

5FM5509 – SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACHES

The Rise of the Hardcore Demarcation

Introduction

On November 19th 2006 the Japanese company Nintendo released their fifth home console, the *Wii*, to a deliberately broader demographic than has ever been targeted before in the history of the videogame entertainment medium. At a press conference in Tokyo on December 12th 2006, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata said “We're not thinking about fighting Sony, but about how many people we can get to play games. The thing we're thinking about most is not portable systems, consoles, and so forth, but that we want to get new people playing games⁻¹”. A successful marketing campaign of television and internet adverts (often focusing on the play of parents and grandparents; one slogan consisting of ‘*Wii* would like to Play’) has caught the imagination of many, with one pensioner of 103, having been reported² of enjoying *Wii Sports* (2006). The videogame was no longer to exist exclusively in the domain of the old core audience and is instead now marketed as a lifestyle accessory to a new audience, successfully sold in a permanent and pervasive fashion. This opening up of the industry has culminated in 50 million *Wii* units having been shipped as of the end of March 2009³, yet the inexorable flipside to this situation is many of whom consist of the old core audience as consequently feeling disenfranchised or at worse betrayed by this shift in attention, as made evident by the influx of frustrated messages on many online game related message boards⁴. In the West, the typically 12-30 year old male demographic have been the highest proportion of consumers of videogame products in the past, and the advent of the *Wii* has resulted in the forging by this core of a new demarcation of ‘Hardcore’ and ‘Casual’ gamers. This controlling – an explicit splitting represents an attempt to preserve a complicated relationship of what has been an identity-giving hobby of devotion, over what will be a highly transient future of the videogame medium.

Firstly this essay seeks to investigate this distinction and what the emergence really means by contrasting the audiences and investigating how the term has evolved.

Secondly, by comparing the Western with the Eastern cultural backgrounds of audiences it is possible to postulate reasons as to why in the West such a cautious relationship with the suturing of technology exists amongst the new Casual audience of many, that such a differentiation needs emerging in the first place from the protective relationship of the older Hardcore few.

Throughout the essay, it is aware that a West/East global split is a relatively antiquated segregation (especially in the light of Marshall McLuhan's (1994) theory of the 'Global Village'⁵ as apparent by the ever weaving communication technology binding the continents) yet the term 'West' will refer to America, UK and Europe, and the 'East' will refer to Japan, Mainland China, Taiwan and South Korea as socio-culturally these two areas offer the most potential for rich analysis.

Part One – The Loaded Lexicon of the Lonely

The term 'Hardcore' is used by members of the old core audience in a weighted gender-laden manner that automatically expresses an evaluative dominance of their opinion. Particularly in online message boards these gender politics are in play to channel assertion of masculine creative force against feminine receptive force, which invites repercussive competition. Power relations between these participants are balanced in a homo-social manner and are a way for like-minded, primarily adolescent males to assert their opinions on what games should be heralded as deserving a fellow Hardcore audience. Goldstein (2006:342) notes "that competition, challenge, and achievement are crucially important, particularly for boys"¹ and these discussions in online message boards are a natural extension from the competitive *Agon* (Caillois, 1961)² (described as "competitive play, which requires skill and training... First person shooter games fall into this category, as would any multiplayer games in which competition occurs against other individuals or teams... Agonistic games are those where there is a clear winning or losing outcome") they experience in their videogame play. Before the release of the Nintendo *Wii* there was very little discrimination between being a Hardcore or a Casual gamer, consequently games that have been heralded as classics, (puzzle games like *Tetris* (1985)) if released today would be considered Casual, which defines the vague and paradoxical nature of the terms. As King and Krzywinska (2006:220)³ articulate:

"Gaming magazines, websites and chat rooms devoted to gaming are central to the creation of a gaming subculture in general, and to particular subcultures related to individual games or genres. The Internet looms especially in this area, a domain that cuts across national boundaries and in which gameplayers are particularly likely to be adept because of the computer based nature of the medium. These mainly participatory modes of communication promote a distinctive shared language that helps to mark gamers off as a subsection of society. Becoming acquainted with the language of gaming and sharing experiences with other gamers creates a sense of shared identity and interest"

Broadly, Casual games are most of the games available for the *Wii* although they are not exclusive to the console (examples include *SingStar* (2007,2008) and *Buzz* (2007,2008) for the *Playstation 3*, and *Lips* (2008) for the *X-Box360*). These types of

games open local social experiences that specialize in instant gratification, allowing gaming to be accessible to a much broader audience. The concept of Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' (1955)⁴ is especially applicable to Casual games where players are eased into an entering and exiting, encouraging the enjoyment of individual moments, instead of long immersive hours of gameplay. The rules are often simple and learning how to play requires little laborious mental effort, which increases with age as the ability of an audience to suspend disbelief decreases. These games are often non-violent in their nature, and can be played in short sessions. They lack finality (there's no definitive point when a game is finished) and are vastly replayable. Poole (2000:183)⁵ comments on the similar nature of the videogame with other activities that incorporate aspects of play and performance, suggesting the parallel to the arena of the family sport - a place that Nintendo have capitalized on with the *Wii*. Casual games represent an easy way for a consumer to enter the digital realm for pleasure, which as Winkler (2006: 143)⁶ notes is still a new experience for many :

"Consider this statement made by the president of a leading manufacturer (on videogaming): "This hobby has a steep learning curve. You don't pick up a book and hop right in. You're either taught how to play, or you read for *four hours* and learn how to play yourself. It's not a mainstream hobby, it requires too much active participation from the participants to ever capture a significant part of our society who have been spoon fed passive entertainment all their lives"

Hardcore games by contrast are almost always violent and serious in tone; designed for a mature male audience. Examples include *Killzone 2* (2009), *Fallout 3* (2008), *Halo 3* (2007), *Gears of War 2* (2008) and *Bioshock* (2007). Considering the explicit roles players are framed in with these games, there is a greater degree of Althusser's (1970)⁷ theory of 'Interpellation', where identification between player and avatar is much more charged in these attached perspectives by contrast to Casual games often detached perspective. King and Krzywinska (2006:197)⁸ describe Interpellation theory with regards to videogame audiences as games having a 'call and response' relationship with players existing via a 'positioning', 'hailed' by the game into this framing. All players reap meaning from their gameplay through this theory, but the myriad and amplified interpellative design aspects of the Hardcore offer an immense,

immersive interior rather than the contrastingly 'gliding' of a play experience that defines the Casual. The emergence of the Hardcore demarcation is an expression of resistance by those players of games used to this high level of interpellative identification, to denote their own boundaries from those who are freshly discovering the potential of the videogame. This boundary is defined by Hardcore players as resistance, via the adoption of increasingly mature themes (such as violence of a serious tone), in an attempt to stop further invasion into 'exclusive' territory. As Crawford and Rutter (2006:156)⁹ suggest:

"Digital gaming can be seen to have its own practices and culture (or habitus) distinct from other leisure forms where issues such as competition, conflict, technology, baiting of competitors, control, game statistics and rapid consumption of new game titles typically shape the practice of being a digital gamer"

Until the emergence of the Casual market players charged their 'Technicity'; forging digital identity and consequent social power in the process through use of all of these elements.

The notion of 'Technicity' is suggested by Dovey and Kennedy (2006:64-80)¹⁰ as a key concept for understanding game culture, citing identity and technological competence as being interconnected, and an important part of personal articulation in the 21st Century where "this identity then becomes a basis for affiliations and connections with like-minded others". Building upon interpreters of Gramsci, it is suggested "those who have the power in our societies to produce and circulate their meanings and interpretations ultimately generate, sort of "hegemonic truths"". This dynamic tension between personal technicity and dominant cultural hegemony is symbolic of the struggle between the identity of Hardcore and the way the invasion of the Casual threatens to erode what has been until recently, a private hobby fueled by respected digital engagers forming a culture of collective technicity. As Dovey and Kennedy note "that when we assert the power of dominant technicities we equally assert that this power is a dynamic process through which other, alternate and subversive identities are being constantly generated". With the success of the now dominant Casual market, the Hardcore fear being absorbed and losing their own dominant outsider status and with it their self-forged identity, charged by their technicity granted through their digital endeavors of programming and playing. This is an identity of mystifying outsiders and therefore

becoming respected harbingers of hacking; an ethos and mythos built upon by the 'CyberPunk' author William Gibson's coined term of 'Edge': "Technological Edge can be defined as the product of a successful conjunction of advanced technological hardware and contextually sophisticated techniques" (Tomas 2000: 179)¹¹. This Edge promotes enhanced agency to the lives of the predominately adolescent Hardcore videogame audience who may be lacking agency in their real lives - and so becomes an important source of cultural capital, harvested through their engagement with these Hardcore games. As the videogame industry opens up to accommodate Casual gamers the focus of the regular consumer will continue to travel from margin to center, and the battle of the Hardcore will continue in tandem as they attempt to charge their dominant identity with the continued evolution of their technicity, as a means of generating edge as cultural capital - for there is none in the homogenized. For developers, this political economy of Edge will prove to be an important structural currency to earn in the future designs of their games, as the socially withdrawn continue to find solace in sharpening their Edge of rebellious technicity.

This currency of Edge is gendered as masculine, where gathering is a means of accumulating social power. It represents an opposing ideology to what the (comparatively feminine) advent of the *Wii* has heralded, where inferior technical hardware specifications have resulted in a bigger sales success than the more powerful X-Box360 and Playstation 3. Up to now each successive generation of console has brought with it faster central and more powerful graphical processing units, representing a shift in the way the videogames industry is now consumed. For the Casual designer a new emphasis now rests in designing innovative ways of interfacing with a machine rather than interpellating at the realistic level, yet this is another collision in attitude to the Hardcore audience. This notion of the videogame classed by society as the trivial toy clashes especially with adolescents attempting to distance themselves from the immature. Questions of masculinity and adulthood are raised in anxious older males as well, if caught enjoying the effeminate or childish; highlighting an attitude where acceptance is only deemed appropriate if conforming to a particularly mature enough taste. Pierre Bourdieu (1986:173)¹² suggested "Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is

the generative formula of lifestyle". Symbolic goods, and especially the semiotically heavy videogame, generate cultural capital for an audience to express lifestyle. Western men in particular have a rigid template of masculinity to adhere to if competitive edge is to be maintained, and consequently the subconsciously insecure may keep a distance from anything that could reflect badly upon the power relations of their self-constructed image. The Hardcore audience resent this spotlight of triviality, as a hobby marketed as leisure peripherals for casual fun can also be more easily grouped together as toys rather than taken seriously as a worthwhile spend of time in an adult entertainment medium - reflecting badly upon personal taste, and hence lifestyle.

The Hardcore disagree with specific genres of game that 'fail' to interpellate a satisfactory level of agency. 'On-Rail Shooters' (an example is the *Wii's House of the Dead: Overkill* (2009)) that trade agency for orchestration are understood as childish, even if their environments, enemies and semiotic themes are far from it (they can be understood as being guided experiences, perhaps harking back to subconscious childhood themes by the Hardcore audience). Even if the reason for a game in this style is for system optimization, as with the forthcoming *Wii* title *Dead Space: Extraction* (2009), the Hardcore digest it as a half bothered development instead of understanding it as having the development emphasis on immersive graphics, which is important for a franchise such as *Dead Space*. The free-roaming level of agency transferred in most games deemed 'hardcore' represent the highest form of videogame potential – any other versions for other consoles that have their mechanics tweaked for optimization reasons are deemed as inferior version.

Specifically, a typical Casual player may observe Hardcore gaming as an ageing mode of engagement. Contrastingly, the Hardcore audience focuses on the Casual market as supplying 'easy' games that do not reward cumulative skill and instead reinforce penalty-less failure. More resentment flows from the Hardcore as the industry is so closely scrutinized; the level of player technicity compliments the skill level of Internet use, so the Hardcore will always have information on developments to digest and discuss. Allegiances to consoles and game developers runs high, and currently much resentment is aimed at Nintendo for ushering in the era of Casual videogaming; brand loyalty is broken when preferences and expectations are strained. The success of Nintendo was due to the

old Hardcore, and feelings run that Nintendo no longer cater to their desires; the irony is that gamers failed to support the 2001 released *Gamecube* and if it was not for the income from the *Gameboy Advance* the company may have filed for bankruptcy. Games such as *F-Zero GX* (2003), *Super Smash Bros Melee* (2001), *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002), *Pikmin* (2001), and *Zelda: Legend of the Wind Waker* (2002) were potentially deemed as too childish, at a time when audiences were playing comparatively more adult titles on the then thriving *Playstation 2*. Nintendo are not a multi-conglomerate, diverse manufacturer of electronics (Sony) or the most dominant software company in the world (Microsoft) and could not afford to not make money on videogames as it is all they have ever done. Their gamers first abandoned Nintendo and not the other way around, and naturally as a business can only exist if they are profitable – which is often overlooked by Hardcore audience members lamenting about the current course of videogame history.

It could be argued that resentment is a natural process that occurs as an audience gets older and begins to hark back to the past with seemingly hyper articulate memories of nostalgia. Time-subjective culture is often considered better, when actually age is sensitive to the sensual and artistic, where seemingly no era before or after will ever produce art with the sublime depth, poignancy and meaning of before. Nostalgia is well known for the clouding distortion effect it has on the mind, where the funny is subversively anarchic and music is more exhilarating. Resentment exists from the Hardcore as a fear of ‘dumbing down’, where ‘easier’ casual games are being produced by minimizing enemies and including too many unbalanced powerups/lives. These gamers have grown up with the games from before the 32-bit era, which due to technical limitations tested much more skill and precision in their gameplay. Therefore their gameplay suspension of disbelief has been widened much more than an audience is used to today - older games have testing and built up a patience level that otherwise would result in a firm switching off of the machine today.

Many ironies have become apparent by the rise of the Hardcore demarcation. As mature as the games consumed by the Hardcore are, they are displaying their immaturity by erecting the desired impenetrable stereotype-barriers of the demarcation in the first place; it is a private place where backlash and resentment generated can be bounced within their enclosed group while the Casual market carries on functioning unaware of

their derision. The *Wii* is the best-selling console of this generation⁻¹⁴, and though deemed as immature by the Hardcore, purchases have been made with serious and adult money; blurring the boundary between adult gadget and child toy.

The Playstation 3 from the consumer lifestyle brand Sony, perhaps has a console that is used as less of a consumer lifestyle product than Nintendo because of the cunning living-room residing releases of *Wii Fit* and *Wii Sports*. This notion of a high and low level of lusus attitude as possibly related to geo-political culture will be discussed in Part Two of this essay. That is not to cast the demaraction in a completely negative light as it generally helps to denote how much work goes into a game - which can help with the current issue of Piracy and how much it is worth for developers to spend on protecting their games. A Casual virtual darts throwing game such as *PDC World Championship Darts 2008* (2008) for the *Wii* has the irony of selling more than a Hardcore game that has spent much longer in production such as *Madworld* (2009), but will get pirated much less.

There has been a definitive shift in perception from the consumer as videogames become further absorbed into the mainstream. In one respect, a popular game by its definition is a good game. As *Wii Sports* has sold the most games ever⁻¹⁵ then, whether this make it the pinnacle of gaming is open to debate - gaming is multifaceted by its nature, and may have many definitions. A good game is not necessarily a revolutionary, innovative, ingenious masterpiece; as it is based on technology it is how well it functions as an interface between cyborg man and organic machine. As *Wii Fit* (2007) is a fitness game for a mass market audience, it successfully does its designated function well. For the Hardcore it remains to be seen whether what is typically a Hardcore game can yet be heralded by the mainstream as a serious masterpiece when to many, gaming is supposed to be light-hearted, fun and entertaining by its very nature - a Casual audience may suggest when a game is serious it is not pleasurable, and therefore not a game. What an audience may grasp as a good game is founded upon individual geo-political cultural structures, with the social cultures of the East and West being useful contrast for identifying different play attitudes.

Part Two –Oriental Orientation

As digital game play is a socially constructed, dynamic and diverse cultural practice, the Hardcore and Casual playing styles reflect the player demographics of the West. We live in a 'Global Village' that has emerged, and whilst reconciliation has occurred between the East and West since the Second World War there are discerning tastes mirrored in their consumed media from each side that still show an instinctual distinction. The emergence of the Hardcore demarcation signifies a shift in perception amongst Western gamers, yet that such a shift has occurred in the first place represents an indication of the cautious relationship Western culture has with technology. Comparison with the East allows for rich contextual contrast in the shared and differing cultural attitudes constructed by how their societies work, which defines what the West and East have as base values for their cultural capital, which further defines the politics within how their videogamers behave. The medium of the Videogame is part of a broader tapestry of cultural products that require a lusory attitude to engage with in the first place which Winkler (2006:143)¹ further expresses with:

"...the gaming industry can be seen as part of a larger industry of fantasy and sci-fi products that also include closely associated industries. Examples include: fantasy and science fiction novels, comic books, Japanese anime and manga, sci-fi or fantasy TV shows or movies (eg *Star Trek*, *Buffy*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings trilogy*), collectable action figures and other toys. These are all cultural products that many participants in the gaming industry will have knowledge of and own"

As shall be discussed the East has a naturally higher level of expressive lusory attitude that has evolved, mirrored in the distinctive style vocabulary of the 'manga' art style found in their comics and consequent games, that has become synonymous with the geographical region. Arguably the aesthetic and gaming are a more natural match than the Western comic as both focus on amplification at much higher levels. Often characters are designed with exaggerated eyes, tiny noses and big mouths which allow high levels of expressive freedom in generating emotion with the characters facial features, and static images are often semiotically rich in their clothing design, portrayed in dynamic poses (see image 1 below). Often emotions are denoted semiotically as well, with exaggerated teardrops appearing on the side of heads to denote anxiety, and pupils disappearing to denote shock. There are even different types of manga aimed at different ages in the East; *seinen* specifically targeted directed at older males. The Eastern style of the distorted lends itself to many of the Casual games released in the West. Typically Western lusory

media such as Disney cartoons are different by contrast, where each creation has its own style, with narratives often charged with didactic undertones so adults can justify their children's engaging in them - often media of a cartoon nature which is luscious and irreverent for the sake of it is not seemed suitable for Western children digestion; the anarchic can be justified with a lesson attached.

Image 1 - a recently released X-Box360 promotional booklet from Japan, displaying the distinctive shared style of the luscious.

TAKE FREE!

メッセサンオーが
Xbox 360を
オススメするには**理由**がある

Xbox 360
スーパー
カタログ
Powered by
メッセサンオー

マルチプラットフォームの
ゲームを遊ぶなら、
PS3より Xbox 360!

イラスト:
ぽよん♡ろっく
※本カタログの価格情報は、すべて税込み価格です。

PS3の
約半額!

Xbox 360 アーケード
19,800円

Xbox 360
29,800円

これを買えば
間違いない!

ゲーム
エリートなら
コレを買え!

Xbox 360 エリート
39,800円

A potential reason for these shared notions of what consists of good design is that Eastern culture is grounded in the teachings of Confucianism, which is a

"Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius 551–479 BC). It focuses on human morality and right action. And it is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical, and quasi-religious thought that has had tremendous influence on the culture and history of East Asia. It might be considered a state religion of some East Asian countries, because of governmental promotion of Confucian values." -2

Fundamental at the core of the teachings of Confucius is Collectivism, where the sense of personal Self is directed toward the social purpose of the community, rather than concentrating on being a truly distinct individual, which is a Western ideal. As Ho (256)³ states on the subject of Eastern identity:

"The significance of social connections goes beyond informal social identification to the very definition of identity, I use the term *relational identity* to refer to identity defined by a person's significant social connections. To illustrate, the Chinese term for identity, *shenfen*, has a strong connotation of a person's social "place".... For Westerners, an individual's identity may be defined quite independent of the group. For Asians, however, individual identity tends to be interwoven with collective identity... Each member partakes of the attributes of the group. Each shares the pride that the group claims and bears the burden of its collective humiliation"

In many ways the cultural history of anthropology and psychology of the East lends itself better to digital play, where working in an organized group is similar to the matrix of the technical composition of electronic media, and a shared harmonious 'hive mind' imagination can lend itself better to refining what it is to play collectively with cooperation. Arguably the East has more female gamers as the archetypal tropes of the Western Hardcore gamer alienate them. Based upon the spirit of competition, it is often used to display dominance over fellow players. Unlike men who are biologically prone to emulous behaviour, women have little urge to be aggressive or show this sense of dominance, having been bred by society to act submissive and apathetic toward their male counterparts. Unless fighting for the sake of their offspring or for the affections of a suitable mate, women are not combative, and as a result, find little to no interest in playing video games, often finding them a waste of valuable time and effort. Eastern games are much less about competition and therefore encompass a wider market; this lusory attitude is reflected in the thriving Japanese arcade scene, a world where it is

normal for schoolgirls to frequent sticker machines after school or housewives heading for the UFO catcher.

From this shared subconscious imagination reservoir comes another element of the Casual, which are games of *Alea*, which Callois (1961)⁴ coined as games of chance or fortune. Pachinko is a type of pinball style game which is very popular in the Japanese arcade industry - the game is a personification of non-violent sublime trepidation that would be the definition of a Casual game to the West, such as PopCap Games *Peggle* (2007). Callois (1962:154)⁵ further writes about Chinese games with "The Chinese also use the word *yeou* to designate idling and games in space, especially kite-flying, and also great flights of fancy, mystic journeys of shaman, and the wanderings of ghosts and the damned", and Kelts (2004:211)⁶ similarly writes that "'Japanese people love fighting as an art form" says Iso-San, citing the massive crowds at Mixed Martial Arts events in Japan, the proliferation of graphically violent comic books that would raise eyebrows, at the least in today's closeted America. What Americans disdainfully call 'Ultimate Fighting' for example, and see as brutes bashing each other in the ring, is honoured here as a contemporary blending of ancient sports". These two quotes illustrate the heavy Eastern interest in motion, reflecting the fluidity of the haptic interface of the Nintendo *Wii* - one of the core values of what Westerns consider as Casual. By comparison Eastern technology shops also have a very different attitude to consumer electronics with their goods displayed with demonstration models and not behind counters, suggesting a much more interactive, less anxious and easy attitude with technology than the West.

Religion is one of the many socio-cultural reasons for these differences between the West and East as it one of the deepest forms of human expression. Western Theology has a habit of breeding angst and anxiety from a desire to purge oneself of sin, feelings of guilt due to the release of the Original Sin from Eden, and being aware of the trepidation that comes with believing in the upcoming Last Judgement. This angst is mirrored in the Western taste for the typical visceral reality of the gritty, grim and dark Hardcore game that focuses on reconciliation with a hostile environment. The East by contrast have religions that have much broader scopes to their structures - Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism all focus on a principle of Duality and balance; of owning the darker side of life with the lighter, instead of polarizing a direction to face. Consequently the themes of Eastern games often display philosophical musings on the polarity of energy or 'chi', and many Japanese videogame mascots have their own binary opposite to highlight each other (Mario and Wario, Sonic and Shadow). The history of the West being built on the Colonialist American Frontier dream of conquest often interpellates players as soldiers in science-fiction inspired settings as that conquest moves into Space, or the English

equivalent of the Medieval Knight in the romantic or barbaric⁷. Historical Eastern games often focus on Ronin or Bushido Samurai, which in turn are focuses on the graceful performance and practice of wielding a blade instead of the excessive Western obsession with guns in games. Guns lend themselves better to the Western Hardcore perspective of the first-person, where swords are an extension of the body and work in all game perspectives.

Wolf (2001:176)⁸ writes "...games themselves have become an art form containing the cultural archetypes of all human knowledge. Because these themes connect with the innermost sense of self and the world, they perpetuate a distinctive culture and interpretation of reality that stands in stark contrast to the rigidity of our scientific, rational, modern world" - this 'rigidity' is mirrored in Western Hardcore games that generate a virtual reality that is often as realistic as possible. Eastern games are designed to further investigate this 'interpretation of reality', which is why there are so many games about ghosts and parallel spirit worlds. Eastern horror games are much more slow-draining and have a psychological Gothic dissonance in their approach (examples include *Silent Hill* (1999), *Siren Blood Curse* (2008), and *Castlevania* (1986)) than Western games that use visceral physical horror tropes to resonate with their audiences. These games work by being subtle in their nuances - it is about what can be created with the raw ingredients of colour and sound to really generate some emotional resonance. It represents a difference in attitude where the West focuses on vicarious interpellation into virtual reality, and the East focuses on the detached luscious attitude of unreality.

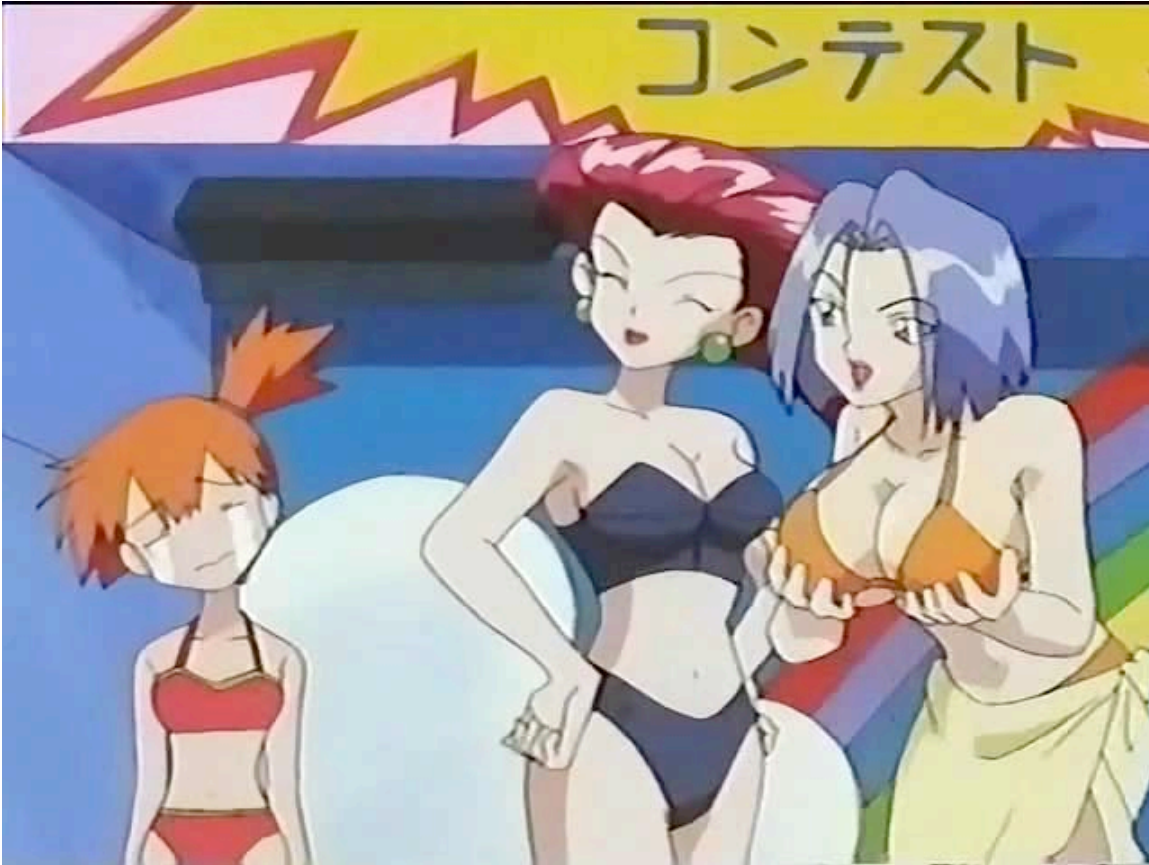
Localization is a key issue then for reaching a wide audience in a specific global area as there is a tension between what culture allows defined as fresh, original, novel entertainment or otherwise too unusual and irrelevant. With regards to understanding game players from a designer's point of view, Kerr (2006:97+154)⁹ writes about tastes and patterns of demand across different markets:

"While we know that an American Football game will not sell in Europe and that Japanese dating games rarely make it to the West, certain titles like Pokemon sell globally. Indeed it appears that Japanese game sell better in the West than Western game sell in Japan...A panel at the Korea Games Conference in 2005 noted that Koreans found the lighting in many Western games too dark and they considered the game characters to be ugly... while for many in the USA and the UK certain Japanese game genres like romance games seem foreign... Games need to be adapted to local cultural and legal specificities. This includes... the Japanese version of Tomb Raider so that avatars run out of time rather than die"

The psychology studies of Carl Jung into the Female Anima's emotional heart and Male

Animus' logical brain are structural gender archetype patterns that are culturally very specific, and apply very heavily to the West but not so much to the East. The Macho Muscular Male archetype in Western Hardcore games is a homosexual stereotype in the East, as the androgynous or exaggerated anime characters of the East are homosexual or childish stereotypes to the West. Certain games can successfully reverse these notions though, as seen with the new *Prince of Persia* (2003) series revamps - which are Western (though set in the East) yet interestingly gender their avatar as Feminine with his fluid acrobatics as well as his use of the ability to rewind time rather than accelerate towards an unknowing future. Other feminized avatars such as Altair in *Assassin's Creed* (2008) still adhere to an important Western archetype of physical agency in their men, and it is given importance in his character design, yet to the East it is articulation and drama that is more important (perhaps easier to convey within a more androgynous character). Androgynous avatars still have a very transgressive unknown edge to them to the West within adult boundaries where it is much more acceptable play as an androgynous adolescent as seen in the *Final Fantasy* games. As Kelts (2004:205)¹⁰ notes "'Japanese games are better than American ones, but only through character", says Sho Matsushashi, Japanese General Manager of TOKYOPOP, the dominant importer of Japanese manga to the US... "But character means a lot". There is much more focus in Eastern games on the dramatics unfolding that are being read by the player, the character arcs and plot developments rather than the Western emphasis on suturing a player as an interpellated protagonist. This focus on story and character does not always resonate with the West, and franchises aimed at Western children yet adopted by all of Eastern culture have censorship applied when dealing with elements of a sexual nature, often of a homosexual or transsexual nature (*Pokemon* (1995) and *Sailor Moon* (1992) have all been censored by the West - see image 2 below).

Image 2 - in the *Pokemon* anime series one episode was banned in the West as the effeminate male James/Kojiro of Team Rocket had a breast operation.



Often foreign symbolism is fresh to the mind and therefore possesses a greater capacity to inspire and stimulate the imagination. Common socio-cultural elements between the West and East are because of fundamental human similarities with intrinsic meaning, but also because mass appropriation of foreign culture occurs as developers look to the other sides of the world for inspiration. The success story of the domestic videogame came with a steady stream of Japanese games released locally in the West, but heavy mainstream appropriation of Eastern tropes began with the worldwide success of *Pokemon*. The success of the game and the anime show worked in tandem, supporting each other as it gained a wider audience. Masuyama (2002:42)⁻¹¹ suggests "Perhaps the striking worldwide success of *Pokemon* should not be considered the result of the adoption of 'Japanese culture' on a global level (as with Sushi), but should be seen as two cultures meeting halfway in the 1990s, as Japan became more Westernized and the West became more open to foreign culture. Gone are the days when in the realm of entertainment, globalization meant only Americanization". *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) is a successful franchise that blends the Western Disney with Eastern *Final Fantasy*

characters and may be the first of many potential videogames based on franchises from opposite geo-political backgrounds that otherwise would never have been blended. The success of *Pokemon* may be repeated with another franchise, and the walls of the Western Hardcore will be slowly eroded from the East with each success.

Arguably there will always be cultural differences steeped in a deep history and surrounding environment, no matter how much cultural erosion by the Global Village - media localization will never be obsolete. Taste in Euro-centric countries can be put down to the 'Politics of Fear' that have long pervaded their cultures, especially today with the threat of terrorism being a daily fundamental fear (police shooting people, bombs, airport security, massively increased CCTV). Anxieties are amplified with regards to personal security – consequently this filters down into adoption of technology - with Hardcore gaming amongst the few and technological loathing amongst the many. Casual gamers have taken so long to have a go at being a cyborg for pleasure, as risk is subconsciously associated with anything unfamiliar, especially from the other side of the planet - and this results in over-reflection and reflexivity. Nintendo have capitalized on this with the *Wii*, and in many respects have shown that the game industry should not be attempting to replicate grim reality as this just further pushes away the average consumer who is realistically already scared of technology; Hardcore games represent an average consumer having to wrestle another form of (albeit virtual) reality which is trying its hardest to become more real. Haptic use of both the DS stylus and Wiimote allows a more easier and instant immersion than that of using a control pad. It allows instant and welcome interaction instead of a daunting experience to the average consumer – the malleable controller makes becoming a cyborg seem warm and inviting, as the nature of digital immersion is still unnatural and unusual to most of an older generation.

Gaming preferences and pleasures will always be at the mercy of culturally specific sociality, which Kerr (2006:118)⁻¹² describes with:

"One study of variations in game preferences between countries, specifically the UK and Japan, found that social aspects of gaming were very important to teenage Japanese game players and strongly constrain their genre and game selection, while competition was more important to UK teenagers.-13 Observations of Japanese teenagers and British teenagers playing the same racing game found remarkable differences in playing style, with the Japanese teenagers slowing down at the finish line so they could cross the line alongside their competitor. Such findings indicate, that regardless of how competition is structured within a game, during gameplay players may develop their own style and strategies"

This indicates that an aggressive gaming identity that is forged is only through Western

players, and hence the East does not need to coin a difference between the Hardcore and Casual. The East is more about discovery rather than conquest, perhaps more comfortable with the military-industrial complex from which digital games has emerged, as made evident with their love of the mechanical in most media. If cultural capital is generated through the political economy of technological Edge, then the Edge of Eastern gamers in their Electronic sport competitions denotes a sharing of environment and experiences. Ultimately the West are very introspective and segregated as individuals in comparison to the East, which is reflected in the games they play and should have designed for them, where at least for the Hardcore anyway, the polygon count of a game will always be important – fixated on the interpellative potential of the technology itself as well as the play experience.

Part Three: Conclusions

Culture is dynamic, flowing and ever changing - yet stating the existence of the Hardcore demarcation is a tool for anchoring a collective opinion over the uncertain future as the comparatively infant industry still unfolds. It is a symptom of older gamers not letting go and embracing the inevitable future, holding onto the comfort of the past - “surface manifestations of a deep-rooted shift: the decolonization of global culture”⁻¹. This surrendering of technicity will not happen without a struggle, as Edgy adolescent rebels gain cultural capital by refusing to acknowledge the popular. Audience differentiation occurs for their own gain in the charging of Edge against the hegemonic and anything can be defined as Casual if unpopular enough. As outsiders the Hardcore will continue to resist the existing normative meanings as it gives meaning to their own existences. Discerning between Casual and Hardcore is not the problem - rather it is the negative associations made towards either group, and labeling games that are not cared for by a consumer as the opposing side before they are even played. Consequently demographics refuse to associate with people or games of the opposing nature. If a technological artifact is complex and takes hours to master it does not make it Hardcore and vice-versa.

For the Western Hardcore audience, being interpellated into a force conquering resistance perhaps is a way of escaping the agency lacking in their own lives. Hardcore adolescents exist in a private realm invaded by parents and teachers – so there will always be a market for and more transgressive games such as Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) and *Manhunt* (2003). This is where the line is being drawn right now, but in the future as a method for a deeper demarcation it is impossible to suggest the content of such transgressive games. Immersion in a violent Hardcore game can also be argued as due to a religious vacuum, as a meditation upon being faithless alone, perhaps especially resonant with the core Hardcore crowd of adolescents and unsure 20-30 year olds.

Hardcore games have struggling avatars and the real life of players in Western societies are a direct reflection; as players have comparatively more agency in comparison to the gritty, grinding nature of the games they fight through, therapeutic closure is granted. Hardcore games are an easy way to target a more adult audience as this mirroring - angst, helplessness, oppression, betrayal, searching, struggle and collapse are all adult topics one must grapple with. The optimistic and positive can be seen as childish in comparison to the invitingly Hardcore games sublime trepidation of real life safety yet virtual danger. Anxious Westerners suffer from threats of terrorism and economic oppression, and give rise to a desire to explore the artistically dark and surreal, yet all Hardcore games ironically feature no futility as closure is ultimately required for

satisfying gameplay. Hardcore games give meaning to the journey of adolescent awkward struggle and eventual closure in the pining for eventual lost vagueness.

Casual games are gender-neutral and the advent is a sign of moving away from hermeneutic reflections of themes of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity and the fantasy of violence and competition in games, the dominance of male avatars and the submissive ways in which female characters are usually represented. The demarcation exists as a means of protecting the delicate male ego as videogame playing represents a complicated identity sculpting medium; the embracing by the mainstream would leave players of the Hardcore audience potentially open to online defeat by the geriatric or the opposite sex, which would further hit the male ego. In an industry that has been dominated by a very masculine cyborg-hacker attitude, it is ironic that a system that revolves around the principles of simple-to-use design, being the least expensive and having the least technological specifications was to make the most impact - the success of the *Wii* is due to the lack of an attached semiotic jungle, which was until its release to the West, a staple part of technological artifacts.

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