



## **Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture**

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This article introduces Japanese dating-simulation (dating-sim) games and examines their depictions of young men, women, and romantic relationships in “virtual Japan.” Several intersecting realms of Japanese popular culture are examined—video games, *anime* アニメ, *manga* 漫画, and *hentai* 変態 (pornography)—in order to classify dating-sim games. Dating-sim games are also placed in a social context in contemporary Japan by analyzing common attitudes toward *otaku* オタク (geek) culture. *Otaku* are increasingly labeled as *shōjo* 少女 (*lit.*, young girls), essentially a feminization; but dating-sim games offer players a clear identity as non-*shōjo*. This article also demonstrates how dating-sim games are strongly enmeshed within Japanese culture, one major factor that has hindered their popularity abroad.

### **Why Study Dating-Simulation Games?**

This article analyzes Japanese dating-simulation (hereafter, dating-sim) games, particularly for their depiction of young men, women, and romantic relationships in “virtual Japan.” Although these games are quite popular in Japan today, they have not yet been received favorably abroad. In fact, most of the writing about dating-sim games by non-Japanese viewers has been in the form of satire.<sup>1</sup> What about these games, then, is specifically appealing in Japan, so much so that they are considered mainstream there but ridiculed abroad? To address this question, I first introduce dating-sim games in general; then I provide detailed descriptions of four specific games. I focus mainly on the relationships among the male and female characters in the games, with the goal of identifying what is especially “Japanese” about them. I conclude by analyzing how these relationships fit into the context of Japanese dating practices and geek culture, thus demonstrating the strong correspondence between these games and Japanese society.

Very little has previously been written about dating-sim games.<sup>2</sup> The dearth of information is remarkable, given how the study of these games

seems crucial to the understanding of other important topics, including the male figures of the *otaku* オタク (geek, nerd) and *hikikomori* 引きこもり (social shut-in) as well as the currently hot topic of “parasite singles”—unmarried men and women who live with their parents while working and who have substantial disposable incomes to spend on luxury items. All of these other issues have been explored in several recent publications about Japan.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as a critical part of Japanese youth culture, dating-sim games demand serious analysis for what they can illuminate about this aspect of Japanese society. As computer games with both dating-simulation and pornographic material, they fall under three categories of study: (1) Japanese dating and personal relationships, (2) Japanese gaming and leisure, and (3) obscenity and pornography in Japan. Of the first topic, several accounts and studies have been written.<sup>4</sup> The latter two topics, however, have become a part of academic discourse only since the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

The connecting worlds of leisure and sexuality in Japan have been explored quite extensively by anthropologist Anne Allison, whose works include *Nightwork* (1994), *Permitted and Prohibited Desires* (2000), and, most recently, *Millennial Monsters* (2006).<sup>6</sup> During her fieldwork for *Nightwork*, an in-depth study of Japanese hostess clubs, Allison received several negative reactions from the Japanese men and women she attempted to interview inside and outside the clubs. These individuals assured her that hostess clubs did not fit into an academic study of Japan. Other topics, they suggested, would offer a “better,” “more correct” view of their culture.<sup>7</sup> And yet Allison has clearly demonstrated the value of examining “frivolous” aspects of Japanese society—such as the hostess club—by proving that they are integral parts of the society and can reveal much about the Japanese outlook on family, work, and sex. In *Millennial Monsters*, Allison examines Japanese toys. Her far-reaching study of Japanese youth culture and its craving for cuteness (a lucrative export to the United States, in fact) once again demonstrates that the world of leisure is a fruitful topic for the study of Japanese society. Dating-sim games demand examination for the same reason. As eroticized games, they lie somewhere between the realms of toys and pornography, offering, I believe, insights into both topics.

### Dating-Simulation & *Bishōjo* Games: Gameplay, Goals & Characters

#### *Description of the Genre & One Subgenre*

Dating-sim games remain confined, for the most part, to the Japanese video and computer game market. While uncommon in the American and European gaming market, they form a significant portion of the Japanese market, with the sales of some games surpassing one million copies.<sup>8</sup> These games can be bought and sold at most video game stores in Japan, as well as directly from other users through Japanese-language electronic market-

places, such as Amazon and eBay. Used games can be purchased at video game stores for as little as ¥3,000 to ¥4,000 (approximately US\$25–33, at US\$1 = ¥120) if they are older or less popular, but most used dating-sim games are available for around ¥5,000 to ¥7,000 (US\$42–58). New games typically run from ¥8,000 to ¥10,000 (US\$67–83).

One can define a dating-sim game, in short, as a video or computer game that focuses on dating or romance and may contain erotic content. Several subgenres can be identified: *bishōjo* 美少女 games, in which a playable male character interacts with attractive *anime*-style girls; *GxB* or *otome* 乙女 games, where a playable female character dates male characters; and *BL* (“boys’ love”) games, where the characters are homosexual. *Bishōjo* games, the focus of this article, are the most common.

*Bishōjo* games share a basic structure and feel. The gamer plays a male character who interacts with various female characters as well as secondary characters such as family members, neighbors, and teachers. Dialogue is usually spoken by voice actors or may appear as text on the screen. The main character’s words, thoughts, and actions, however, are described through text only; the main character has no voice actor. Dating-sim games usually have no animation; the background remains static and changes only when the character moves to another location.<sup>9</sup> Often, the same backgrounds are reused in different situations. For example, if the character is in a classroom when other students are around, the room appears empty so it can be reused for scenes in which the character is alone. In cases such as these, text-based descriptions of the surroundings, rather than the images on the screen, establish whether others are present. Clearly, dating-sim games require the player to use his (or her)<sup>10</sup> imagination much more than do typical video games. Additionally, when the main character is interacting with another person, that person appears in front of the background and remains still, merely alternating between poses (which, like the backgrounds, are static and frequently reused) to match what the conversation partner is saying. The main character, with whom the gamer is meant to identify, rarely appears on the screen.

The interactive portions of the game arise through options presented to the gamer, which are typically binary, although options with three choices occasionally arise. These options occur sporadically and often involve seemingly trivial choices, such as whether to go to a movie or art museum. Interestingly, any life-changing decisions in the game, such as whether the main character will donate a kidney, are often not decided by the game player. The game player takes advantage of options to manipulate the main character’s actions to bring about his desired result.

These results come in the form of endings, of which dating-sim games have typically ten to twenty. Some are “good endings,” in which the main character ends up with one (or more) of the female characters and lives

happily with her, usually entailing marriage; others are “bad endings,” which vary widely but may involve the death of a female character, one of the characters moving away, or the male and female characters living together unhappily. Usually, each female character has the potential to bring about both a good ending and a bad ending; the player must select the options carefully to get the one he wants.

Intuitively, one would think that players would aim for good endings, but such is not always the case. The only way to “beat” the game is to play it numerous times, experiencing *all* the endings. After playing through the game, players can go to the main menu and check their “status,” which shows how much of the game is finished. To reach a status of 100 percent, signaling completion of the game, all endings must be reached. Essentially, the only way to “lose” when playing a dating-sim game is not to get a bad ending but to get the same ending twice, since doing so prevents players from making any progress toward game completion. Thus, unlike most video games, dating-sim games are not particularly competitive; they have no final “bosses” whom the players try to defeat. After getting through all the endings, extra scenes or characters may be unlocked, including, occasionally, “harem endings,” which allow the main character to end up living with *all* the female characters.

Dating-sim games remain two dimensional, despite the vast majority of other video games presently being rendered in rich three-dimensional graphics. One reason is the focus in dating-sim games on characters. Video games such as Rockstar Games’ “Grand Theft Auto” can be animated in three dimensions because most visuals are landscapes. Three-dimensional characters, however, tend to look blocky and distorted when seen up close. Konami’s *Tokimeki Memorial 3* ときめきメモリアル3 (2001) was the first *bishōjo* game to be animated in three dimensions, but its low sales likely discouraged other companies from following this lead. Thus *bishōjo* games remain a slideshow of two-dimensional images plus voice and text.<sup>11</sup>

### *Synopses of Four Dating-Sim Games*

For this article, I have chosen four *bishōjo* games that reveal the complexities and possibilities of the genre: a touching, fan-favorite visual novel; a light-hearted romance-comedy; and two *erogē* エロゲー (erotic games). I have based the following descriptions of these games on English translations at [www.g-collections.com](http://www.g-collections.com). And unlike other Japanese terms presented in this article, the Japanese dating-sim game names in this section are offered parenthetically, followed by their Japanese release dates.

D. O.’s *Kana Imouto*<sup>12</sup> (加奈~いもうと~, 1999), a type of *bishōjo* game called a visual novel, is perhaps more romantic than most dating-sim games, despite the seemingly *iyarashii* 嫌らしい (perverted) premise of its protagonist falling in love with his sister (who, he finds out later in the game, is

adopted). Taka, the protagonist, can potentially form a relationship with only two female characters: Kana, his sister, who is two years his junior; and Yumi, his first love from elementary school. Kana suffers from chronic renal deficiency, a debilitating disease that forces her to spend most of her life in the hospital. *Kana Imouto* is an emotionally poignant game; it starts when Taka is age seven and continues linearly until he turns twenty. Essentially, the game player lives Taka's life and grows up along with his friends. For its complex plot and characters, *Kana Imouto* has become wildly popular. In March 2006, for example, only one used copy was available at Amazon.co.jp; it was priced at ¥9,000 (US\$75).<sup>13</sup> *Kana Imouto* has captivated even American audiences, and several English-language fan Web sites are dedicated to the game, including fan fiction sites.<sup>14</sup>

In D. O.'s *Sensei 2* (せ・ん・せ・い2, 2001), the playable character is a high school student named Nakata Shuichi. The story begins during his childhood on the day of his father's death. His childhood friend, Kumiko, who is an older-sister figure for him, invites Shuichi to move to Tokyo with her. The story jumps forward to Shuichi as a young high school student who is unconcerned with his grades or future. He spends his time socializing with Kumiko, who has become his *senpai* 先輩 (upper classmate). They share an interest in art, and Shuichi often sketches Kumiko in the art room after school. Again the story flashes forward, this time to the present day, where Shuichi is now a junior in high school and Kumiko has become an art teacher at his school. After a male teacher (who, as Kumiko's boyfriend, is suspicious of Shuichi's relationship with her) punches Shuichi multiple times for having a bad attitude toward school, Shuichi feels himself change. A "peculiar urge" awakens in him, and he begins to desire several of the female characters: Kumiko; Shoko, a naïve student teacher; Sachiho, the voluptuous principal; Seno, the strict P.E. teacher; and Ito, the mysterious and emotionally cold chemistry teacher.

ZyX's *Tsuki ~ Possession* (憑き ~ Possession, 2001) is similar to *Sensei 2* in that the main character, Yosuke, undergoes a sinister change as an evil spirit begins to possess him, and he begins to desire the women around him. The pursuable female characters include his stepmother, his stepsister, the student body president, a chemistry teacher, and the manager at the café where he has a part-time job. What is interesting about *Tsuki ~ Possession* is that, although the main character undergoes a transformation from normal to sinister, this change affords him weak psychic powers in order to win over women. However, Yosuke does not like his transformation and often attempts to resist it. He is successful at the end of the game: the evil spirit leaves him, and he spends the rest of his life living happily with whichever female character the player has chosen.

Trabulance's *Tottemo! Pheromone* (とつてもフェロモン, 2002) is a light-hearted fantasy/romance-comedy dating-sim game. The main character, Ta-

kuya, has to leave home to attend college in another city. He moves in with his cousin and, in exchange for his hospitality, works at his cousin's cake shop. One day, a beautiful girl falls through the ceiling into his living room, landing on Takuya's lap. She identifies herself as Silk and claims to be a time-traveler from another world. To get back to her own world, she convinces Takuya to extract magical powers from five particular girls (who, luckily, all frequently visit the cake shop) by having sex with them. Takuya, an ordinary, sexually inexperienced student, does not feel up to this task, so Silk casts a magic spell on him, making him ten times more attractive. Thus, it is the game-player's challenge to procure all the magical power Silk needs to get home. At the end of the game, the player can choose one female to date exclusively. If he picks his options carefully, he can also end up with Silk.

### What Are Dating-Sim Games? Classification of an Ambiguous Genre

Classifying dating-sim games is no simple task. The games could simply be labeled as video games: They are playable on gaming consoles (Sony Playstations or Microsoft XBoxes) or on personal computers; players uncover new endings, scenes, and characters, adding to the excitement; and players can role-play the main characters. Dating-sim games are not arcade-style video games, however, because players often "play" the game for an hour or more before the first option appears. Some games have fewer than ten options, and as much as half an hour can elapse between choices. During these option-less sequences, dating-sim game feels more like *anime* アニメ or *manga* 漫画, Japanese animation and comics, respectively. Additionally, in most games, there is an "auto-forward" option that allows the text to continue without requiring input from the player at the end of each line. Players can also set the speed of the text display, adjusting it to comfortable reading speeds. Between options, players simply watch the screen, read the text, and listen to the dialogue; playing dating-sim games feels much more passive than playing arcade-style video games.

Furthermore, many dating-sim games and *anime* episodes have similar structures. *Tottemo! Pheromone* has an "eyecatch" between each scene consisting of still shots of the characters in a short, flashy animated sequence, much like *anime* episodes use to signal commercial breaks. *Kana Imouto* has an opening that consists of still shots of Kana set to a short song, like the beginning of an *anime* episode.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, dating-sim games contain several plot points and tropes similar to those used in *anime* and *manga*. For example, in *Kana Imouto*, Taka sends a love letter to his classmate Yumi, but he later finds her reading it along with everyone else in his class. He assumes he has been rejected and he flees the room, ignoring Yumi's protests that she did not intentionally show their classmates the letter. (This plot device is found, for example, in the popular romance-comedy series

*Marmalade Boy*.) Furthermore, the premise of *Tottemo! Pheromone*, where a magical goddess suddenly appears and eventually falls in love with a human, is reminiscent of the romance-comedy series *Ah! My Goddess*. Thus, dating-sim games often feel more like *anime* or *manga* than they do actual video games.

Although not all dating-sim games contain erotic content, the majority do, even if erotic content is not the focus of the game. Therefore, dating-sim games could potentially be categorized as a type of pornography. Erotic content in dating-sim games, in fact, mirrors that found in other pornographic media in Japan. Several tropes characteristic of pornographic *anime* and *manga* also appear in dating-sim games. Common themes include bondage, rape, incest, and enemas.

In short, by incorporating elements of video games, *anime*, *manga*, and pornography, dating-sim games cannot be neatly placed into any one of those classifications. I propose, therefore, that dating-sim games be considered interactive *anime/manga* with erotic content, a classification recognizing that dating-sim games combine both the voyeuristic aspect of (pornographic) *anime* or *manga* with the participatory aspect of video games.

### Male Characters in Dating-Sim Games

The playable character in dating-sim games is a particularly interesting figure that necessitates close inspection. In *bishōjo* games, players play a protagonist who is always a young, heterosexual male. Unlike some video games with multiple playable characters, no choices of protagonist exist in dating-sim games. The protagonist is typically in high school or college or, infrequently, is a young college graduate or older male. (If the character is older than a college student, the game usually centers on his life as a professional—a doctor, private detective, or the like.) The main character's daily experiences are normal and believable: he attends class, rides the train, participates in club activities, and goes to a part-time job. His face is rarely shown; players watch the events through the main character's eyes. When parts of the main character's face appears, he can be found to have Japanese features (usually dark hair and light-colored skin). Interestingly, his eyes are always either closed or concealed by his hair. As mentioned earlier, the main character's dialogue appears as text only.

Male characters in dating-sim games are essentially empty shells. They are characterized not by their personalities but by their lack thereof, have no outstanding traits or personalities, are mediocre students, and are not especially popular with women. Although players can occasionally name the main characters, most come with preset, generic names (like *Shuichi* or *Taka*). Thus, game players can easily fit themselves into this character mold; any dating-sim game owner has the potential to become the main character.

Male characters are often presented as the opposite of *shōjo* 少女 (young girls), a term that carries numerous connotations.<sup>16</sup> It typically refers to females who are between puberty and marriage and suggests heterosexual inexperience<sup>17</sup> and consumerism.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, most playable male characters are heterosexually experienced. Regardless of the female's sexual experience, even in cases where she is a married woman, a prostitute, or otherwise sexually experienced—and the male character is a virgin—the male is always more knowledgeable about both his and the woman's sexuality. Male characters are not unattractive, but they are also not particularly “cute” or otherwise especially attractive, at least originally; their physical features typically do not play a role in the game (thus enhancing their presentation as empty shells). Finally, male characters never become emotional. Whereas female characters often cry or become angry or happy, male characters tend to remain emotionally static. On the rare occasions when they experience emotions (usually confined to either happiness or frustration), the emotions are not outwardly expressed.

When male characters do display some sort of talent or power, it comes from an outside source and involves a transformation. Transformation does not occur in all dating-sim games, but it appears to be a prominent theme, much like magical girls are a theme in some *anime* and *manga*. In *Tottemo! Pheromone*, this transformation is a direct result of a magical spell cast on Takuya. In *Tsuki ~ Possession*, the transformation is a result of possession by an evil spirit which causes Yosuke to split into a “good” self and an “evil” self. In *Sensei 2*, Shuichi's transformation is the result of genetics (his family has a history of males who control and abuse women) coupled with stress (a teacher who physically assaults him).

These transformations differ from typical transformations in *anime* and *manga* in several ways. The transformations in *anime* and *manga* are almost always experienced by females, who are empowered by them.<sup>19</sup> The transforming figures in *anime* and *manga* “possess supernatural strength and powers . . . , impossible yet very desirable attributes for a human adolescent.”<sup>20</sup> Obviously, the transforming male in dating-sim games also possesses supernatural powers and desirable though impossible traits, such as being able to read women's minds, yet these transformations are often more negative than the kinds in *anime* and *manga*. Transformations in *anime* and *manga* empower the female characters and are almost always reversible. Transformations in dating-sim games, however, are often negative and/or permanent. For examples, Takuya wishes to be rid of the spell cast on him because he feels guilty about taking advantage of women (and is inconvenienced by their constant pleas for his affection), but Silk fails in her attempt to remove it. Shuichi does not resist his transformation and takes pleasure in his new, powerful self; but Takuya is terrified by his split and attempts to fight it, ultimately with success. Because male characters become power-

ful not through hard work or natural talent but through outside forces, game players are more easily able to understand the male character's power over women.

These transformations are labeled as undesirable by being alien, non-Japanese forms of transformation. What is most striking about the male transformations in dating-sim games is that they follow the style of American, rather than Japanese, superheroes. Tom Gill analyzes this distinction in "Transformational Magic," wherein he claims American superheroes "bio-transform," while Japanese superheroes "mecha-transform."<sup>21</sup> Bio-transformation, according to Gill, has two key features: it can be involuntary, or can lie somewhere between voluntary and involuntary, and it is often based on a childhood incident (a spider bite, for example) or—although Gill does not mention this possibility—genetics (as is the case with Superman). Mecha-transformation, however, is always voluntary. It usually involves an instrument that the superhero uses to transform him- or herself, and returning to original form is accomplished voluntarily after the enemy is defeated. Representative examples of mecha-transformation are Power Rangers and Sailor Moon.

The meaning of the distinction is clear: Only those with special or privileged histories are capable of bio-transformation, but the democratic mecha-transformation is possible for anyone once he or she has the technology (be it a magic wand, brooch, bracelet, or other type of transformation-instigating device).<sup>22</sup> These tools also give the superhero a reassuring sense of control and of normalcy; only a Japanese-style superhero is able to be a truly normal person between battles. American transformers such as Superman and Spider-Man embody their powers biologically and are unable to discard their powers along with their disguises; their transformation exists as a permanent marker of abnormality. Why, then, do Japanese games include transformations that follow the American, rather than Japanese, prototype? A possible explanation for this oddity is that it labels the main character and his actions as alien and abnormal, perhaps even inhuman. Therefore, players' inability to mimic the game characters' supernatural successes with women cannot be perceived as any sort of flaw.

### **Female Characters in Dating-Sim Games**

The female characters that appear in dating-sim games include both complex and simple figures. Numerous non-playable female characters are present. Some dating-sim games force players to pursue only one female character at a time, after which players can start the game over in order to form relationships with other characters. Other dating-sim games allow players to form simultaneous relationships. Some female characters are more elusive than others; a relationship with one of these characters can be

“unlocked” only after playing through the game multiple times. For example, in *Sensei 2*, Shuichi can form a relationship with Shoko (the student teacher), Kumiko (the childhood friend), or Sachiho (the principal) the first time the game is played. However, in order to form a relationship with the other characters, Seno (the P.E. teacher) and Ito (the chemistry teacher), players must completely play through the game with the first three female characters. Only then do these final two characters become unlocked.

Female characters in dating-sim games are in many ways opposites of the main male character. Rather than sporting drab, generic appearances and personalities, they often have unique traits and rarely appear Japanese. Traits include attributes such as multicolored hair and eyes (green, blue, pink, red, yellow, purple) and one-dimensional or exaggerated personalities (incredibly intelligent, sporty, outgoing, or shy). Whereas the male character is designed so that players can relate to him, female characters appear to be designed so that they would not resemble any real-life people the players might know. A remarkable example of this separation of unrealistic female characters from real-life people is found in *Tottemo! Pheromone*: Takuya’s cousin’s wife is named Ms. Silk (not to be confused with Silk, the main female character). Ms. Silk is a magical girl who traveled to Earth and, because she fell in love, chose to remain on Earth and had to surrender her magical powers. After giving up her powers, her striking blond hair and blue eyes turned black, making her appear Japanese. Ms. Silk is not a pursuable character in *Tottemo! Pheromone*, and this separation from the other female characters is displayed graphically by her realistic, Japanese features.

Women are never particularly strong characters in dating-sim games. Many female characters appear strong initially, but this first impression always turns out to be a mere façade. The protagonist seeks to remove each woman’s supposed power and reveal her “true form,” which is one of weakness and the desire to be subordinate to men. One extreme instance of this portrayal occurs in *Sensei 2*, where players can choose to pursue Sachiho, Shuichi’s high school principal. In this case, Shuichi begins a sexual relationship with her, and Sachiho becomes so infatuated with him that she divorces her husband, quits her job, and moves in with Shuichi to be his permanent “slave.” The message here is not only that, in the supernatural world of dating-sim games, one can subdue even the most powerful female around and reduce her to a non-entity but also that strength and independence are mere pretense: women are fundamentally weak and dependent upon men.

For that reason, almost all female characters in dating-sim games can be called *shōjo*. Although the characters are over eighteen and are thus “women,” not “girls,” they are presented as *shōjo* for being heterosexually inexperienced, cute, or emotional—or for, by the end of the game, having reverted to a *shōjo*-like state, as happens to Sachiho in *Sensei 2*. Perhaps

such a construct is employed is because dating-sim players consider *shōjo* to be attractive sex partners. John Whittier Treat writes that *shōjo* are erotic because they “lack libidinal agency of [their] own.”<sup>23</sup> Essentially, these *shōjo* are objects of play for men—living dolls. One possible ending in *Sensei 2* demonstrates this point quite clearly: Shuichi pursues Ito, the mysterious and attractive chemistry teacher, but she is not interested in him. However, she is defenseless against his sexual advances because she is indebted to him; he rescued her daughter from a stalker. Although Shuichi does not win Ito’s affections, she becomes a sex doll for him. The ending is aptly titled “Doll.” Thus, in dating-sim games, women are presented as either being defenseless playthings for the male character or are reduced to such by the end of the game, essentially reverting to a childlike, *shōjo* state.

Dating-sim characters are always very successful with relationships. They are never belittled or outdone by their partners, and they are often more knowledgeable about relationships (even if it is their first time). For example, in *Ever17*, a science fiction dating-sim game where Takeshi, the main character, is trapped in a malfunctioning underwater theme park along with four other females, the omnipresent android character who runs the aquarium (and is, of course, extremely attractive) implores Takeshi to teach her what “love” means. Despite her computer-like intelligence, she is ignorant compared to Takeshi. Additionally, in cases where the player makes a mistake and misses his chance with a girl, he or she is able to rewind the game so that this oversight can be amended. In the world of dating-sim games, any mistakes can be completely fixed and forgotten.

In these games, women desire very little from a relationship. In more hardcore games such as *Tsuki ~ Possession* and *Sensei 2*, the male character often subjects the women to rape, bondage, and violent sex. How could these female characters possibly enjoy these relationships, especially given the lack of kindness and sensitivity on the part of the males? A female character may often already have a boyfriend (or, in the case of Sachiho in *Sensei 2*, a husband) who treats her kindly, but she will choose to leave him for the main character who almost always treats her poorly. Dating-sim games appear to be presenting an *akogare* 憧れ (longing, fantasy) for men, in which relationships are simple because women have no needs or expectations and may even *enjoy* the imperfections in their male partners.

### Dating-Sim Games & Japanese Society: The Changing Face of the *Otaku*

Dating-sim games transport players into fantasy worlds in which everything is idealized to an absurd degree. The games represent a departure from the real world and its problems into seemingly familiar but bizarre alternatives, which may contain magical elements such as transformation.

Players' interactions with the game ensures that they become engrossed in the fantasy world, allowing temporary escapes from reality.

Such escapes are meaningful, however, as they can serve one or more specific purposes for players. In the case I explore in the remainder of this article, dating-sim games protect *otaku* from the risk of being labeled as *shō-jo*, a pejorative appellation that is a result of being feminized through watching romance-comedy *anime* and from being sexually inexperienced, unmarried consumers. In short, *otaku* are geeks. They are obsessive fans, usually of *anime*, *manga*, and/or video games. The term *otaku* arose in the 1980s as a derogatory term to describe *henjin* 変人 (weirdos) among the amateur *manga* community. The word *otaku* literally means “your honorable home” (when written as 御宅), and it humorously alludes to the social ineptitude of a geek who might attempt to communicate with peers in an overly formal manner.<sup>24</sup>

The *otaku* are of interest because of their high consumption of products geared toward fantasy. Such products include dating-sim and role-playing games, maid cafés (cafés where waitresses don maid costumes and refer to customers as “master”), and costumes for cosplay (*kosupure* コスプレ, a portmanteau of “costume” and “roleplay” which means dressing up as *anime*, *manga*, or video game characters). These are some of the ways in which the *otaku* crowd is understood as choosing to blur the line between reality and fantasy. Although *otaku* may be viewed with a bit of condescension from those with more mainstream tastes in Japan, *otaku* are generally condoned and are not believed to be a threat to society, unlike members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult or *hikikomori* (shut-ins who often exhibit violence toward family members or others), social outcasts who bring their fantasies into reality in disturbing ways.<sup>25</sup>

The interconnection between fantasy and reality is a key element of *otaku* culture. As a rejection of societal expectations for them to get married and support a household, an ideal based on the *salaryman* figure (the man who dedicates himself to his company to support his family), *otaku* choose instead to delve into a fantasy world of *anime*, *manga*, and video games. Many *otaku* claim that they express themselves better through computers and virtual identities than they do in real life; for these people, their virtual self is the “real them,” continuing to blur the line between fantasy and reality. Like young women who delay marriage and become “parasite singles,” *otaku* may also hold full-time jobs—but their income goes toward consuming fantasy in the form of dating-sim games, trips to maid cafés, *anime* and *manga* paraphernalia, and so on. *Otaku* therefore represent a rejection of adulthood by resisting work, women, and the *salaryman* ideal.

One important characteristic of *otaku* is their supposed inability to communicate. This stereotype is seen in the 2005 movie *Densha Otoko* 電車男, in which the main character, Densha Otoko (Train Man), stammers in a

nervous, high-pitched voice when speaking to women over the phone—yet, when communicating over the Internet, Densha Otoko is calm and eloquent. Such characterization typifies the common perception that *otaku* have come to rely on computers and cell phones for communication and that the result of this constant electronic mediation is essentially a fissure of identity: a cool, confident “virtual” self co-exists with a socially inept “real life” self.<sup>26</sup> In addition to pointing to these traits as prime *otaku* characterizations, Joseph Dela Pena also characterizes *otaku* as identity-seekers. He argues that *otaku* fail to fit within the “socially optimal” identity by being studious and performing well on tests; therefore, they create a new identity based on fantasy worlds of *anime*, *manga*, and gaming.<sup>27</sup>

Identities created specifically through playing dating-sim games are meaningful: They reaffirm *otaku* masculinity. *Otaku* who enjoy romance-comedy *anime* are passively consuming animated fantasies about non-sexual romance, according to Annalee Newitz.<sup>28</sup> In her study of *anime* in America, Newitz uncovers an anxiety that heterosexual males in Japan who watch romance-comedy *anime* risk being feminized. Dating-sim games can be seen as a foil to this effect: They offer sexual romances that players can experience directly rather than as passive viewers/voyeurs. Some of the games with more hardcore pornographic images are the opposite of romance-comedy *anime*, being, essentially, sexual non-romance. Newitz also argues that the American *anime* fan does not risk being feminized like his Japanese counterpart,<sup>29</sup> so perhaps this claim partially explains the lack of popularity of dating-sim games outside Japan.

Recently, the word *shōjo* has been expanded to include both males and females who are young, between the ages of puberty and marriage, and are consumers. This new umbrella meaning often applies to *otaku*. Therefore, that *shōjo* are subjected to control in dating-sim games is not surprising: Controlling a group of people offers a way for the controllers to identify themselves as “not-them.” This argument is presented in Ichirō Tomiyama’s study of the relationship between Okinawa and mainland Japan in the 1910s: “rather than asking ‘who are we?’, [the Japanese] began with the question, ‘who are they?’, aimed at . . . the Ryukyuan (the Okinawans) in the south.”<sup>30</sup> Tomiyama is arguing that Japan in the 1910s, during the Meiji Period (1868–1912), was searching for an identity, and that this identity was easily achieved by colonizing Okinawa (as well as Taiwan and Korea) and defining Japan as “not-them.” I argue that present-day *otaku* are searching for an identity. Through dating-sim games, they control *shōjo* and thus define themselves as “not-*shōjo*.” In this way, the *otaku* reaffirms his masculinity.

Seen in this light, dating-sim games appear to be similarly affecting the *otaku*’s preferences for computer-mediated or computer-created relationships and a fondness for the female beauty depicted in *anime*. Beginning in

the early 1990s, the connotation of the word *otaku* began to shift from negative to positive as the word began to indicate a person with extensive specialized knowledge. *Otaku* came to be perceived as sensitive, presumably from obsessively watching romance-comedy *anime*, and desirable as boy-friends. As one Japanese girl was quoted in the *Japan Times*, “The age of the hunk is over. I prefer the kinder, nerdier, cuddlier *Akiba-Kei* [*otaku*].”<sup>31</sup> The article goes on to claim that *otaku* are now renowned for their impossibly high standards: they prefer women who are “cute, malleable, big-breasted, thin-legged, large-eyed, and erotic.”<sup>32</sup> Essentially, they want a female character from dating-sim games. One self-proclaimed *otaku* admits that “a real woman will always lose to a digital chick.”<sup>33</sup>

Why, though, would a normal relationship, consisting of hard work, compromise, and inevitable moments of sadness, be preferred over a digital one, in which the opposite sex is easily controlled, understandable, and as beautiful as the player demands? I am not suggesting that dating-sim games affect all users so drastically, but such an effect does seem to exist, to some degree. Nevertheless, the consistency in the players’ roles, the depiction and position of the female characters, and the storylines themselves suggest that the games can function on one level to reinforce a kind of masculine identification in the players, no matter how seriously or lightly they may regard the computer-mediated intimacy.

### The Dating-Sim Game as “Japanese”

Through the theatrics of dating-sim games, players are transported to idealized worlds where they can temporarily escape from reality. In Japan, *otaku* may be already engrossed in fantasy, perhaps to the extent that they consider their virtual selves to be their “real” selves. In such cases, dating-sim games provide very real and captivating experiences, experiences that might cause *otaku* to idealize the two-dimensional versions of women on the screen and reject real women because the real ones seem comparatively inadequate (or perhaps because male players have already been rejected by such women themselves). Additionally, as the *otaku* figure is becoming increasingly feminized, dating-sim games, through their control and exploitation of weak, *shōjo* characters, allow (or even encourage) the player to affirm his identity as non-*shōjo*, or masculine, thus empowering and reassuring him.

Dating-sim games are clearly an integral part of Japanese society, comprising around 25 percent of software that is bought and sold at video game stores across Japan. These games are enmeshed in the social context of Japan, including such areas as *otaku* culture. With these deep connections to Japanese society and culture, therefore, we should not be particularly surprised that such games have not yet been well received abroad. Perhaps the

gradually increasing levels of popular awareness of Japanese culture in the West will enlarge the market for Japanese-style dating-sim games among certain populations abroad; or perhaps producers of dating-sim games will modify their approach—the very premise upon which dating-sim games are built, and the very premise that makes such games so quintessentially “Japanese”—for foreign markets. Even if neither scenario manifests itself in the near future, dating-sim games will remain remarkable windows into Japanese popular culture, social expectations, gender relations, and the meanings of work and leisure in contemporary Japan.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the reviews of dating-sim games at <http://www.somethingawful.com>.

<sup>2</sup>I have found only one scholarly work that offers more than cursory comments on the games: Joseph L. Dela Pena’s “Otaku: Images and Identity in Flux,” *CUREj: College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal*, University of Pennsylvania (2006), available at <http://repository.upenn.edu/curej/9> (accessed July 19, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the *otaku*, *hikikomori*, and “parasite single” figures, see, for example: Thomas Lamarre, “An Introduction to Otaku Movement,” *EnterText* 4, no. 1 (winter 2004–5): 151–87, available online at <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/4042/entertext4.1/lamarre1.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2007); Mariko Tran, “Unable or Unwilling to Leave the Nest? An Analysis and Evaluation of Japanese Parasite Single Theories,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (July 3, 2006), available online at <http://japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/2006/Tran.html> (accessed September 15, 2007); and Michael Zielenziger, *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>For relatively recent information on Japanese dating and relationships, see Rebecca E. Fukuzawa and Gerald K. LeTendre, *Intense Years: How Japanese Adolescents Balance School, Family, and Friends* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001); Hiroko Hirakawa, “Give Me One Good Reason to Marry a Japanese Man: Japanese Women Debating Ideal Lifestyles,” *Women’s Studies* 33, no. 4 (2004): 423–51; and Noriko O. Tsuya and Larry L. Bumpass, eds., *Marriage, Work, and Family Life in Comparative Perspective: Japan, South Korea, and the United States* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>For more information on obscenity and pornography in Japan, see Nicholas Bornoff, *Pink Samurai: Love, Marriage & Sex in Contemporary Japan* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991); and Joel Powell Dahlquist and Lee Garth Vigilant, “Way Better than Real: Manga Sex to Tentacle Hentai,” in *Net.SeXXX: Readings on Sex, Pornography, and the Internet*, ed. Dennis D. Waskul (New York: P. Lang, 2004), 91–103. For more information on Japanese gaming and leisure, see David R. Leheny, *The Rules of Play: National Identity and the Shaping of Japanese Leisure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). Finally, several essays in Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher’s recent edited volume, *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century: Literate Connections* (Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), address Japanese influences on the worldwide phenomenon and experience of computer gaming vis-à-vis issues of gender, identity formation, and cultural models.

<sup>6</sup>Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Boulder, CO: Westview

Press, 1996); and Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup>Allison, *Nightwork*, 11.

<sup>8</sup>“Bishōjo Game,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bish%C5%8Djo\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bish%C5%8Djo_game) (accessed May 2, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>Some games include brief animated segments at the beginning or end or, occasionally, between scenes.

<sup>10</sup>Although female players also enjoy playing dating-sim games, I use masculine pronouns to refer to players for the remainder of this article. On the demographics of female gamers around the world, though, see Barbara Lippe, “Japan: Games for, by and about Girls,” in *Gender in E-Learning and Educational Games: A Reader*, ed. Sabine Zauchner, Karin Siebenhandl, and Michael Wagner (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2007), 223–40. See also Angela Thomas and Valerie Walkerdine, *Girls and Computer Games*, <http://www.women.it/quarta/workshops/laracroft5/angelathomas.htm> (accessed September 15, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>“Bishōjo Game.”

<sup>12</sup>Romanization of game names follows the game developers’ discretion and, for some titles (including this one), differs from the linguistic standards followed elsewhere in this piece. (D. O. is the name of the game developer; other developers mentioned in this article are Rockstar Games, Konami, ZyX, and Trabulance.) Likewise, character names appear in Anglicized form, that is, without macrons (e.g., “Shuichi” instead of “Shūichi,” “Shoko” instead of “Shōko,” “Ito” instead of “Itō,” and “Yosuke” instead of “Yōsuke”).

<sup>13</sup>As of the writing of this article (June 2007), no used copies were available through Amazon.co.jp.

<sup>14</sup>The most popular fan Web site is *Kana’s Left Kidney* (<http://pages.prodigy.net/kana/>). The creator of this fan Web site, as well as several reviewers the creator cites, claims that the appeal of this game is its touching, realistic characters: “The cast of characters you will encounter in this game are vivid and captivating, each with their own personality. You will get a feel for what each of the individuals are actually like. I love the personalities . . . they are not the typical corny stuff you would expect from a video game.” One fan’s enthusiasm toward the game and the characters inspired him to tattoo his arm with a picture of Kana (<http://www.angelfire.com/ne/Eltink/kana/tattoo/>). And a fan Web site in Spanish ([http://ar.geocities.com/dark\\_diego/](http://ar.geocities.com/dark_diego/)) offers a brief glimpse at the worldwide popularity of this Japanese visual novel. (All URLs accessed July 13, 2007.)

<sup>15</sup>Soundtracks of the opening and closing songs and background music are available, integrating the music industry with the gaming industry and further commercializing the phenomenon. Further spin-offs include various types of character merchandise and even *anime* series based on especially popular game titles.

<sup>16</sup>Presumably referring to the unmarried state of the *shōjo*, Robertson defines the term as “not quite female.” Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* *Shōjo* 処女, a near-homophone, is the Japanese term for “virgin.”

<sup>18</sup>John Whittier Treat, “Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: *Shōjo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993): 353–87, 363.

<sup>19</sup>Michelle Tung describes such transformations in *anime* and *manga* in detail in her senior honors thesis, *Technology Transformation: The Anime Cyberbabe* (Stanford, CA: Humanities Honors Program, Stanford University, 2001).

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup>Tom Gill, "Transformational Magic: Some Japanese Super-heroes and Monsters." In *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D. P. Martinez. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33–55: 46.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>23</sup>Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home," 363.

<sup>24</sup>Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 128.

<sup>25</sup>Dela Pena, "Otaku," 18.

<sup>26</sup>Anthropologists Anne Allison and John Nathan have argued that the majority of Japanese youth suffer from an inability to communicate that has arisen from dependence on virtual communication. See Allison's *Millennial Monsters*, 66–74; and Nathan's *Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation's Quest for Pride and Purpose* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 43. The exaggerated, comical form of the ineptitude in *Densha Otoko* might be a form of displacement for those suffering from communication disorders.

<sup>27</sup>Dela Pena, "Otaku," 16–17.

<sup>28</sup>Annalee Newitz, "Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1995): 2–15, 6.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Ichirō Tomiyama, "The Critical Limits of the National Community: The Ryukyuan Subject," *Social Science Japan Journal* 1, no. 2 (1998): 165–79, 168.

<sup>31</sup>Kaori Shoji, "Sweetness Counts for Women in Search of Geeks," *Japan Times*, December 13, 2005.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*