

Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Media Mixes, Hypersociality, and Recombinant Cultural Form

By Mizuko Ito

From 1998–2002, I conducted fieldwork in Tokyo among children, parents, and media industrialists. One focus of my work was *Yugioh*, the wildly successful Japanese *anime* (cartoon) and *manga* (comic) series, which was a phenomenon among elementary-age boys¹ in Japan from 2000 to 2002 and which is now firmly entrenched in European and American youth culture.

The *Yugioh* comic series has spawned a television cartoon, an immensely popular card game, over ten different video game versions, and character goods ranging from T-shirts to packaged curry to pencil boxes, all of which manifest the *Yugioh* imagination across multiple sites of consumption, play, spectatorship, and social action. *Yugioh* is an example of a "media mix" of the type pioneered by *Pokemon*, integrating different media forms through licensed character content.

One survey in 2000 of three hundred students in a Kyoto elementary school indicated that, by the third grade, every student owned some *Yugioh* cards (*Asahi Shinbun* 2001). The *Yugioh* cartoon was released in the US in 2001, and now the card game has overtaken *Pokemon* here in popularity. *Pokemon* was a breakthrough media form in positioning the strategies and narrative of a video game as fodder for serialized, non-interactive forms of media (TV, *manga*) as well as relying on portable and intimate technologies (Game Boy, playing cards) that enabled kids to perform these narratives in diverse settings of social interaction (Allison 2002). *Yugioh* similarly relies on virtual game play as the focal object of serialized narratives enacted in digital, analog, and everyday sites of play.

Here I use the case of *Yugioh* as a way of exploring emergent technologies of the imagination, i.e., how certain social conditions and cultural forms of childhood are tied to newly pervasive media technologies. Like Benedict Anderson (1991) and Arjun Appadurai (1996a), I see the imagination as a "collective social fact," built on the spread of certain media technologies at particular historical junctures (Appadurai 1996a, 5). Appadurai has argued that the circulation of mass electronic media has defined a role for the imagination that is more integrated with the everyday lives of ordinary people. He also posits that people are engaging with these imaginings in more agentive, mobilized, and selective ways, as part of the creation of new kinds of collective identifications, or "communities of sentiment." (1996a, 6–8). "The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (1996a: 7). My focus is on the more recent

¹Although some girls engage with *Yugioh*, it was decisively marked as boys' content, unlike *Pokemon*. I don't have space to describe a case of a girls' media mix, and consequently, the topic of gender difference. But I would like to note that, like most kinds of technology-oriented media cultures, the trends in *anime* media mixes are being set by boys' media and filtering over to girls'.

technologies of networked digital media and how they are further inflected toward ubiquitous, activist, and customized engagements with a technologized imaginary. More specifically, this essay describes the imaginary of *Yugioh* as built upon media mixing as technical form, *hypersociality* as social form, and *remix* as cultural form.

The Media Mix

In the past decade, study of digital culture has increasingly recognized that the "virtual world" of the Internet is a site of "real" politics, identities, and capital rather than a dematerialized realm of free-flowing information (for example, Castronova 2001; Hine 2000; Lessig 1999; Lovink 2003; Miller and Slater 2000; Rheingold 2002). The media mix insists that we also recognize the inverse flow: the real is being colonized by the virtual as technologies of the digital imagination become more pervasive in the everyday environment. *Yugioh* and an ecology of pervasive digital technology in urban Japan are indicative of this porous membrane between the real and virtual, the imagination and everyday life. Through dramatic competition between players, fantastic creatures manifest in the everyday world with more and more fidelity through advancing virtual, or augmented² reality technologies; familiar settings in the urban landscape are transformed. In the *manga*, duels become vividly life-like through "duel disks" worn on the players' arms that project the monsters in vivid holographic 3D. Virtual monsters inflict bodily damage on real life duelists as they blast the playing field with dragon fire and destructive magic.

Yugioh is similar to the media mixes of *Pokemon* and *Digimon* in that they involve human players who mobilize other-worldly monsters in battle. Unlike *Digimon* and *Pokemon*, however, the monsters in *Yugioh* inhabit the everyday world of Yugi and his peers in the form of trading cards that the players carry with them in their ongoing adventures. The "other world" of the monsters is in intimate relationship with the everyday; the human players in the *manga* mobilize monsters in their everyday world, and kids in "real life" mobilize these same monsters in their play with trading cards and Game Boys. The activities of children in our world thus closely mimic the activities and materialities of children in Yugi's world. They collect and trade the same cards and engage in play with the same strategies and rules. Scenes in the *anime* depict Yugi frequenting card shops and

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

buying card packs, enjoying the thrill of getting a rare card, dramatizing everyday moments of media consumption in addition to the highly stylized and fantastic dramas of the duels themselves.

While the intertextual dynamics of media mixing have existed for as long as people have transcribed oral narratives or dramatized written ones, contemporary versions do have unique qualities. They go beyond the more familiar form of adaptation between one media form and another, as when a movie is made with the characters of a prior book or video game. With *Yugioh*, multiple media forms *concurrently* manifest an evolving but shared virtual referent of fantasy game play and collection. And unlike earlier forms of card play, *Pokemon* and *Yugioh* cards are tied to an immense narrative apparatus of *anime* and *manga* series spanning multiple years, as well as digital game play. Cards and card decks are marketed based on their association with particular *anime* characters and episodes, and the Game Boy and Play Station games reproduce the *anime* narrative. Conversely, players can input the codes on the physical cards to make those same cards manifest in Game Boy games, to play against their friends or characters in the *anime* series. The media mix is a heterogeneous but integrated web of reference manifesting in multiple material forms.

Hypersociality

In addition to manifesting the imagination in everyday life through teeming media technologies, media mixes also change the positioning of the media consumer. Far from the shut-in behavior that gave rise to the most familiar forms of anti-media rhetoric, this media mix of children's popular culture is wired, extroverted and hypersocial, sociality augmented by a dense set of technologies, signifiers, and systems of exchange. The image of solitary kids staring at television screens and twiddling their thumbs has given way to the figure of the activist kid beaming monsters between Game Boys, trading cards in the park, text messaging friends on their bus ride home, and reading breaking *Yugioh* information emailed to a mobile phone. This digitally-augmented sociality is an unremarkable fact of life now to the current generation of kids in urban Japan. Now that the majority of Japan accesses the Internet through mobile phones and Game Boys are becoming the preferred platform for game play, computer and TV screens are no longer privileged access points to the virtual and the networked world.

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

The imagination of *Yugioh* pervades the everyday settings

of childhood as it is channeled through these portable and intimate media forms. These forms of play are one part of a broader set of shifts towards intimate and portable technologies that enable lightweight imaginative sharing between people going about their everyday business. These include trading cards, portable game devices, an extensive range of "character goods" that display characters like Yugi on food, clothing, and school supplies, as well as multi-



media mobile phones that capture and exchange visual as well as textual information (Ito 2003; Okabe and Ito 2003). The imagination is now more than ever part of the semiotics of everyday social life.

Remix and Revaluation

Rather than a one-way street connoted by the term mass media or mass culture, hypersocial exchange is about active, differentiated, and entrepreneurial consumer positions and a high degree of media and technical literacy. This builds on the sensibilities of kids that grew up with the interactive and layered formats of video games as a fact of life, bringing this subjectivity to bear on other media forms. Players build a personalized relationship to this content by collecting their own set of cards and virtual monsters and combining them into a deck or battle team that reflects a unique style of play. *Pokemon* decisively inflected video game culture towards personalization and recombination, demonstrating that chil-

dren can master highly esoteric content, customization, remixing, and a pantheon of hundreds of characters. These more challenging forms of play have also attracted a wide following of adults.

Like most popular forms of *anime* content, *Yugioh* has an avid following of adult fans, often labeled by the Japanese term for media geek, "otaku" (Napier 2000). Adult *otaku* communities are the illegitimate offspring of the *Yugioh* media empire, and are in an uneasy relationship with the entertainment industries that create *Yugioh* content. They exploit gaps in dominant systems of meaning and mainstream commodity capitalism, mobilizing tactics that are a thorn in the side of those relying on mass marketing and distribution. With the advent of the Internet, *otaku* communities found their medium, an organizing ground for special interest fan communities and a site for distribution of alternative content and grey market goods. For example, comic artists intervene in the symbolic and economic exchange of *Yugioh* by creating zines that depict liaisons such as those between a feminized Yugi romantically coupled with his card-duel rival, a gently domineering Kaiba. They sell their glossy productions on the Internet and at Comic Market, the largest "trade" show in Japan, which brings together 300,000 fans twice a year. Cultural remix is about the appropriation and reshaping of mass cultural content as well as its revaluation through alternative economies and systems of exchange.

Card *otaku* are also considered a threat to normalized capitalist relations. As atomized and commodified offspring of an empire of the imagination, trading cards invite unique economies of exchange. *Yugioh* cards have been released in a variety of forms, including ready-to-play packs, vending machine versions, and limited release versions packaged with Game Boy software, in books, and distributed at trade shows. The most common form of purchase is in five card packs costing ¥150 (just over \$1). A new series of these five card packs is released every few months. When purchasing a pack of cards, one doesn't know what one will get within the fifty or so cards in a series. Most card packs have only "normal" run of the mill cards, but if you are lucky you may get a "rare," "super rare," "ultra rare," or perhaps even an "ultimate rare" card in one of your packs.

One kind of *otaku* knowledge is known as *sa-chi* or "searching." These are methods by which card collectors identify rare card packs *before* purchase. Collectors meet to make the rounds of convenience stores. They share tips and techniques, and eventually post them to web sites that traffic in cards. I find myself out at 1 AM with a group of card collectors, pawing through three boxes of just released cards. The salesperson is amused but slightly annoyed, and it takes some negotiating to get him to open all three boxes. My companions pride themselves on their well-trained fingertips and disciplined vision that enables them to identify the key card packs. They teach me a few tricks of the trade, but clearly this is a skill born of intensive practice. After identifying all the rare, super rare, and ultra rare cards in the store,

they head out to clear the other neighborhood shops of rare cards before daybreak, when run-of-the-mill consumers will start purchasing.

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

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

Technologies of the Imagination

The backchannel discourse of the card *otaku* is the mostly unsung but often performed story of *Yugioh* as a case of new economy commodity capitalism and of an entrepreneurial, extroverted, and wired childhood. Unlike spectacular narratives of good and evil told on the TV screen, the buzz of competitive exchange between kids in the park, the furtive rounds of collectors in the night, and the flow of cards and monsters through Internet commerce and street-level exchange point to a peer-to-peer imaginary that is heterogeneously materialized and produced through highly distributed social practices. The imaginary of *Yugioh* refuses to be contained within the sanctioned networks and contact points of mainstream industrialists marketing hegemonic narratives to supposedly passive masses of children. Portable, intimate, and personalized digital media (described in the technology world with terms such as augmented reality or ubiquitous, mobile, and pervasive computing) couple with

emergent changes in the way we affiliate, organize, and imagine. While the Internet has stolen center stage in our theorizing of new forms of communication and relationality, media mixes in children's content, operating below the radar of adult society, have been quietly radicalizing a new generation's relationship to culture and social life.

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

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Online

Address

On December 5, 2003, the SSRC Education Program launched the Transitions to College project's website: "Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice." The Program's goal is to build an on-line multi-disciplinary and multi-media resource center for students, scholars and practitioners working on transition issues. The site includes records of journal articles, reports, policy briefs and other materials. Registered users may search these records and add to them. The project's committee members may use the site to post and amend their in-process work for the project, as well as add citations, websites, conferences and events that relate to our project's mission. The site also features a bulletin board of public events and fellowship opportunities and an extensive list of websites relevant to transitions to college.

This site is an experiment: an attempt to build a virtual research tool for a highly diverse set of users that reside in very different kinds of intellectual locations, with direct input from those users. We also hope that it will provide an interesting model for a virtual workspace that will increase the efficiency and quality of our work by allowing committee members to communicate easily with each other and with the SSRC staff.