Japan's Imaginary Obsession: How the Unreal Engendered a Subculture

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Abstract

Regarding Japan's population, a general consensus pervades the American public; namely, that the Japanese people are largely homogeneous, and highly collectivist-minded. While the country does have a mainstream public, underneath that deceiving exterior exists the *otaku* subculture—males often compared to geeks or nerds. There also exists a female variety of *otaku*, known as *fujoshi*. *Otaku* often choose to separate from the pressures of the mainstream by investing their time and obsessive interest on any number of hobbies. However, while *otaku* can be pinpointed by their high level of obsession over a hobby in comparison to non-*otaku*, they are further divided into types which categorize and describe them in greater depth. Currently five types of *otaku* are defined, and each differs in terms of the types of hobbies they choose to focus on, their level of sociability, and how they integrate their hobby into their daily lives. One of these types of *otaku* emphasizes a contemporary way of consolidating the fruits of their obsession, via an online activity known as databasing. Databasing involves cataloguing the traits of characters from Japanese *anime*, or animation; *manga*, or comics; and video games. These traits can range from the physical, such as large eyes; or accessories, such as cat ears; or a clothing type, such as a maid outfit. These characteristics evoke a sense of *moe* in the observer—a euphoric response not unlike the effects of Prozac. *Moe* characteristics are often very popular among databasing *otaku* due to their emotional capital rather than physical. This is because, for many of these *otaku*, true fulfillment can only be found within their reaction to a specific type of fictional—colloquially known as 2D—character. These 2D characters are tagged by their traits and features so other *otaku* can find a given image and add tags of their own. This makes databasing an interactive affair, as it involves the active input of a number of individuals. However, not all *otaku* are interested in databasing or *moe* elements. Bolstered by their hobbies, many are interested in decidedly more social fare, such as attending conventions, meeting up at *manga* cafés, playing *anime*-inspired arcade games, and cosplaying—dressing up as and acting like a 2D character. It is not reasonable to assume all *otaku*—going by their particular nature—are all antisocial recluses, which would better describe another group, known as *hikikomori*, who have reacted to societal pressures in a decidedly more negative manner. There are numerous *otaku* who find pleasure in sharing their personal interests with their peers. As such, while the mainstream public may still reject some aspects of *otaku* subculture, they have managed to carve out a niche which they can claim as their own.

Keywords: *Otaku*, *Moe*, **Databasing**

1. Introduction

In Japan, there currently exist an estimated 2.85 million self-proclaimed *otaku* (Kitabayashi 1). In layman's terms, an *otaku* could very well be thought of as the equivalent of either a geek, nerd, or similar such individual here in America. However, that sort of simplified definition is both accurate, yet at the same time could not be farther from the truth. When we consider the nature of geeks, nerds, and the like, we usually think of them as people who are

particularly interested in certain hobbies, and often share those hobbies with other like-minded peers, but are otherwise rather introverted and shy. In many ways, this is an apt description of the nature of *otaku* and their activities as well, since many are just as content to pursue their individual passions without bothering with forming interpersonal relationships—and on the other end of the spectrum there are *otaku* who are more outgoing and personable in everyday situations.

However, what truly sets *otaku* apart from their American brethren is the reasons why their subculture first came into being, and how—despite an unspoken consensus regarding *otaku* as strange, or unable to form meaningful relationships—they have managed to persevere and find a decidedly different, yet equally effective way to thrive within Japanese society. While it is feasible to imagine that *otaku* could very well be looked at in a kinder or more understanding light if they were to have grown up in America, at the same time living in America would not have been conducive to the creation of such a subculture in the first place. It is the nature of the Japanese media—chief among them *anime*, or animation, *manga*, or comics, and video games—the collectivistic nature of Japanese society, and the sexual repression thrust upon them which are the chief reasons *otaku* have become the type of cohesive subculture that they are.

Many may look at *otaku* as not fully-formed adults, due to their interest in stereotypically childish hobbies and growing immersion in the cataloguing—that is to say, databasing—of various elements culled from fictional characters which they find particularly attractive. In spite of this, *otaku* themselves understand the negative stigma that has attached itself to their lifestyle, and in fact openly embrace it. They instead choose to thrive within an environment which does not usually afford individuals the opportunity to be themselves in daily life. It is implied that with the decision to focus on the self, there is an inevitable cost to the community. However, for *otaku* there is no such concern, as they have come to a collective understanding regarding who they are, and what they represent—which is an unbridled interest in fiction, and the myriad forms that it takes. They are also well aware of the distinction between reality and fantasy, but they openly embrace the latter. In so doing, they create relationships with two-dimensional characters. Of course, that is not to say the fictional can only lie within the two-dimensional; rather, *otaku* have constructed ways in which to bridge the 2D with the 3D—in other words, reality. This is accomplished through activities such as cosplay, which involves dressing up and acting like one's favorite 2D character, and will be touched on near the end of the paper.

It should also be noted that *otaku* could very well be said to have transcended the reality-bound, physical relationships shared between two partners; instead, certain types of *otaku* have reached a point where their interest has shifted from real women to 2D characters that embody certain traits which evoke a euphoric response in the observer. It should be noted here that the phrase "real women" denotes a specific heterosexual orientation assumed by male *otaku*; that is not to say homosexual *otaku* do not exist, but neither they—or the female version of *otaku*, known as *fujoshi*—are covered in this particular paper. In regards to the traits which a growing number of heterosexual male *otaku* choose to focus on, they are referred to as *moe*, the physical manifestation of a "fictional [sense] of desire" (Azuma 48) which is evoked in the observer. *Moe* elements which accomplish this goal can take numerous forms and include, but are not limited to: glasses, ribbons, bells, cat ears, twin tails or pigtails, school uniforms, swimsuits, maid outfits, and more. These elements have led to the emergence of a new type of *moe*-hungry *otaku*, who choose to catalogue the objects of their obsession via databasing. From a historical perspective, the *otaku* subculture focused on these hobbies in particular as a means of escaping the confines of Japanese society, which was more interested in their societal obligations. However, while these hobbies first started off as simple ways by which *otaku* could indulge in their individuality, they subsequently grew more obsessive over the decades, which culminated in their interest in databasing. For a growing number of *otaku*, it has become less about the overall product they are consuming, and more about the *moe* reaction elicited by a characters' elements and traits, and the subsequent cataloguing of those traits.

However, while many may understand the general connection between *otaku* and their obsessive nature, it is more important—and less well understood—to examine how they first began gravitating towards these hobbies, and for what reasons. In this respect, the *otaku* subculture can be defined by its unique endurance in spite of Japan's "rigid, segregated society which is comprised of various small subcultures, with a seemingly impermeable mainstream mass at its center" (Rivera 194). While on the surface Japanese society dictates that there is a defined place for everyone, it fails to mention that this definition excludes those who do not adhere to societal norms: they are the nails that refuse to be complacently hammered down, whereas most do not stand up for themselves in the first place, so they are in no need of being hammered down.

For those exceptions who do not fit into the predetermined molds accepted by the mainstream, they are dubbed atypical and antisocial—as the most common reason they would be considered outsiders would have to do with their choosing individuality over collectivism—and subsequently cast to the side to fend for themselves. The *otaku* subculture may indeed occupy a square peg which fails to fit into the round holes of Japanese society; however, this

does not mean that *otaku* are incapable of having social relations, despite their shift from the community to the individual in terms of the content and makeup of their hobbies, which are more geared towards individual consumption instead of requiring a group of friends in order to properly enjoy. Rather, they are still able to do so, but instead via the form dictated by the perpetually-evolving *otaku* subculture, which draws its existential purpose from various obsessions and the sharing of the fruits of those obsessions with other like-minded peers.

2. Differences Between *Otaku* and *Hikikomori*

Due to the intensely obsessive nature of their hobby, and its detraction from focusing on the community, it may be said that *otaku* impose a sort of self-isolation from the rest of Japanese society on themselves. However, *otaku* are in fact quite social in their own right, as they often use their hobby as a context for attending conventions, cosplaying—the act of dressing up as and acting like one's favorite fictional character—and meeting up with other like-minded brethren to discuss the newest incarnation of *moe* elements they have chosen to fixate on. While many people would typically picture *otaku* as loners cooped up in their room during all hours of the day, unwilling to participate in society at large, this image is a great deal more reflective of another subset of Japanese society, the *hikikomori*.

   Hikikomori are often just as individualistic as *otaku*, but usually choose to cope with the demands of society in a decidedly different—and many would rightly argue unhealthier—manner. The majority have been pressured by the strict demands of society to the point that they have developed acute social withdrawal, a social disorder which characterizes this specific type of seclusion, but can be found in some Japanese *otaku* as well. However, while some *otaku* may experience acute social withdrawal, this does not mean the majority of them do. Thankfully, *otaku* have found constructive ways of creating their own separate world of sorts, and it is also for this reason they can be labeled as a subculture. On the other hand, *hikikomori* simply do not have the drive to participate in Japanese society, nor associate with supportive peers.

3. *Otaku* Generations

Also unlike *hikkikomori*, who are chiefly defined by their acute social withdrawal, *otaku* can be defined in more historical terms—that is, by the generations in which they grew up and were first exposed to the Japanese media and technology of the day. There are approximately three distinct generations of *otaku*, starting during the 1960s—pinpointed as the "origin of *otaku*" (Azuma 6)—continuing in the 1970s, and going up until the 1980s. These three generations of *otaku* build off of each other, with the first often described as the primordial soup from which sprung the first forms of the different types of media we have come to commonly associate with *otaku* culture. Of course, at the time proto-*otaku* were unaware that these various media would give rise to a mature and highly legitimized subculture. Instead, this first generation of *otaku* was comprised of more "cutting-edge youths and their followers who saw *anime* as a counter-culture opposed to adult society" (Morikawa 6) as opposed to a new subculture that would not draw a barrier between adults and adolescents, but included the entirety of Japanese mainstream society.

   As a consequence, the second generation of the 1970s was able to enjoy the "diversified and matured *otaku* culture produced by the preceding generation" (7) of the 1960s. It was then during the third generation of the 1980s that the budding concept of "*moe* [was] most strongly felt" (Galbraith, *Moe* 5). To an even greater extent, it was during this generation that the elements of *otaku* culture as established by the previous two generations were then taken and labeled as a "form of 'pure sanctuary'" (5). This third generation also had the luck to collide with the "spread of the Internet…and, as a result, their main forum for general fan activities…moved to Web sites, and…their focus shifted towards computer graphics" (Azuma 7), which gave rise to databasing, an increasingly integral part of being an *otaku* in the modern age. True to the categorical nature of databasing, something first has to be categorized, and it was these *moe* elements—elements which have spawned "fantasy ideals and [a] consumer culture providing material to support those fantasies" (Galbraith, *Moe* 5)—which came to serve that distinct purpose. Thanks to the influence of technology, databasing has becoming an increasingly integral activity common among *moe*-obsessed *otaku*.

4. Five Types of *Otaku*

It should be noted that *moe*-obsessed, databasing *otaku* only comprise one out of five distinct types of *otaku* as defined by the Nomura Research Institute; there are still others whose main concern is neither related to *moe* nor databasing, and instead may, for example, choose to focus on a wide variety of media sources, be more interested in social interactions in the real world than they are online, or wish to maintain a family alongside their hobby. The highest percentage of the *otaku* population—25%—occupies the first type, dubbed the "family-oriented *otaku*" (3), who are most concerned with preserving the natural *honne-tatemae* distinction cultivated by Japanese society. They are often categorized as "closet *otaku*", because their family may or may not know about their obsession, but either way their personal life and family life are able to coexist in harmony. The second most abundant type—23%—is the "leaving my own mark on the world *otaku*" (3), which best reflects the growing percentage of *otaku* who are interested in databasing *moe* characteristics, and one of two types I focus on in this paper.

This third type—22%— is the "media-sensitive multiple-interest *otaku*" (3) which seems to bleed into the second type due to the fact they are the most interested in a variety of media sources, including online databases, but are also the most socially-oriented. This is the type I explore in the most depth in the paper. Indeed, this type of *otaku* is by and large the most social out of the five types, and thus finds validation in sharing their interest in a wide variety of hobbies and media with other *otaku*. They are the most likely to be found at *manga* cafés, conventions, or even cosplaying; for them, it is almost less about the type of media itself, but how that media can allow them to achieve a social goal, and feel as though they are truly part of a supportive community.

However, it is important not to discount the fourth type—18%—known as the "outgoing and assertive *otaku*" (3), who are defined by the values developed during their first exposure to *otaku* culture, and their desire to impart those values onto those around them. There is some bleeding here between the five types as well, for while the first type— i.e., the family-oriented type—is more content to act in a low-key manner, there are still elements of strong individualism found within the second—i.e., the "leaving my own mark on the world" (3)—and third—i.e., the "media sensitive multiple-interest" (3)—types. That is to say, they are not content with simply hiding their obsession in the shadows; rather, they want to feel comfortable both indulging in their hobby and being a part of society at large. Last is the fifth—12%—type, which is admittedly the smallest in percentage out of the five types, but they are also the most creative, and are less interested in collecting or databasing than they are in creating actual content that may very well end up being consumed by the other four types. Their name describes them as "fan magazine-obsessed *otaku*" (3), because it is within these magazines that such *otaku* can share and debut their newest works, much the way databasing *otaku* enjoy sharing their favorite blend of *moe* elements with others.

5. *Moe* Characters: What and Why

Not all types of *otaku* deliberately choose to consume certain types of media in order to come into contact with— and accordingly database—various *moe* elements. For those who do, there is a specific type of character which best exemplifies these elements: 2D girls with neotenized facial features. In other words, they are generally baby-faced characters of early adolescent age. This character type originated from *manga* magazines that "sexualized the figures and bodies of the sweet, innocent characters of young girls usually featured in *shōjo manga* (*manga* for girls)" (Morikawa 4). Whether or not these characters are indeed of early adolescent age, they are nonetheless portrayed as "youthful, innocent girls" (Galbraith, *Moe* 9).

Of the reasons why these *otaku* choose such characters over more mature-looking alternatives, chief among them is because these *otaku* enjoy the innocence and purity reflected in their large eyes and tiny proportions, while still maintaining sexual undertones. This blend of playful innocence and coy sexuality is not found in American pornography, which is at its core "all form and no content, all body and no soul" (Kimmel 189). That is not to say Japan does not have its own brand of reality-bound 3D and fantasy-centered 2D pornography as well. The latter is often referred to as *hentai*, *anime* of a distinctly sexual nature. True to the nature of pornography, even *hentai* has the consumer's carnal satisfaction in mind first and foremost. The difference is that Japan also specializes in creating characters whose purpose goes beyond simple sexual gratification. Rather, the prepubescent-looking girls featured in the types of media *otaku* consume—that is to say, outside of *hentai*—are never depicted in an overtly sexual manner—instead, it is the beguiling sum of their *moe* elements which these *otaku* find so attractive.

In a way, not only *otaku* but many Japanese adolescents and young adults lost their sense of childhood and playfulness along the way to adulthood as they strove to achieve in academics, sports, and social networking in

order to secure a stable position in Japanese society. For *otaku*, a means of regaining or at least reflecting on those bygone days is through characters that embody those nostalgic feelings and values. However, *moe*-obsessed *otaku* who fixate on these sorts of characters should not be confused with *lolicon*, the subset of *otaku* who inherently find young children, both 2D and 3D, sexually attractive. *Otaku* simply want an opportunity to indulge in a type of "'pure love' apart from reality" (Galbraith, *Moe* 10) with characters who are "unspoiled by maturity" (10), an outlook with a distinctly *Peter Pan*-esque vibe.

Unfortunately, due to the rise of highly questionable practices such as *enjo-kōsai*, or compensated dating, the "age of sexual … maturity becomes ever younger" (10); as a result, "the age of purity re-centers on even younger girls" (10) in the eyes of *otaku*. There is good reason for this response: *enjo-kōsai* involves primary and middle-school students who temporarily date older benefactors for the sake of receiving monetary compensation. It is an act closely related to prostitution, but does not necessarily require sexual activity. However, regardless of how old a character may look or actually be, for *otaku* it is not the literal "age of the girl that is attractive, but a form of 'cuteness' (*kawai-rashii*) that she represents" (Shigematsu 130). This is a distinctly Japanese type of attraction to a fictional character, whereas the women portrayed in *hentai* and American pornography's sole purpose is to serve the physical needs of the consumer, with no consideration given to their presumed emotional needs.

It is worth noting that not all of these *otaku* first gravitated toward such characters—or 2D characters at all—as a means of satisfying their emotional and sexual urges; rather, there are many who have, at one point or another, been attracted to and interested in starting a relationship with a real woman. Unfortunately, it is often the case that *otaku*, who are "long on hobbies and passion and short on looks and money" (Galbraith, *Moe* 10), are rather consciously "excluded from the market of love" (10), giving them even less of a chance of achieving this ever loftier life goal. It has even been said that the very concept of *moe* "spawned from the idea of the 'weak man' …someone who is neither rich nor good-looking, and [is unable] to get a girlfriend" (Rivera 197). Not to mention, it has been an uphill battle to expunge the negative portrayal of *otaku* as "pedophiles incapable of dealing with mature women" (Kotani 227), although "the vast majority of *otaku* [other than the *lolicon* subset] are not pedophiles in actual life" (228). The idea of nurturing a relationship with a 2D character has become an increasingly attractive alternative to traditional relationships for lovelorn *otaku*, many of whom find this alternative form of love "far more stable and rewarding than 'real' love could ever be" (Galbraith, *Moe* 7). For instance, while real women may seek "only a handsome or rich man" (Rivera 198), *otaku* do not have to fear desertion from "these two-dimensional characters [who] 'would never betray' [them]" (198).

6. *Otaku*s' Artificial Sexuality

Otaku not only embrace these young, innocent characters out of a desire to reconnect with the childhood they lost along the way to adulthood, but as the closest equivalent to a form of sexuality they are not allowed to legally experience. This form of sexuality has thus been dubbed "'artificial sexuality' or 'techno-eroticism" (Shigemtasu 130). These terms denote the fact that the media these *otaku* consume do not feature the depiction—or any sort of depiction even remotely close—of sexual acts involving young, innocent female characters. That is not the point of focusing on such characters—rather than for purposes of sexual satisfaction, it is the emotional outlet these characters provide that is truly important.

While there may be a somewhat "erotic nature inside the emotion … [these *otaku*] will never take the next step of action of any sort" (Kelts 162), nor do they desire to do so. Rather, such characters are there to grant *otaku* a safe haven in which they can "[engage] a *moe* character as a pure being and his one true love, and then [imagine] perverse sexual interactions with the same character" (Galbraith, *Moe* 4). One could compare these *otaku*s' interactions with 2D characters to the Beatlemania phenomenon experienced by all manner of adolescent girls in the 1960s. Because they were still too young to engage in sexual relations, they were confined to experiencing sexual feelings by focusing on the unobtainable. They indulged in fantasies that granted them both physical and emotional satisfaction without crossing inappropriate boundaries.

Indeed, these *otaku* indulged in *anime*, *manga*, and other forms of media as a means of "seek[ing] value in the fictional" (Kotani 227). For them, "fiction itself can be a sexual object" (227). Of course, because not all *otaku* start with this attraction to 2D characters, "in order to possess the object of their love" (227), they often end up "resort[ing] to fictionalization" (227) to do so. What sets this type of *otaku* apart from fandoms overseas is not only their obsession with databasing *moe* elements in the twenty-first century, but the "act of loving the object [of their affections] by possessing it" (227), which can be seen in these *otaku*'s obsessive commitment to buying rare, often

rather expensive goods such as *anime* DVDs, *manga* volumes, figurines, *dakimakura* or hug pillows, video games, or visual novels featuring their favorite character.

The difference between the way these *otaku* and *lolicon* approach young-looking or prepubescent characters lies in the fact that the latter's relation to such characters is a "matter of possession rather than perversion" (237). They have avoided being labeled as such through the "practice of fictionalizing, since the desire to fictionalize a thing is ultimately the desire to own it, and stops there" (237). While these *otaku* do stop short of having their hobby labeled as a form of perversion, there is still debate as to whether or not there may be some fetishistic elements in desiring after the fictional, since "when we desire an object, what we desire is something the object fundamentally lacks" (237). Most fetishists are "usually unaware of this lack, [but these] *otaku* are conscious of it to some extent" (237), because they understand the "object of their desire is nothing more than a fiction" (237) and will never be anything more. In fact, a large draw of 2D characters comes from an awareness of a perpetual "absence of consummation" (Kelts 162), which causes these *otaku*s' "feelings and emotions for [the character to] rise and increase" (162).

In spite of their awareness that the characters they love will always be a part of the realm of fiction, these *otaku* feel that above all, "fulfillment as a human being can only be found inside one's own brain as a reaction to fantasy characters" (Galbraith, *Moe* 3). Indeed, the *moe*-induced response to these characters who have no discernible "context or depth" (6) is made possible by "flattening characters to surfaces on which to project desires" (6); whatever sort of attitudes, feelings, or emotions happen to compose them are not what is important—rather, it is how receptive they are towards the projection of an *otaku*'s desires, and how the *otaku* reacts in turn.

7. Emotional Support And Indulgence

Of course, these *otaku*s' overindulgence in their emotions and desires is decidedly at odds with the long-established conception of manhood that has been favored by Japan for centuries. Because Japan has traditionally encouraged the likes of men whose masculinity would allow them to assert themselves in their patriarchal society, whether in work or in home life, *otaku* have often felt threatened by the pressure to act in this manner. However, that is not to say that their unique indulgence in their emotional side makes all *otaku* inherently effeminate, at least by traditional Japanese standards; rather, because of the hierarchical nature of Japanese society, and the fact *otaku* area already shunned by mainstream society for their obsessive nature, it is unlikely they will be given the opportunity to occupy a position which would allow them to assert their masculinity. Rather, many *otaku* may find themselves confined to low-wage jobs such as those found in convenience stores. Because of their status as workers whose only concern is to serve the needs of the customer, they must adopt a less threatening, perceivably effeminate personality in order to accommodate the customer, who comes first.

Nonetheless, whether or not an *otaku* happens to innately possess masculine qualities, there has been enough reason for them to look back and idealize childhood, "a time before social pressures to perform as a responsible adult at work … and home" (Galbraith, *Moe* 10). By "awakening [their] imagination" (4) via their fixation on *moe* characters, *otaku* "can escape the confines of masculinity" (4) through their "indulg[ence] in a desire for cute things" (4). These characters give *otaku* a new identity completely separate from the one conjured up by the pressures of society, allowing them to comfortably access media that "indulge the feminine restricted by social norms" (9), one popular outlet for which is a specific genre of visual novel known as a *nakigē*, which are, at their core, "devoted to making players cry as they watch the romance and struggles of the female characters unfold" (9). For most Japanese men, this would be an affront towards their precious masculinity, but for *otaku* it is a rare opportunity to indulge in more feminine emotions that are socially prohibited.

For reasons such as this, these *otaku* are constantly supported in their pursuit of the fictional over the real, for the personal comfort it affords them in a cold world which rejects their individuality and perceived emotional fragility. They focus their energy on constructing a pantheon of *moe* elements in the form of a database—the very embodiment of "virtual Japan," in a sense. It is from this database that "pleasure can be mechanically manipulated and (re)produced" (Galbraith, *Bishōjo* 12), by allowing these *otaku* to search for such elements and construct characters which fulfill their personal desires within their imagination. There is a sense of comfort in knowing that the characters they choose to fixate on, unlike real people, help support the idea of a simple relationship through their apparent lack of "needs or expectations and [their enjoyment of] the imperfections in their male partners" (Taylor 12).

8. Connecting Fantasy with Reality

8.1. Databasing

For such reasons as discussed earlier, databasing and multiple-interest *otaku* are unique in how they have come to look past the narratives which inform the characters they enjoy so much. Instead, they tend to focus on the minute details which make these characters so physically and emotionally attractive in the first place. Whether these traits are cultivated from Eastern or Western cultures, when effectively pieced together they amount to a character that exudes a sense of *moe*. This is one of the foremost reasons why characters found in *anime*, *manga*, visual novels, and dating simulation games have gained such popularity among *otaku*. While these products are most certainly enjoyed in mass quantity by the public—especially *manga*, which can be leisurely read while commuting—the manner in which these *otaku* approach and consume these materials is inherently different in nature than that of the unengaged reader. Instead of passively enjoying these goods, they take their original use several steps farther: instead of being interested in the overarching narrative, they are "satiated by classifying … characters … according to their traits and … creating databases that catalog, store, and display the results" (Azuma xvi).

The obsession with databasing *moe* elements can even be seen in the very rooms of *otaku* who—while they may own countless *anime*, *manga*, visual novels, games, and figurines—always find a way to neatly organize and display each individual element of their burgeoning collection, so as to give each piece its own special place to occupy, just as they do within their hearts. This is in stark contrast with the living quarters of *hikikomori*, whose rooms generally reflect the inner workings of their mind, which have become clouded from self- and society-manufactured seclusion—suffice it to say, they occupy spaces which are decidedly less organized and in a general state of chaos and disarray, with remnants of consumed meals, empty bottles, and other general refuse littering all formally empty areas of the room.

However, it should be reiterated that databasing *otaku* are still a rather new variety of *otaku*; the majority are not nearly as invested in the *moe* elements to the point that they wish to database them. Rather, they usually prefer to focus on the overall narrative instead. But because of the growing popularity of such characters, even in lieu of an overarching narrative, a greater number of products are being "designed specifically to elicit an emotional response in the consumer" (Galbraith, *Moe* 5). In a sense, a growing number of characters in Japanese media are being specifically designed so they can be easily "removed from context, emptied of depth and positioned outside reality" (2). In this way, it becomes as though they are "bod[ies] without organs" (2), in that they are missing elements that would make them more realistic, which is not what these *otaku* look for in fictional characters. True to the effects of postmodernity and the move away from the grand narrative, characters positioned within the narrative are deconstructed into "constituent parts that inspire *moe*, or '*moe* elements'" (4) that these *otaku* crave.

Indeed, tossing aside the narrative presented in an *anime*, *manga*, or game in favor of unearthing a character's *moe* elements is the real goal, and the reason these *otaku* so easily shift from one source to the next. Ultimately, the "functions of *moe* elements in *otaku* culture are not so different from those of Prozac or psychotropic drugs" (Azuma 94). As such, the satisfaction that these *moe* elements elicit in the consumer is generally fleeting by design. In order to regain such feelings once again, databasing *otaku* in particular—the second type, who is most concerned with leaving their mark on the world—is constantly searching for the next rendition of *moe* elements. This is accomplished by following online forums in order to find out what is on other *otaku*s' radars. After coming upon their newest notable discovery in the realm of all things considered *moe*, these *otaku* naturally progress towards taking these individual *moe* elements and recording them, usually in an online database such as Tinami.

Such databases afford this type of *otaku* a rare opportunity to engage in a hobby which they can inherently claim as their own and do with as they see fit within the confines of a largely collectivistic society. These databases also allow them to consolidate their obsessive behavior with like-minded friends and acquaintances. This is the reason these "*otaku* choose fiction over reality" (27); it is not because "they cannot distinguish between them but rather as a result of having considered which is the most effective for their human relations" (27). Of course, even though this hobby affords *otaku* a way to interact with other people, one can still view the impersonal activity of databasing as one which forgoes "the substance of sociality" (93) while still "maintain[ing] its form" (93) on the outside, framing the interactions *otaku* do have with each other as hollow and devoid of meaning. It should still be noted that for whatever the reason, the *otaku* subculture is still largely social, as they often use their hobby as a context for attending conventions, cosplaying, and meeting up with other like-minded brethren to discuss the newest incarnation of *moe* elements they have chosen to fixate on.

8.2. Figurines

Figurines are yet another way of bridging the unreal and the real, allowing *otaku* to become that much more intimate with the characters over which they obsess. American geeks and nerds often collect figurines of their favorite character or superhero as well; however, they cannot compare to the unique way in which *otaku* interact with their own brand of figurines. Such figurines—often costing obscene amounts of money and often equally obscene in physical appearance as well—are a highly popular means of displaying one's devotion to the pantheon of *moe*-evoking characters produced in Japan. An *otaku*'s ability to afford a number of boxed, pristine condition figurines with which to display in their often cramped apartment spaces or rooms denotes an almost *otaku*-exclusive status symbol of sorts.

With the creation of this *otaku*-centric hobby, another *otaku*-inspired term was added to the Japanese lexicon: "figure *moe zoku*", meaning "figure lover group" in English. First coined by Akihiro Ōtani, a Japanese journalist who led an outwardly political but inwardly personal crusade against *otaku*, the term is made up of three distinct elements: "figure"—short for "figurine"—with "*moe*", and "*zoku*", a word denoting a tribe, clan, or family. Originally the activities of those *otaku* who are especially keen on collecting figurines were related to agalmatophilia, the sexual attraction to figurative objects. Unfortunately, the term instead became synonymous with the *lolicon* subset of *otaku* after the kidnapping and murder of a 7-year-old girl in November 2004. Ōtani had theorized that the killer's actions came from his interest not in the girl's "living body, but in her corpse" (Wikipedia), which brought up the contrast between a living human and a lifeless figurine. Just as Miyazaki was falsely labeled an *otaku*, thus giving the entire subculture a negative and highly unfavorable undertone, this killer was labeled a *lolicon* vis-à-vis the connection with figurine-obsessed *otaku* that Ōtani conjured out of thin air. Since the incident, the term has reverted back to its original connection with agalmatophilia, and it has become an unspoken part of Japanese society that such *otaku* do exist, but their activities are not—and will never be—remotely related to such horrible incidents.

8.3. Dating Simulation Games

While figurines are indeed a popular staple of *otaku* consumer culture, the medium which would seem to best imbue these static characters with a sense of responsive interactivity and real-world social application would likely be via a decisively technology-driven form. In this regard, the dating simulation game might exemplify technology's growing capability to fulfill *otaku*'s desire for intimacy, in a way removed from the stifling confines dictated by reality. Also known as *bishōjo* (beautiful girl) games, [and] sometimes called *galgē* (girl games)" (Galbraith, *Bishōjo* 6), the user chooses between several different 2D characters to court. The genre's purpose is to allow the player to meet, become familiar with, and eventually start a relationship with a character—or multiple characters—of their choice.

The other forms of media *otaku* consume are of a decidedly more passive nature, in that there is no direct or necessary interaction with the 2D character being portrayed—they are simply there for the purpose of evoking a desirable response in the user. In fact, dating simulation games could even be considered "interactive *anime/manga* with erotic content" (Taylor 198) in that they add the defining interactive element to the picture. There are also novel games, which require the user's input to a lesser degree. All that is necessary is their physical presence as they click through the dialogue in order to advance the story. On the other hand, true dating simulation games have certain plot points where the outcome can be determined by the user, like a choose-your-own-adventure, but rather a choose-your-own-girl. Whether such games are played on a computer or portable console, there is still a greater degree of choice and interactivity when compared with other popular media towards which *otaku* gravitate.

Dating simulation games take the assumed one-sided interaction between an *otaku* and the 2D character they are viewing and raise it to a new level, in that the emotions and feelings of the virtual girl the player chooses to court become just as important. As such, it can be said that dating simulation games create a false yet comforting "sense of engagement and often control in the illusory world of the video game" (Cross 224). Thus, this type of relationship "goes beyond the carefully calibrated 'payoffs' of emotional 'hits'" (224) that are the goal of most *moe*-centric media these *otaku* consume. They also allow *otaku* to bridge their desire for techno-intimacy with the connections they have forged with other *otaku*; indeed, because many of these games are played on portable consoles, they essentially "[allow] bonds to be extended from private to public space" (Galbraith, *Bishōjo* 15), giving *otaku* the opportunity to both be social with friends and yet bring their virtual girlfriend along as well.

There is a unique "social dynamic here, in which the machine is a part" (15), and this is very valuable for *otaku*, for just like people in normal relationships they still want a way to interact with others without being tied down by

an immovable, static image of their desires. However, this virtual girl is indeed only virtual, and as such fits the term "technological companion species" (15) more so than a virtual human. While this may be so, it is feasible that this very distinction between real and unreal is what makes such virtual characters so attractive to *otaku* in the first place. Rather, it is more important that an *otaku*'s imagination focuses on creating "a vision of the life form …that feels real and to which one relates" (Allison 178). In that respect, even the "imagination of a 'significant other' is real" (Galbraith, *Bishōjo* 16), and this reflection is more important than the perceived presence of the dating simulation character. As mentioned, many *otaku* may have at one point tried to start a relationship with a real woman, only to have it fail or simply not come into being. Of course, this is not the only reason why *otaku* may turn to the unreal in a bid for love—albeit on a virtual level—but it certainly becomes a much more attractive alternative considering real women's own, often confrontational, ideas about the life they want to lead and the kind of person to whom they would like to marry.

8.4. Cosplay

However, the most socially acceptable means for *otaku* to both display their love of a character and engage with others who feel the same is via the act of cosplay. Both Japanese and American *otaku* are fans of this hobby, which at its most basic level involves dressing up as one's favorite *anime*, *manga*, or video game character and even going so far as to act like them. The origin of this phrase comes from "Takahashi Nobuyuki … founder of and writer for Studio Hard, an *anime* publishing company" (Winge 66). Having attended a science fiction convention in Los Angeles, he returned to Japan after being highly "impressed with the costumed science fiction and fantasy fans" (66) he witnessed there. In writing about his experience, Takahashi "encourage his Japanese readers to incorporate costumes into their *anime* and *manga* conventions" (67), coining the phrase "costume play, which was eventually shortened to *kosupure*, or cosplay" (67). In so doing, Takahashi inadvertently "added two new words to the subculture and pop culture lexicon: cosplay and cosplayer" (67).

The primary goal of cosplay for Japanese *otaku* is the "enactment of two-dimensional characters" (Galbraith, *Moe*11). While the "crucible of *moe* is a de-emphasis on the reality of the character and relations with the character" (11), cosplay is the most notable exception to this rule. Rather, it is not even that much of an exception, for in the mind of the *otaku*, cosplayers and the act of cosplaying occupy a "liminal existence between fantasy and reality" (11); that is to say, they are "2.5 dimensional" (11)—located right in between 2D characters and 3D human beings. For the Japanese *otaku* who is obsessed with *moe* elements and the euphoric response they evoke, cosplay is yet another means of exploring the "two dimensional, the image, for the virtual possibilities of the character" (11). It all goes back to what the cosplayer represents in the mind of the spectating *otaku*, not so much what they see directly in front of them, which is clearly of 3D form but possessing those characteristics and *moe* elements which are otherwise only found amongst 2D characters. The aim of cosplay is to more fundamentally challenge the 2D-3D boundary by linking that which is fictional with reality—cosplayers operate within the bounds which separate these two distinctions, yet at the same time manage to link them together through this unique hobby.

Otaku who are interested in assuming the role of the character they adore "[make] a costume as close to an image as possible and [memorize] character poses and spoken lines" (11), for it is these specific elements of a character—costume, poses, and lines—which most often invoke a *moe*-induced response. So careful are they to maintain the form and composure of the character they are cosplaying as that if another *otaku* wishes to take a photo of them, the cosplayer must first confirm that they successfully "recreate[d] the aura of the character" (11) when the photo was taken—if not, they may "request images not 'in character' to be erased from the photographer's camera" (11). This is the length to which *otaku* cherish these characters, to the point that they do not wish to desecrate their image and natural aura by making the mistake of posing out of character—a strong indication of how much *otaku* know about the character and their inner workings, for indeed, how else could one make such a purposeful, exact judgment?

9. Conclusion

Due to a number of external factors, chief among them the individuality-shunning, sexually-repressive nature of Japanese society, and the overwhelming pressure to succeed academically and assert one's assumed masculinity, those who exhibit qualities of an *otaku* are eventually drawn to certain hobbies—*anime*, *manga*, video games, etc.—as their chief means of emotional support in the face of a restrictive, collectivist society. Due to the Internet's innate ability to globalize cultures and make them more accessible, *otaku* have been highly influenced by the freeing, individualistic lives they see and hear being led by Westerners outside of the confines of Japanese society. As a

result, they often desire to adopt that sense of freedom and individualism into their own life as a means of going against the current and carving their own path. They choose to focus on what satisfies their individual needs instead of the Japanese community at large.

Thus the daily existence of *otaku* is defined not only by their obsession—which in this particular case are the fictional characters in *anime*, *manga*, video games, and visual novels that possess certain qualities which, when applied in the right way, elicit a desirable emotional response—but how they came to cope with their suppressed individuality, which has been successfully accomplished in a wide variety of ways. While there are certainly nerds, geeks, and other such individuals in America, the most important distinction between them and Japanese *otaku* is the latter's unique desire to free themselves from the confines of their society by carving their own path in life, while being emotionally supported by both other like-minded peers and the fictional characters they love. However, this is not meant to imply that *otaku* outright reject Japanese society—rather, their aim is to find a way for individualism to co-exist with collectivism. As is the case, most types of *otaku* are able to achieve this precarious balance, and in effect meet society halfway. There is a consensus of sorts within the *otaku* subculture which declares that it will operate within the general contours of Japanese society, as long as there is still access to the types of media over which *otaku* choose to obsess.

However, in regards to the two types of *otaku* which are focused on throughout the paper, this balance is a great deal harder to achieve; due to their compulsion to categorize and database *moe* characteristics in order to help satisfy their Prozac-like cravings for *moe*-induced euphoria, they generally retreat from Japanese society more than most types of *otaku*. As such, it is these specific types of *otaku* who have the most difficult time conforming to the demands of Japanese society while juggling the particularly obsessive nature of their databasing hobby. In this sense, they could very well be viewed as counterparts to *hikikomori*, although they respond to Japanese society's demands in a decidedly different manner.

Whereas *hikikomori* are prone to collapsing in on themselves as a result of societal rejection and apathy, *moe*-obsessed *otaku* take a decidedly different route: they have pinpointed a niche in which they can take a part of Japanese society and mold it to their preference and desires. This reaction could very well be seen as a way of regaining some semblance of control in their private lives that they inherently lack in the real world. As a result, the *otaku* subculture has come to be more or less tolerated in contemporary Japan—as long as the fantasy in which they indulge is not taken to an extreme. Such self-indulgent interest in Japanese media is allowed as long as it does not significantly harm or upset the balance of Japanese society, and so it goes on to co-exist with the collectivist values perpetrated by Japanese society.

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