Akihabara

A Proto-Metaverse

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Akihabara is a district in Tokyo that has found itself transformed from a place for electronics to a fantasy-like space dedicated to the celebration and consumption of Otaku culture. In an interview with Patrick Galbraith, design theorist Kaichiro Morikawa explains that in his eyes:

> "This was not just a transition from shops specializing in one type of commodity to another. Rather, my argument was that the geographic concentration of otaku, who share personality traits and tastes, came to be reflected in the urban space of Akihabara. On all the signs—everywhere, actually—you can now see images of bishojo characters of the type preferred by otaku. It's as if private interests have entered into public space—as if the contents of an otaku's bedroom have spilled out into an entire neighborhood of Tokyo."[1]

This curious development can be likened to other spaces that exhibit hyperreal qualities, be it Disneyland or Las Vegas. How did the example of Akihabara come to be, what characteristics frame it, and how can it inform our understanding of technology and a move into cyberspace?

This chapter will establish how Akihabara exemplifies a transitionary period between digital and physical: In the years of early consumer digital information technology, Akihabara stood at the intersection of moé and character culture, which enabled its development into a physical hub for Otaku culture. Because the technology was yet nascent, an entire fandom instead comes to represent itself within a district in Tokyo and then said district goes on to be represented again

1 Galbraith, Patrick W.: *The Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming*, Tuttle Publishing, 2014, p. 160.

within their art. From media to maid cafes, this chapter will show how Akihabara can be understood as a unique analog representation of future digital spaces—A Proto-Metaverse.

I WHAT IS AKIHABARA? —TRACING THEORY AND HISTORY

Hyperreality, Simulacra, and Anticipation

The descriptor "hyperreality" can be traced back to philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco, who formulated the idea during his visits to the United States. To Eco, the worlds of Disneyland and other theme parks are categorized by their ambivalence to represent something accurately. Instead, they present an alternate reality that can fulfill the needs and impressions we are looking for more than an accurate representation could: "In this sense, Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure, it is a fantasy that is absolutely reproduced."[2]

Jean Baudrillard later spoke of the concept of simulacrum—a simulation devoid of an original—when outlining hyperrealities. He wrote: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[3] Hyperreal thus refers to the quality of something which is "more real" than its original. It is a focus on the defining, recognizable attributes, providing an exaggerated experience to which the real version cannot compare.

In *Vegas, Disney, and the Metaverse*, media and game studies scholar Gundolf S. Freyermuth outlines how the forming of the hyperreal spaces in both Disneyland and Las Vegas anticipates developments within media and technology.[4] The

2 Eco, Umberto: *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1986, p. 24.

3 Baudrillard, Jean: *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 1994, p. 1.

4 Cf. Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: "Vegas, Disney, and the Metaverse: On the Material Anticipation of Virtual Worlds and Virtual Play in the Second Half of the 20th Century," in: Beil, Benjamin et al. (eds.): *Playful Materialities: The Stuff That Games Are Made Of*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2022, pp. 17-97, here pp. 21-24, https://www.transcript-open.de/doi/10.14361/9783839462003-002

concept of anticipation originates within Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and it describes art's ability to foresee the forming of a future. [5] Freyermuth concludes that the unique hyperreal architectures and media landscapes anticipate the forming of virtual worlds through "a functional reconstruction of reality itself, or more precisely, the superimposition of virtuality on the material world."[6]

These developments have shaped our present state wherein proto-metaverses have emerged in games through social experiences such as SECOND LIFE and more traditional video games like MINECRAFT or FORTNITE that have evolved into social spaces.[7] The term *Metaverse* originates in Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel *Snow Crash* and describes a fully immersive and interconnected virtual world that people can enter and spend time in. [8] Freyermuth writes:

> "Compared to the media of the analog past, these virtual game worlds possess a unique quality: They have transformed from escapist entertainment, to which one retreats for a few hours, to living environments that—like Las Vegas—exist parallel to and entirely on an equal footing with everyday reality. Under the conditions of cultural digitalization, media utopias become social utopias, utopias of new hybrid life forms that survive partly in materiality and partly in virtuality."[9]

Akihabara is a similar type of space that exists 'in a different time' to the rest of the world. Akihabara, like Las Vegas, anticipates the forming of virtual words, though it does so through the specific lens of otaku culture and forms in a different historical context. However, as society moves onto a digital world, the physical precursors of it—the manifestations of proto-metaverses within reality—may prove to be ephemeral.

To understand Akihabara as a hyperreal space and how it formed as an anticipator of a digital turn, we must first understand its history and culture. Modern Akihabara is a space that was shaped by a particular group of people, the *otaku*. Without otaku and their obsession with *moé*, Akihabara would not have formed in the special way that it did. Thus, we need to first understand both otaku and their

5 Benjamin, Walter: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: Arendt, Hannah (ed.): *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, NY: Schocken Books 1969, p. 3.

6 Ibid., p. 84.

7 Ibid., p. 85.

8 Cf. Stephenson, Neal: Snow Crash. New York, NY: Bantam Books 1992.

9 G. Freyermuth: "Vegas, Disney, and the Metaverse," p. 86.

unique relationship with reality and how moé played an integral part in manifesting fiction within this place. Afterward, we will explore the multi-faceted way that otaku culture and Akihabara intertwine, and finally, we will look at how different virtualizing forces have been reimplementing the proto-metaverse into the digital space.[10]

Of Otaku and Moé

Otaku is a term that is surprisingly hard to define. I will give both a historical summary and a few different perspectives to provide context that will help clear up the term's meaning. Japanese culture critic Hiroki Azuma describes it by saying: "Simply put, it is a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on."[11] Morikawa in his paper on the topic offers its closest equivalents in English to be "nerd" or "geek."[12] However, it is of paramount importance to note that otaku does refer to a specific type of "geek."

Despite the initial impression one might have of the term otaku being directly tied to the manga or anime industry, otaku are not necessarily defined by being geeks who happen to be into anime or manga.[13] Morikawa traces the origin of the current term to an essay by Nakamori Akio where it is made clear that "these types aren't just manga fans" but can extend into people obsessed with computers, audio equipment, and idol fans, to name just a few.[14]

By the early 1980s, the term had become commonplace within communities to clearly differentiate themselves from 'normal people'; it was both self-deprecating and self-affirming. The term gained a strong negative connotation after the

10 For a glossary of the terminology surrounding Akihabara and otaku culture, see pp. 387-388.

11 Azuma, Hiroki: *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel/Shion Kono, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2009, p. 3.

12 Cf. Morikawa, Kaichiro: "おたく Otaku/Geek," trans. Dennis Washburn, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 25, no. 1 (2013), Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press 2013, pp. 56-66, here p. 57, https://doi.org/10.1353/roj.2013.0002

13 It should be noted that there is a difference between the Japanese usage of the term and the now somewhat common usage of the term in English—where it is specifically applied to people with interests related to anime and manga. The Japanese version is more far-reaching and less clearly definable.

14 K. Morikawa: *おたく Otaku/Geek*, p. 57.

murderer and rapist of four young girls, Miyazaki Tsutomu, was apprehended by police in 1989. The term was popularized by the media, who saw his avid collection of thousands of videotapes (including anime, special effects movies, and pornography) as the motive behind his horrible actions.[15] However, attempts at reclaiming the term have been made—especially since the success of the 1995 television anime NEON GENESIS EVANGELION,[16] which, according to Azuma, led to the creation of a new generation of otaku.[17]

It should be noted that the term has retained usage even as its proliferation to an international audience in the last 20 years continued and became more and more established, even among global communities.[18] Indeed, as Katelin Garner points out: "The sheer breadth of these commercial and public resources for anime-specific media indicates that Otaku Culture is no longer a niche subculture, but a ubiquitous and profitable market."[19]

However, Japanese psychologist Saitō Tamaki distinguishes between otaku and "maniacs." In his book on otaku psychology, *Beautiful Fighting Girl,* he writes: "I believe that today's otaku derive from a group of maniacs who have reacted to the changes in the media environment by a proliferating set of adaptations."[20] To Saitō, the difference between the two lies in that the otaku's focus lies within a different layer of materiality. A person obsessed with cameras would fall into the category of a maniac,[21] while a person obsessed with anime would fall into the category of an otaku.[22]

Saitō argues that where a maniac would collect objects or build out a radio setup, thus "possessing" their object of desire, otaku do so through fictionalization. He writes, "The only way that otaku have of acquiring the objects they love is by fictionalizing them and turning them into their own works. This inevitably

15 Ibid., p. 60.

16 NEON GENESIS EVANGELION (Japan 1995, D: Hideaki Anno).

17 Cf. H. Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, pp. 5-10.

18 Garner, Katelin: *The Digital Otaku: Anime, Participatory Culture, and Desire*, Long Beach, CA: California State University 2019, p. 23.

19 Ibid., p. 24.

20 Saitō, Tamaki: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. Keith Vincent/Dawn Lawson, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2011, p. 17.

21 I chose to retain the term that Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson used in their translation of Beautiful Fighting Girl. For clarification, the Japanese original uses mania/maniac, loan words from English that do not carry the negative idea of insanity the English terms do. They are closer to "enthusiasts."

22 T. Saitō: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, pp. 17-19.

leads to the creation of new fictional contexts," pulling in both the creation of derivative fanworks (doujinshi—more later) and cosplay as acts of otaku fictionalization.[23] Putting it succinctly in reference to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Saitō writes, "Maniacs are enchanted by the aura of the original object, while the otaku fashion an original aura for their (fictional) reproductions."[24]

The act of creating and layering fictional contexts can be seen as a central aspect of otaku identity. Media theorist Ōtsuka Eiji wrote on what he terms "narrative consumption" in 1989, describing a postmodern shift in consumption where "[w]hat is being consumed is not an individual drama or thing but the system itself that was supposedly concealed in the background."[25] This is a shift that Ōtsuka considers a move to a program (that is, a digital) type of narrative—he goes as far as to liken it to a video game.[26] Steinberg outlines in his translator's preface on Ōtsuka's essay how his research anticipated and helped shape the Japanese "media mix," the Japanese equivalent of the North American concept of transmedia storytelling.[27] Ōtsuka later went on to work on multiple media mix projects himself.

Within this new context, once the audience has understood the program, consumers can repurpose narratives to create new works within those narrative structures. In writing on the phenomenon of the publication of *Captain Tsubasa*[28] *doujinshi*,[29] Ōtsuka wrote: "These girls extracted the Tsubasa 'program' from Takahashi Yōichi's Captain Tsubasa and wrote their respective Tsubasas by following the order of this program in their own individual, creative ways. For these girls, the original work was merely the raw material from which to extract the Tsubasa program."[30]

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23 Ibid., p. 20.

24 Ibid., p. 19.

25 Ōtsuka, Eiji/Steinberg, Marc: "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative," *Mechademia* 5, no. 1 (2010), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 99-116, here p. 109.

26 Ibid., pp. 107-108.

27 Ibid., p. 100.

28 Takahashi, Yōichi: *Captain Tsubasa*, Tokyo: Shueisha 1981.

29 Doujin (同人—written with the characters for "same" and "person") in its etymology already outlines the idea. These are works made by average people often as a hobby—someone just like you and me, so to speak. The "shi" (誌) in doujinshi is simply the character for "magazine". These are magazines for like-minded individuals.

30 Ōtsuka refers here to the female authors of these fanworks (E. Ōtsuka and M. Steinberg: "World and Variation," p. 110).

This understanding of otaku as consuming narrative to create their own versions not only maps onto Saitō's ideas of otaku acquiring objects of desire through fictionalization but can be traced historically back to *Comiket* (short for Comic Market) where otaku sell these doujinshi and other derivative works.

Finally, it should be noted that despite the image potentially created through some of the descriptions of otaku and Saitō's focus on male otaku sexuality, it remains a gender-neutral term, and a significant portion of otaku are female.[31] Huge subgenres exist within female otaku communities, including Boys Love (or BL) fiction—doujinshi and works featuring homosexual relationships between male characters.[32]

Moé—Love for Fictionality

The fascination with fictional characters Saitō describes is so commonplace among otaku that it has earned itself a term of its own: *moé*.[33] To Saitō, the term is directly linked to otaku sexuality,[34] but I will be considering cultural anthropologist Patrick Galbraith's exploration of the concept in his 2014 book *The Moé Manifesto*[35] to build out a clear and comprehensive understanding of the term. Galbraith explains his position that moé is more than sexual arousal:

"I don't think the moé phenomenon can simply [be] explained as ogling cute girls. That doesn't explain Hayasaka Miki drawing from the perspective of his character's elder sister, or men dressing up as Haruhi on the streets of Akihabara, or the impulse to marry a fictional character." [36]

Within the book, Galbraith offers a succinct definition:

31 K. Morikawa: *おたく Otaku/Geek*, pp. 64-65.

32 Novitskaya, Alexandra: "Otaku Sexualities in Japan," in: *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History*, Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2019, p. 1179.

33 Sometimes romanized as moe. The accent emphasizes the pronunciation.

34 T. Saitō: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, pp. 29-31.

35 P. Galbraith: *The Moé Manifesto*.

36 Galbraith refers to Suzumiya Haruhi, main heroine of popular light novel and anime THE MELANCHOLY OF HARUHI SUZUMIYA (Japan 2006, D: Tatsuya Ishihara); P. Galbraith: *The Moé Manifesto*, p. 23.

"In this contemporary usage, moé means an affectionate response to fictional characters. There are three things to note about this definition. First, moé is a response, a verb, something that is done. Second, as a response, moé is situated in those responding to a character, not the character itself. Third, the response is triggered by fictional characters."[37]

What this means in context is that characters evoke moé within otaku. Galbraith outlines that it is a feeling unique to fictional characters—however, material representations of characters can evoke it. This includes voice lines, figures, art, or even a person in costume playing a character (cosplay). The important aspect here is that the moé is a response to the fictional character, not the human or the costume.[38]

Galbraith's work on moé is fascinating, and his interviews elucidating, especially in terms of how moé relates to gender. Many aspects break out of traditional gender norms and ideas of heterosexuality.[39]

Tracing Akihabara's History

Akihabara is a district located within Tokyo. While it used to be a destination for electronics, nowadays, Akihabara serves as the center stage of otaku culture. After being established as a district for electronic household appliances in the 1970s and through the 1980s, the burst of the economic bubble led to a specialization in personal computers.[40] Morikawa explains that this shift marked a change in visitor demographics—from families to young geeks.[41] This shift would be important for its later transformation. The appearance of game consoles in the space led it from a pure electronics focus to an expansion into pop culture.[42]

The release and success of NEON GENESIS EVANGELION spurred a boom in demand for all manner of merchandise, both official and unofficial, in the form of

37 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

38 Ibid., pp. 5-8.

39 See in particular his interview with Momoi Halko on page 72 onward in the book.

40 Morikawa, Kaichiro: "Otaku and the City: The Rebirth of Akihabara," in: Itō, Mizuko/Okabe, Daisuke/Izumi Tsuji (eds.): *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2012, pp. 133-157, here pp. 133-136.

41 Ibid., p. 136.

42 Nobuoka, Jakob: "User Innovation and Creative Consumption in Japanese Culture Industries: The Case of Akihabara, Tokyo," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 92, no. 3 (September 2010), pp. 205-218, here p. 209, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0467.2010.00348.x

doujinshi or garage kits (non-commercially produced model kits) starting in 1997. This extreme success catalyzed a rapid expansion and concentration of stores catering to these needs in an area where the target demographic was already present—Akihabara.[43]

Originally, another district of Tokyo, East Ikebukuro, had a headstart within the growing market. Anime-related stores riding the boom of the early 1990s gained traction in the area, but as Akihabara developed into a center for male otaku-oriented goods over the subsequent years, a gender split in urban development occurred. In Akihabara, personal computers (a largely male-dominated hobby) attracted mostly male visitors, while the stores in Ikebukuro, which had already seen a significant female visitorship, doubled down on serving their female customers.[44]

What sets Akihabara's development apart is that it is entirely a result of demand, not government or corporate intervention. Here, we can see the influence of cyberspace: Communities of interest organized through the web (thus gaining influence) not only flocked together online but shaped an entire district to be a space for them.[45]

II AKIHABARA AS A HYPERREAL SPACE

Akihabara, as a space, realizes the desires of otaku culture, pulling cyberspace into reality. Morikawa argues in his chapter "Otaku and the City: The Rebirth of Akihabara" in *Fandom Unbound—Otaku Culture in a Connected World* that:

"Simply put, in the case of Akihabara, an urban district was re-created by an architecture of tastes and interests as though the structure of the web manifested in real space. Computers are, by nature, machines that specialize in mimicking reality. Akihabara points in the opposite direction, where reality mimics the cyberspace created by computers."[46]

Akihabara—The Otaku Capital

Akihabara was transformed into the capital of otaku taste over the course of the 1990s—that is to say, it became the de-facto place to visit for anything relating to

43 K. Morikawa: "Otaku and the City," pp. 141-147.

44 Ibid., p. 140.

45 Ibid., p. 152.

46 Ibid., p. 152.

the growing subculture. Anime and its character goods, video games, novels, and more subsumed the electronic district over time as its primary merchandise. As this process continued, Akihabara became known as the primary destination for anything related to the topic. This, in turn, led to the secondary development of places specifically seeking to appeal to that target audience opening up—for example, specialty stores for doujinshi or maid cafés.

This has, over time, created a pilgrimage for visiting fans, which slowly converged in Akihabara, and as such, Akihabara became a symbol of otaku culture.[47] Hiroki Azuma, in his seminal work *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals,* argues that otaku culture is itself reflective of cyberspace, a place where grand narratives give way to databases. He argues that characters "are broken up into elements, categorized, and registered to a database. If there is no appropriate classification, a new element or category simply will be added. In this sense, the originality of an "original" character can only exist as a simulacrum."[48] Azuma goes on to point out that "in the shift from modernity to postmodernity, our world image is experiencing a sea change, from one sustained by a narrative-like, cinematic perspective on the entire world to one read-up by search engines, characterized by databases and interfaces."[49] This shift away from the narrative toward a focus on the characters opens a new avenue for fictional characters to go through experiences that themselves are drawn less from a direct narrative concept but rather from a database of shared experiences and tropes that continue to be referenced within otaku media.

Although Azuma does not make direct mention of him in *Otaku, Database Animals*, Lev Manovich also spoke of a shift towards a database model of understanding and relating to media in his 1998 article *Database as a Symbolic Form*. Manovich argues that while cinema centered on narratives as the key form of cultural expression, digital media instead focuses on databases. Referring to the act of the player building a mental model of the game's internal model, he writes: "What we encountered here is an example of the general principle of new media: the projection of the ontology of a computer onto culture itself."[50] Indeed, otaku culture can be viewed as a consumer culture defined by this database understanding of the narratives they consume. By the 2000s, many of these aspects of the database came into view clearly. Fans of anime began speaking of the "beach episode" or the "*onsen* (hot springs) episode" that many shows share. They became

47 Ibid., pp. 147-49.

48 H. Azuma: *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals,* p. 47.

49 Ibid., p. 54.

50 Manovich, Lev: "Database as a Symbolic Form," 1998, p. 5, http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/database-as-a-symbolic-form

part of the more extensive database. Viewers see the characters of any given show visit these places and play through the same ideas, just in a slightly different configuration over and over.

Any given aspect of the database soon loses its own reference point—a character with cat ears might become popular, and it will add the idea of cat ears into the database, which will then be eternally reproduced as an element of moé in and of itself. Otaku culture is permeated by simulacra—and as Azuma outlines, they are hyperaware of this distinction: "The otaku consumers, who are extremely sensitive to the double-layer structure of postmodernity, clearly distinguish between the surface outer layer within which dwell simulacra, i.e., the works, and the deep inner layer within which dwells the database, i.e., settings."[51]

How, then, does this relate back to Akihabara? Many characters in these works are themselves otaku and consume otaku media within their diegetic worlds. Just as otaku in our world go on pilgrimages to Akihabara, so do their virtual counterparts. Thus, Akihabara becomes more than simply a space for the fandom; it itself becomes part of the culture, part of the works that it is celebrating. As this process is repeated in the database, all aspects of otaku culture within Akihabara are reassembled. The Akihabara, brimming with otaku culture, becomes itself a part of the culture. These aspects turn synonymous with Akihabara as they continue to be represented again and again within otaku media; they are distilled down to an essential version of themselves and change. This feedback loop creates a space of hyperreality—it is more than simply Akihabara; it embodies the *idea* of Akihabara.

In each of the following subsections, I will explore a different aspect of this process, such as how the character culture gives rise to community or how the so-called maid cafés offer up spaces for roleplay. These aspects will be considered both in terms of their position in the space of Akihabara as well as how each gives shape to another part of the otaku consciousness.[52]

Akihabara as a Public Fantasy World of Desire—Of Storefronts and Moé Characters

One of the most striking things about Akihabara is its position as a public space. Not only are there huge billboards, but almost every storefront is also filled with

51 H. Azuma: Otaku: *Japan's Database Animals*, p. 33.

52 It should be noted that any facts within this chapter that have not otherwise had sources cited are based on personal experience over the course of multiple stays in Japan and many trips to Akihabara.

anime characters.[53] To be in Akihabara is to move through a distinct space where otaku culture is out on display, quite literally. Characters from recent shows will be on one building. Another will have an advertisement for a maid café. Yet another might carry an ad for an upcoming release: an adult dating sim game.

These ads have come to do more than simply provide space for companies to advertise. They form a large landscape of moé that proliferates all aspects of Akihabara's public spaces. Particularly fascinating is that even the train station is filled with posters and billboards relating to otaku culture.[54] Of course, advertisements featuring anime or moé characters are not entirely constrained to Akihabara; however, the complete focus on it is unique to it. There, we see a sort of gateway to other parts of the city that delineates Akihabara's moé landscape as clearly distinct from other parts of the city from the moment one exits the train.

In *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,* Foucault describes the concepts of heterotopias, places which "are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality."[55] Heterotopias are real spaces that reflect utopias into reality. The views that Akihabara opens up are those of a postmodern, media-consumer-centric fantasy world that yet exists as a space for that very consumer to live out and purchase objects of desire. It is at once a space where the visitor is pulled into a type of alternative reality with make-believe cosplay cafés while also being sold the newest game or anime figure.

Akihabara as a Space for Sharing in Community Creation— Of Comiket and Akihabara's Doujinshi Stores

A huge aspect of otaku culture is the self-reflective aspect. As explained before, borrowing Azuma's concepts of databases, the otaku media landscape is defined by its characters and sorts itself within databases. A huge aspect of this is the creation of non-professional doujin derivative works, which feature characters from popular franchises. These derivative works range from comics or manga (both pornographic and not), novels, games, or music and are produced for and have historically been sold at large, regularly scheduled events, the biggest of which is the "Comic Market" or Comiket for short.

The Comiket is a biannual event hosted at the Tokyo Big Site Exhibition Center, which, before the COVID-19 pandemic, drew over seven hundred thousand

53 K. Morikawa: "Otaku and the City," p. 133.

54 Ibid., p. 153.

55 Foucault, Michel: "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), p. 24, https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

visitors over four days.[56] It is an event with a long history, dating back to the 1970s, and has been hugely influential in the development of otaku culture. The doujin scene is a complex topic that has been studied extensively.[57] It served as an incubator for a lot of hobbyist talent, and many of the biggest production companies and creators of otaku media began by selling their work as a circle at Comiket decades ago, especially before digital distribution was widely available.[58] Continued existence is possible due to the particularities of copyright litigation strategies of companies in Japan.[59] While doujinshi could well be considered copyright infringement even within Japanese copyright law,[60] they have been allowed to exist and prosper by copyright holders as they have opted not to litigate.[61] Many of these derivative works then find their way not onto regular store shelves but rather onto

56 N. N.: "Comiket 97 After Report," **コミックマーケット公式**, accessed March 22, 2023, https://www.comiket.co.jp/info-a/C97/C97AfterReport.html

57 Nelle Noppe provides an excellent overview of the cultural, historic, and economic context of doujinshi (Noppe, Nelle: *The Cultural Economy of Fanwork in Japan: Dōjinshi Exchange as a Hybrid Economy of Open Source Cultural Goods*. PhD Thesis, University of Leuven 2014, https://lirias.kuleuven.be/retrieve/280506).

58 Circle as used in "sewing circle." Circles are the names or banners under which individuals or groups create doujin works and sell them; akin to a company or brand, though without any of the legal context. Cf. YABAI Writers: "Doujinshi and the Deal with Self-Publishing" *YABAI—The Modern, Vibrant Face of Japan*, June 14, 2017, http://yabai.com/p/2197

59 Cf. He, Tianxiang: "What Can We Learn from Japanese Anime Industries? The Differences Between Domestic and Overseas Copyright Protection Strategies Towards Fan Activities," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 62, December 1 (2014), pp. 1009-1042, here pp. 1010-1015, https://doi.org/10.5131/AJCL.2014.0029

60 Mehra, Salil K.: *Copyright and Comics in Japan: Does Law Explain Why All the Cartoons My Kid Watches Are Japanese Imports?*, November 25, 2002, Rochester, NY: SSRN Scholarly Paper, pp. 23-31, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.347620

61 The exact reasons for this are not clear—Mehra and He both offer multiple possible explanations, including lower financial gains on possible litigation, a less strict delineation of fair use, and a tacit agreement to not litigate since doujinshi are ultimately more beneficial to the industry than not. Many authors and artists pursue doujin activities outside their regular occupations and become part of the community around doujin works which also offers a degree of protection. While an exact look into the details is beyond the scope, the doujinshi fanworks' copyright infringements appear to be tolerated with an understanding that the industry has the power to interfere should the situation no longer be a benefit to them.

the shelves of specialized stores that focus on selling doujinshi (doujin manga or magazines) and other doujin goods. While these stores, such as *Melonbooks* or *Tora no Ana,* have branches even outside Tokyo, they are clearly concentrated in Akihabara, with *Tora no Ana* at its height having four individual locations within Akihabara.[62]

Since Comiket is a huge and time-sensitive event, many visitors prioritize certain artists and circles and aim to buy works they missed later in these specialist stores. This means that outside of these Comiket-style events, Akihabara is the go-to place to purchase these doujin works, and a huge market has developed around them localized within Akihabara. Shops like *Surugaya* or *Mandarake* have focused on second-hand reselling of otaku goods, including doujin works. A trip to Akihabara will often include browsing or seeking out new releases from the latest Comiket or looking through the second-hand shops for one particular article. Akihabara centralized the doujin world as a type of off-season Comiket. To be interested and partake in enjoying doujin works is—or at least was in a time before a fully digital distribution channel—to visit Akihabara in person.

Finally, it comes as no surprise that all aspects mentioned have been co-opted back into the larger database of otaku media. Light novels such as *Saenai Heroine no Sodatekata*[63] (*How to Raise a Boring Girfriend*) or manga *Stella no Mahou*[64] (*Magic of Stella*) offer a story of high schoolers starting their own doujin circle to make a visual novel or video game, the anime LUCKY STAR[65] features an episode that chronicles the process of attending Comiket, and the manga *Denki-gai no Honya-san*[66] (*The Electric Town's Bookstore*) follows the everyday life of a worker at one of these specialized stores. Thus, these parts of Akihabara never remain part of just the district; they have become part of the ethos of Akihabara itself.

Akihabara as a Communal Space of Play—Akihabara and Its Arcades

Arcades have played different roles in different countries and their domestic video game markets. While incomes were slowly declining in Japan, arcades remained

62 N. Noppe: *The Cultural Economy of Fanwork in Japan*, accessed April 5, 2023.

63 Maruto, Fumiaki: *Saekano: How to Raise a Boring Girlfriend,* 10 vols., Tokyo: Fujimi Fantasia Bunko 2012.

64 Cloba.U: *Magic of Stella*, Tokyo: Houbunsha 2012.

65 LUCKY STAR (Japan 2007, D: Yutaka Yamamoto, Yasuhiro Takemoto).

66 Mizu Asato: *Denkigai no Honya-san*, 15 vols., Tokyo: Media Factory 2011.

relevant for much longer than in the European or American markets.[67] Japanese arcades still exist and hold a sizable chunk of sway over certain genres, in particular up to the late 2010s, with only the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating a slow decline.[68] Rhythm games and fighting games are both outliers in terms of the longevity of arcade influence, largely for different reasons.

Rhythm games continue to benefit from unique physical interfaces, allowing for specialized game experiences that would not be easily accessible on PCs or consoles without high added costs via extra peripherals. Konami's Bemani games, like SOUND VOLTEX,[69] feature unique layouts with knobs and sliders for very different gameplay compared to a regular console controller. Furthermore, more recently, games like Sega's ONGEKI[70] feature card readers, enabling microtransaction-based monetization in the arcade. For well over a decade, arcades in Japan have also introduced save file systems via an RFID-based card, which has been standardized in recent years to allow interplay between different companies. While the Konami rhythm games strongly focus on original tracks and remixes, Sega's rhythm games provide a song selection from popular games and anime series. Ultimately, both are deeply linked to otaku culture as many of the arrangements are made by doujin artists, and both feature a plethora of doujin music originally sold at Comiket as part of their song libraries.

Fighting games are the other type of arcade game that continues to exist as a separate subculture in arcades. Deep into the 2010s, it was the industry standard for a fighting game to first release exclusively in arcades and then receive a console port over a year later. For many players who had direct access to arcades (which remain commonplace in Japan), this meant that the most recent version was usually played not at home but at the arcade, one quarter at a time. Beyond this, most weekly tournaments and smaller events were hosted at arcades, and inter-arcade rivalries built up as playing online (with arcade cabinets from all over the country) became a possibility. For the fighting games community, from the 1990s through the 2000s and 2010s and to a lesser degree until today, visiting an arcade was part of the regular play to enjoy the genre competitively.

67 Cf. Lewis, Leo: "Game on: Why Japan's Arcades Are Still Winning," *Financial Times*, February 9, 2017, https://www.ft.com/japanarcades

68 Cf. Ashcraft, Brian: "Arcades In Japan Keep Closing, Which Sucks," Kotaku November 24, 2021, https://kotaku.com/arcades-in-japan-keep-closing-which-sucks-1848115616

69 SOUND VOLTEX (Konami 2012, O: Konami).

70 ONGEKI (Sega 2018, O: Sega Interactive).

Unsurprisingly, Akihabara is home to many arcades in its blocks. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, four large SEGA buildings were entirely dedicated to arcades, not to mention others run by other companies, such as Taito, or individuals. To an otaku visiting Akihabara, dropping by an arcade can both be a planned destination or a short, spontaneous stop while waiting for someone. Though arcades are not uncommon per se in Japan, they do deserve special mention here because they fill out another aspect of the otaku lifestyle that transpires within Akihabara's borders—the actual act of media consumption itself is just as present as the purchasing of media. Consequently, arcade culture has become a larger part of the otaku media landscape. For example, the manga *Hi-Score Girl*[71] (later adapted into an anime) tells the story of two elementary schoolers and their visits to the arcades to play classic arcade games, with a special focus on fighting games.

Akihabara as a Space for Interpersonal Relationships—Akihabara and Its Maid Cafés

Another critical aspect of Akihabara as a cultural symbol is its maid cafés, which have become deeply intertwined with the location. They also do exist elsewhere, but they are disproportionately represented in Akihabara.[72]

What Is a Maid Café?

Maid cafés are, in simplest terms, restaurants or diners wherein a customer is served food and drink by waitresses dressed in maid outfits. The customer can additionally engage in conversation, play board games, and take commemorative photographs with the maids serving them.[73]

In *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, Patrick Galbraith, who spent years visiting maid cafés regularly and interviewing both customers and maids alike, offers an ethnographic account of them. It is clear that the need maid cafés are satisfying is not for food but for human contact and communication:

71 Oshikiri, Rensuke: *Hi Score Girl*, 10 vols., Tokyo: Square Enix 2010.

72 Cf. Galbraith, Patrick W.: *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2019, p. 188.

73 Sharp, Luke: "The Heterogeneity of Maid Cafés: Exploring Object-Oriented Fandom in Japan," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16, June 15 (2014), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0505

"Maids welcome customers, remember their names, ask after them and are generally obliging. In smiling and laughing, in showing an interest in their lives, maids give regular customers the confidence to engage in communication. Maid cafés also facilitate communication by structuring and simplifying interactions. Each purchase, each performance, is an opportunity for contact."[74]

Manifesting Fiction

Maid cafés are what Foucault terms heterotopias; they occupy a space outside of society and have a new formalized set of rules. Maids working at the café are not simply themselves—they become characters of a shared fiction. They turn into 2D characters, and sometimes, this is even represented directly through the creation of anime-style avatars for the maids.[75] The act of entering the maid café is ritualized, with maids greeting the "master" with the words *okaerinasai, goshujin-sama* (Welcome home, master), and everything beyond that point can be considered within the magic circle, part of the game.[76] Indeed, Japanese studies researchers Erica Baffelli and Keiko Yamaki go as far as to use the term directly:

"But both participants know that [the visit to the maid cafés] is a game and that there are rules, shared and accepted by participants. The relationship between customers and the fantasy world they create can be understood only if we consider the subcultural background which they share. In particular, customers enjoy this brief fictional entry into the manga-world, a fantasy place where they can meet their heroine or particular popular *moé* characters."[77]

This aspect of the cafés is notably not a merging of reality with fiction but rather a pocket of fiction brought to life within reality. In studying otaku, psychoanalyst

74 Galbraith, Patrick W.: "Maid in Japan: An Ethnographic Account of Alternative Intimacy," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 25, no. 2 (2011), sec. 19, http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue25/galbraith.htm

75 Galbraith, Patrick W.: "Maid Cafés: The Affect of Fictional Characters in Akihabara, Japan," *Asian Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (December 2013), pp. 104-125, here pp. 116-118, https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2013.854882

76 Cf. Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. Gillin, John L., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1949, p. 10.

77 Baffelli, Erica/Yamaki, Keiko: "Maids in Akihabara: Fantasy, Consumption and Role-Playing in Tokyo.," *Journal of International Economic Studies* 32, pp. 117-137, here p. 132.

Saitō Tamaki describes not a loss of distinction between fiction and reality but rather that otaku are "able to switch freely between levels of fictional context."[78] The maids—otaku themselves—are part of the performance.[79] In distinguishing from cosplay (wherein you take on the role of an existing character), Galbraith explains, "In contrast, in a maid café, one articulates a performance as a maid, which is an amorphous character inspired by manga, anime, and games, but also reflects one's own character. That is, the maid is both a fictional character and a form of self-expression."[80] The maids and customers are playing their parts in a shared fiction, created and maintained within the space of the café, offering a unique—and heavily mediated—form of expression and relationship bound within the subcultural rituals delineated within otaku media.

Maid Cafés as Part of the Akihabara Myth

Maid Cafés have become a distinct feature of Akihabara. Their ubiquity in Akihabara can manifest in many ways. Frequently, stories that take place in Akihabara feature maids prominently or as characters within their cast.

An example of the representation of maids in fiction is Faris NyanNyan, a maid character working at a café within the story of STEINS;GATE (Visual novel and multimedia franchise).[81] While a time travel story, it takes place almost entirely within Akihabara. Faris appears almost exclusively in her maid uniform and almost never breaks character save for those people she trusts.

While Faris is a side heroine in the STEINS;GATE franchise, other times, the maid cafés take center stage within fiction as well, as seen in the 2022 anime AKIBA MAID SENSOU[82] (Akiba Maid Wars), which focuses on a fictionalized Akihabara with maid cafés as fronts for the Yakuza and features an all-maid cast. NHK's 2005 documentary AKIHABARA GEEKS (NIPPON NO GENBA: AKIHABARA TOSHINOSE NO MONOGATARI) follows multiple "inhabitants" of Akihabara as it describes them.[83] Indeed, within them, we find a doujin game developer and a maid working at a maid café. Beyond that, Japan's official tourism website names maid cafés multiple times on its website on Akihabara, describing the town with

78 T. Saitō: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, p. 24.

79 Cf. P. Galbraith: "Maid in Japan," secs. 32, 33.

80 P. Galbraith: "Maid Cafés," p. 115.

81 Faris NyanNyan is her maid name; STEINS;GATE (5pb. 2009, O: Nitroplus).

82 AKIBA MAID WAR. (Japan 2022, D: Sōichi Masui).

83 NIPPON NO GENBA: AKIHABARA TOSHINOSE NO MONOGATARI (Japan 2005, D: Satoshi Kobayashi, Kohei Nagashima).

the words, "Once all about gadgets and the latest electronics, Akihabara is now an even mix of electrical goods megastores, maid cafés and all things anime."[84]

Maid cafés have become more than simple destinations for customers that just so happen to operate within Akihabara disproportionately—they have become a symbol of Akihabara itself. In the myth of Akihabara as the otaku capital, maids are now clearly considered "inhabitants" of the district. Even outside the maid cafés, the maids themselves are a common sight; there are usually many maids giving out flyers or tissue packs with adverts to passing pedestrians in the Akihabara district.[85]

While maid cafés can be represented in otaku media, this is also not a one-way street. For example, Hayakawa Kiyo, in his compendium on maid café *Meido Kissa de Aimashō* (Let's meet at the maid café), chronicles different maid cafés and their history. Of particular note is the *Pia Carrot!! Restaurant* that operated in Akihabara between 1999 and 2000.[86] The restaurant was operated by the publisher of the *galge* series PIA CARROT!! which centers around a fictional restaurant. Within the PIA CARROT!![87] games, most of the girls the player can romance are waitresses at the restaurant. Within the café the publisher operated, maids were dressed in the outfits of the in-game restaurant, letting players experience the moé they felt when playing the game in reality.

PIA CARROT!!'s maid café emphasizes how maid cafés are windows into a 2D world. In *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan,* Galbraith explains: "The significance of the maid café, as Hayakawa and Higashimura see it, is facilitating embodied interactions with fictional characters, or role-playing interactions with two-dimensional beings in the three-dimensional world. Bodies come together, but in addition to that of the costumed waitress is the character—or, indeed, characters—layered onto her. Recognizing that characters are a crucial part of interactions, if not the most crucial part, is distinctive of maid cafés in Akihabara."[88]

In contrast to Morikawa's description of the gender split between Akihabara and East Ikebukuro in the late 1990s (see *Tracing Akihabara's History*), in terms of demographic representation, we can also see a surprisingly large spectrum.

84 Japan National Tourism Organization: "Akihabara | Travel Japan (Japan National Tourism Organization)," *Travel Japan*, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.japan.travel/en/spot/2178/

85 Wired Staff: "Akihabara Lifestyle Weekend," *Wired*, September 18, 2006, accessed March 22, 2023, https://www.wired.com/2006/09/akihabara-lifes/

86 Cf. Hayakawa Kiyo: *Meido Kissa de Aimashō*, Tokyo: Āruzu Shuppan 2008, p. 91.

87 WELCOME TO PIA CARROT!! (Cocktail Soft 1996, O: Cocktail Soft).

88 P. Galbraith: *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, pp. 213-214.

While many visitors, especially regulars, are straight men, the visitorship of maid cafés is broader than that demographic. In an interview with the Tokyo Weekender, an ex-maid recounts that there were also many regular female customers as well as children.[89]

Baffelli and Keiko note both a female-only maid café that had opened in Akihabara as well as the existence of butler cafés in which "waitpersons are young boys dressed as old-style butlers and dansō cafés, such as *B:Lily Rose*, where waitpersons are women who dress and act as men."[90] Indeed, this shows us that the Akihabara of today is visited by a more diverse group of otaku than in the past. Of course, significant portions of establishments catering specifically to female otaku are also located directly within East Ikebukuro.[91]

A Space Between Private and Public

In *Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis*, Morikawa argues that the developments in Akihabara constitute a notable shift from what we commonly see in architecture—"Here, you can see that the classic notion of 'public' is invalid. Akihabara has come to be more an extension of private space, an otaku rooms [sic] blown up into the city."[92]

Foucault notes that heterotopias are, in general, "not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications."[93] In the case of a maid café, I have previously spoken of the moment the customer enters the establishment and is greeted with a welcome back—and replies with "I'm home." However, if we can think of Akihabara as an extension of the rooms of otaku, then the posters and wall scrolls are replaced by billboards and storefronts, and the consoles by arcades—it becomes a communal space for otaku to gather and enjoy the activities not simply in public, but rather in a space that is uniquely open to those who understand the culture.

89 Cf. Juric, Alana: "Maid Café Secrets Spilled by a Former Maid," *Tokyo Weekender (blog)*, July 23, 2021, https://www.tokyoweekender.com/art_and_culture/entertainment-art_and_culture/maid-cafe-secrets-spilled-former-maid/

90 E. Baffelli/K. Yamaki: "Maids in Akihabara," p. 125.

91 Ibid., p. 125.

92 Morikawa, Kaichiro: *Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis*, Schriften der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, August 14, 2008, p. 124, https://www.db-thueringen.de/receive/dbt_mods_00036661, https://doi.org/10.25643/bauhaus-universitaet.1316

93 M. Foucault: "Of Other Spaces," p. 25.

Akihabara's position as an extension of the otaku's room has specific extended implications for an audience beyond Tokyo. We spoke before of a "pilgrimage," and indeed, with the continued rise of the popularity of otaku media overseas, tourism to Akihabara has increased in turn.[94] International visitors' expectations of Akihabara are heavily formed by its depiction and positioning within otaku media. Within the following part of this chapter, this will precisely be what I will examine through several examples.

The different aspects of Akihabara explored in this subsection form a basis of a set of diverse needs the space answers for otaku: aesthetic, consumerist, creative, communal, and interpersonal.

III AKIHABARA PRESERVED?—A FUTURE IN THE DIGITAL

To understand the future development, it is necessary to first examine Akihabara's and otaku culture's changes in the last years and identify trends in different contexts. The landscape of Akihabara is changing, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is a catalyst here, though many of these trends can be traced to developments that predate it.

However, it must be noted explicitly that none of these trends or developments are complete reversals. The culture is shifting, and changes are visible, but the changes are mostly subtle, slow, and partial. Often, these changes occur not as a replacement but in an additive fashion. Whether they will supplant previous paradigms, time will tell.

Discovery—From Physical to Digital

A trend that has been visible is a move from the physical to the digital surrounding otaku culture. One of the ways we can see this trend is in the sourcing of new talent.

We have spoken in the previous subsection *Akihabara as a Space for Sharing in Community Creation* about the popularity of doujin works and how many of the most popular ones were taken on by publishers or led to the founding of companies and media franchises. To name two prominent examples, TSUKIHIME[95] and HIGURASHI NO NAKU KORO NI[96] were both doujin visual novels that have grown

94 Cf. K. Garner: *The Digital Otaku*, pp. 2-4.

95 TSUKIHIME (Type Moon 2000, O: Type Moon).

96 HIGURASHI NO NAKU KORO NI. (07th Expansion 2002, O: 07th Expansion).

into huge multimedia franchises with anime adaptations and major publisher backing that are active to this day.[97] Since the mid-2010s, a huge boom of *isekai* (otherworld) stories has been taking place. These stories find their origins in large parts on the online amateur publishing website *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* (Let's Become an Author). Major light novel publishers choose stories based on user ratings and sign contracts with the authors to turn them into media mix properties.[98]

This largely digital process stands in stark contrast to the physicality of the sale of doujin software at Comiket. While Comiket remains a large factor in otaku culture, what used to be the solitary method to create and distribute independent works is now becoming merely one of the avenues. Long "doujin games" were considered equivalent to "indie games from Japan," but this has changed in recent years as alternate distribution channels and the influence from the Western indie scene grew.[99] Mikhail Fiadotau delineates the difference as being "conceptual, historical, (media) ecological, and textual."[100]

Moé—From Physical to Digital

Maid and costume cafés offered a space for moé to be experienced directly. Maids were, as identified before, specifically appealing because they were 2D characters, even if played out by a real person. Otaku yearn for interaction with the characters of the media they love but are separated by layers of fictionality. Maid cafés are thus a type of role-play to make experiencing the two-dimensional possible. In the past few years, we have seen a fascinating new trend arise: Virtual Youtubers, or Vtubers for short. Liudmila Bredikhina describes Vtubers as "3-D or 2-D computer-generated (CG) virtual characters (avatars) embodied by the users who control them. Vtubers are virtual entertainers who take on anime-like visual characteristics and broadcast entertaining content."[101]

97 Fiadotau, Mikhail: "Indie and Dōjin Games: A Multilayered Cross-Cultural Comparison," *gamevironments* 10 January 1 (2019), pp. 39-84, here p. 43, https://www.academia.edu/40095159/

98 Cf. Tagliamonte, Giovanni and Yang, Yaochong: "Isekai: Tracing Interactive Control in Non-Interactive Media," in: Beil, Benjamin/Freyermuth, Gundolf S./Schmidt, Hanns Christian (eds.): *Paratextualizing Games: Investigations on the Paraphernalia and Peripheries of Play*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2021, pp. 341-372, here pp. 343-46.

99 M. Fiadotau: "Indie and Dōjin Games," pp. 53-57.

100 Ibid., p. 40.

101 Bredikhina: Liudmila: "Virtual Theatrics and the Ideal VTuber Bishōjo," *REPLAYING JAPAN* 3, March 1 (2021), pp. 21-32, here: p. 21.

Historically speaking, we can see *Hatsune Miku*, a virtual idol, as the precursor to Vtubers. Hatsune Miku was created as a character for vocal synthesizer software *Vocaloid* in 2007 and found immense success.[102] However, although Miku's voice was created by sampling a real Japanese voice actress, Fujita Saki,[103] Miku was not played by a real person. Miku was comparable to a mascot character; she functioned as an anime character that represented a product, whereas the current trend of Vtubers, which started with *Kizuna Ai,*[104] is a real person playing a character.

The character of Vtubers mirrors previous aspects discussed on the topic of identity when performing maid characters. In both cases, real people are playing anime characters that are original characters that were created with one's own self as a base. They are avatars as much as they are fictional characters. The popularity of Vtubers among the otaku crowd is extraordinary and is easily visible in their economic power: Seven of ten of the top superchat earners on *YouTube* in the world in 2020.[105] Vtubers' appeal lies at the intersection of online personality and influencers and moé. They fulfill both roles, and while the technology has been democratized and anyone given a webcam and software can become a Vtuber, many of the biggest Vtubers are part of agencies that are comparable to idol agencies. Kizuna Ai, the first Vtuber, herself went through a change in voice actors behind the scenes.[106]

Vtubers show a development in which otaku culture utilizes a new technology to create a new way to manifest two-dimensional characters. Experiencing another

102 Ibid., p. 21.

103 Ibid., p. 21.

104 Suan, Stevie: "Performing Virtual YouTubers: Acting Across Borders in the Platform Society," in: Roth, Martin/Yoshida, Hiroshi/Picard, Martin (eds.), *Japan's Contemporary Media Culture between Local and Global: Content, Practice and Theory*, Berlin: CrossAsia-eBooks, 2021, pp. 187-222, here pp. 187-190, https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/xa/catalog/book/971/c12884

105 Vtubers can also refer to non-anime related virtual avatars. In this context, it will refer specifically to the anime character avatars which are traced back to Kizuna Ai. The Vtubers listed in this statistic are also only anime-style Vtubers; Morrissy, Kim: "Playboard: World's Biggest Superchat Earner Is Virtual YouTuber Kiryu Coco," *Anime News Network*, April 5, 2023, https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2020-08-22/playboard-world-biggest-superchat-earner-is-virtual-youtuber-kiryu-coco/.163103

106 Cf. S. Suan: "Performing Virtual YouTubers," pp. 204-207.

human play out an anime character to experience moé is now possible from one's own home, at any point, for anyone.

Community—From Physical to Digital

As mentioned before, arcades are losing relevance in Japan. After a multi-year absence due to the pandemic, the Japanese version of the biggest international fighting game tournament, *Evo Japan,* took place in Tokyo from March 31 to April 2, 2023.[107]After the event, long-time fighting game commentator Majinobama spoke out regarding a trend he had witnessed recently: Players would come to Japan, and a huge part of their gameplay experience was playing fighting games online from their hotel rooms.[108] Fighting games are heavily dependent on strong, low-latency connections, so in many cases, network play across the world is not going to provide an experience comparable to offline play. [109]

Majinobama clarifies in a subsequent post that consistent offline meetups to play were the norm just a couple of years ago and that the situation has shifted to the extent that it is impossible to explain what people had missed.[110] As arcades closed over the pandemic, a lot of the play naturally moved online by necessity—and it has not returned to the arcades. This is, at least in part, because many arcades stayed closed, and Sega sold off its arcade business entirely after 56 years.[111]

These changes show us an Akihabara that is changing quickly and losing at least part of the functions it had within otaku culture. As communities move and

107 Cf. N.N.: "EVO Japan 2023," accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.evojapan.gg/

108 Cf. 2dJazz, "Saddest Shit to Me for People That Come to JP for Modern Fgs (If They Miss the Few Regular Offline Gatherings) Is Seeing Majority of Their Gameplay Exp Boil down to Netplay from a Hotel Room. It Used to Be so Different...," *Twitter*, April 4, 2023, https://twitter.com/2dJazz/status/1643097801562423296

109 Cf. Infil: "Netcode [P1]: Fightin' Words," accessed April 5, 2023, https://words.infil.net/w02-netcode.html

110 Cf. 2dJazz: "@Speedkicks What i Realized Too, Is You Will Never Be Able to Make Them Understand What They Missed out on. Ignorance Is Bliss, Generational Gap Too Wide Imo. Just Think about Even Trying to Explain This Shit to People in 5 Years. They Will Think You Have Alzheimers," *Twitter*, April 4, 2023, https://twitter.com/2dJazz/status/1643151241948856320

111 Cf. Batchelor, James: "Sega Exits the Arcade Business after 56 Years," *GamesIndustry.biz*, January 28, 2022, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/sega-exits-the-arcade-business-after-56-years

organize into online spaces, an aspect of Akihabara's culture will only be preserved within fiction. However, it is also opening the opportunity for a new type of organized community. What was left behind in the arcades was the sharing of space—sitting down at the cabinet across from one's opponent, competing as part of a community within a local space.

Indeed, we can see modern fighting games make direct attempts at creating virtual shared space, with virtual avatars for players to represent them. Where STREET FIGHTER V[112] (2016) featured a lobby system that was entirely composed of menus, the upcoming STREET FIGHTER 6[113] (2023) features a character creator and a 3D environment for its lobbies. In fact, in an interview with *Game Informer,* producer Matsumoto Shuhei explained that this was a deliberate goal:

"Especially with COVID, there's not many opportunities to go to arcades and socialize with your friends," Matsumoto says. "So, we felt like, 'What if we made an online version of an arcade? Are we able to do that within Street Fighter?' That was a challenge we wanted to take on and recreate because we grew up in the era of going to arcades with our friends, and that's something we have fond memories of."[114]

A Hyperreality Presented as a Time Capsule

Within the *Acquire*'s game series AKIBA'S TRIP,[115] we can see an adaptation of Akihabara into a digital space that players traverse. The space has been faithfully reproduced within the game down to getting the storefronts right and using real stores that existed there at the time of the games' releases.

Perhaps appropriately for a space shaped by market forces, a significant aspect of the game is purchasing items from shops. The way the game presents this is through a simple graphical user interface rather than letting you "browse" the shop for different items. The shopping experience is quite interesting in that it shows us which aspects the game focused on adapting. Strolling through a shop's aisles, looking for a specific item, the different spaces the shops occupy, or what they feel like as you walk through them were not given priority and are left behind in adaptation.

112 STREET FIGHTER V (Capcom 2016, O: Capcom).

113 STREET FIGHTER 6 (Capcom 2023, O: Capcom).

114 Shea, Brian: "Street Fighter 6 Cover Story—The Dawn of a New Era," *Game Informer*, December 28, 2022, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.gameinformer.com/feature/2022/12/28/street-fighter-6-cover-story-the-dawn-of-a-new-era

115 AKIBA'S TRIP (Acquire 2011, O: Acquire).

The merchandise itself is not generic, however, and offers relevance to the shop it's in—A PC part store will sell you a keyboard, and a doujin store will sell you magazines. These items are given unique descriptions, sometimes containing references. However, what AKIBA'S TRIP puts a lot of emphasis on is the recognizability of the stores. The shopping itself may be a generic UI, but the background will usually be a photo of the shop interior, and a mascot character of the shop will be displayed on screen prominently (see Figure 1).

The example of Tsukumo-tan, as seen in the figures, is particularly interesting as she is no longer the mascot of the chain of PC hardware stores. When her retirement was announced in 2020, she stopped appearing in Akihabara—yet she remains visible in AKIBA'S TRIP.[116]

The fact that AKIBA'S TRIP is more concerned with showing off the mascots and a view of the store rather than the experience of browsing betrays the importance of the mascots (or *yurukyara*) themselves. Mascots are frequently used in Japan,[117] and the shops' mascots have become a part of Akihabara's culture. *Tsukumo-tan* herself was quite popular—in the eleven years she was *Tsukumo*'s mascot, she won a poll on the most popular moé character you find within Akihabara every single year.[118] Over the years, a lot of merchandise featuring the character has been sold as the goodbye message states[119] outright, and at a time, there was a vending machine featuring *Tsukumo-tan* outside one of the stores[120] (see Figures 2 and 3).

116 N.N.: "「つくもたん」契約終了のお知らせ," Tsukumo-tan's Retirement, accessed March 29, 2023, https://tenpo.tsukumo.co.jp/static/info/39-tsukumotan.html

117 Chang, Eddy YL: "Let the Yuru-Chara Do the Job: Japan's Mascot Character Frenzy and Its Socioeconomic Implications," *Mirai. Estudios Japoneses* 1 (2017), pp. 237-52, here: pp. 239-240.

118 N.N.: 株式会社インプレス, "「アキバで見かけた萌えキャラコンテスト 2019」結果発表," AKIBA PC Hotline! Character Contest Results 2019, December 27, 2019, https://akiba-pc.watch.impress.co.jp/docs/sp/1226770.html

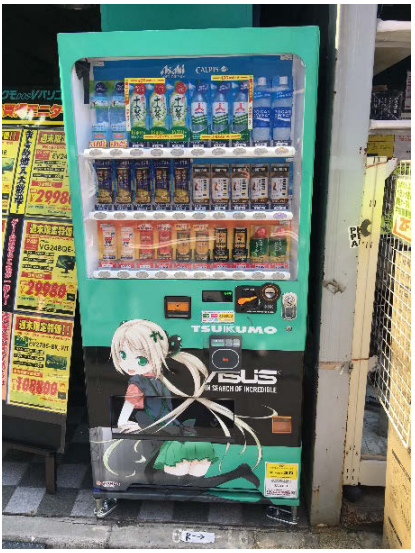
119 N.N: "「つくもたん」契約終了のお知らせ," Tsukumo-tan's Retirement.

120 N.N.: "ツクモDOS/Vパソコン館前に「つくもたんのラッピング自動販売機」が登場," Tsukumo-tan receives a vending machine, accessed March 29, 2023, https://blog.goo.ne.jp/omaketeki/e/bd90245c7535d1ba33660bcc47cdeabb

Figure 1: The interface as the player enters the PC store "Tsukumo" in Akiba's Trip. It prominently features their mascot character Tsukumo-tan

Figure 2 (left): A photo of a vending machine serving drinks in Akihabara featuring the mascot character Tsukumo-tan in March 2018

Figure 3 (right): A photo of an advert at one of the Tsukumo stores in Akihabara featuring Tsukumo-tan in March 2018



Photos and Screenshots by G. Tagliamonte

Azuma points out that "independently and without relation to an original narrative, consumers in the 1990s consumed only such fragmentary illustrations or settings; and this different type of consumption appeared when the individual consumer empathy toward these fragments strengthened. The otaku themselves called this new consumer behavior 'chara-moé'—the feeling of moé toward characters and their alluring characteristics."[121] The mascot characters are (at least at the surface level) removed from direct narrative backdrops and constitute an instance of "fragmentary illustrations." We can see here that mascot characters are thus not removed from the culture and otaku media themselves; they merge and reflect them. A fantastic example of this act of self-reflection can be seen within DI GI CHARAT.[122] The Akihabara store *Gamers* created a mascot character called DI GI CHARAT, which Galbraith describes as an "assemblage of elements of character design that fans like" (e.g., she is wearing a maid outfit and has cat ears and a tail).[123] DI GI CHARAT became a successful anime and manga franchise in the late 90s and early 2000s[124] and most recently received a new anime series that aired in late 2022.[125]

The popularity of these mascot characters shows us that there is never a clear dividing line between the works sold at these stores and the stores themselves. Just as Akihabara has become part of what people think of regarding the otaku subculture, so have the characters meant to advertise the stores become the direct focus of attention and stories. *Tsukumo-tan's* representation within AKIBA'S TRIP thus remains a time capsule for an Akihabara that once was, preserving it as one may have remembered it—Akihabara within AKIBA'S TRIP is a fantasy, an imagined space that may at first glance link to space lost in time but is in fact more than that.

Indeed, in an interview on *Siliconera*, Associate Producer of AKIBA'S TRIP said when asked for the reason they chose to set the game in Akihabara:

"It's as much like a contemporary 'fantasy' world as places come, so we felt it was a natural choice. Also, Akihabara is a living, breathing entity that is constantly changing with the rise

121 H. Azuma: Otaku: Japan's Database Animals, p. 36.

122 DI GI CHARAT (Japan 1999, D: Hiroaki Sakurai).

123 P. Galbraith: The Moé Manifesto, pp. 174-175.

124 Ibid.

125 CF. Loo, Egan: "Reiwa No Di Gi Charat Mini Anime's 2nd Teaser Unveils October 7 Premiere," Anime News Network, March 28, 2023, https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2022-09-10/reiwa-no-di-gi-charat-mini-anime-2nd-teaser-unveils-october-7-p remiere/.189551

and fall of trends and counterculture, so we felt that to capture one specific moment in Akihabara's 'life' in the form of a game is also a valuable and interesting thing to do for the sake of entertainment."[126]

If Akihabara is a space of fantasy, then it is specifically a space in which otaku fantasy turns into reality. The memories and associations captured within are not lost but saved and reimagined within depictions of the space in media. Saitō spoke of simultaneous multi-layered understandings of fictionality.[127] Can we not then say that what otaku see when they walk through the city is distinctly multi-layered? My contention is that when otaku visit Akihabara, they are not only seeing the city itself. Simultaneously—the same way they are able to both fully buy into a character on screen while also recognizing their voice actor immediately—they are seeing a space beyond its physicality. They are seeing an Akihabara beyond the real.

This, then, is why AKIBA'S TRIP'S depiction of Akihabara works. In its disjointed form, in its accuracy to specific characteristics that are not of as much geographic importance as they are of symbolic significance, it simulates the hyperreal Akihabara. It is neither a simulation of the real Akihabara nor a simulacrum. It is a second-order simulation—a simulation of a simulacrum. It brings the player to the space of fantasy, not the place of reality.

Akihabara—A Link Between Worlds

AISP@CE,[128] a massively multiplayer social space that ran from 2008 until 2011, shows us a different adaptation of Akihabara. In this case, it is a type of proto-metaverse, though one developing out of the otaku sensibilities of its era. It is an expression of a desire to coexist digitally formulated through the ideas of Akihabara. Akihabara here becomes the gateway to a space for otaku to gather and live out desires and interact with digital characters—just as its real-world counterpart did.

Outside the player's own digital home, which they could customize with furniture and items, the game was split into multiple separate "islands." The game

126 Siliconera Staff, "This Interview With Acquire Gives Us A Tour Of Akiba's Trip," *Siliconera* (blog), February 25, 2011, https://www.siliconera.com/this-interview-with-acquire-gives-us-a-tour-of-akibas-trip/

127 T. Saitō: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, pp. 24-25.

128 AISP@CE (Ai Space Production Committee 2008, O: Headlock).

was built in collaboration with three eroge developers, and each of the three islands corresponded to the franchises that built the foundation of the game—CLANNAD, SHUFFLE!, and DA CAPO.[129] Finally, a central "Akihabara Island" connected all of them.[130] It served as a hub as well as a social space and was modeled after the district in Tokyo.[131] We can see here a distinctly literal positioning of Akihabara as a bridge between different media franchises. (see Figure 4 for a screenshot of AISP@CE's representation of Akihabara) Ōtsuka spoke in his work on narrative consumption about a state in which "we are no longer capable of distinguishing whether a given commodity is 'real' or 'counterfeit.'"[132]

Indeed, we can see here a situation where the world of these dating games is being represented within another world, a social space in which the characters and spaces are completely removed from their original context. In fact, not only are these worlds removed from their context, but they are also direct objects of fandom. AISP@CE is not an extension of their universes directly. Rather, it is a digitalization of the fandom into a ludic space. Events granted players digital posters and merchandise.[133] I argue that this is an act of fictionalizing, as Saitō termed it. AISP@CE is a place for us to digitally engage with fictional characters in new contexts. It provides a terminal for interactivity with fictional characters whom players have already developed moé for and lets players quite literally 'live' with them.

AISP@CE is thus a space wherein players can both experience dress-up and living together with their favorite characters but specifically within the context of them being *characters*. Here, Saitō Tamaki's observation of the otaku's ability to effortlessly navigate multiple layers of fictionality is pulled into focus. The player may visit the locations from within these games and speak to a character from one

129 CLANNAD (Key 2004, O: Jun Maeda).; SHUFFLE! (Omegavision 2004, O: Navel).; D.C. II ~DA CAPO II~ (Circus 2006, O: Circus).

130 Serizawa, Kamone: "Memories of aisp@ce," September 19, 2021, YouTube video, 05:22, https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=4SB3OF-sSGE

131 Okada, Yuka: "「CLANNADは人生」を3Dで実現 ギャルゲーキャラと暮らす仮想空間、ドワンゴなど開発. ("Clanad is life"—A virtual space wherein galge characters turn real)," *ITmedia NEWS*, accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.itmedia.co.jp/ news/articles/0804/08/news104.html

132 E. Ōtsuka and M. Steinberg: "World and Variation," p. 110.

133 YURIKA, "Ai Sp@ce Joins the Rain Bandwagon," かわいいじゃなきゃダメなの！ (blog), June 2, 2009, https://breadmasterlee.com/2009/06/02/ai-spce-joins-the-rain-bandwagon/

of the games while wearing a shirt featuring another dating game.[134] Akihabara is presented here as the interlinking piece for the worlds. It serves as the main social hub for otaku, quite literally a digital Akihabara. I argue that AISP@CE is not a direct form of advertising for any of the three games. Rather, *CLANNAD*, *SHUFFLE!*, and *DA CAPO* form the backdrop for a digital space for otaku culture.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Akihabara within AISP@CE. Note the presence of Gamers with their mascot character DI GI CHARAT, visible on the sign

Image Source: https://image.itmedia.co.jp/l/im/news/articles/0804/08/l_yuo_aispec_10.jpg

Akihabara in the Metaverse

Akihabara is changing. While doujinshi are as popular as ever, the popular doujin shop *Tora no Ana* closed every single one of their five Akihabara branch stores in the last few years.[135] Arcade experiences are lost and replicated within virtual

134 YURIKA, "Aisp@ce Celebrates Comptique's 25th Anniversary," かわいいじゃなきゃダメなの！ (blog), December 8, 2008, https://breadmasterlee.com/2008/12/08/ai-spce-celebrates-comptiques-25th-anniversary/

135 The shop served as the basis for *Denki-gai no Honya-san*, a manga (with a subsequent anime adaptation) about working at a doujin store; Cf. Baseel, Casey: "Akihabara Landmark Toranoana Is Permanently Closing, Chain Downsizes to Just One Branch in Japan," *SoraNews24 -Japan News-* (blog), July 6, 2022, https://soranews24.com/

worlds. Vtubers serve a similar function to maid cafés, only served to a worldwide audience, digitally.

Akihabara, as a hyperreal space, is very unlikely to die out. It has been manifested as a part of otaku culture and its history and thus will likely continue finding representation in this form. Just as AISP@CE made Akihabara the hub for otaku media, any future versions of a virtual space will likely draw from the collective understanding of Akihabara as the place of belonging for otaku when designing something aimed at them. It is therein where we can expect preservationist efforts to develop, as AKIBA'S TRIP already has, with mascots such as *Tsukumo-tan,* which remain in-game, including re-releases despite her deletion from the real Akihabara.

Then what does such a future look like? Otaku have unusually high compatibility with accepting fictional contexts, as we established in *Of Otaku and Moé*. The technological shifts before us ask us to accept new forms of interaction and living. In his talk *Character, Culture, Platform: Locating Emotional Technology in Contemporary Japan,* Patrick Galbraith describes the act of willingly accepting fiction for truth to be able to live within two-dimensional fictional contexts as "self-hacking."[136] Indeed, perhaps an exceptional ability to "self-hack" is one of the attributes of otaku. As cases of generative AI capturing users' hearts spread,[137] the many cases of otaku looking to marry fictional characters come to mind.[138]

Another precursor to a realization of a Metaverse can be seen in the app *VR CHAT*, wherein otaku are engaging in a form of romantic relationship with each other, termed "sugar." These relationships are not bound by the limits of their real-world identities, including gender.[139] Bredikhina, too, identifies it as an act of

2022/07/06/akihabara-landmark-toranoana-is-permanently-closing-chain-downsizes-to-just- one-branch-in-japan/

136 Cf. Galbraith, Patrick W.: "Character, Culture, Platform: Locating Emotional Technology in Contemporary Japan|Desired Identities." *Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac*, June 28, 2020. YouTube video, 20:46, here 12:00-14:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rOv5WHDgDw

137 Thompson, Ben: "Apple and AI, Lobotomized Lovers, XR Companions," *Stratechery*, March 21, 2023, https://stratechery.com/2023/apple-and-ai-lobotomized-lovers-xr-co mpanions/

138 P. Galbraith: *Character, Culture, Platform*, here. 15:00-19:00.

139 Bredikhina, Liudmila: "Virtual 'Sweet Relationships' in Japan: Navigating Affection through Technology. Communal Practices, Behaviors, and Latent Socio-Cultural Meaning," *Comunifé* 22 (2022), pp. 53-62, here pp. 57-58.

"hacking" the self in which one is "breaking down the binary and creating fractional identities that are not afraid of kinship with and as fictional beings enabled by machines (PC) and communication technologies."[140] As Freyermuth concludes, the future of media and design lies within digitalization and requires artificial intelligence to come to fruition—taking the form of a symbiosis of human and machine, borrowing the concept of J. C. R. Licklider, a cyborg. [141]

Then why Akihabara? Why there? And why is it fading now? "As if the contents of an otaku's bedroom have spilled out into an entire neighborhood of Tokyo"—this was the description Morikawa offered of Akihabara. An important aspect to mention is that Akihabara grew in an environment where social digitization was beginning but hadn't matured yet. In Japan, the way the Internet took hold in everyday life was different from many other countries. Whereas within Europe and America, the Personal Computer brought the Internet into the everyday, Japan developed a focus on internet-connected phones (*keitai*).[142]

Indeed, it appears that the use of these webphones emphasized the communicative aspects while de-emphasizing the communal:

"Webphones are most often used to exchange short, quick messages with those who are physically nearby. They are less often used to access the Internet, and they are rarely used to gather information about social issues or to participate in online communities. It appears that webphones are useful to maintain strong ties with people who are socially or physically close."[143]

140 Ibid., p. 61.

141 Cf. Licklider, J. C. R.: "Man-Computer Symbiosis," *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics* HFE-1, no. 1 (March 1960), pp. 4-11, https://doi.org/10.1109/THFE2.1960.4503259; Cf. Cf. Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: "Design, Spiel, Metaversum: Zukünfte in der digitalen Kultur," in: Thilo Schwer/Melanie Kurz (eds), *Design für Spiel Spaß Spannung—Gestaltung von Artefakten zum spielerischen Handeln* vol. 6, Stuttgart: avedition, 2023, pp. 86-103, here pp. 100-102.

142 Cf. Matsuda, Mia: "Discourses of Keitai in Japan," in: Itō, Mizuko/Okabe, Daisuke/Matsuda, Misa (eds.): *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, pp. 19-40, here pp. 28-35.

143 Miyata, Kakuko et al.: "The Mobileizing Japanese: Connecting to the Internet by PC and Webphone in Yamanashi," in: Itō, Mizuko/Okabe, Daisuke/Matsuda, Misa (eds.): *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 143-164, here p. 160.

Years before the launch of the smartphone, connection to the web was not tied to a static location, and we can theorize that this focus of the digital element on locality and the unique slowing of the digitalization of communities helped foster a communal *physical* space for subculture. Indeed, we can connect this to the question of what Akihabara was anticipating in the first place. Morikawa described Akihabara as a space that mimics cyberspace created by computers.[144]

We can argue that many of these factors come together to create what Akihabara ultimately is—a digital community as we know it now, manifested as a space within Tokyo. It happened with Otaku of all communities because they had both the market force and a unique understanding of fictionality. They were able to bring about a space that is itself a proto-metaverse.

In explaining his concept of media consumption, Ōtsuka said, "With the accumulation of these small narratives, a 'grand narrative' reminiscent of a mythological epic appeared."[145] Akihabara's history mirrors this idea—the creation of the otaku capital did not form top-down but bottom-up as a result of smaller, individual actors synchronizing. Azuma and Manovich both describe a media landscape defined not by narratives but by databases.[146] Indeed, otaku culture is a culture of databases—doujin works provide endless reinterpretations and reconfigurations of previous narratives, and characters are built up through moé traits.[147] Narratives themselves reinterpret video games' concepts overtly, as exemplified within the new genre of isekai fiction.[148] Akihabara's adaptations within media reflect this idea as well. Within AISP@CE, we are shown a vision of Akihabara as a digital space that reconfigures the contexts of fiction into one where we can coexist with it. With its maid and costume cafés, one can see that attempts at coexistence with fiction are already present within Akihabara.[149] At the same time, we see the virtual world spill back into Akihabara the same way: Held for the first time in June 2023, the *Virtual Market 2023: Real in Akiba* represents a real-life component to a previously entirely virtual event centered around Metaverse concepts, with many of its activities crossing the boundaries between real and virtual.[150] As anticipated in AISP@CE, Akihabara serves as the bridge between real and virtual.

144 Cf. K. Morikawa: *Otaku and the City: The Rebirth of Akihabara*, p. 152.

145 E. Ōtsuka and M. Steinberg: "World and Variation," p. 106.

146 See *Akihabara—The Otaku Capital*.

147 See *Akihabara as a Space for Sharing in Community Creation*.

148 Cf. G. Tagliamonte and Y. Yang: "Isekai," pp. 347-359.

149 See *Akihabara as a Space for Interpersonal Relationsh*ips.

150 Cf. Hikky: "40,000 Visitors Recorded! More Than 8,000 Real Products Sold! Report on "'Virtual Market 2023 Real in Akiba'," *Virtual Market* (blog), August 28, 2023,

Thus, in a world that is moving rapidly towards digitalization and virtualization, a space like Akihabara constitutes a transitional period. Cities and stores are replaced by websites. Community spaces are brought into the digital and become global. People channeling 2D characters to bring living and breathing moé into our reality within maid cafes are granted entirely new outlets through technology (Vtubers, AI, VRCHAT).

The cityscape of Akihabara anticipated telepresence technology which allows living in spaces centered around community and personal interests. Those spaces are turning out to be digital. A place described as a fantasy within reality[151] thus anticipated a reality that is a fantasy. To the otaku, the degree of its reality was never a concern after all.

GLOSSARY

Otaku—The Japanese word for "geek" but with a significant amount of additional connotations. Otaku of all types exist, though generally, they have a certain degree of obsession with fictional characters. A longer exploration of the term is presented in *Of Otaku and Moé*.

Moé—The term generally describes the feeling of attraction toward fictional characters. While the exact etymology is not clear, it is written as 萌え (moé—budding) and is not necessarily sexual in nature. Otaku use the term to describe their emotional reaction evoked by characters. It is also not necessarily holistic as a descriptor: a character's action or pose can evoke moé. A longer explanation of the term is presented in *Of Otaku and Moé*. For further reading, Patrick Galbraith's book *The Moé Manifesto* is entirely dedicated to exploring the concept.

Doujinshi—Derivative works, usually manga, created by doujin (hobbyist) artists. Doujinshi refers specifically to magazines/manga, and many are explicit in nature. Doujinshi are usually made for and sold at specific events (often at a loss), such as Comiket.

https://virtual-market.prowly.com/258265-40000-visitors-recorded-more-than-8000-re al-products-sold-report-on-virtual-market-2023-real-in-akiba

151 Cf. Siliconera Staff: "This Interview With Acquire Gives Us A Tour Of Akiba's Trip," Siliconera (blog), February 25, 2011, https://www.siliconera.com/this-interview-with-acquire-gives-us-a-tour-of-akibas-trip/

Comiket—Short for Comic Market. The biggest doujin event is held bi-annually at the Tokyo Big Sight exhibition space. Comiket 97 (shortened to C97) in 2019 attracted 750,000 visitors across four days before the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only doujinshi but also other doujin works such as games or music are sold.

Otome Road—A specific street within East Ikebukuro with stores mostly catering to female otaku, often specifically carrying BL (Boys Love) fiction.

Galge—Short for girl game. A dating game, often eroge, but not always. Most galge feature multiple heroines (usually five) that the player can romance by making the right choices. These games are usually presented in visual novel format with a text box at the bottom of the screen.

Eroge—Short of erotic game. Not all eroge are galge, but many of them are. Most of them are visual novels, but some feature gameplay. Despite their pornographic content, they are often not focused on it, and frequently, only a fraction of their content is explicit in nature. Again, outliers exist. Eroge that specifically focus on the pornographic aspects are often referred to as *nukige*. Due to multiple historical reasons, eroge are almost entirely PC games, and in the 2000s, "PC games" were almost synonymous with eroge in Japan. Many games received console versions that cut out the explicit content (referred to in Japan as "consumer versions").

Tora no Ana—A chain of doujinshi stores across Japan. They have closed a majority of their physical locations since the COVID-19 pandemic and now operate almost exclusively online.

Akihabara Gamers—A store that sells games and other otaku culture-related products. The Akihabara store is their main store, though they have a number of branches—even multiple within Akihabara.

DI GI CHARAT—The mascot character of Gamers. She wears a maid uniform and has large cat ears, a cat tail, and giant bells. The character was very popular and spawned multiple anime and manga adaptations.

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