

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.

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 Japan³ (Ōtsuka & Steinberg 2010, 99), as well as between Japan and the West⁴ (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 culture⁵ 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).

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 skimmers) [...]” (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-Witthford, 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).

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:

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 *dōjinshi* 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

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 *eroe/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 video-game 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 *ero*ge (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 market-places, 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 gaming³⁷ in Japan is most often linked with the commuting aspect of Japanese society³⁸ 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 through 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.

