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Joseph Britton

“A man who is *ill-adjusted to the world* is always on the point of finding himself. One who is adjusted to the world never finds himself, but gets to be a cabinet minister.”
Hermann Hesse

ABSTRACT

The Japanese youth are re-defining and re-shaping themselves-physically, mentally and spiritually. What does this new *presentation* mean for Japan’s future and how is it influencing the youth culture’s *perception of communication*?

This paper, part of which is based upon my interviewing(400)18-22 year old Japanese, along with a control group of(20)23-60 year old working Japanese over a period of 7 years will begin by exploring the changing *nature of Japan’s youth and their tendencies*. A special focus will be placed on the rising power of Japan’s *otaku-nerds/geeks*; especially the *akiba-kei*- the gadget obsessed, self-centered, young men and the fast growing number of women. Next, we will take a journey into the unique *communication paths* they are forging with robots and through the mediums of simulated games and virtual social networks. And last, we will examine the refreshingly new *social interaction products* they are cultivating and, in turn, the challenges these innovations place upon society.

My premise is that Japan is becoming an *otacool nation*. This word I have created is a combination of *otaku* and the intriguingly, fashionable social distinction of being *cool*.

INTRODUCTION

What is propelling the dynamic society of Japan that is driving the cultural and technological innovations through-out Asia, and influencing lifestyles around the world? In general, the Japanese society runs like a well oiled machine, with endless checks and balances to assure that all its inhabitants know and follow the time honored, established *rules*. It is a country of over-lapping *groups* of members who lend support to all within their circle. What happens when some people jump out of their group, thereby, losing their pre-determined *way* and *identity*?

Within these Japanese social group bubbles, cultural transformations are taking place that will dramatically effect how we perceive and live our lives. With their enchantment in *developing anthropomorphic robots, computer generated animation(anime), manga comics, computational intelligence, screened social interactions, and non-physical*

communications the fantasy world of virtual social networks and its highly dedicated, sub-culture lifestyle have spread their influence through-out Japan and into the youth mind-set around the world. My focus will be on these new worlds of inter-personal communications ‘*where no man has gone before*’...or have they?

COMMUNICATION

The notion that true communication takes place best in a sensory rich environment whereby two people are in each other’s physical presence of seeing, hearing, touching and smelling will, in the near future, continue to be considered vital, yet, merely a subset of what we accept as *interpersonal communication*. In its most general form interpersonal communication would include gestures(physical and non-verbal), writing and verbal speaking. A message, or as I would prefer to frame it, an intention, is directed toward a destination-another person, a group or oneself as in a diary. The quality of the message is determined by the sender’s clarity in transmission of which is inherently bonded to the degree it is clearly and openly received and understood.

What happens to communication when the two parties are not face to face? In not seeing the subtle facial gestures and body movements, nor hearing variations in voice power and inflection, along with removing our subconscious sensing of shifts in the other’s energy field how do we compute, conclude and understand intentions, meanings and inferences?

Let’s explore a variation on this theme of communication by entering the world of the Japanese *otaku*. Within the etymology of the word *otaku*(お宅)is the honorific term for another’s house or family. Yet, it is also an honorable way to refer to the second person pronoun as in *thou* or the singular *vous* in French. Today though, it is a slang word and is thereby written in hiragana(おたく)or katakana(オタク)and refers to a fanatic with the character traits of a geek or nerd. The word *otaku* went through a negative metamorphosis in the 1980s with the writings of humorist and essayist Akio Nakamori¹ His influence stirred such *otaku* related comments as “*They are the type that generally live in their parents’ basement at 30 years old and have no social life*”, from *Urban Dictionary*, and “*The Japanese have never been good at verbal communication, but the problem with ‘otaku’ is that they are so engrossed in their own favorite world and don’t have the ability, interest, or confidence to interact with other human beings. Their impact on society is enormous*”, Hiroko Mizushima, a legislator and psychiatrist(*Washington Post*), reprinted in *Japan Today*. From this point the negative stereotype spread through the Japanese psyche and still colors the *otaku* of today. Is this a true depiction? Yet, as the Psychiatrist Carl Jung once said, “Nothing worse could happen to one than to be completely understood.” I believe the present day *otaku persona* needs some facial adjustments.

There are many manifestations of the Japanese *otaku*, but this research will focus on

the technologically driven and inwardly seeking *gēmu otaku* (video and online gaming), the *pāsokon otaku* (personal computers), *roboto otaku* (robots) and a variety of other virtual reality centered *otaku* and their interaction with the outer world.

Among my interviews and surveys with over 400 young students (computer science, mathematics, physics, science and engineering majors) sympathetic to and naturally aligned with *otaku* I have assembled a trend, an inertial flow, an undertow running counter to the Japanese *salaryman* and always-in-style young ladies (*oshare garu*) image. What follows are perceptions and opinions, by those surveyed, of *otaku* life today. As an added note, the Japanese youth culture is very sensitive to changes in trends that seem to sweep the country in dramatic form and quickly change direction like flocks of birds or schools of fish.

OTAKU NATURE

1. pacifists
2. Buddhists
3. multi-taskers
4. intellectually driven
5. good “short term” memories
6. comfortable with robot companions
7. lovers of anime
8. fantasy seekers
9. gamers
10. prefer virtual, non-physical body worlds
11. sparse with hugging, touching and greetings
12. oblivious to big department store clothing styles and the season: prefer checked or *anime* shirts, chemically washed slim jeans, small back packs, caps and scarves anytime
13. convenient processed, fast food including McDonald’s, Moss Burger, Yoshinoya cheap beef dishes, vending machine “oden kan”, and processed nutrition bars, e.g. Calorie Mate
14. dislike for natto, celery, shitake mushrooms, eggplant and fish (note: these food items seemed to come up frequently in the negative category)
15. collect dolls and figurines of heroes and idols
16. reluctant to communicate in person with others and very shy with the opposite sex

The above are general tendencies, reference points from where to begin, markers along life’s daily unfolding forming a setting from which one may peek into *otaku* nature.

The *way* of the *otacool* is to transfigure accepted patterns of beauty, lifestyle and truth itself. In stepping outside of the Japanese group and, in turn, outside of society’s

box, the *otacool* touches other ways to be alive. Priorities are set up around *mind-time*; a time to enter the mysterious realms of the imagination; a time to interact with possibility; a time to bring back never seen treasures from foreign lands. Often entry into these mental spaces is through self reflection, art, science and digitally created virtual environments-all reality testers and shapers. Such is our power to explore wonder.

As we all are creatures of the earth though, delighting in touching the soil beneath our feet; smiling with the cool breeze that blows through our hair on a warm, summer eve; smelling bread as the hot oven door opens; singing a song arising from our soul; and melting into the embrace of a lover we need the sensual too. Among the shy, focused, inwardly drawn *otaku* there is often a desire to explore this gentler, warmer, loving aspect of life, including healthy relationships. Those *otaku* who bring back bright concepts and successfully integrate them into a balanced lifestyle of mind's creativity with earth's sensuality become today's true *otacool*.

OTAKU INTERESTS

In search of where and what are the interests of today's *otaku* I met with Osaka Prefecture University's Professor Nobuhiro Sugimura, an internationally renowned researcher, designer and leader in *Intelligent Manufacturing Equipment and Systems* (IMES). Professor Sugimura's interests are in creating *intelligent factories* that integrate robots with manufacturing tools and equipment. The initial goal is to increase the decision making abilities of each piece of equipment. The greater goal is creating an autonomous and cooperative manufacturing and distribution system. Each building block-*holon*-within this system, is itself autonomous and cooperative. Each *holon* consists of an *information processing* part and often a *physical processing* part thereby giving it the capability of controlling its own decisions in using data for strategic planning and manufacturing. A *holarchy* is thus created consisting of 'a system of *holons* that can cooperate to achieve a goal or objective. The *holarchy* defines the basic rules for cooperation of the *holons* and thereby limits their autonomy.' Professor Sugimura stated that a *holarchy* is based upon the fundamental principles of a healthy society whereby the individualist is working together with others to create something beyond itself, a functioning whole benefiting others.

At this moment, *holarchies* work best in manufacturing systems that require small volumes of precision work and frequent changes in specifications.

In questioning Professor Sugimura about the future of holonics he mentioned the following, "I would like to see human operators replaced with *holonic* equipment. Self-replicating robots and software are now available. An example is to look at Fanuc Robotics, based in the States, which has over 155,000 robots in operation."

'Do you foresee any future problems with these *holarchies*?' "Not so much between *holons* and humans, but possible collisions between the *holons* themselves in decision

making.” Professor Sugimura believes that as Japanese have grown up with robots, there is a level of comfort and admiration. I suppose one day it will be mutual.

Within the mindset of the *intimacy, human touch shy otaku*, an intelligent, responsive, non-emotionally threatening robot would be a good place to start ‘working on’ relationship communication issues...within him/herself and within the robot.

How may we then define *intelligence*? In pursuit of this question, I interviewed Professor Hisao Ishibuchi. He spoke of three types of *intelligence* that we are dealing with today. The following is a brief overlay based on our *intelligence* today:

1. **Biological Intelligence**-motivation, free will, self-preservation, perception, attention, language and mathematics skills, cognition, meaning of subtle facial gestures, and intentionality
2. **Artificial Intelligence**-decisions and conclusions, though potentially vast in number, are limited to the criteria and context of choices inputted by humans
3. **Computational Intelligence**-self evolving decision making by machines

In writing about *biological intelligence*, Professors Donald and Elaine Delaune Distinguished Professor of Electrical Engineering at Louisiana State University has written, “...ecological systems, which are biological communities that have complex interrelationship amongst its components, are self-organizing, without being self-aware. This suggests that while self-organization is a necessary pre-requisite for consciousness, it is not sufficient.”²

Consciousness now comes into this discussion as a topic of a longtime intense debate: ‘Is intelligence linked to consciousness?’ In an attempt to avoid a cursory analysis of this magnificent question, I will touch upon two tests; one is a computer-human competition, and the other is a human to computer communication.

First, during the 1900’s, IBM was touting the near human-like artificial intelligence of *Deep Blue*. *Deep* represented deep thought, and *Blue* honored IBM’s self-endearing name of Big Blue. This 1300 kg computer boasting a highly parallel system had just been installed with the latest chess *knowledge*.

But first there was Garry Kaparov, child prodigy; Grand Master chess champion at the age of 17; the youngest world chess champion ever, at age 22; the supreme strategist with his uncanny, lightning fast intuitive play; who never lost a chess match during the 12 years of his reign. On May of 1997, he conceded defeat to Deep Blue in just 19 moves.

As David Stork, chief scientist of Ricoh Silicon Valley observed, “Controlled psychological experiments have shown that human chess masters are far more accurate than non-chess players at remembering chess board positions taken from real games, where the placement of pieces arose in strategic play and represented meaningful tactical

positions...chess masters remember positions based on certain patterns, alignments and structure whereas, of course, computers have no difficulty remembering – storing – all the games or random arrangements ever made and need no “meaning” in the placements.

“Humans are slow but exquisitely good at pattern recognition and strategy; computers, on the other hand, are extremely fast and have superb memories but are annoyingly poor at pattern recognition and complex strategy. Kaparov can make roughly two moves per second; Deep Blue has special-purpose hardware that enables it to calculate nearly a quarter of a billion chess positions per second.” *Intelligent?* Perhaps. And conscious? Maybe not at this point.

Now, let’s take a different seat and look again at *intelligence* but from Professor Hisao Ishibuchi’s point of view. His third category, *computational intelligence*, a process whereby, the computer grows and evolves in its learning, appears to be imbued with an almost child-like quality. He likens this to neural networks in the human brain and in real world applications of *fuzzy logic systems*. If computers could be programmed to accept and use imprecise information they would be more...like us. According to Steven Kaehler, fuzzy logic engineer, “FL provides a simple way to arrive at a definite conclusion based upon vague, ambiguous, imprecise, noisy, or missing input information. FL’s approach to control problems mimics how a person would make decisions, only much faster.”³

For humans, this fuzzy, indirect internal process of not knowing precisely where one is going, or how to communicate what one is looking at, is a bit like Heisenberg’s *uncertainty principle* or an *otaku*’s perception of where he is and who he is talking to. *Moving through ambiguous, unorthodox landscapes of unknown possibilities is the romantic nostalgia of otaku.*

For now, *computational intelligence* is being used for such tasks as optimizing university schedules, transportation routes, and designing wing shapes of airplanes (wings bend, vibrate, carry enormous loads and conduct lightning across their surface).

In a moment of reflection, Ishibuchi mentioned that in 50 years, computers could be more *intelligent* than humans. With *computational intelligence*, mutations and the inability to determine the results are part of its inherent nature. In its own fuzzy way, surely this will lead to interesting times. Japanese have found a way to embrace the elusiveness of ambiguity that blurs the lines between the inanimate, animals, ghosts, nature, robots and humans.

An important area of interest for Ishibuchi is evolutionary competition, whereby computers are competing against each other with ever increasing skill. This correlates with the work of Professor Tomoharu Nakashima.

Nakashima is a researcher, supporter and promoter of the international Robo Cup tournament. He specializes in simulated robotic soccer matches which, in turn, model the

physical soccer robots. On a broader level, his hopes are that simulated robots will accurately evaluate the performance of physical robots in such areas as strength and feasibility for design. The next step leads to simulated robots being able to communicate with and supporting our decision making. One area that Nakashima would like to strive for and encourage is the simulated robot serving as our therapist, for body and mind. Certainly, *a welcome direction for otaku* who, in the privacy of their room, could delve deeply into their physical and emotional state with the *privacy and intimacy of their simulated robotic therapist* who has virtually come to visit, with no constraints of time or judgment.

Robocup and Nakashima's dream are entwined—a robot soccer team to beat the human World Cup Soccer champions by the year 2050.

Consciousness is an ever evolving process. In this case, with robots and their interaction and *communication* with humans, what is it that's evolving?

TURING TEST

In returning to one of the original questions in this paper: “Is a machine *intelligent and is it linked to consciousness?*” let's look at test two (test one being DEEP BLUE's chess triumph). It may be of philosophical and historical importance to go back to the year 1950. In these fledgling days of *super fast analyzing* machines, the computer science pioneer Alan Turing proposed his famous test: There are two keyboards in front of you, one connected to a computer, the other leads to a person. You don't know which line goes where. On each keyboard you type in the same question(s) on any topic you like. Both the computer and the human respond by sending their message to each respective computer screen. If you cannot reliably determine which was the person and which the computer, then we say the computer has passed the **Turing test**. Therefore, if the computer is *communicating*, albeit written responses, with answers that are seemingly intellectually reasonable, is it *intelligent*; and if emotionally imbued, is it *conscious*?

What might a world look like where individual human wills, many human wills, interact within endless combinations of mind-stretching possibilities all instantly simulated in the massive memory banks of computers? Enter...

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLEPLAYING GAMES(MMORPG)

According to Video console historian, David Winter⁴ the first video TV game was conceptually created by Ralph Baer, an engineer at Loral TV in the USA. A brief history of the highlights follows:

1. 1951—first video *TV game*, in conception only, by Ralph Baer
2. 1952—first graphic *Tic Tac Toe* game, played on TV simulator, by A.S. Douglas at the University of Cambridge, England
3. 1958—first computer game, *Tennis For Two*, by Willy Higgenbotham, Brookhaven

National Laboratory, USA

4. 1966 – first playable *video game*, played mainly in arcades, a chase game, by Magnavox
5. 1972 – first *PONG* arcade game, created by Atari
6. 1972 – first home video game, *Odyssey*, by Magnavox
7. 1982 – ushered in new era and level of game playing with Nintendo's *Famicom* (Family home computer games)
8. 1983 – 1985 Nintendo has nearly complete worldwide control over the video game industry with Famicom (NES). Their first big hit was *Donkey Kong* that included Mario

1990 marked the beginning of powerful computer driven games whose simulations started approaching real life dramatizations. According to Marcus and Mattias Liedholm, documenters of home computer games, the major events in this entertainment arena occurred in this order:

9. 1990 – Nintendo releases their Super Famicom (SNES) in Japan and *Super Mario Brothers*
10. 1991 – Sega releases *Genesis* (a.k.a. *Mega Driver*)
11. 1995 – SONY releases *Play Station*, and Sega their *Saturn*
12. 1995 – Nintendo releases *Pokémon*
13. 1996 – Nintendo enters the 64 bit market with their “Nintendo 64”

The 32 and 64 bit home video consoles soon overtook and eventually eliminated the old coin operated arcade games. A new age in virtual realism had arrived. As an historical note, PACMAN, up to this point, was the most popular coin operated game in history. PACMAN would eventually be put into home TV consoles and handheld units while being further developed by many companies e.g. Namco, and Mindscape, and played on various platforms e.g. Atari, Nintendo and Sega.

1995 was a monumental year in game development. 30 year old Japanese, Satoshi Tajiri, who as a child was called “Dr. Bug”, created a video game whereby the players could catch, collect, and train hundreds of creatures known as *Pokémon*. *Pokémon* would become a multi-billion dollar franchise empire capturing the video game, anime, manga, card, book, and other media venues. The name *Pokémon* (ポケモン) interestingly came from the French Romanized contraction of the Japanese brand, **Pocket Monsters** (ポケットモンスター *Poketto Monsutā*).

These *Pokémon* could evolve by learning new and more powerful techniques. They never died, but merely fainted, allowing them to go into combat another day. The evolution and no bleeding aspects were sensitive and critical aspects of game playing for

Tajiri. In interviews, Tajiri⁵ has mentioned that as a child, while playing near the fishing pond or looking under stones he would observe the insects communicating with but also competing against one another. But to his dismay, he would also watch as the trees around his neighborhood were slowly being cut down and the population of the insects decreasing. Tajiri took these ideas and, with Japanese sensibility, created the concept of a communication cable between two players who, like in karate, compete, yet subtly bow to each other in respect. For Tajiri it was important that these *Pokémon* monsters were controllable by the players. “It could be the monster within yourself, [representing] fear or anger, for example. And they are put in capsules. Plus, everybody can give them their own names.”⁶

It is at this point that I believe *frames the true*, and often *hidden, nature of otaku*. Tajiri, whose influence in the gaming world has been of enduring significance, embodies a personality that was often alone, searching, highly sensitive to the world around him, striving for new ways to communicate, looking for peaceful ways to compete, and adverse to bloody violence. These attributes he took into the inner world of video game playing; the world that would soon be inhabited by millions of *otaku* worldwide. There is no doubt that much of video and online game playing since then has taken a more violent direction especially outside of Japan. Yet, I would agree with Tajiri’s initial ideas that it is a way for individuals, many of whom are too sensitive to the onslaught of real world violence in fighting and environmental degradation, to *work through these fears and conflictions* of good and evil, right and wrong, the strong and the weak, within the beautiful and the ugly qualities that manifest around us yet live within all of us.

The next major step in video gaming came in the mid-90s with SONY’s Playstation and Sega’s Saturn. Today, this group of industrial cultural mind formers has been joined by Microsoft with their Xbox.

MMORPG

We are now in the world of MMORPG, or for so many people, it is in us. I’m referring to the intoxicating, exotic, dopamine driven mind rush induced by *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*. Today’s online software uses complex routines that allow the characters to respond to each situation differently. The software today is a form of artificial intelligence that approaches the independent “thinking” concepts of computational intelligence presented earlier. And the processing speed of the hardware is fast, very fast. The characters and their settings look mystifyingly alive and act in what appears to be real time. Upon entering this world, your character can act out chosen personas; and can change at your wish their personality, appearance, name, and the setting. The weak, the poor, the ignored, and the scorned shall inherit the earth, and all the heavens above; and the hells below for those who dare to travel where the dark and vile creatures roam.

As the trend is toward *online* gaming, the *otaku* have enriched an imaginary world

that is becoming ever so real. For a small fixed monthly fee, using wide band or cell phones, plus the cost of the game software, you can purchase a permit for endless hours and times of playing.

Some of the more popular titles are *Final Fantasy XI*, *Halo 2*, *Warcraft*, and *Aegis*, an engaging format of real world confrontations of war, politics and military strategy. Some of these games have over 6,000,000 players who have jumped in and joined the membership guilds.

As MMORPG is stretching the envelope of the imagination, it in itself is being taken into new territory, with MMOG - Massively Multiplayer Online Games. They are attracting more females than the MMORPGs, though the overall percentage remains low compared with males. Within MMOG the emphasis is placed less upon role playing and more upon building new realities and ways of "living", like *Second Life*. The MMOG software engines allow player-created content within the games, from animation to life-like architectural settings and self created textures in a "persistent" world. For those with an entrepreneurial inclination, these games can then be sold for a profit.

Nick Yee⁷, online gaming researcher at Stanford University, in interviewing 30,000 online gamers compiled the following demographics; surprising, to some.

Average age – 26

Median age – 25

Range in age – 11 – 69

Teenagers – 25%

Female users – 8 – 16% depending on the game

Work full time – 50%

Married – 36%

Have children – 22%

Yee found that the average gaming time per week is 20 hours, though for many, it is not unusual to play 40 hours a week when the urge arises. At first, this may seem to be so much, but according to *Roper Reports* that monitors media viewing habits, "Globally, individuals say they spent 16.6 hours watching television, 8 hours listening to the radio, 6.5 hours reading and 8.9 hours on computers/Internet (for non-work related reasons) on average each week." More specifically, this broke down to 19 hours per week of TV watching in the USA, 17.9 hours in Japan, and 17.3 in France. Statistically speaking, average online gaming time is not out of the ordinary for typical weekly media viewing time worldwide.

In the world of MMORPGs, typically, a new person will join a guild, a team, comprised of a group of members. Each guild member will take on a certain personality trait that will respond accordingly to the other members and the action at hand. Yee's research found the characters to be most chosen are: the *tragic*-slain parents, pained lovers; the *zany*-humorous, never tragic; *interaction*-scripted parts gradually developed by

other's response to them; *drama queens*-overly emotional, high strung; *heroes*; and *villains*.

At times, there are people who jump deeply into online gaming and appear to take on the negative personality traits often associated with *otaku*. First of all, not all gamers are *otaku*, and not all *otaku* traits are negative. Through my interviews, I've come to the conclusion that online role playing games *do not create psychological conditions* in the players such as: withdrawal, depression, anti-social behavior, and an inability to cope with real world conditions, along with feelings of being misunderstood, not accepted by others, and not being appreciated. Online gaming does not cause but rather *highlights the existing symptoms*, and for many, provides a setting from which it is possible to *nurture undeveloped positive traits*.

There is no doubt that many people become obsessed with online gaming-why? For many people, with varying shades and degrees of *otaku* nature, the virtual world is not only a release from the stresses of the real world, but a place to "safely" work out, explore, experiment with, and grow with newly discovered parts of themselves. Actually, *joining a guild* in an online game can be very challenging in demanding *teamwork, communicating decisively with the others, socializing, courage, creativity, maintaining a focus, and at times, leadership skills*. The rewards are the building of prestige as one moves to higher levels of playing, pushing the limits of power, and gaining a sense of accomplishment, along with the virtual accumulation of *loot* (virtual reward items).

As a comparison one might look at *Superman Returns*, the 2006 movie rendition of the American mythological hero. Superman had his debut in Action Comics in 1936. In the story, he is a young man who was born on another planet, Krypton. As a note, this is not so different than the Japanese *Ultraman* series that began in 1966. Superman is sent to earth on a spaceship, for his safety and well-being, by his father who he really doesn't know. He is raised by a kindly couple, but always feels like a stranger or someone who doesn't fit in. He has two personalities: one is Clark Kent, a city reporter whose glasses and necktie are always crooked; is forever tripping over or bumping into things he doesn't see in front of him; feels shy and awkward when communicating with women; doesn't know how to make and keep relationships of any kind; and is especially underappreciated by others. His other personality, Superman, comes out when the helpless are in need, whereby, he fervently takes off his required business clothes and reveals the Superman outfit hidden beneath. He now is ever-confident, compassionate, mighty and powerful. He flies through the air, sees through buildings and can hear anything, anywhere. Nothing escapes his scrutiny. He's a savior for humanity from the tyrannical evil-doers who continually ruthlessly harm, steal from, and kill innocent people. He is loved by all except for the villains who roam the earth. This story, and its accompanying movies, comics, dolls, and clothing, has become popular among those who enjoy mythology and hero stories, and especially among the *otaku*. It's a metaphor for the dual

personalities that many find themselves in; the underdeveloped outer person and the bold hero beneath.

MOE CULTURE

“*Moe moe!*” the shout of joy or cheer by *otaku*. *Moe* is slang for a “very cute thing, or lovely thing.” Many of the *otaku* heroes and adored stars come from the characters in *manga*, *anime*, video and online gaming. A girl character that is idolized is given the added name of Tan(たん), the charming and cute child’s mispronunciation of Chan, a name of endearment given to young Japanese girls. An example is in the anime story of *Binchou-tan*, a girl who lives by herself in a house far from town. She wears a piece of charcoal on her head. Binchou-tan is seemingly orphaned, takes care of herself by working and buying what she needs, and in the beginning is quite a lonely person. Ren-tan, another young girl in the story, is a *miko* and thus communicates with spirits. Other characters round out this anime series of good-hearted survivors of what life has, sometimes, cruelly given them. For male and female *otaku*, these *anime* characters often reflect how they find themselves in everyday life.

A massive, extensive industry has been built around this *moe culture*. Shirts designed with *moe* characters, *moe* and *otaku* pants and hats that have now been universally integrated into standard clothing wear, dolls of the *anime* and on-line gaming idols and heroes, *maid cafes*, along with many more games, *manga* and *anime* to be consumed by the ever-loyal *otaku* and now an ever-growing fan base of mainstream followers. 65% of anime worldwide are made in Japan, but South Korea and China are quickly catching up in adapting the *moe culture* including all the electronic devices and lifestyle items that support it.

The expanding *doll and figurine industry* has been quite a surprise with the famous electronic gadget districts of Akihabara in Tokyo and Nihonbashi in Osaka full of doll stores. Often they are found near the *maid cafes* (*meido kissa*), theme cafes that cleverly cater to the special needs of *otaku*. Upon entering a *maid café*, a young waitress dressed in a cute, traditional European maid outfit, teacher or doctor uniform, greets the customer with “Welcome Master” while bowing reverentially deeply. In the cafe will be found large journal books for the customer to write short letters to one of his favorite maids. As part of her job, she will soon write a response in the journal so that when he returns, he can sit at his table or often a desk, and leisurely, by himself, eat his dessert while reading this letter from his fantasy admirer; and such is their communication. Perhaps a sign on the wall quoting Dr. Seuss would fit in here, “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind.”

POP ART

Within the *pop art* venue, I interviewed on several occasions **Junichi Ono**, the teenage pop artist phenom. Time Magazine in 2003, chose him as one of Asia's top ten child prodigies. From an early age he was traveling freely through the world of symbols, images and meaning. In his bright room, private and secluded from the outside, filled with pens, pencils, paper, computers and games, the creations of his lively imagination take shape. At the age of 8, after visiting the Statue of Liberty, he gave his first exhibition of sketches from his impressions of this grand monument. At the age of 10 he published his first book. NHK TV broadcasting company made a documentary on his life that has been aired more than 6 times by request from the viewers. He has held exhibitions in New York and Seoul, and by request of Prime Minister Koizumi met with President Bush as an adversary of peace. He has done charity exhibitions for Afghan refugees and victims of the tsunami disaster of 2004. His artwork is on T-shirts, postcards, bags, accessories and TV anime. His colorfully inspired message shines of hope for global peace and friendship.

Although Junichi Ono exhibits otaku tendencies, he is well integrated into society and represents today's *otacool*.

2-CHANNEL

If *otaku* are shy and indirect about their face to face communications, then what form of communication, outside of gaming, can channel their need to share? In 1999, upon the Japanese social stage, entered Hiroyuki Nishimura. A self-proclaimed *hikikomori* (an adolescent or young adult who has chosen to acutely withdraw from the rest of the world, and often a severe reclusive version of *otaku*), Nishimura started a major social phenomena, **2-Channel**. *2-Channel* (ni chaneru) is the most popular website in Japan, and one of the largest message boards (BBS) in the world. This site receives over *1 million posts per day*, and over *20 million views (hits) per day*.

Why has this site attracted so many people?

1. *Over 200 topics of discussion* – covers a variety of areas from computer hacking to preparing a sumptuous dinner to political leadership

2. *Attention getter* – announces events or news that Japanese feel close to; arouses group action against unjust social law and corporate misbehavior; encourages group protests against corrupt politicians

3. *Anonymity* – no social pressure from personal criticism for points of view posted; no dominant person to influence or control the others; one idea is accepted as much as the next

4. *2-Channel culture* – members call themselves (ni chan ne rah). Posters (members) can create short *anime* pieces for all to view. Text only anime characters are created, shared, and added to by the posters, e.g. a bear/cat mascot and Giko the cat

At first sight, one may describe this as a Japanese nation-wide entrenchment from the stresses of everyday life and, in turn, a diminishing of the quality of communications one might receive in face to face relationships. My analysis though of *2-channel* is a broad based communication platform serving a deep seated need for Japanese to connect emotionally and intellectually. Along with the desirous aspect of being part of a group friendships are deepened and new ones created, albeit virtually. For the *otaku*, it's an emotionally safe way to express thoughts and new ideas without being judged by others along with reaching out. Today's Japanese society is fast paced with many demands; a reality inherited, and not brought on, by the young. *2-Channel* is super-connecting people.

MIXI

How about simple, relaxing fun? Let's take a close look at *MIXI*. *MIXI* is the biggest Japanese Community Entertainment Social Network. The word stems from a combination of *I* and *mixes* with others. It was founded by Kenji Kasahara in 2004, and it took two years to reach five million users. 70% of the members are in their teens and early 20's. How does it work?

1. People join a circle by invitation only
2. It's free of charge to join
3. Members must be 18 years of age or older
4. It's wholesome, safe, and comfortable
5. Can communicate with people of similar interests along with friends of friends
6. Personal profiles and diaries to be read only by circle members and commented on
7. Blogging free of charge up to a limited amount of storage, beyond that a small monthly fee is charged
8. Personal lifestyle preferences shared within the circle, e.g. music can be downloaded through iTunes, Windows Media Player, and Winamp, and then listed for all circle members to view
9. Movie, music, and product reviews by the members
10. Easy purchasing of products – an important revenue stream as members are connected directly to the internet sellers e.g. Amazon Japan and iTunes. This is an added feature beyond that offered by MySpace of the USA and Skyblog, a web log, in France.
11. Information search, along with MIXI general broadcast information

There has been concern expressed by some that MIXI creates exclusivity by each group as membership to a circle is by invitation only; the possibility of privacy invasion; false personas are sometimes represented; and MIXI intoxication. As membership is by *invitation only* this actually adds to its appeal by limiting false identities along with the “screening” of new members thereby providing a cushion of safety. Privacy invasion is

always a concern when online, but sharing personal information is also a personal choice. Upon entering these circles, actually virtual rooms, members have an expanded universe of friendship, and information sharing far beyond pre-MIXI days. Many interviewees I spoke with expressed having spent many times, and many hours deep into the night online with MIXI. *MIXI intoxication?* Maybe, but I recall my youth lifestyle survey responses from several years ago stating how many hours were spent on the telephone and more recently the cell phone, or watching late night TV. The MIXI phenomenon symbolizes a more focused, broader, richer communication and relationship with others and the world at large.

CONCLUSION

I would like to redefine *otaku* and, in turn, society's perception of their nature. I have called this *otaku* tendency *OTACOOOL*. The *otacool* of today are, in some ways, the shadows of *Zen* monks who, over the centuries, have illuminated the mindscapes of thousands of self-awareness journeyers. They withdraw, go into an isolated area, enter the realms of their mind, and face the creations of their conscious and unconscious imagination: fear, doubt, sorrow, pain, wonder, and joy. Deep feelings come forth of survival, sex, power, love, truth, and compassion. These feelings take the imaginative forms of protective deities and destructive demons of idyllic heavens and hellish landscapes. Scenarios from the most mundane to the heroic are played out. Are these *Zen*-like *otacool* the teachers or are they the students? They are *unenlightened teachers by default*, meaning they are traveling in new mental territory without guidance or seasoned wisdom and bringing many others along with them for this ride. The trip is, exciting, exhilarating, creative and at times, destabilizing, scary and, for some, dangerous.

Many *otacool* have had a *major influence* on Japan's society. Though often below the radar screen for observing, they have been prominent drivers in moving Japan out of the economic recession of the 1990s and early 2000s. Many have integrated well into the society. Many have not. Their devotion to *devising, inspiring and using high technology* hardware, software, tools, gadgets, anime, manga, robots, and games, along with a clothing style that has become mainstream pumped the Japanese economy. Jumping over to the States, one of earliest and most famous *otacool* is Bill Gates, Harvard University drop-out and Microsoft co-founder: a success in *otacool* integration. They have also *changed the way the youth of today communicate*. The network of friends and the amount of daily communications with others has, in general, vastly increased. Although much of this communication is in a virtual, non face to face form, at this point, one cannot say that it carries less feeling or is not as deep and meaningful as pre-internet days. The nature of the transmission of ideas, emotion and information has changed. The *sensory input within a communication exchange has been mitigated, but the importance of words and symbols has been enhanced*.

On some level it may seem that I've completely embraced the otacool lifestyle of befriending intelligent computers and withdrawing into fantasy worlds and virtual communication relationships. Actually, I believe in their premise and promise of an enriched life through a deepening and extension of the wonder of our imagination. There are *three important concerns* though that I have with the *otacool* lifestyle.

First, as Japan is moving more towards an *otacool nation* there is a tendency among young people to *withdraw from the outer real world*, and become physically isolated in a world of their own making. The negative implications could be seriously detrimental to the country, including such areas as forsaking responsible work and an inability to maintain harmony within social interactions.

Second, on the edges of society, there is a *polarization that is growing ever stronger*. Politically, the ultra-conservative far right, that fosters militaristic nationalism, has become more active, threatening and, at times, reactively violent towards people who publicly speak out on issues that run counter to their beliefs. The *otacool*, though not a political force and seem to take little political action, are taking up the ultra left, liberal, anti-war, unobstructed freedom position. Albeit quite different than the action oriented hippies facing off against the pro-war conservatives during the Vietnam War, the *otacool* are standing against their nemesis figuratively through battles on the virtual playing field. Despite this ultra-conservative right wing group being small in number, their voices are loud, demanding to be heard and emotionally felt, and their actions forceful. *Otacool* character on the other hand is energetically and metaphorically the polar opposite in being outwardly peaceful, quiet and sensitive; maybe too sensitive to the violence of armed conflict around the world, nuclear threats from North Korea, environmental degradation from global warming and pollution, clean water sources decreasing, and a looming energy crisis. For *otacool*, these problems are then internally transformed to the extent of each person's ability to do so, diminished, or even dismissed in the shared privacy of their virtual worlds.

My *third* concern is *integration*. To be fully functioning, active, healthy, contributing members of society *otacool* must find a balance between living in the inner and outer worlds. There is a time to go within to collect, to assimilate, to refresh, to organize, and to renegotiate one's relationship with the greater Life. And there's a time to go outward into the world as an integrated whole being. The question is, "Who is willing and who is capable of understanding their special characteristics and needs and, in turn, guide the *otacool* towards confidence, well-being and wholeness?" Such a demand is often beyond the parent's ability, as how could a parent fully understand unless he or she knows their world, experientially or vicariously. For a parent to live in this *otacool* state of mind with a child would not be easily accepted by the child, as it would be perceived as moving into their personal territory. And how many teachers are prepared to pass through the portals of this new land where the winds carry information coded in new forms,

relationships are built upon simulations, and guidance is scarce? It's a significant challenge that we are all faced with, and the degree to which we understand it will define the depth of our relationships, the clarity of our communications and the economic health of our society.

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