Workshop *Occupied by Play: Rethinking Reading and Learning in Japan*
at Cambridge University

Abstracts (as of 26 January 2023)

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Jaqueline Berndt
Manga at Play: Reading, Toying, and Performing

Japan-studies anthropologists have investigated "Japan at play" since around 2000 (Linhart, 1998; Hendry & Ravieri, eds, 2005; Daliot-Bul, 2014); they have shed light on the wide acceptance of something regarded as childish elsewhere, that is, playing, and also the ubiquitous intertwinement of education with enjoyment, as representatives of the serious and the light-minded. Shifting the emphasis from "Japan" to entertaining fiction, this talk looks into contemporary manga with respect to "the capacity [...] to afford playful behavior" (Sicart, 2017). It departs from the central role ascribed to "reading manga" in Japanese comics studies and extends the notion of "reading manga" to include multiple levels, not limited to the semiotic one. Can playing with manga as an artifact be included? How does manga ask readers to acknowledge the aesthetic materiality of reading matter? How does such attention facilitate fusions between education and entertainment, aesthetic creativity and consumption-oriented conventionality, analog and digital? What does this mean for reader agency, and why is playing with the materiality of comics less an issue in modern Japan than, for example, in Franco-Belgian comics publishing? These questions will be mainly posed and pursued through the manga serial *Uchi no shishō wa shippo ga nai* (My master has no tail, in *good! Afternoon*, 2019–2023) by artist TNSK (b. 1984), whose previous illustration work was connected to games, and light novels. His first long series (which was adapted to a TV anime in 2022 and encompasses ten *tankōbon* volumes by February 2023) is set in the world of *rakugo* in pre-war Osaka, which brings the dimension of sound to the fore.

Hiroshi Yoshida
Between the Virtual and the Physical: Japanese Video Games in the Tradition of Toys

This talk revisits digital games from the perspective of "toys" and reconsiders their physicality and materiality. Unlike the majority of European and American rivals, Japanese video companies arose from toy makers. This historical background has been characterizing Japanese games up to the present in terms of their interface design and play experience. Consequently, researchers of digital or virtual cultures are expected to investigate not only the contents or the screen space but also the events and experiences happening in the user or player space outside the screen.

Martin Roth (Ritsumeikan University, via Zoom)
Free to play? Rethinking "play" beyond rules and transgression

Play is usually conceptualized as an activity constituted by and constitutive of rules. Some play theories distinguish between structured play based on predefined rules (*ludus*), and unstructured, "free" play, which does not follow specific rules but rather creates new ones in contrast to the situation within which it unfolds (*paidia*). Furthermore, play is widely recognized for its constructive or creative potential, be it in relation to art, politics, education, or the capitalist economy. Such aspects notwithstanding, what happens if we ignore the relation between playing and rules or goals for a moment and consider a third type of play, one that serves as a way of relating to the world experimentally, tentatively, and disinterestedly? Is it possible to conceptualize play as an intentional but not necessarily reason-based, exploratory practice grounded in curiosity? This paper presents a series of fragments that may suggest a pathway toward the philosophical basis necessary for such conceptualization. Looking at digital games and their appropriation by players is one way of approaching this task. However, I hope to show that playing with the world potentially includes a wider range of activities, from hate speech to conspiracy theories. Digital spaces, I suspect, are important for facilitating and promoting such play.

Selen Çalık Bedir
Storytelling, Storyliving, Storybeing: Juggling Different Levels of Play in Contemporary Narrative Engagement

Transferring some qualities of games to all sorts of experiences, especially through the systematic introduction of goals and rewards to make any performance playful, is quite well-known as *gamification*. Gamification has turned into a common choice of design across countless fields of profession in the past decade, and it is not an exaggeration to say that games have made a noticeable impact on contemporary narrative engagement among other things. In a similar fashion, *interactivity*, which presents a two-way flow between the user and the material of consumption by swiftly incorporating the user input in the production process, has become another quality that is supposed to push any activity, including one's engagement with narratives, in a gamelike direction.

A familiar form of interactive narrative is the visual novel which leaves plot development to the choices of the readers. Interestingly, while it has been argued that visual novels present low levels of interactivity as the act of the reader to unravel the plot is often reduced to a trivial effort to go to the next screen, it can also be argued that more traditional, linear types of narratives create room for play as well. By defining play as the "freedom of movement within a system of limits," game designer Brian Upton allows us to re-envision the reader as an active agent participating in a game of anticipation. Stretching Upton's claims a

little further, it can also be argued that some texts encourage *combinatory play*, by leading the readers on with a purposefully vague sense of causality to actively imagine alternative plot developments for the narratives they enjoy.

Digital image and video creation software along with content distribution platforms have grown increasingly accessible; consequently, derivative scenarios created by the fans take all sorts of forms with differing levels of interactivity and room for play. An interesting addition to the fascinating variety of fan works is VR content that grants people direct access to storyworlds. The question is, in a time when digitalization is taken for granted and interactivity seemingly in demand, are we constantly engaged in play? Through the curious example of how the *Sword Art Online* media mix meets fan-made VR content, this presentation aims to develop a wider outlook on contemporary media-engagement in relation to play, ranging from story-telling to story-living, and to story-being.

Olga Kopylova

Reading Visual Novels: Play and/or Emotion Work?

The Japanese "visual novel" offers an interesting case of a multi-branching narrative: it prescribes several modes of engagement which are supposed to be mutually reinforcing but may end up at odds with each other. As evident from its very name, the visual novel occupies an ambiguous position between digital games and interactive fiction. It thus harbors a vast range of gameplay and storytelling options for the creative team and, likewise, a variety of potential ways to structure the user's experience of the resulting text. However, most accounts of the Japanese visual novel (and its overseas analogs) foreground its "focus on intimacy" (Bruno 2021: 145), where the user's activities as both reader and gamer boil down to cultivating relationships with fictional characters in order to enjoy intense affective reactions. The common formula assigns each "love interest" a separate narrative branch, or "route." The user navigates these routes with the help of additional rules and conditions. Often the regulations are mechanical (for instance, certain routes being accessible only in replays), but they may also get ingrained in the overall narrative structure. This last type of regulation-through-narrative creates the ground for alternative modes of engagement, which at times may conflict with the visual novel's focus on intimacy. When interest in the story content or the desire to master the narrative in its entirety takes priority, pursuing close relationships with different characters becomes little more than a game mechanic, to the point that affect gives place to emotion work.

References

Luca Bruno, "A Glimpse of the Imaginative Environment," in Martin Roth, Yoshida Hiroshi, and Martin Picard (eds.), *Japan's Contemporary Media Culture between Local and Global: Content, Practice and Theory*, Heidelberg; Berlin: CrossAsia-eBooks, 2021, https://doi.org/10.11588/crossasia.971.c12882.

Mitsuyo Kuwano Lidén (Stockholm University) [in Japanese]
Play(fulness) and Japanese Language Education in the JFL setting: Application of gamification in language teaching and learning

As the term *play* in English can be used to refer to an engagement in an activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose (cf. definition in OED), so is the Japanese verb for play, 遊ぶ *asobu*, often associated with "pleasure/enjoyment" and "frivolity" (cf. Daijisen). Taking Japanese language education in an institutional setting as a "serious" matter with a clearly determined goal (or purpose) that must be attained within a limited time, there seems to be no room for "play", as it, by definition, has no practical purpose. Finding common traits in the essential elements of games (a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation) as presented by McGonigal (2011), and the elements argued in learner autonomy and good teaching practices, I would like to discuss that game(fulness) – extended from play(fulness) – is valid for language teaching and learning. Although gamification itself may not be a solution for all teaching or learning, the notion of gamification is applicable to designing learning activities for both inside and outside classes.

Marcella M. Mariotti (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)
Game-over in critical Japanese Language Education? Students' playfulness at work

Taking its departure from research underlining the role of pleasure "as the only constant source of motivation" (Balboni 2005, Caon 2020) in foreign language acquisition, this presentation will, first, shortly address differences between game-based learning, gamification, and educational game, to secondly focus on how (and if) students of a foreign language can "experience entertainment within the didactic" (Moretti 2020), interacting within a critical-transformative language pedagogy that asks them to cope with the freedom of finding their own rules to play their own game with. Games may be seen as activities characterized by fun, and the uncertainty of unforeseeable outcomes; activities that are fictitious, neither productive nor useful, with rules different from everyday life (Alazawi, Albalushi, Alfuliti 2016). Data collected from surveys about JaLea (Mariotti, Mantelli 2016) an intermedia and intertextual platform for Japanese e-Learning, and surveys about the recent Japan-Foundation funded projects *Virtual "ryūgaku" for real interaction and job-hunting: supporting Covid-19 online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills* (VR1, Oct.- Nov. 2021), *Virtual "ryūgaku" for real interactions: collaborative empowerment & SDGs* (VR2, Feb. -Mar. 2022), and *Authentic Japanese: working in a language with social media!* (2023), targeting high-school students, will show what students regarded as playful, and what role such playfulness ("the capacity of some objects to afford playful behavior") had in motivating their constant engagement with the projects. Paraphrasing the collaboration project's initial orientation on texts' "power [that] resides in their playfulness, i.e., their

participatory, performative, and medial rather than representational potential", I will argue that the same power can be disclosed in the playfulness offered by a kind of didactic where students are asked to do something other than strictly following the teacher's rules.