, "[f]raming controls are the syntaxical structures that govern the usage of lexia, determining the possible constitutive relations between a game's semantics." One of their primary functions is to ensure "that possible combinations of lexia maintain some kind of coherency" (Ibid., 125).

Summing up, consulting Chapman has proven quite helpful for this study. At higher levels of abstraction, Chapman provides an integrative perspective on the relation between computer games and history that includes fictionalized representations of history in games and is not primarily driven by questions of scholarly accuracy. Due to Chapman's emphasis on formal analysis, he also proposed applicable concepts and terminology that will aid this study in localizing and contextualizing its points of interest in the research material.

1.4 Works related to MGS

The following paragraphs introduce characteristic features of MGS games by examining research publications on MGS-related topics. Klevjer (2014) provides a helpful discussion of one of the MGS franchise's most prominent forms of presentation: cut-scenes. Wasser (2019) helps us see the persuasive potential of MGS games through his discussion of the moral challenges that MGS games can pose to their players. I continue to expand on the notion of persuasion by consulting and discussing publications by Stamenković et al. (2016), Dwulecki (2016), and Calleja (2007). They provide more background to the concept of persuasion while also touching upon the relation between gameplay and persuasion, as well as the difference between player and non-player characters in this context. This section concludes with the discussion of a broader approach to cultural memory and media. Hutchinson (2019) attempts to reconstruct Japanese popular culture with regard to the atomic bombardments on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 through a comparative study of the representation of atomic imagery in popular Japanese media. This helps raise awareness of cultural differences, tensions, and frictions.

1.4.1 Cut-scenes

Over the course of the series, MGS gained notoriety for elaborately employing cut-scenes in order to convey its narrative. Klevjer (2014) argues "that cut-scenes set up a separate cinematic space in parallel to ordinary game space, which redefines rather than necessarily excludes player agency" (Ibid., 1). Klevjer frames cut-scenes functionally: "A cut-scene is a cinematic sequence that suspends regular gameplay in order to convey plot, characterization, and spectacle. In broad gameplay terms, cut-scenes contribute to structure and pacing in story-based single-player games" (Ibid., 2). The MGS series features numerous cut-scenes that fulfil the function he outlines.

However, MGS3's cut-scenes retain a level of interactivity and are woven into the regular gameplay. Cut-scenes seem to be less parallel to regular gameplay and rather lateral. While player agency is reframed during cut-scenes, it is also more an extension of regular gameplay into cut-scenes. Players can zoom into the video by pressing a button. Sometimes, a button prompt invites players to change the perspective in a cut-scene to a first-person view. At other times, this functionality is hidden when the game abstains from such button prompts but still responds to the input. Utilizing these affordances may reveal optional content like additional solutions to puzzles, for instance to escape captivity. Another noticeable affordance of cut-scene interactivity in MGS3 is to subject the female non-player character *Eva* to a male gaze, basically allowing players to stare at her body. While this is likely an attempt to cater to male audiences, Eva's character also references the Bond movies (cf. Wasser 2019, 25).

MGS3 is somewhat challenging because the distinction between narrative fragments and lexia is rather permeable and blurry. While the game prominently features a deterministic story structure (cf. Chapman 2016b, 119) that sets a clear path for players to experience, it is also saturated with lexia that allow players to produce ludonarrative.

It is worth noting that MGS3 has means to drive forward its plot, other than cut-scenes, which barely qualify as cinematic. Snake is in contact with his support team via radio communication. Conversations over radio are less cut-scenes and more audio dramas. Even when mainly providing aural output, MGS3 retains some level of interactivity in this case, too. Radio conversations are visually represented by a numerical display that shows the current frequency and a set of pictures of Snake's conversation partners. Frequently, players can switch between a front view, and one picture from both the left and the right side. In some instances, pictures are added that convey additional information. This turns these extensible sets of pictures into miniature slide shows in which players can change slides as they see fit over the course of the call. Radio calls also relate strongly to MGS3's ludic properties. Based on the

current area that is loaded by the game, the item currently selected from the inventory, or other factors, custom conversations can be triggered. The internal structure of these calls may be deterministic in the sense that the conversations consist of prerecorded audio and video that tie into the framing narrative. However, they also function as lexia that contribute to the ludonarrative by providing players with a mechanic to unlock optional information. This further emphasizes MGS3 structural hybridity.

1.4.2 MGS challenging players

In his Master's thesis, Wasser (2019) investigates the question, "What Metal Gear Can Teach Us About Morality?" He assesses that, "[w]hat makes games like Snake Eater, Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain so transformative is their ability to challenge the morality of players without ruining the overall experience of the game" (Ibid., 56). It is not the aim of this section to challenge Wasser's views regarding morality. More interesting is how he attempts to develop his argument from a foundation of MG's history. In order to examine moral dilemmas posed by MGS3 and both MGSVs, he characterizes these titles within the context of the canonical MGS subseries. Wasser emphasizes the role of Hideo Kojima as creator of the series, and as the leading producer and creative director of the canonical titles (Ibid., 6–10).

Wasser further specifies that, "[t]he meaning of Metal Gear extends beyond its relationship with its creator and publisher; each game's narrative features implicit and explicit philosophical, political, and psychological concepts, as relevant within the game as they are in the real world" (Ibid., 7). This statement certainly expresses his conviction that MGS games are capable of conveying meaning and knowledge, and that they reach beyond their game worlds.

Wasser helps us understand the dramatic difference for the player experience between player character and non-player character. His discussion of moral dilemmas is aimed at the agency of players and to what extent they may feel morally challenged when playing as Snake. Sokolov may serve as a framing and ludonarrative device to intensify such player experiences. Since players cannot choose for Sokolov, it seems plausible for Wasser to not consider this character's moral ambiguities. While it was interesting to see Wasser present more characteristic persuasive properties of MGS games, it is now time to turn to approaches that are less focused on player agency and therefore that potentially allow us to better address Sokolov.

1.4.3 MGS and persuasion

Stamenković et al. (2016) present an investigation into the "persuasive power" (Ibid., 2) games might possess. Approaching *Metal Gear Solid* (MGS1) from "a multimodal discourse theoretical perspective" (Ibid.), they attempt to reconstruct the persuasive aims of MGS1. With reference to Aarseth's concept of cybertexts (1997), Stamenković et al. establish that the "cybernetic sign consists of the internal level of code and external level of representation, both of which are equally essential, and each of which exists independently of the other" (Stamenković et al. 2016, 10). In other words: "video games signify [meaning] not only via their semiotics […], but also via their mechanics" (Ibid., 11).

Stamenković et al. expand on Bogost's concept of procedural rhetorics, which provides them with the analytic means to characterize MGS1 as a "persuasive game" (Ibid., 14). The "way in which the game spurs the player towards non-violence is the ranking system at the end of the game: in order to get the highest rank, codenamed: Big Boss," the authors state. This shows the persuasive capabilities of MGS1, which produces a ranking screen at the end. The more enemies players kill in MGS1, the lower they will be ranked. The game creates a trajectory towards non-violence by sanctioning high kill counts. MGS3 continues this trajectory. Its non-lethal weapons and attacks allow players to avoid killing altogether, which, in turn, is rewarded with special rankings.

Dwulecki (2016) also investigates the MGS series from a persuasive games perspective. To him, the "most promising level of persuasive intervention is a phenomenon that shall be called immersion fracture" (Ibid., 161). An "immersion fracture occurs within a game session by consciously breaking the fictional/ludic frame and establishes for a short instance a direct contact with the player." In other words: immersion fractures extend beyond the internal level of software and the external level of representation. They are the result of game design, ludic engagement, and persuasive intervention. An example for immersion fractures in MGS3 might be how the game has a mechanic tied to the hardware's internal clock, as already mentioned above.

Calleja (2007) attempts to "question the uni-directional nature of the 'immersion' metaphor and the binary relationship between participant and environment that it implies" (Ibid., 83). The author puts considerable argumentative weight on the term "environment." His extensive discussion of the terms "presence" and "immersion" leads him to ascertain that both refer to "[t]he phenomenon of virtual environment habitation." In other words, immersion is referring to a specific player experience that, according to Calleja, requires a certain mindset from the players: "The experience of habitation depends on digital games that allow players to absorb the game world into their consciousness

as a habitable place as opposed to controlling a detached agent (or set of pieces) in a game-space" (Ibid., 216).

Calleja provided valuable background to Dwulecki's argument for MGS1's persuasive capabilities. In this sense, immersion fracture refers to a design strategy that is employed within an already established game environment. Its disruptive character results from the way a game may confront players with (pre-defined) deviations from pre-established design structures of the play experience. With regard to the examination MGS3, this means that Sokolov shows little involvement in immersion fractures and likely had to be designed in a way that conforms with MGS3's *habitation* requirements.

1.4.4 MGS and cultural trauma

Hutchinson (2019) attempts to view historic representation from a broader, culturally interested perspective. With regard to media theory, she shows how the film *Battles without Honor or Humanity* and MGS1 reproduce and recontextualize historic imagery of atomic explosions to create a distinct perspective on Japanese history. "To portray the impact and effects of atomic war, both Fukasaku [the movie's director] and Kojima [MGS1's director] import techniques from other media" (Ibid., 2). This brings another facet of MGS3's hybrid representation style to our attention. MGS3 features archival video material as well as quasi-documentary video and illustrations that mimic the effects of the physical degradation of archival materials. This predominantly visual design choice contributes to MGS3's sense of nostalgia.

Hutchinson's comparison shows that both "play with the relationship between fictive world and real world in their texts, making the two worlds collide and intersect" (Ibid., 3). Kojima's MGS1 differs from Fukusaku's film in respect of "the agency of both main character and consumer [which] is stronger in Kojima's work." Both "used Hiroshima to point an accusing finger at the United States as well as the global military-industrial complex. Where Fukasaku is critical of postwar Japan, however, Kojima's text has removed Japan from the visible sphere of action, repositioning Japan as a victim of history with no bearing on the contemporary political world" (Ibid.). Hutchinson refers to player agency as the characteristic feature of MGS1 that distinguishes it from Fukasaku's movie. She manages to acknowledge the interactive nature of computer games and to sustain a perspective that allows her to integrate a broader cultural view.

Hutchinson aims to present a perspective on atomic imagery being reproduced in popular media in Japan. MGS1's ambitious involvement in anti-war rhetoric reaches out globally from a specific cultural context. Furthermore,

from the publications discussed so far that deal with the MGS games, hers is the only paper that pays attention to a lack of representation. Hutchinsons argues that MGS1 "removed Japan from the visible sphere of action" (see above). This leads to the question of how cultural backgrounds shape perspectives on history in general, and in particular how MGS3's representation of history may be impacted by the cultural backgrounds of its developers. A proper discussion of the matter, unfortunately, exceeds the scope of this study. However, Hutchinson's input is valuable because she explores approaches to popular culture that are sensitive to cultural differences, tensions, and frictions.

2 Case study: Metal Gear Solid 3

2.1 Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater – Release history and consulted editions

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (MGS3) is the third release within a series of games that carries the main title "Metal Gear Solid.". It was first released in 2004 by *Konami Digital Entertainment* (Konami) and was developed by an in-house development unit that operated from Tokyo. Initially, the game was exclusively released for Sony's PlayStation 2 (PS2). Later re-releases made it available for other platforms including the PlayStation Vita (PSv).

I did not personally consult editions for Japan (because I lack the necessary language skills) and North America (because I lack an NTSC console and I expect only marginal differences to the PAL versions). My access was limited to two localizations for the German market. The Internet Games Database (IGDB) has registered five distinct versions of MGS3. This includes a bundle that consists of conversions of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (MGS2) and MGS3. This bundle has been released for multiple platforms.

The following versions of MGS3 were used in preparation for this study:

Konami. 2006. *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence*. Konami Digital Entertainment. PlayStation 2 (PAL). Sony ID: SLES 82046, 82047, 82052 [3 DVDs].

------. 2012. "Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater". In: Konami. *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*. Konami Digital Entertainment. PlayStation Vita (PAL). Sony ID: PCSB 00118.

MGS3's (2006) DVD labelled "SLES 82046" is most resemblant of MGS3 (2012). Both versions share some content additions and adjustments. While the original release of MGS3 (2004) worked with fixed camera positions when navigating the game world, reminiscent of the camera setups in the previous two games, MGS3 2006 and 2012 feature a freely movable camera that can be controlled with the right joystick of the controller. Furthermore, players

have access to conversions of the first *Metal Gear* (MG1) from 1987 and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (MG2) from 1990 by accessing an assigned item from the game's main menu. In other words, both releases in my possession entail providing access to emulations of two much older releases that are significant to the franchise's own history. In preparation for this study, I consulted MG1 and MG2 only superficially in favour of focusing on MGS3's story. However, both seem to have been visually adjusted to fit the technical requirements of high-definition displays, on one side, and, on the other side, new character illustrations were implemented. The PSv version (MGS3 2012) differs notably from the PS2 version (MGS3 2006) as it does not entail the online multiplayer game *Metal Gear Online*. Regarding the main single-player campaign's story, no significant differences could be detected. However, there are quite a few hardware differences. Sony's DualShock 2 has pressure sensitive buttons that allow for very minute manipulations at the expense of committing time to developing the required fine motor skills. My PSv release omitted pressure sensitivity and was adjusted to different input devices such as its touch sensitive screen and backside (requiring its own set of fine motor skills). This discussion mainly serves to identify my own copies, which I used to verify auxiliary textual resources and will reference accordingly when necessary. If not stated otherwise, MGS3 refers to the game on a higher level of abstraction as the story events are sufficiently similar among most publications bearing the title *Metal Gear Solid 3*.

MGS3 (2006) was shipped with a booklet containing all sorts of information, including the "MGS3 Zeittafel [timeline]" (MGS3 2006 Manual, 042–044). This timeline consists of historical facts on war and political events, fictional events related more closely to MGS3's narrative, a few references to characters outside of MGS3, and the years and months of birth of Harry Gregson-Williams (December 1961), Kyle Cooper (July 1962), Hideo Kojima (August 1963), and Motosada Mori (December 1964). All of these people are part of the production of MGS3. The timeline begins in 1939 and states for September (please note that all translations provided in parentheses were produced by me):

> "Deutsche Armee fällt in Polen ein und löst so den Zweiten Weltkrieg aus."
> (MGS3 2006 Manual, 042; in English: *The German Army invades Poland and starts World War Two.)*

For June of 1944, the timeline states two entries:

> "Die Verbündeten landen in der Normandie (D-Day) | V-1-Raketen [sic] treffen London"
> (MGS3 2006 Manual, 042; in English: *Allied Forces land in Normandy (D-Day) | V-1 rockets hit London*)

According to Neumann (2007), whom we will encounter later, the rockets hitting London were actually named "V2" or "Aggregat 4" missiles. This may seem a minor observation, but the events surrounding the V2 weapons technology will play an important role in this paper. The awkward translation "Verbündete", instead of "Alliierte" for "Allied Forces", and "V-1" instead of "V-2" are indicative of a localization process that seemingly could have used a bit more time. It appears that the text was translated from an original language other than German. Therefore, I assume that this timeline information is not exclusive to my MGS3 (2006).

The history of atomic weapons technology is first registered in August 1942:

> "Forschungsabteilung der US-Armee beginnt mit der Entwicklung der Atombombe (Projekt Manhattan). Otacons Großvater ist an der Entwicklung beteiligt."
> (MGS3 2006 Manual, 042; in English: *US Army's research division commences development of the atomic bomb (Project Manhattan). Otacon's grandfather is involved.)*

This entry taps into the history of the technology that was used to obliterate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "Otacon" refers to a character from another game, also called "Hal Emmerich" (MG-Wiki 3), and hints at his family having their own history with weapons development.

For August 1945 (MGS3 2006 Manual, 042), three items are stated:

> "Atombomben auf Hiroshima und Nagasaki abgeworfen | Otacons Vater geboren | Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges" (in English: *atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki | Otacon's [Hal Emmerich's] father is born | end of World War II*)

This entry takes two events, one historic and one fictional, to signify a third: the end of World War II. While the first can be read as a subtle reference to the traumatic events of the atomic bombardment of Japan, the second event is a reference to a fictional character from different games, "Hal Emmerich", and addresses his fatefully tragic relation to weapons development. The timeline links Emmerich to what we already encountered as culturally traumatic events. This hints at weapons development as one of the topics in which the MGS series critically engages.

The timeline ends with December 1964. The beginning of MGS3's fictional events is registered in August:

> "Snake nach Tselinoyarsk entsandt, um Sokolov zu befreien" (MGS3 2006 Manual, 044. in English: *Snake sent to Tselinoyarsk to rescue Sokolov*)

2.2 Plot overview

MGS3 sends its players on the journey of a highly capable male US soldier, codenamed Naked Snake (MG-Wiki 19), who is sent alone on two missions. The *Virtuous Mission* serves as a narrative prologue as well as an introduction to the controls and mechanics of the game. The major portion of the game is committed to *Operation: Snake Eater*. The game's plot is set in 1964, shortly after the Cuban Crisis of 1962.

Snake's first task is to rescue a Russian rocket scientist named Dr. Nikolai Stepanovich Sokolov (MG-Wiki 8) from a facility in the Soviet Union. The reckless mission plan is to insert Snake into Soviet territory via halo jump and with minimal equipment, basically approving the violation of international treaties. He must then locate and rescue the scientist and bring him to the other side of the Iron Curtain and into the US.

Sokolov's relevance to the plot stems from his advanced knowledge of rocket engineering. He is forced to help develop a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). Extracting Sokolov is supposed to prevent the finalization of this WMD, removing a global nuclear threat from the game's Cold War fiction.

Snake is supported by a team of collaborators consisting of his commander (MG-Wiki 20), a medical and regional expert (MG-Wiki 9), and Snake's mentor and legendary soldier called "The Boss" (MG-Wiki 19). The Boss initially provides knowledge in weapons items and strategy, but ultimately prevents mission success by confronting Snake in the mission area and defeating him in combat.

This seals a deal between The Boss and the rogue Soviet commander "Volgin"' (MG-Wiki 22) to whom she is defecting. She also brought a portable nuclear weapon as a gift for her new commander. Volgin, who controls a secret and massive fortune addressed as *The Philosopher's Legacy* with which he funds his rogue operations, decides to use a nuclear warhead against Sokolov's former research facilities with catastrophic results.

This situation has severe implications for the state of the Cold War, potentially causing open military conflict between the superpowers. In order to prevent a nuclear war, Snake barely has time to recover from his injuries from the *Virtuous Mission* and is sent on his next assignment. While rescuing Sokolov is again part of the mission objectives, killing The Boss (as well as Volgin informally), and destroying the WMD in development, the "Shagohod", are new on this list. Snake's primary objective is to prevent the finalization of the weapon at any cost. A new radio support frequency is available that is assigned to "Sigint" (MG-Wiki 10) who acts an expert on weapons and technology, filling the position vacated by The Boss.

Snake manages to locate Sokolov again but only after the prototype's construction is finished. Their escape is prevented by Volgin, who imprisons and

tortures them. Sokolov dies from the injuries inflicted by Volgin. Snake escapes captivity and succeeds in both destroying the "Shagohod" (killing Volgin during the process) and killing The Boss. But the mission's success comes at a high personal cost to Snake. His strong personal connection with his mentor, whom he killed, left him conflicted regarding his patriotism and status as a highly decorated US soldier. MGS3's 1964 US government awards Snake the title "Big Boss," who is now on his path to grow into the villain of the series' first installments MG1 and MG2.

2.3 MGS3 and the Metal Gear Solid subseries

There are many ways to illustrate MGS3's relation to the whole franchise. One important distinction to make is between "Metal Gear" and "Metal Gear Solid," both of which refer to a series of multiple game releases. The former entails all games of the franchise, intellectual property of Konami. The latter is a subset of these games. The earliest release to bear the title addition "Solid" was initially released exclusively for the PlayStation (PS1). We have already briefly encountered the second iteration of the MGS subset as a part of the *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection* (2012) at my disposal.

A characterizing feature of both my MGS3 versions is that they provide access to two other games of the franchise. Not only are their first releases significantly older than MGS3. They also lack "Solid" in their title. This is by no means splitting hairs. The MGS subseries is considered for its canonicity, discerning canonical releases from spin-offs. This distinction largely depends on Hideo Kojima's status as a games auteur (see Hutchinson 2019, 10; Wasser 2019, 6; Dwulecki 2016, 149; Stamenković et al. 2016, 41) and his degree of involvement in the production. For the purposes of this study, the following nine titles out of Metal Gear's over 30 years of publication history were considered as parts of the canonical MGS subset:

- MG1: Metal Gear (Konami 1987: MSX2)
- MG2: Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (Konami 1990: MSX2)
- MGS1: Metal Gear Solid (Konami 1998: PlayStation)
- MGS2: Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of the Patriots (Konami 2001: PlayStation 2)
- MGS3
- MGS4: Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots (Konami 2008: PlayStation 3)
- MGS-PW: Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker (Konami 2010: PlayStation Portable)

- MGSV-GZ: Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes (Konami 2014: PlayStation 3 & 4 [non-exclusive])
- MGSV-TPP: Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain (Konami 2015: PlayStation 3 & 4 [non-exclusive])

MGS3 conveys the events that lead to Snake's promotion to the supposedly legendary rank of "Big Boss." MGS knows multiple characters whose code name contains the word "Snake." MGS3's Snake is also the protagonist and playable character of MGS-PW and MGSV-GZ. He is the main antagonist in MG and MG2. MGS 1, 2, 4, and MGSV-TPP reference MGS3's Snake less directly and mainly through their narratives. The MGS subset is held to together by a framing narrative that is built over the course of multiple titles.

3 Findings

MGS3's complex formal structures pose a challenge for an analysis of its historic references. The inclusive and rather open concept of history that Chapman proposes allows for multiple possible ways in which games can engage with history, which MGS3 seems to do so eloquently. One risk of such inclusiveness can be that it detracts from the research focus in case of an overabundance of options. MGS3 does not refer to history as a monolithic structure, but approaches it from different angles.

In order to maintain focus, I limit the discussion to three types of historical references that are prominent in MGS3: First, MGS3 refers to the history of the Cold War as a foundation for its story. Second, the game devises strategies to refer to media history. We encountered two such strategies with regard to styles of audiovisual presentation: MGS3 embraces cinema tropes from 1960s spy-action movies, and it also utilizes a documentary style. It is noteworthy that the PS2 versions of MGS3 are themselves historical documents of the gaming industry before games were distributed digitally. Although it basically featured a software patch for the camera controls and additional content, MGS3 "Subsistence" (2006) had to be published as a new edition, separated from the initial release. Nowadays, games would handle this with software updates and downloadable content. Third, MGS3 makes reference to the history of MG as a franchise. This already becomes clear when contextualizing Naked Snake, who is set up to become Big Boss, within the series. MGS has established a set of its own tropes, many of which are present in MGS3. The protagonist being betrayed by his commander, stealth gameplay that rewards players who avoid lethal combat, escaping captivity or hostage rescue missions are among

such tropes. In the next section, I will examine one such trope more closely: weapons scientists.

3.1 Scientist characters in MGS

The aim of this section is to contextualize Sokolov as a character in the MGS series by examining the trope of weapons scientists. Table 1 serves to illustrate different types of characters with a scientific or engineering background and their distribution over the MGS series. The top row shows the year in which MGS games were first released. The second row features the title abbreviations introduced above. Starting in the third row, the left column lists all the names of MGS characters with an identifiable scientific background. Characters are categorized in three groups: hostages that are to be rescued (H); scientists who act antagonistically to the player or rival the hostage-scientist (A); and members of the protagonist's radio support team (S). This typology seeks to convey characteristic features of scientist characters to make them comparable. It is mostly a suggestion for how this could be formalized (Table 1).

Table 1. H - hostage to be rescued, A - antagonistic scientist, S - support team member

initial release year	1987	1990	1998	2001	**2004**	2008	2010	2014	2015
	MG1	MG2	MGS1	MGS2	**MGS3**	MGS4	MGS -PW	MGSV -GZ	MGSV -TPP
Drago Pettrovich Madnar	H	A							
Kio Marv		H							
Hal Emmerich			HS	S		S			
Naomi Hunter			SA			H			
Mei Ling			S						
Emma Emmerich				H					
Aleksandr Leonovitch Granin					A				
Nikolai Stepanovich Sokolov					H				
Dr. Clark/Para Medic					S				
Sigint/Donald Anderson			(H)		S				
Dr. Strangelove							A		
Huey Emmerich							HS		HS
Code Talker									HS

This illustration shows two important things: Firstly, it illustrates that Sokolov stands in a long line of scientist characters in MGS, who sometimes appear in more than one game. Secondly, it allows us to see that MGS established recurring character constellations. Sokolov character design and presentation are therefore likely guided by considerations regarding this trope, which may well lead to pointed or simplified design choices. Every MGS title features a scientist hostage, with the exception of MGSV-GZ. The above table annotated "Sigint/Donald Anderson" as "(H)" for MGS1. He is part of MGS3's radio support Team and advises on weapons and engineering. The parentheses are meant to signify that, in MGS1, it is a mission objective to save him, but Anderson already died before he could be rescued (or could even be met alive in the first place). MGS1 features a second hostage, "Kenneth Baker," who was omitted for his emphasis on war as a business and absence of scientific background. MGS1's "Hal Emmerich," in turn, is not a mission objective. But he proves essential to the mission's success due to his knowledge of MGS1's WMD *Metal Gear Rex*. Although she also appears in MGS4, Mei Ling was omitted, despite appearing in MGS4 as the commanding officer of an attack ship, and does not act as part of Snake's support team.

In MGS3, "Para Medic" is part of Snake's mission support. Her main functions are to create save files and provide medical advice, while she is also very knowledgeable on Japanese popular culture. For the most part, she acts through radio calls. "Aleksandr Leonovitch Granin" is another, highly decorated Soviet weapons engineer who is, however, not a mission target. He antagonises Sokolov's research because they compete for funding that rendered Granin defeated:

> Granin: Sokolov! It's him you're looking for, isn't it? Because of him, I have been stripped of my authority. My research has come to nothing. Look! (pulls out some schematics and hands them to Snake) It is a revolutionary mobile nuclear missile system, a bipedal tank." (GameFAQs)

Granin subverts his superior's interests by helping Snake progress in the game. His betrayal costs him his life later in the game. His aim is to sabotage Sokolov's project, hoping to resume his former place at the top:

> "Snake: Why are you helping me?
> Granin: Unlike Sokolov, the thought of defecting has never once crossed my mind. I love… my country. I love this land. I cannot even imagine living anywhere else. I wish to remain a hero… of the great motherland. I cannot bear the thought of being hounded into a corner and left to waste away. …" (GameFAQs)

For the duration of the prologue *Virtuous Mission*, Snake is codenamed differently, "Jack," which is changed later for *Operation Snake Eater*. MGS3 introduces Sokolov during its opening cut-scene as follows:

> "Jack: Sokolov… isn't he that famous rocket scientist?
> Zero: The very same. On April 12, 1961, the Soviets achieved the first manned space flight in history. …
> Zero: … The rocket that carried Yuri Gagarin into orbit was the A1, known as the Vostok rocket. Sokolov is said to be the man most responsible for the multi-engine cluster used in that rocket. After Gagarin's flight, Sokolov left rocket development to become the head of the newly established Design Bureau." (GameFAQs)

Sokolov's contributions to rocket science are of such extreme magnitude, as Zero confirms, that the Cuba Crisis was defused and nuclear war was averted because Sokolov was handed over to the USSR:

> Zero: … Finally, on October 28 [1962], the Soviet Union agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba. And so the world avoided a nuclear holocaust. But in order to get the Soviets to pull their missiles out, we had to make a deal.
> Jack: You mean the one where the US agreed to remove its IRBMs [intermediate-range ballistic missiles] from Turkey?
> Zero: No. The Jupiter IRBMs deployed in Turkey were obsolete and we were going to get rid of them anyway. They had no strategic value whatsoever to either the US or the Russians. The Turkey deal was a ruse – a cover story that was fed to the other intelligence agencies around the world.
> Jack: So, what did the Russians really want?
> Zero: Sokolov. They wanted us to return Sokolov.
> Jack: You mean the Soviets pulled out of Cuba just to get their hands on Sokolov?
> Zero: That's right." (GameFAQs)

Snake's first encounter with Sokolov takes place during the *Virtuous Mission*. Sokolov says about his situation, that he was guarded by soldiers, not in order to detain him but to keep Sokolov out of Volgin's, MGS3's main villain, reach:

> "Sokolov: The intelligence says that they [Volgin's troops] are going to make their move during the test.
> Snake: Then the soldiers outside…
> Sokolov: Exactly. They wouldn' need that many men just to keep me inside. Their orders were to prevent Colonel Volgin from capturing me. Even if it meant killing me in the process, or so it would seem. Volgin will come, I'm sure of it. You must get me out of here before then." (GameFAQs)

Snake asks Sokolov about the weapon he developed. He replies that it is not yet finished and cannot be completed without him. The construction of an operational prototype would already constitute a severe threat:

> "Snake: The end of the Cold War?
> Sokolov: Yes. And then [after the weapon's completion] the age of fear will truly begin…
> Snake: A world war?
> Sokolov: I had no choice but to cooperate! I didn't want to die. I wanted to see my wife and child again in America…. Please, take me to America quickly. They cannot complete it without my help." (GameFAQs)

Sokolov preemptively answers questions regarding his motivation and complicity, being left without a choice because his life was threatened. He also seems acutely aware of the threat posed by his invention. Snake's first attempt to rescue Sokolov fails. They meet again during "Operation: Snake Eater." Sokolov informs Snake that he has completed work on a prototype and helps Snake develop a plan to destroy the weapon prototype. Sokolov also opens up about his view of the situation:

> "Sokolov: Khrushchev has abandoned me. I cannot return to my country. I would most certainly be sent to the gulags.
> Snake: What about the US?
> Sokolov: Yes. I once thought of that. My family is waiting for me there. But even if I fled to the United States, I would once again find myself creating weapons of mass murder. In the end, it doesn't matter where I go. I am still a weapons scientist. To be honest with you, I am tired. Every day, I help create things that should never be used – things that should never have existed in the first place. Every day, without sleep. Without a word of praise from others. And my creations do not even benefit mankind. They are merely the tools of politicians. All I wanted to do was build space rockets. But it was not to be. The space race between America and Russia became the prey the of (sic!) politicians. The space race and the arms race are one and the same. Missiles, rockets… what's the difference? Scientists are always being used. Please watch over my family." (GameFAQs)

Sokolov states that nothing binds him to his home country anymore, although his resignation might go deeper than that. He also remarks on his research on the "Shagohod". He regrets the destructive nature of his work and describes his treatment in captivity as sleep deprived and ungrateful. He bitterly acknowledges that the conflict between the US and the USSR shattered his dreams of building space rockets, as the "space race […] became the prey [of the] politicians. The space race and the arms race are one and the same thing." This presents him as a person whose talents were abused and if it were not for political intervention, Sokolov's endeavour would have taken a different, likely

civilian, and more peaceful path. This encounter between Snake and Sokolov ends abruptly when they are discovered, captured, and, ultimately, tortured by Volgin. Sokolov does not survive the torture.

Sokolov's notion, that scientists in general were nothing but political tools without any control over their actions, may have been expressed out of his regret and resignation. However, it enforces the powerlessness of his position and, in doing so, implicitly absolves his ambiguous involvement. But not only is this statement – scientists are always being used – simply not true, this emphasis on victimhood shuts out questions regarding the scientist's moral challenges. Furthermore, and rather implicitly, in the dialogue excerpts above the threat posed by WMDs is reduced to their use against humans in combat. This reduction is problematic because, as I will show below, the Nazi science that gave rise to the technology and that Sokolov embraces so wholeheartedly claimed even more lives in the concentration camps in which it was built than in attacks conducted with the "V-2."

4 Discussion

4.1 Sokolov the rocket scientist

Who is Dr. Nikolai Stepanovich Sokolov? He is a character in a computer game. He *is* what and how he is *represented* in MGS3. He can be characterized as the leading mind in rocket science – at least within MGS3's fictional framing narrative. This informs the search for commonalities with the – non-fictional – von Braun. Both share proficiency, popularity, and a single-minded pursuit of bringing humans into space. The following discussion of excerpts of von Braun's career will, in turn, show the differences between the two. Von Braun, who is viewed as one of the most influential pioneers of space flight, remains an ambigous persona due to his close relation with the Nazi's V-weapons programme, which saw him involved in the exploitation of forced labourers in the Mittelbau Dora concentration camp and in Peenemünde on the Baltic coast. While he has not been criminally charged with war crimes, the Faustian bargain he made prevented him from rising to the highest positions in NASA. Sokolov, on the other hand, is designed in a way that leaves no room for ambiguities. Weapons development in MGS3 is dominantly characterized as one arena of political power play. This encompasses the instrumentalization of scientists like Sokolov, who himself has next to no agency or control over his fate. While von Braun's single-mindedness brought him to make a deal with the devil, Sokolov shows no sign of such fatal opportunism. While Sokolov dies at the hands of his oppressor, carrying regrets about having built weapons

of mass destruction, von Braun transitioned with relative ease via Operation Paperclip into NASA's space programme. The issue of forced labour affects them very differently: While von Braun only rarely commented publicly on his role in the murderous exploitation of forced labourers who assembled his rocket designs, MGS3 shows mainly Sokolov as having suffered from forced labor.

Sokolov is predominantly present in cut-scenes. His – not necessarily the player's – moral dilemma is between saving his life and exposing millions of lives to the risk of atomic warfare. However, Sokolov's character is developed making explicit reference to historic events, like the first manned space flight of the USSR to which he is said to have contributed so greatly – while in fact the Russian Sergei Korolov is considered the leading mind behind the Vostok rocket. Another such reference is made to the Cuba Crisis in 1962, which was defused only because of Sokolov's return to the USSR. And since he is also the only person who can complete the "Shagohod," he becomes a high priority target in Snake's missions during MGS3.

Sokolov is presented as helpless and without choice, limiting his accountability in WMD development. In the expression of his resentment for the destructive way in which he claims to have been affected by political power struggles, he points the finger at the realm of politics. He states that his interest in rocket science arose from an interest in space travel. He wanted to contribute something to civilization but now he helps destroy it. Sokolov may have little agency, but his ties to events of historical proportions help establish both a sense of the era in which the plot takes place and a sense of urgency to come to his rescue. However, Sokolov seems to be set up to show as little ambiguity as possible.

MGS3 also features atomic imagery. The threat of atomic war is deeply rooted in its Cold War setting. But the same goes for World War II, which is acknowledged as the event that shaped the geopolitical situation of the Cold War. A text card at the very beginning of MGS3's opening cut-scene states:

> "After the end of World War II, the world was split into two – East and West. This marked the beginning of the era called the Cold War." (GameFAQs)

So, how does this constitute a reduction of complexity of historic reality? How can this be strategic and when does this become problematic? I argue that the emphasis on the end of World War II constitutes a complexity reduction, as it marginalizes questions about how, why, and who began this war. The war's importance supposedly lies in its end. Nazi Germany began World War II and employed Wernher von Braun to build weapons systems that would go on to

become the foundation on which space rockets as well as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were built. If MGS3's persuasive aim lies in promoting critical and nuanced reflection on war, technology, and politics, disproportionate complexity reduction seems to work against these aims.

Regarding Sokolov, his pronounced position allows MGS3 to have a competent and knowledgeable character at its disposal to which it attributes considerable weight when it comes to rocket technology. To be fair, Granin is also an elite scientist who works in weapons development. But he is far less committed to rocket technology. Instead, he wanted tanks to have legs, indicating Granin as the earliest beginnings of the bipedal weapons technology named Metal Gear (also cf. above) which establishes a strong connection to the overarching narrative of MGS:

> "Granin: … Legs!! Legs that allow it to go anywhere!! Just as when humans learned to walk upright! THAT is the real evolution in weaponry! Don't you agree? But… the fools in charge choose Sokolov." (GameFAQs)

Granin, however, who carries the Order of Lenin, also represents not only his team of researchers, but also stands for the Soviet Union's core values, signified by the honours he received. He also represents a branch of weapons development that was pushed aside by Sokolov's work. Both Sokolov and Granin are helpless subjects to political and military decisions. They are not "in charge" (aside from head positions in Soviet design bureaus it seems) and both meet the same tragic end. They suffer dehumanization in their expendability once their usefulness expires. This feeds into Sokolov's sentiment about being a tool to political powers who abused him. MGS3 exaggerates its scientist characters, Granin and Sokolov, to a degree where they can carry significant argumentative weight. However, both characters are presented in a way that leaves little room for doubt or the critical questioning of their roles, which partly obstructs the view on moral ambiguities. MGS3's representation also seems to have a discursive blind spot regarding the organizational structures behind weapons development.

So, what constitutes MGS3's anti-war sentiment and how is the game conflicted? In the final moments before Snake fights his former mentor, The Boss, to the death, he asks about her motivations:

> "Boss: Why? To make the world one again. … Is there such thing as an absolute timeless enemy? There is no such thing and never has been. And the reason is that our enemies are human beings like us. They can only be our enemies in relative terms. The world must be made whole again. …" (GameFAQs)

This conversation leads to the climax of the game. The Boss's argument against "an absolute timeless enemy" takes place right before players have to defeat her. Snake eventually completes his mission. But having to kill his mentor during a mission alienates him from the national military that he served and sets him on a path that leads to the villains players encounter in MG1 and MG2.

The tragedy of Sokolov contributes to The Boss's notion of an existence in which "the foibles of politics and the march of time can turn friends into enemies just as easily as the wind changes." (GameFAQs) Enemies are defined by history ("march of time") and politics, both human and therefore relative, constantly changing constructs. Soldiers like The Boss or Snake, but also civilians like Sokolov and Granin are subject to this change. This process, however, is more similar to forces of nature ("as easy as the wind changes"). This allows her to invalidate political conflict as relatively short-lived or meaningless competition in contrast to the magnitude of achievements in the twentieth century. As intriguing as The Boss's view may be, it rests on the assumption that the world can be united as it once was ("again"). Since World War II was introduced as the event that marked the global schism, The Boss's statement prompts the question of *if* or *when* the world has ever been in a united state before. World War I already announced the twentieth century as an era of unprecedented conflict and destruction. Did The Boss refer to a time before then? Unfortunately, she remains vague on the matter.

The paragraphs above serve to show Sokolov's development in MGS3, while represented with exaggerations and abbreviations, is in alignment with the broader persuasive aim of MGS3 regarding its anti-war rhetoric. However, his disambiguated narrative setup and the nuanced proposition that the game makes towards reflecting on war contrast sharply. MGS3 made several concessions to the series, for instance, regarding recurring character constellations. Simplification in this context is likely a strategy devised to drive its plot forward, support MGS3's compatibility with tropes of the series, and the audiovisual conventions that are emulated in the game. MGS3 was also designed as an entertainment product, meaning that design choices were aimed at creating a marketable product and not necessarily at an extensive discussion of (political) history. Still, the game reaches beyond trivial matters and attempts a balancing act between entertainment and thought provocation.

4.2 Remov(-ed/-ing) context

Until this point, I have showed that MGS3 entertains different types of relations to historical topics. Sokolov's role within MGS3 is quite complex. While he plays a big role in the game's framing narrative, his design attempts to conform

to the series' weapons scientist trope and to audiovisual conventions of cinema and documentary style. Simplified representations of history may, in Sokolov's case, be rooted in one or more of the aforementioned procedures. As a result, however, Sokolov's representation seems somewhat conflicted as it omits key aspects of the history of rocket science in favour of a clear-cut picture. Consequently, it also manages to reproduce another blindspot that characterized the popular discourse surrounding one of space technologies early pioneers. The following section mainly serves to illuminate this subject in an attempt to fill in the blanks in MGS3's representation.

Rocket technology originated largely from World War II and went on to become one of the most contended technologies of the Cold War. Wernher von Braun is famously considered to be among the most talented early contributors. He was known for his contributions to NASA's advances in space flight. His involvement with the Nazi's military during World War II continued to draw critique.

Von Braun was chosen in this study for three reasons. Firstly, his persona is as famously and closely linked to the history of rocket technology as few others. Secondly, he was surrounded with a highly polarized discourse that viewed von Braun either as an unprincipled opportunist or a blameless victim of the turmoils of World War II. But the situation is not as simple as that. Thirdly, the polarized discourse surrounding him also created a gap between von Braun's weapons designs for, and the weapon's application by the Nazis. In a way, von Braun's persona overshadowed crimes that Nazis committed in order to realize his designs. It also overshadowed his part in these crimes, such as his role in planning the facilities and calculating the required workforce. About 20,000 people were worked to death or suffered other mistreatment in German concentration camps assembling the V-weapons between 1943 and 45 (Neumann 2007). Yet, if we return to the manual from the beginning (MGS3 2006 Manual), the remark on the falsely labelled "V-1" missiles was made with regard to the weapons hitting London.

Musical satirist Tom Lehrer's Song "Wernher von Braun" helps illustrate von Braun's discursive surroundings during the 1960s. In the introduction to his performance of the song in Copenhagen in 1967 (Lehrer 1967), Lehrer makes explicit reference to the arms race and space race when he asks his audience:

> "What is it that makes America the world's greatest nuclear power? And what is it that will make it possible for us to use twenty thousand million dollars of our taxpayer's money to put some idiot on the moon?"
> Lehrer answers the question himself:

> "Well it was the great, enormous superiority of American technology, of course, provided by our great American scientists, such as Dr. Wernher von Braun."

Lehrer creates tension between the national connotation of the US's technological superiority and von Braun's name, which hints at his German descent. The joke lies in the contrast between expectations raised by a strong American patriotic charge and von Braun's non-American sounding name.

Lehrer's satirical remark on von Braun's Nazi past ("Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown") sets the tone for the whole song. The second verse maybe shows best (Lehrer's grasp on) the polarized nature of the popular discourse on Wernher von Braun:

> "do not say that he's hypocritical | Say rather he's apolitical | 'Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? | That's not my department' says Wernher von Braun."

The tension between "hypocritical" and "apolitical" stems from von Braun's involvement in the V-Weapons programme of the Nazis and unresolved questions of moral (if not criminal) responsibility, for instance, with regard to the attacks on London. Did he act consciously supporting the Nazi regime? Lehrer's song suggests that von Braun would answer by relativizing his connection to the Nazis and his involvement in political affairs. The third verse continues:

> "Some have harsh words for this man of renown | But some think our attitude | Should be one of gratitude | Like the widows and cripples of old London town | Who owe their large pensions to Wernher von Braun."

This verse is characterized by a similar polarization as the second. This time it is between condemning him ("harsh words") and an "attitude … of gratitude." The last half of this verse ironically addresses those who fell victim to the fruits of von Braun's work for the Nazis. But this view, too, leaves out those who died not from those attacks but from building the V-Weapons in concentration camps. In a way, MGS3 managed to reproduce a historical blind spot that also seems to have been present in Western popular culture at least during the 1960s.

This excursion contributes two important insights so far: Firstly, Lehrer's performance in Copenhagen is indicative of the popular reputation of Wernher von Braun, in the sense that he was in fact a "famous rocket scientist" (cf. above). Secondly, Lehrer, too, is relying on simplified representations of social reality, in this case the polarization of evaluations of von Braun's Nazi past. Similar to MGS3's discourse that evolves around Sokolov, Lehrer's satirical

song pays no attention to the work force behind von Braun's technological achievements, as if exempt from the discussion.

How is this polarization problematic with regard to the history of rocket science? Could von Braun not simply be an example of an "enemy in relative terms" (GameFAQs)? Firstly, von Braun's involvement with the Nazis was more complex than a narrow enemy/friend or perpetrator/victim dichotomy might suggest.

Neumann (2007), who shows his extensive historical research in his book *Von Braun. Dreamer of Space | Engineer of War*, offers biographical findings on Wernher von Braun. His V-2 rocket "went on to influence missile technology in the United States, the USSR, France, Britain, and China, accelerating the arrival of the ICBM and the space launch vehicle by perhaps a decade. Nothing von Braun ever did in his life was ever as influential as that" (Ibid., 476–477) Neumann outlines von Braun's position regarding the space race to be strongly contended by the Soviet rocket scientist Sergei Korolov, who, in terms of firsts, may have achieved more than von Braun – including the development the Vostok rocket that carried Gagarin into orbit. But still: "[Korolov's] postwar accomplishments were founded on German technology: by Stalin's order, he started over in 1945–46 by copying the V-2" (Ibid., 477).

However magnificent von Braun's achievements in engineering may be, Neumann says he also symbolizes the "temptations of engineers and scientists in [the twentieth century] and beyond: the temptation to work on weapons of mass destruction in the name of duty to one's nation, the temptation to work with an evil regime in return for the resources to carry out the research closest to one's heart" (Ibid.). His Nazi past prevented him from rising above the position of Administrator in NASA (cf. Ibid., 5). Von Braun excelled most in organizational leadership, not engineering, and was materially motivated by space exploration: "the foundation of his remarkable career as an engineering manager and space visionary was his romantic ambition to explore space, if possible personally" (Ibid., 6).

Neumann's paper on *Questions of Moral, Political, and Criminal Responsibility* (2002), argues against the "decisive split between pro- and anti-von Braun camps [of discourse]" (Ibid., 57). He describes the antagonising characterizations of von Brown as "apolitical space enthusiast who was not a 'real' Nazi and had nothing to do with the crimes of the Third Reich" on the one side, and "unprincipled opportunist or even a convinced Nazi who is directly responsible for the deaths of 20,000 prisoners" (Ibid., emphasis in original) on the other.

Neumann argues against such dualism. He states that it "is his [von Braun's] involvement in concentration-camp labor that is central to any judgement of him." Faced with "meager surviving evidence" he sees himself unable to provide "a conclusive answer as to the degree of his [criminal] responsibility"

(Ibid., 58). Neumann concludes that "[i]n many ways, Wernher von Braun remains an ambiguous case" (Ibid.). However, von Braun "witnessed the terrible conditions in Dora and elsewhere and was in a position of some power, he cannot escape moral responsibility for the criminal abuse of concentration-camp labor" (Ibid., 72).

"Mittelbau Dora" was the name of the facilities in von Braun's administrative reach after production was moved from the Baltic coast to underground facilities in the inner country's Harz Mountains region in response to an attack. Between late summer 1943 and April 1945, the SS-operated concentration camp was committed to von Braun's secret projects. Within the complex of concentration camps associated with Buchenwald, it soon became feared "because of the catastrophic conditions of starvation, bad sanitation, brutal overseers, rampant disease, cold, and overwork prevailing there. During the winter of 1943/44, twenty prisoners on average died each day" (Ibid., 64).

This is the history of rocket science, too. The propulsion systems that helped humans travel into space are achievements not only built on the shoulders of intellectual giants and pioneers of engineering, they are also built on the mass graves of forced labourers. MGS3's deafening silence on the subject may be due to formal or commercial concessions and even resembles the polarization of the popular discourse surrounding von Braun in the 1960s. However, the game's comparatively uncritical representation of rocket science is in sharp contrast to its persuasive aims. Considering how thorough and careful MGS3 has been researched and designed, the absence of the conflicted history of rocket science appears more like a deliberate omission. However, the reasoning behind this decision remains unclear.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine MGS3's representation of the historic relation between weapons engineering and the military. Chapman's inclusive concept of popular history and his framework for the formal analysis of historic games are foundational components of the analysis of the game. I could show that MGS3 devises multiple strategies to engage players in its game world and that historic references play a big part in this process. Within Chapman's analytic framework, MGS3 is a structural hybrid that utilizes realist as well as conceptual simulation styles and in which framing narrative and ludonarrative are tightly interwoven. Notwithstanding its prowess as an entertainment product, MGS3 attempts to raise awareness to the moral ambiguities of war, proposing to abandon the notion of absolute enemies. However, the game subverts these ambitions when it comes to the relation between weapons engineering and the

military. Compared to the historic tensions of rocket science and given MGS3's strong emphasis on rocket propulsion technologies, Sokolov's representation of the field is rather simplistic because every indication of moral ambiguities is seemingly removed in favour of a woodcut-like victimization. If the aim was to encourage players to think critically beyond the dualism of friend and foe, it does not seem helpful in the long run to remove ambiguities and therefore opportunities to engage critically with the past. At least with Sokolov, rocket science and weapons engineering, and how the murderous beginnings of rocket technologies were entirely omitted from MGS3's fiction, this seems to be the case. While von Braun may be a historical figure that helps illustrate the Faustian bargain between science and military like few others, the popular discourse surrounding him in the 1960s also hints at something else. The conditions and the extent to which forced labourers in Nazi Germany paid with their lives to achieve the technological foundation on which space travel would be built seem to have been underrepresented beyond MGS3. In both the historic popular discourse and in MGS3, their fates were overshadowed by few great minds.

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Comment by Hugo Gelis

Konstantin Freybe's chapter on *Metal Gear Solid 3*'s (*MGS3*) rocket scientist deals with the consequences of World War II and how it is portrayed in popular

media. *MGS3* is set in the Cold War era and, while it touches upon the fallout of World War II, it mostly ignores it. Indeed, The Boss and her Cobra Unit are the only characters whose backstory ties into the previous conflict.

Sokolov's role in the war is unknown: while born at roughly the same time as Wernher von Braun, around 1910, his history only starts in the 1960s. He is a blank state, a scientist in distress having contributed to the space race.

Kojima Production's anti-war stance is clear and their research thorough, yet they leave an unfortunate blank spot. While Von Braun had a hand in exploitation and death in Nazi Germany's work camps, Sokolov apparently has no responsibility whatsoever. The true extent of the work of a rocket scientist, their involvement in decision-making and war crimes is ignored.

While the game's presentation, mixing archival footage and character voiceovers, anchors its story in history, its narrative does not address the full extent of the moral complexity of the Cold War.

Comment by Siyu Yang

Thanks for offering me the chance to review this paper. I found it really intriguing to read, since it reveals a contradiction in the scenario of *Metal Gear Solid 3*: The selected reflection on "real" history. I presume that, from the author's point of view, it is strongly influenced by Western historical culture, as is clear from the portrayal of the German rocket scientist Wernher von Braun. Moreover, this paper shows that there is a new type of storytelling in *MGS3*, one that goes beyond the ideologies and attitude towards historical events in video games based on history or the "real world". I also find it interesting that the author uses the word "persuade" to describe how the *Metal Gear (Solid)* series expresses its anti-war sentiment.

On the other hand, I have a simple comment: Since, in this case, history is nothing more than a backdrop, and the core of the story is fictional, I would like to know whether the author believes it is necessary – or not – to show this side of history in a commercial top-selling video game series, whose central point is not to "reflect the true history." Also, if the narrative really followed the course that the author suggests in this chapter, then this has implications for the game's story and the overall direction of the franchise, and thus warrants further discussion.

Peter Mühleder and Martin Roth

Playing Out of Bounds?

Cross-Platform Community Practice in and Beyond *Dark Souls*[*]

Contemporary community practices in digital space

Playing videogames was never only about reacting to what happens on the screen. It has always also been about sharing experiences. And, it has always also been about finding playful ways of extending one's experience both within and beyond the confines of a particular game. Inventing new rules and playing differently is as much part of that as interacting and communicating with others about a game, and through a game. By engaging in such practices of play in a broad sense, the players create common ground, common experiences and perceptions. Such activities frequently result in the emergence of communities of practice, characterized by an informal but structured exchange, focused on generating novel knowledge and opportunities to act, and held together by a reflexive interpretation of their own practice (Stalder 2016, 136). In contrast to formal communities, which are based on statutes and documented membership, these communities are established and held together through their practices, which are continuously subjected to reflexive interpretation, meaning "establishing, preserving and transforming the interpretive framework that lends actions, processes and objects their meaning and authority" (Ibid.).[1] In this

* This chapter builds on and develops our previous research (Mühleder, Becker, and Roth 2019). Some of the data used hereafter has been gathered with the help of Wanting Chen and Shunsuke Mukae. Your help is highly appreciated. We would also like to thank our reviewers for their important comments and critique.

1 In an early theoretical conception, Tönnies (1991 [1887]) pitted the strong ties of community against the non-binding, weak ties of society, thus deploying community as a critique of modernization and urban life. In the second half of the 20th century, sociologists have identified a shift from such binding communities to less binding, temporary, "post-traditional communities," "tribes," or "scenes" (Hitzler, Honer and Pfadenhauer 2008, 12–18; Hitzler, Bucher and Niederbacher 2005; Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2007).

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chapter, we explore the common practices emerging from the widely popular videogame series *Dark Souls*, developed by Japanese company FromSoftware from 2011 to 2016. Analysing how player practices in and outside of the *Dark Souls* game worlds define and renegotiate commonality, we show that *Dark Souls* provides opportunities for finding common ground on multiple levels. These practices not only connect, but also divide the playership internally. Furthermore, they establish links to other, non-gaming contexts through their dissemination on different media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch.tv.[2] Tracing some of these trends, the chapter suggests that *Dark Souls* does not give rise to one community of practice, but rather involves a process of internal stratification and fragmentation, while also remixing game-related practices with other domains.

Insofar as they take place most centrally in digital space, such negotiations and dynamics are also framed by technical affordances and mechanisms of control and exploitation (Dean 2005; Ōtsuka 2016; Srnicek 2017; Stalder 2016; Steinberg 2019). An analysis of the ways in which common practices in digital space establish and negotiate internal and external boundaries requires us to take the constitutive force of such technologies into account. It also demands consideration for how language boundaries and other factors weigh in. Focusing on the English- and the Japanese language spaces, we specifically consider the extent to which languages factor into the emergence of commonality in social media practices among players.

We chose the *Dark Souls* series in order to explore these questions for two reasons. First, it serves as a prime example of the control mechanisms in place on contemporary platforms and in societies of control more generally, as the games offer a strictly confined and regulated space for the player to freely engage with (Galloway 2008; Roth 2017). The *Dark Souls* games provide a more or less open world to interact with, but one in which communication affordances between players are strictly limited. As our analysis shows, the players have reacted to this situation both in and outside of the game with a wide range of common practices, in Stalder's sense, in particular via various types of memes that consolidate and distinguish communities within the playership. In doing so, they play beyond the game worlds' bounds, only to establish new boundaries.

Second, the *Dark Souls* series serves as an exemplary showcase of cross-platform practices. The difficulty and wide range of possible engagements

2 In recent years, practices like live streaming (especially on Twitch.tv) have become an important part of the political economy of the video game world (Johnson/Woodcock 2019)

have prompted vivid community practices, in particular on the video sharing platform YouTube and the streaming platform Twitch.tv. The documents of common practice available there serve as central data for our research, and provide a starting point for considering communities of practice across platforms. Insofar as they provide technologically framed spaces and facilitate communication in a wide range of languages, they also offer an opportunity to observe language-specific practices and cross-lingual interaction.

Our analysis leans heavily on tools developed as part of the project "Data-based Infrastructure for Global Game Culture Research" (2017–2021). In particular, we created two YouTube datasets, containing video metadata and user comments from YouTube for English and Japanese gaming channels featuring *Dark Souls* content. These large-scale datasets provide us with the possibility to make empirical observations about communicative practices and their user structures in relation to *Dark Souls* games using open-source data analysis and visualization tools.[3] In order to show how common referential practices are both framed by platforms and take shape across them, we focus on "memetic" practices, which Shifman (2021, 190) defines as "the act of participation through mimesis […]. It captures a wide range of communicative intentions and actions, spanning all the way from naive copying to scornful imitation."

Section two shows how such memetic practices emerge from the *Dark Souls* game world around emblematic phrases like "Praise the Sun" and section three focuses on a meme that appeared within the context of YouTube's remix culture: "Giant Dad." Following this, section four considers how language barriers intersect with community practices, using the Japanese language space as an example. The conclusion summarizes our findings and discusses potential avenues for future research. We discuss how practices generate commonality across platforms and, more importantly, across cultural domains. Examining the game-like chat communications accompanying a hearing in the US Congress, streamed on Twitch.tv., we find an indication that communication follows a similar grammar to that found in the gaming cultural communication practices that served to establish the *Dark Souls* communities of practice. Control mechanisms are not at the centre of our analysis but they serve as important context in this particular section, which draws attention to the platforms themselves, as well as their underlying economic structures.

3 The data mining tool pyg (https://github.com/diggr/pyg) was used for the creation of the datasets; Gephi (https://gephi.org/) and Kibana (https://www.elastic.co/kibana) were used for data analysis and visualization.

"Praise the sun": The emergence of memetic community practices

The *Dark Souls* game worlds offers a wide range of, albeit strictly limited contents and communicative practices that have given rise to a distinct culture of communication and identification. One prominent feature is the so-called Orange soapstone messages: By using specific items, players can leave graffiti-like messages within the game world. Players are not free to formulate any message, they can arrange sentences from a set of pre-arranged words and phrases (see Fig. 1). By using online features, these messages then show up in other players' sessions, who can then "rate" these messages (similar to "likes/dislikes" on social media posts). This generated many creative ways of using these messages: silly jokes; helping other players (warning them about ambushes, pointing to hidden doorways and items); tricking them; or warning them about messages trying to trick them, and so on.

From this, emerged a series of widely recognized, emblematic phrases and related memetic practices in the game itself as well as on various social media and broadcasting platforms, which have contributed significantly to the formation of communities of practice.

The most widely recognized catchphrase in the *Dark Souls* world is "Praise the Sun," spoken by the non-player character Solaire of Astora in a dialogue with the player in the first installment of the series, in combination with an iconic gesture, which sees Solaire raise both arms up to create a V-shape above his head. Later in the game, players can learn the gesture and perform it at will. As Fig. 1 shows, the phrase is also available to the player in the messaging system.

Neither the gesture, nor the phrase have any significant meaning related to the gameplay, other than referring to the religious beliefs of Solaire and the respective cult of the sun. As Morton puts it, "Praise the Sun" receives its meaning from common practice:

> The beauty of praising the sun is that it has no baked-in meaning. Waving and bowing and pointing all have obvious uses based on real-world application. […] Praising the sun was an opportunity for players to place their own meaning on the game world, rather than continue to excavate its vague item descriptions and cryptic cut scenes for scraps of information. […] So with Solaire as their inspiration, everyone came to a collective, gradual decision on the meaning of praising the sun. It would be a sign of joy, hope, and jolly cooperation. (Morton 2017)

In other words, "Praise the sun" has been imbued with meaning for the community due to reflexive interpretive practices: it has come to serve as a

Figure 1. The "Orange Soapstone" messaging system in *Dark Souls 1*.

reference to the games, and, at the same time, it provides a way of identifying the subject voicing or enacting it as part of said community. This symbolic character has presumably developed gradually. Inside the game, players can enact its gesture in multiplayer games to communicate with others, or leave a "Praise the Sun" message on the ground for others to find. Beyond the game, the phrase and gesture have come to be used as a symbol of joy, and as a greeting. In this sense, "Praise the Sun" is not so much a phrase used for its communicative content, but rather for its function of signalling belonging to a vaguely defined community of practice engaging with *Dark Souls*.

Using a dataset of *Dark Souls* peer-to-peer network traffic,[4] we have mapped a large number of messages onto the game world. Filtering out the "Praise the Sun" messages shows that many players have reaffirmed the relevance of the moment at which Solaire of Astora is introduced to the player by echoing his praise with their messages in his vicinity (Fig. 2).

The bird's-eye view on the map suggests that turning "Praise the Sun" into a symbolic reference to the game has been a crowd effort. An effort, we would add, without which neither Solaire, nor his phrase and gesture would have gained significant relevance in relation to any community of practice. In other words, it serves to establish and uphold the interpretive framework of *Dark Souls* players, to the point that it turns into a ritualistic practice that marks

4 https://github.com/pawREP/Dark-Souls-1-P2P-Data

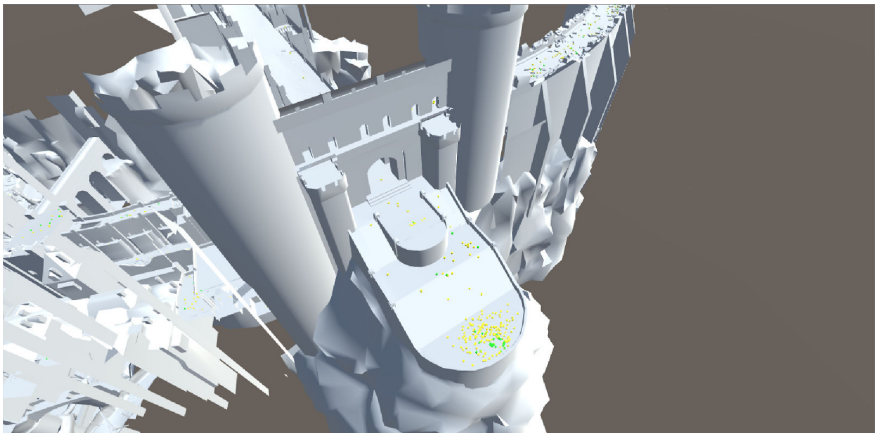

Figure 2. 3D Visualization of "Orange Soapstone" player messages at the scene of the first meeting with Solaire. Yellow dots represent "Praise the Sun" messages, green dots other messages.

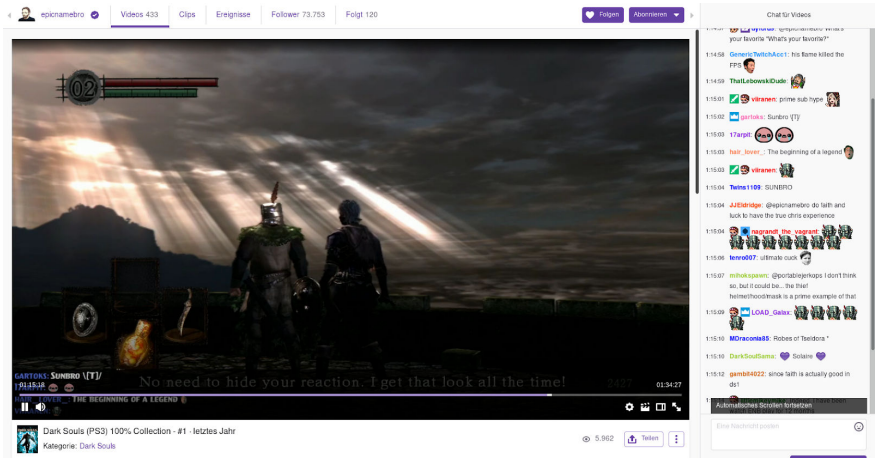

Figure 3. Streamer "epicnamebro" meets Solaire of Astora in a *Dark Souls* playthrough.

belonging to a *Souls*-related community of practice, as the following example shows (Fig. 3).

In Twitch streams, during specific moments of the playthrough, the viewers flood the Live-Chat with "Praise the Sun" emoticons (usually depicting a character in the distinct pose of the "Praise the Sun" gesture). This happens during story moments as described above, but also at moments when the streamer "meets" other players in multiplayer. In other words, "Praise the Sun" not only acts as a reference to a specific moment in the *Dark Souls* series, but its usage also indicates that many players are aware of its relevance for the game.

As such, the phrase has become part of the repertoire of a broadly defined community of practice emerging from *Dark Souls*. Considering its popularity and introduction at a non-optional waypoint in the game, "Praise the Sun" serves as a low-barrier reference to the games, widely known by players. For Stalder, referencing, in a broad sense of the word, is a "method by which individuals inscribe themselves in cultural processes" (Stalder 2016, 95, our translation), and by which meanings are continuously affirmed (Ibid., 128). "Praise the Sun" is a prime example of how particular, emblematic phrases and gestures can signal common ground: referencing them serves as an access token to a vaguely defined community of practice somehow connected to the *Dark Souls* series.

Such referencing not only takes place in the game worlds, but also in other digital spaces. The *Souls* series has sparked vivid video recording and streaming activities. This is partly due to the difficulty of the games, partly due to their variability, and partly due to their player-versus-player capabilities, which have turned playing into a stage for many capable players. "Praise the Sun" has been transposed and adapted to the textual communication channels accompanying the respective video sharing and streaming platforms. Analysing the communications about the *Souls* series related to popular YouTube and Twitch channels, we were able to trace a temporal evolution of different versions of the "Praise the Sun" gesture in the YouTube comment section and the Twitch chat (Fig. 4).

These changes also contribute to the memetic status of the gesture. In relation to online media, the term "meme" is broadly used to describe "shared in-jokes, catchphrases, idiosyncratic habits, and of course participants' tendency to caption countless pictures of cats" (Phillips and Milner 2017). For our purposes, we follow Shifman's (2014b, 41) definition of memes as, "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."

Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017, 484) argue that memes can contribute to separating communities and provide for internal distinctions. They mark subcultural knowledge and serve as gatekeepers for communities, distinguishing between the "in-group" and "passer's-by" (Ibid., 485), sending a "constant signal of belonging" (Ibid., 498). As "instable equilibria," they provide a space for established and new knowledge to merge (Ibid., 494–498). In other words, they offer both spaces in which meanings can gradually evolve, and spaces in which they can be combined with other meanings.

"Praise the Sun" is a clear example of such gatekeeping and identification function of memes. Whilst partly an affective act, players use the phrase and gesture (including the various versions of its emoticon), consciously in order to mutually affirm their in-group status. As a commenter on YouTube puts it:

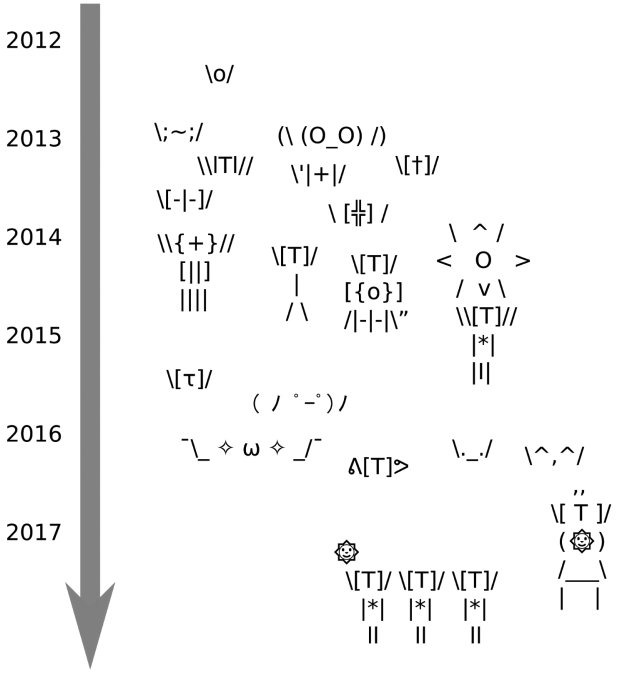

Figure 4. "Praise the Sun" emojis in YouTube comments.

> I think it'd be awesome if we all did this… In honor of Solaire of Astora and supporting the theory that Solaire is one of the children of Gwyn, I will lay a "Praise the Sun!" message in front of the pedestal where his statue once stood, in the room where you fought Ornstein & Smough. What say you, Sunbros?
> (Wijmer – "Dark Souls Story ▸ Solaire and the Sun." (VaatiVidya), 27 March 2013)

"Praise the Sun," both as phrase and gesture, has developed from a reference to a specific moment in the *Souls* series, into a reference for the game series and a somewhat vaguely defined community of players and other members interested in the games. This "evolution" has been induced by common practices both inside and beyond the game worlds. As such, "Praise the Sun" is not necessarily tied to its origin anymore – constantly reflected on and reinvented, the (ritualized) practice of referencing it serves to signal and mutually reaffirm the players' common affiliation. While it references a particular moment in the game or a choice players make for a particular in-game religion, the phrase has gained more significance as an omnipresent reference to the *Souls* series and its game worlds, as well as a broadly defined community of practice emerging

from them. We would even speculate that "Praise the Sun" may have entered the canon of references to a wider community attached to gaming culture, turning those in the know (even if only vaguely) into the in-group.

Remixing community practices across media and platforms: "Giant Dad"

Other *Souls* memes are less inclusive and, at the same time, more strongly interlinked with other media cultures. "Giant Dad" is an example of a meme that functions to distinguish a particular group from the wider *Souls*-related community. It is also an example of how memes are spaces in which new meanings are created by combining different elements that are not necessarily of the same domain, and are shaped by media platform affordances.

The "Giant Dad" (aka "The Legend") is a character build[5] that has gained recognition due to its superiority over other builds at an early stage of character development in *Dark Souls*. It was specifically used for player-versus-player matches and named "Giant Dad" for its ingredients, the "Giant Armor" and the "Mask of the Father." Just like Solaire of Astora, "Giant Dad" is often accompanied with a specific in-game gesture ("Well! This is it"). Incidentally, this gesture is frequently used to mock the defeated opponent in player-versus-player matches.

The "Giant Dad" character build gave rise to one of the most widely advanced *Souls* memes. Its popularity can be traced to the YouTube video "HE'S BACK" on the OnlyAfro channel (2012). It is by far the most viewed video in our dataset, with approximately 6.5 million views. Other videos about "Giant Dad," such as "Dark Souls: How to make Giantdad" (ymfah, 2018) and "The Legend – Dark Souls Lore: Giant Dad" (DaveControl, 2014) rank high in terms of views in our dataset.[6] Whereas "Praise the Sun" emerged from a predefined part of the storyworld, "Giant Dad" originates in player-based creativity targeting both the functional and the aesthetic dimension of character builds. However, the memetic practice related to the "Giant Dad" only emerged through common practices outside of the game, most prominently on YouTube. Unlike "Praise the Sun," the "Giant Dad" is not a mandatory element of the *Souls* worlds and, as such, has not become part of broader *Souls* community

5 The term character build refers to a specific way of developing ones role playing game character (character attributes, armor, weaponry, etc.)

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQD_QoZt-AY; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWPM5k_yYy8.

knowledge. The group of players actively perpetuating it is rather limited to those with the respective experience, knowledge, and player-versus-player inclinations. In other words, the meme is at the centre of its own sub-community within the common *Souls* space.

YouTube allows us to trace the emergence of the meme. Following the publication by OnlyAfro (2012), the "Giant Dad" theme was only briefly confined to this channel. Beginning in March 2013, comments on other channels started to refer to it. Initially, these comments were still limited to the domain of player-versus-player-content focused channels, but by mid-2013, they were regularly appearing on other channels (focusing more on narrative elements and "lore"[7]), where the meme was met with puzzlement:

> What's a giant dad? All i could find is that it's a PVP build. There can't be any lore behind that, can there?
> (theGreenaffect – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ▸ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 22.07.2013)

> Can you please explain what giant dad is, I've beaten the game several times and im [sic] interested in the lore but I've only heard of it once
> (Moplonn – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ▸ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 22.07.2013)

Whereas some commentators reacted by explaining the origin of the meme, others started inventing lore about "Giant Dad" themselves:

> A mysterious knight in Golden Armor, hiding its true face behind an enchanted mask, the Giant-Dad stalks Lordran, destroying all that dare to cross its unique greatsword; the Bass-Cannon. An immortal specimen, many thought of imitating its fighting style, only to be put in their place by superior warriors. Those that know the truth of its origins realize that it is the creation of a God-like schoolgirl, content with the fact that the Giant-Dad will persist and live on. (I'm not as good as Vaati)
> (Demegamachete – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ▸ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 23.07.2013)

The latter points to the ironic and reflexive engagement with lore about the *Souls* worlds on YouTube. Demegamachete's comment can be read as an ironic response to VaatiVidya's lore-related video content. In this playful interaction, the "in-group" is aware of the construction of stories about *Dark Souls* in Vaati-

7 In gaming, "lore" refers to a body of knowledge about specific game worlds, their history, characters and events. This knowledge can be presented inside the game (story sequences, item descriptions, …) as well as outside the game (supplemental media such as Comic books, novels, artbooks, …).

Vidya's videos, and they take pleasure in using this expert status to actively blur the lines between game-related facts and their own speculation or fictions. In August 2014, EpicNameBro published the video "The Legend – Dark Souls Lore: Giant Dad," which follows the general pattern of lore introductions and treats the "Giant Dad" as if he was a character in the game. Once again, the meta-level of the discourse is only accessible to those in the know.

Shifman (2014a, 344) calls such ironic and reflexive communication practices "hypersignification": "the code itself was no longer concealed, but was turned itself into a sign. [...Memes] are more about the process of meaning-making than about meaning itself." The "Giant Dad" lore discourse is a prime example of this tendency, while also showing the function it has for dividing in-group and out-group, thus introducing a further distinction within the more vaguely defined *Souls* community.

However, the "Giant Dad" is not simply a specialization from within a broader community – it also emerges from a remix of cultural elements and practices unrelated to the *Souls* games. The original video by OnlyAfro itself is an example of what Shifman (2012, 190) calls a memetic video, meaning "a popular clip that lures extensive creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work."

We were able to find eleven videos that remix form and content of the original video, sometimes adapting it to other games. While most of these adaptations focuses on titles in the *Souls* series (*Dark Souls III, Dark Souls Remastered* (QLOC und Virtuous 2018), there are also adaptations featuring the historical action game *For Honor* (Ubisoft Montreal et al. 2017). In each case, the characteristic elements of the original (cut, music, voice, use of other memes) are central to the adaptation, whereas the original intention of portraying character-build information and the "ingredients" of the build are adapted to the respective game context. Furthermore, the music used in the original video – the dubstep track "Excision & Downlink – Existence VIP" – has become integral to the meme, to the extent that it is imitated/adapted to text in the comments section:

> Filthy Casual! GiantDad will ANNIHILATE you with his +5 Bass Cannon for liking that SCRUBBY CRAP! Initiate Phase 1! Power Up the Bass Cannon... ...fire! TXZTUPFUGIRSDTRSTDYRSTTDRSTDPTIRSTDRZSRSTZIGIFZXGIPZIFOFXGIXPFPUXXITURZITSTDRZRURZUPYZROOZRSROSRYFZXTYFXUCUimJustKiddingDZYDYOFOYXD Y REI
> (Fadedgogeta – Comment on "How we were lied to about Dark Souls 2" (Fungo), 04.08.2015)

Practices of referencing or adapting the "Giant Dad" meme thus serve as an internal distinction "within" the broader, more vaguely defined *Dark Souls*

community of practice, but they also extend the space of reference beyond a particular game universe and, arguably beyond gaming cultural contexts. By engaging in such practices, players involve themselves with a variety of communities of practice, shaped by the media platforms they are embedded in.

Community practices and language barriers

In the previous section, we showed how memetic practices emerged from gameplay mechanisms and were reproduced, amplified, or adapted across various media and platforms. We have considered some of the ways in which these practices contribute to establishing common ground and result in various common practices and, arguably, communities of practice. So far, our exploration has been limited to English-language documents on YouTube and Twitch.tv. But are these common practices persistent across language spaces? Do communities of practice transgress language boundaries? Given that any language space – and the English language space in particular – may be open to a wide range of speakers and actors from various places and backgrounds, it seems problematic to treat different language spaces on equal ground. We should at least expect a much wider range of participants in the English language space, including Japanese native speakers. At the same time, it seems likely that the Japanese language space is the main space for engaging with *Dark Souls* online for many Japanese native speakers. If that is the case, our question is whether we find similar common practices there, and how easily memes can transgress language barriers.

While Twitch.tv is not (yet) as prominent in the Japanese language space, YouTube has become an important digital platform for game cultural practices. To take a closer look, we have extracted the comments from twelve prominent YouTube channels producing content about the *Souls* series. Their viewer counts cannot be compared to those of the English-language cases, but are nonetheless significant (Tables 1 and 2).

Analysing the commenting behaviour of the users in the dataset shows that there is hardly any overlap (< 0.1 per cent) between the users of the Japanese- and English-language channels. Figure 5 visualizes the result as a network, clearly showing the two groups of YouTube channels divided in their language spaces. The possibility that users operate under different names in each language space notwithstanding, the data suggest that most of them do not actively participate in the discussions in both languages. This makes it less likely for a memetic practice emerging from one of the language spaces and travelling to the other language space.

Table 1. Five prominent YouTube channels in the English-language dataset.

Channel	*Subscribers*	*Videos*	*Total views*	*Comments*	*Commenters*
VaatiVidya	1,680,000	280	329,261,217	689,144	237,797
Prod	360,000	3219	158,361,704	428,003	98,533
Fighter .PL	409,000	2189	144,296,995	468,468	112,264
LobosJR	366,000	2881	144,582,631	236,417	67,065
SunlightBlade	576,000	215	134,792,495	198,022	88,816

Table 2. Five prominent YouTube channels in the Japanese-language dataset.

Channel	*Subscribers*	*Videos*	*Total views*	*Comments*	*Commenters*
BOW TAIJIN	27,300	177	12,568,509	19,477	4,741
愛の戦士チャンネル	237,000	2591	144,443,047	181,324	43,310
上級騎士なるにぃ	275,000	189	68,309,834	73,845	24,801
フジマロのゲーム部屋	15,700	4509	17,635,651	6085	1855
ふう	200,000	561	79,644,479	69,838	17,704

Table 3. Mentions of “Praise the Sun” in YouTube comments.

Mentions per 1000 comments	
Japanese-speaking channels: "太陽万歳"	English-speaking channels: “Praise the sun”
0.24	1.79

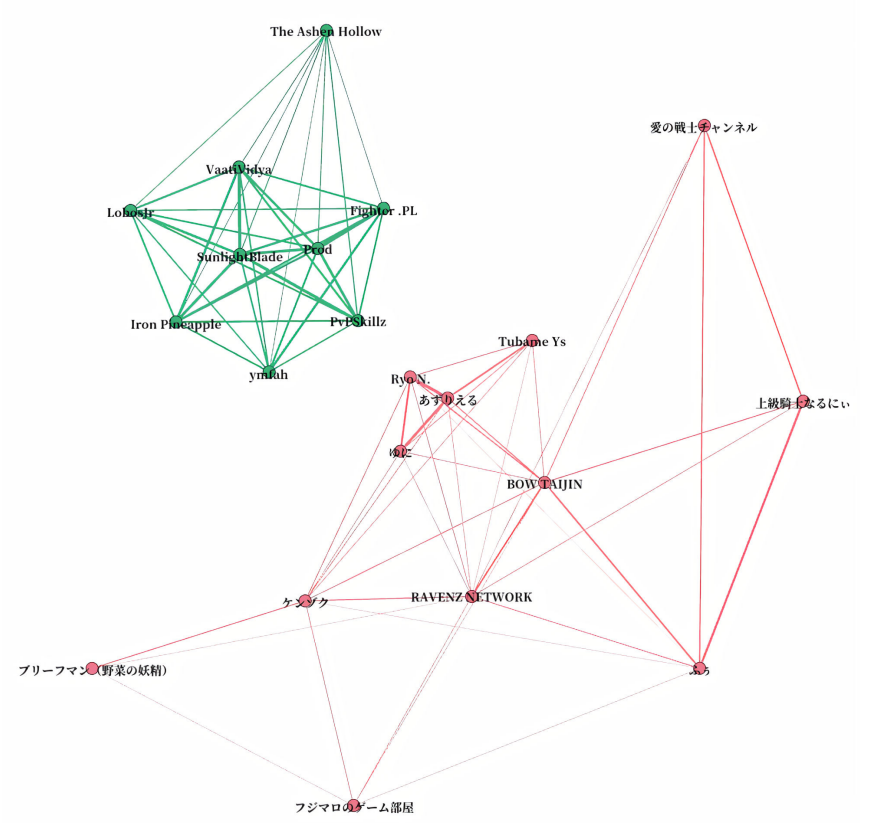

Figure 5. Network visualization of English (green) and Japanese (magenta) YouTube channels[8]

8 The visualization was build with Open Source tool Gephi (v. 0.9.3) using the "Force Feedback 2" layout algorithm. The strength of the edges (w) is calculated as the overlap of two channels' userbases in relation to the combined userbases of the two channels; w = (A ∩ B)/(A ∪ B).

With that in mind, how does the interaction within each language space compare? As the discussion about the "Giant Dad" meme in the previous section showed, there is no single community of practice around *Dark Souls*. However, while such memes indicate differentiation within the more vaguely defined community, an analysis of user participation between (English-speaking) YouTube channels shows that there is a large overlap between the channels' userbases, likely aiding the spread of said meme. Judging from the Japanese channels sampled in our dataset, the chance of memes "travelling" within the Japanese-language channels appears to be much lower: the Japanese YouTube space is characterized by considerably less cross-channel participation, even if we take the different scale of participants and interactions into account.

In terms of memetic content, the Japanese-language YouTube comments are also substantially different from the English language space considered above. Among the roughly 370,000 comments we gathered in the first exploratory data collection, we could hardly find evidence for a Japanese-language version of the "Praise the Sun" meme, not to mention "Giant Dad." While several instances of Ascii art and emoticons referencing "Praise the Sun" could be identified, the numbers are not comparable to the intensity with which the meme is referenced in the English language space (Table 3).

In the absence of the English phrase "Praise the Sun" from the comments in the Japanese-language dataset, it seems plausible to assume that the "Praise the Sun" meme is considerably less important (if present at all) within the Japanese language space. Another phrase similar to "Praise the Sun" - 太陽あれ！("Long may the sun shine!" in the English subtitles) – appears far more frequently in the Japanese comments (0.89 mentions per 1000 comments). This phrase was uttered in *Dark Souls III*, by the non-playable character Siegward of Catarina.[9]

As such, the "Sun" references in the Japanese language space are based on a different shared experience, which unfolds much less in relation to memetic practices. For example, it lacks a visual representation (gesture). Furthermore, most mentions of 太陽あれ！(77 per cent) appeared within the comments of a single channel, while the "Praise the Sun" mentions in the English dataset were more widely distributed among the channels. Whereas "Praise the Sun" is, by now, an established gamer-slang phrase in and beyond the English language

9 https://youtu.be/m5jTOmgmDE4?t=67.

space related to *Dark Souls*,[10] neither its equivalent "太陽万歳！," nor the rephrasing "太陽あれ！" have received similar attention and popularity.[11]

Conclusion and outlook

In this chapter, we have analysed several memetic practices emerging from and alongside the *Dark Souls* games, tracing their dissemination and remixes across different media (platforms) and communities of practice. As shown, "Praise the Sun" gained memetic status within a vaguely defined community precisely due to its lack of content and compatibility with visual communication, making it adaptable in a wide range of media practices across different platforms (Ascii art, Twitch icons), etc. "Giant Dad," on the other hand, could only emerge through memetic (video) practices originating from YouTube, which were then applied to the context of *Dark Souls* by a smaller, more specialized group of players who also connected it to other gaming contexts. In combination, "Praise the Sun" and "Giant Dad" demonstrate how communities diversify in practice, often extending far beyond a particular game context. At the same time, such common practices also establish and perpetuate boundaries. The "Giant Dad" serves as a means of distinction from the broader, more vaguely defined community of *Dark Souls* players within the English language space. Language boundaries appear to stop memes from travelling, at least according to our analysis of the Japanese language space.

These tentative results present us with a challenge for research into game cultural communities of practice. Such research, we argue, needs to be aware of the limitations of its terminologies, platform selections, and the language spaces it focuses on. Common practices may take different forms and follow a different logic in different language spaces and different communities of practice. Different relevances and cultural contexts may work in favour of a different set of common practices, or a different set of memes. Moreover, memetic practices may follow the same logic across different cultural or language spaces. Mapping out communities of practice across media, platforms, and language spaces required taking each of these spaces seriously in terms of their contexts, established routines, and inclinations. Considering structural similarities and differences rather than direct correspondence may be a starting point for such analysis.

10 https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/praise-the-sun/, accessed Jan. 16, 2021.

11 https://dic.nicovideo.jp/a/%E5%A4%AA%E9%99%BD%E3%81%82%E3%82%8C%21, accessed Jan. 16, 2021.

Once we engage with common practices on a structural level, other connections become visible as well. For example, the growing presence of political content on Twitch.tv creates an interesting remix of common practices present in gaming communities. Signs of such convergence of communicative practices can be found if we consider the similarities between the memetic and emoticon-centred communication in the case of a 2018 US Congress hearing (Fig. 6) and a playthrough of *Dark Souls* (Fig. 3).

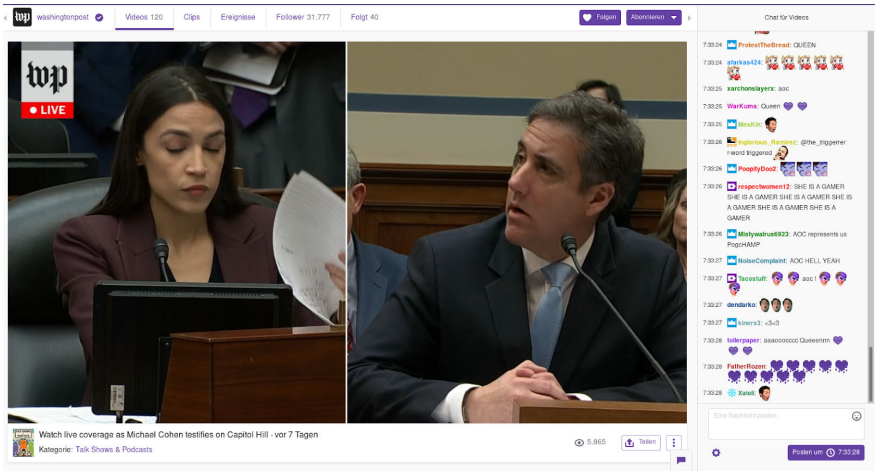

Figure 6. The *Washington Post* streams US Congress hearings live on Twitch.tv.

In both cases, commentators apply a similar style of communication to the contents – in this case, the onscreen appearance of a non-playable game character and a politician. This example suggests that on platforms like Twitch.tv, common practices travel effortlessly, even across widely different domains. Castronova (2008, 15) and others predicted that virtual worlds and their social and cultural development would have a substantial influence on non-virtual ones. This example, we might add, shows how such influence is exerted from within the virtual, as common practices established in one domain transgress the boundaries of other domains.

However, these practices are confined by what Jodi Dean (2005) calls "communicative capitalism," a form of capitalism in which communication is a central resource, means, and tool of capital accumulation. Platforms encourage and facilitate communities of practice, and by doing so they extract value (in form of data) from their users. As such, the converging practices discussed above (game-related as well as political) are part of a global capitalist system Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). Based on her work, William Partin argues that Twitch.tv "monetizes data it extracts from

users by developing consumer profiles – which, in this case, are linked to viewers' Amazon accounts – in order to map and predict trends, manipulate individual and group behavior, and sell collected data in markets that individual users are barred from participating in" (Partin 2019, 158). Viewed from this angle, it is no coincidence that the *Washington Post* was the first news outlet to start streaming political content on Twitch.tv, as both companies belong to Amazon, thus providing new opportunities for gaming-based media practices to converge with other cultural domains.

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Comment By Hugo Gelis

Peter Mühleder and Martin Roth's data-based exploration sheds light on the role and use of memes in online communities. "Praise the Sun!," for example, devoid of any real meaning, lent itself perfectly to the absurdist and nonsensical humour that circulates easily on the internet. Through repetition, it established itself as a running gag and a group marker.

Again, repetition (again) lowers the bar for entry with such memes being widely known and adopting many different forms: text; emoticons, fanart; videos, etc. Some are not even the joke itself but just references to it: "sunbros" seldom need to point at the sky to share a good laugh. While popular enough to break into the general gaming subculture vocabulary and, indeed, remain part of its lexicon since 2011, this meme has barely been acknowledged by developer From Software.

Its only official commodification is an Amiibo figure, produced by Nintendo for the 2018 release of *Dark Souls Remastered*. In the wider capitalist production context, the value of such communal activities is not extracted through items but data. This "memetic capital" has value not only for users of an in-joke, but also for platforms who monetize their appeal, mechanics of communication, and retention.

Comment by Fanny Barnabé

This chapter is of great interest in terms of demonstrating that the ludic experience is far from pure, but is rather coloured by a series of other experiences that constantly interfere with it and feed it. The chapter discusses practices that can be qualified as *détournements* or transformative play, since they imbue the original game with meanings that are not necessarily native to it – as in the example of the "Giant Dad." In doing so, it shows how *détournement* is cyclically embedded in the construction of player communities: the game offers a "grip" for appropriation through an easily repeated symbol (such as the "Praise the sun" sentence); this symbol is remobilized by players in other contexts; finally, these appropriations become the support for the development of an informal community and for peer recognition. The examples developed are particularly interesting in that they show the power of symbols in this process – where other videogame collective practices, such as speedrunning, are formed around other types of unifying elements (common rules, goals, etc.). Moreover, the analyses reveal a stratification within *Dark Souls* players' communities and underline their heterogeneity. In this respect, they offer an exciting basis for refining descriptions of what "community" can mean in the context of videogame culture.

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This collection features a wide range of inquiries into Japan's contemporary media culture, situating popular media content and its related practices and theories in the complex interplay between local and global. The chapters draws attention to several prominent phenomena, suggest new approaches to media culture, and highlight the importance of positionality with regard to research on media culture. The volume documents the results of a series of PhD student workshops held in Kyoto and Leipzig between 2017 and 2019, and continues the discussions started there.