**Notes On SuperFlat and Its Expression in Videogames - David Surman**

**Abstract:** In this exploratory essay the author describes the shared context of Sculptor turned Games Designer Keita Takahashi, best known for his PS2 title Katamari Damacy, and superstar contemporary artist Takashi Murakami. The author argues that Takahashi’s videogame is an expression of the technical, aesthetic and cultural values Murakami describes as SuperFlat, and as such expresses continuity between the popular culture and contemporary art of two of Japan’s best-known international creative practitioners.

**Introduction**

In the transcript accompanying the film-essay *Sans Soleil* (1983), Chris Marker describes the now oft-cited allegory at work in *Pac-Man* (Atarisoft, 1981). For Marker, playing the chomping *Pac-Man* reveals a semantic layer between graphic and gameplay. The character-in-action is charged with a symbolic intensity that exceeds its apparent simplicity.

> Videogames are the first stage in a plan for machines to help the human race, the only plan that offers a future for intelligence. For the moment, the insufferable philosophy of our time is contained in the Pac-Man. I didn’t know when I was sacrificing all my coins to him that he was going to conquer the world. Perhaps [this is] because he is the most graphic metaphor of Man’s Fate. He puts into true perspective the balance of power between the individual and the environment, and he tells us soberly that though there may be honor in carrying out the greatest number of enemy attacks, it always comes a cropper (Marker, 1984, p. 325).

Marker’s ‘reading’ of *Pac-Man* is significant insofar as he considers the character and gameplay together with the physical act of punching coins into the arcade cabinet. In describing the ‘play situation’ the cost of continuing is retold as a timeless elegy on the flickering screen. Marker’s critique is exceptional for its willingness to engage with the semantic potential of the game mechanic as it is played with, challenged and ultimately understood. Emphases on storytelling and gameplay within games critique have downplayed the immanent complexity of the character, and instead posit it simply as a narrative device, play locus, or as indistinguishable from the complexity of the gameworld environment. Espen Aarseth’s suggestion that Lara ceases to be in the face of the priorities of gameplay overstates and homogenizes the broader tactics of the player (Surman, 2007, p. 287-291). We have been effectively shifted away from a consideration of the character as a discourse in its own right by the overarching debates about the role of narrative in games, issues of realism, and a wholesale focus on the nuances of audiences.

And yet the fan cultures that arise around game characters are prolific, and show a marked interest in the idiosyncrasies and visual complexity of characters. Having a well-trained ‘eye for detail’ is instrumental in understanding how contemporary visual culture in and surrounding videogames works. It seems that to just play is no longer enough in the complex esteem structures of modern gaming; one
should necessarily participate in the larger cosmos of merchandise, fictional world building, language games and parody to achieve the vaunted status of ‘gamer’.

The various modes of viewing, collecting, playing and distributing videogames can be collectively understood through the *otaku* phenomenon (obsessive fandom and/or collecting), which has its origins in Japanese popular culture. Information and detail become a form of currency in the social system of *otaku* fandom, which is best understood as an ambiguous and fervent form of connoisseurship, mainly surrounding videogames, *manga* and *anime*. Characters are the fetish object of *otaku*. Through the serialized, iterative development of franchises and the ‘culture of copying’, characters in contemporary Japanese visual media are valued for their ability to rework and so re-embody well-rehearsed gestures, costume motifs, visual styles and so on. Importantly, this culture comes as a consequence of the widespread breakdown between producer and consumer in the new ubiquitous culture of *otaku* (since many artists are recruited through *doujinshi* [amateur] art/writing/games design networks). Authorial legitimacy is transformed into a system of reciprocal consensus (where fans articulate their authorial power) as characters are used and reused by *otaku* authors.

Extremely popular character types, like the ‘Nekomata Cat Girl’ or the ‘Gothic Lolita’ has assumed a substantial and sophisticated rhetoric. Their capacity to evoke complex meanings has grown in step with the development of *otaku* culture; greater numbers of fans examining characters with this voracious ‘eye for detail’ reveals new opportunities for games designers and artists to work within the space of ‘pure character’, free from obligatory narrative frameworks and the usual semantic shackles. For instance, the female leads of the *Onee Chanbara* (Big Sister Chanbara) and their ability to fight, pose and scream in impromptu moments are excellent examples of characters whose whole emergence and continued popularity is contingent on the interest of *otaku* fans, drawing value from the mutability of aesthetic and gameplay tropes. The combined consideration of games and SuperFlat point toward the value of character-as-character, since they mutually anticipate the contemporary mode of appreciation where detail and information as the most important currency.

Contemporary visual culture is buzzing with the movement of digital characters. The annual exhibition and publication *Pictoplasma* and international magazines like *Juxtapose* are dedicated to the transnational appetite for what we might call ‘designer character art’. They mediate our interactions, cushion and frame our immersion into cyberspace, and punctuate the experience of the games we play. Nowadays characters appear across a wide variety of media, in both high cultural and popular forms; to examine their cultural importance one must trace the changing relationships between entertainment, work and everyday life. In this new passion for character that cuts across the boundaries of high and low culture some of the most interesting and provocative aspects of contemporary cultural production are laid bare. As this essay examines, through the ubiquity of characters we can explore the continuities between videogames and developments in contemporary art. Indeed, they can be understood as bedfellows in our convergent media culture, as games and art begin occupying common territory rather than at opposing poles on a scale of cultural value.

The *otaku* phenomenon is in many respects like a caricature of many of the operations of fan culture elsewhere in the world. By talking about *otaku* in Japan, Japanese games and Japanese contemporary art, I hope to make some very precise suggestions about a specific cultural moment. However, I feel that this particular triangulation is at work elsewhere in the vast majority of convergent media culture,
where producers draw upon the constituent labour of fans to refine their output. In a footnote to his recent paper on the arcade gaming scene in Hong Kong, Benjamin Wai-ming Ng suggests that: “Writings on Japanese games focus on their educational, psychological and social aspects. Scholarly studies from cultural and comparative perspectives are relatively few” (Wai-ming Ng, 2007, np). In an effort to take seriously this neglect, this article focuses primarily on the interdisciplinary intersection of the various artistic and cultural histories, circulating around the game *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004). Through a situated analysis of *Katamari* and its sequel *We Love Katamari* (Namco, 2005) I want to explore contemporary Japanese games design and its relationship to ‘SuperFlat’, the familiar ‘-ism’ encapsulating the art and culture of the Tokyo Pop contemporary art movement. While the convergence of art and gaming at work in my case study transcends a certain hierarchy of cultural value, critical opposition to Takashi Murakami and his peers in the contemporary art community echoes the more widespread opposition to videogames as a new artistic medium. The allegedly puerile and childish exterior is not recognized for its complexity and historical specificity, and has, like animation culture before it, been selectively pigeonholed as part of a disposable ‘low culture’.

**Contemporary Japanese Visual Media and Soft Power**

To speak about Japanese games constructively, we must firstly examine Japanese culture and technology, its place in the processes of globalisation, and its role as a powerful contemporary media producer. Japan has played a crucial role in post World War II techno-culture, and since the 1970s and 1980s Japanese industry has come to define the cutting edge of technological innovation. While those developments are ubiquitous in the national portrait of Japan on the international stage, the circulation of such rhetoric has contributed to a contracted image of ‘Japan’ in the global marketplace, which is reinforced both internally and externally. In the global distribution of goods, the specificity of Japanese cultural productions is historically absent; the technological and innovative face is foregrounded in lieu of the culture that has produced it. Koichi Iwabuchi writes about the...

... discrepancy between economic power and cultural influence in terms of Japan’s ambiguous (aimaina) identity in the world, as it internalizes and articulates both first-worldliness and third-worldliness. No matter how strong its economy becomes, Japan is culturally and psychologically dominated by the West (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 2).

Japan’s positioning within globalized media culture has changed through the course of its various economic and cultural shifts since the Second World War. Until relatively recently, ‘Japan’ has been understood in light of American postwar occupation, aggressive ‘soft power’ industrialisation, and rapid economic growth achieved through the export of its technological commodities. As Iwabuchi argues, the everyday and the indigenous is absent from this constructed national image, and thus Japan occupies the disjunctive position of being a player on the world stage by virtue of its technological culture, but absent in terms of the specificity of Japanese indigenous culture. Japan’s assimilation of Western (and specifically American) values contributes to its paradoxical status within global culture, at once continuous with Western modernity, and simultaneously complicit in its Orientalist construction. The architect Kisho Kurokawa identified this quality of Japanese culture as an essential
‘receptivity’, and the means through which Japan survived and responded to successive Western imperial and colonial drives from the Meiji Era onward (see Kurokawa, 1991; cf. Jackson and Jaffer, 2004).

Things have changed in recent years, however, and it has been necessary to rethink the position of contemporary Japan in relation to the West, its Asian neighbours and itself. The accelerated flow of contemporary visual media from new production hubs has redressed the cultural implacability of Japan’s post-industrial products. The onset of global telecommunications, the Internet, mobile phone networking and cheap air travel has impacted greatly on the impression of Japan as a faceless technological superpower. The new mobility of Japanese media has sensitized fresh audiences to the specificity of Japanese and Asian cultural production, and this has had the meta-effect of “recentring globalisation” (cf. Iwabuchi, 2002; Lamarre, 2004). The transnational impact of Japanese media producers has been facilitated by converging contemporary modes of distribution, and has met with enthusiastic global communities eager to receive the latest manga, anime and videogames. The otaku network has played an instrumental role in accelerating this process of distribution. For Iwabuchi (2002; 2004) and others such as Anne Allison (2006), the global reach of these popular entertainment forms has been instrumental in distributing the aesthetic and cultural values of Japan, and so offers an imaginary different from that of hegemonic America. In the realm of children’s culture, talking about the international impact of the transmedia franchise Yu-Gi-Oh!, Mizuko Ito writes:

I would like to suggest that media mixes such as Pokémon and Yugioh [sic] are tied to a changing politics of childhood. I think part of the appeal of these media mixes for children and young adults is that it explicitly recognizes entrepeneurialism and connoisseurship in children’s culture, traits that, by some cultural standards, are not considered appropriate for children. In part, these media mixes are becoming ambassadors for a Japanese vision of Childhood internationally (Ito, 2004: 12).

Allison exclaims that “it is important to study such recentred globalization outside of the scope of a Western anchor”, but adds that equally,

...important, however, is [the need] to test what is happening in the old centre of global culture itself, the United States, examining what kind of influence Japanese goods are actually exerting in the market and on the imaginations of American kids in this moment of changing globalization (Allison, 2006, p. 7).

Murakami and Takahashi

Following Allison’s suggestion, this paper compares the character art and creative philosophies of Keita Takahashi,[1] designer of the Katamari series, and Takashi Murakami, the central figure of Japan’s new Pop Art culture,[2] in an effort to speak of the particular characteristics of Japanese games that distinguish them from other forms of popular culture globally on their own terms, and by extension the otaku culture that celebrates them. With a doctorate in the study of ‘Westernised-Japanese’ Nihon-ga painting, Murakami is an adept critic, and since the mid 1990s has sought to couch his creative practice in a theoretical framework of his own devising. Murakami’s criticism circulates around a core tenet of ‘Superflat’ which he defines as both an aesthetic and cultural description:
The word originated in a sales pitch made by two L.A. gallerists to sell my paintings, something like, “how about this painting? It’s super flat, super high quality, and super clean!” I thought I saw a basic truth about Japanese culture in these words, no different from the words that might be used to sell Japanese cars or electronics. If Japanese culture could not transcend this flat surface, it would not achieve respectability as a “culture” (Murakami, 2005: 153).

Murakami evokes the same picture of Japan as Iwabuchi and others, of technologies seemingly without cultural presence. The invisibility of national culture at work within these commodities recalls a more general perception of videogames in contemporary culture, as entertainment media which doesn’t transmit or reflect culture outside of the terms of its own production. The assumption recognizes that videogames are ‘played’, employing a semiotics maintained in a largely hermetic culture of production and consumption, with little emphasis on originality, and great emphasis, on generic development. This claim has historical validity, but similar to the perception of Japan, is increasingly outmoded. So often in the 1980s and 1990s, it was only the names in the end credits that betrayed the Japanese origin of games that have been sanitised for an American (and vicariously placed European) market. The hermetic structure of games cultures is instrumental in furthering this cultural relativism. Designers, players and technology are hyperaware of one another, and form a closed developmental circuit, which underpins the charge that games (like the pop culture they cluster with) often lack broader contexts, or a capacity for social commentary.

These factors resonate with those described as SuperFlat; Murakami has returned to his concept on numerous occasions in exhibitions, publications and public lectures, and at times his thoughts have seemed somewhat incongruous, as Dana Friis-Hansen writes,

> With Murakami’s contradictory statements, ambiguous gestures of coy cuteness providing cover, the subversive shenanigans of Marcel Duchamp are brought to mind: his simple but slyly altered readymades, the multifaceted, mythologized ‘characters’ he brought to life over the course of his career, and the feigned forsaking of artmaking for chess (while still regularly producing both major and minor artworks) (Friis-Hansen, 1999, p. 32).

His acute millennial speculations on the formal dimensions of Japanese art (Murakami, 2000) have opened out more recently to include broader cultural commentaries about the nature of youth media (Murakami, 2005). His artwork has been positioned at the centre of the Tokyo Pop movement, and embodies the aesthetic philosophy of SuperFlat. In his solo and group shows since 1999, sensuous moulded forms are arranged in ominous circles; numerous almost identical eyes stare out from an immense Day-Glo canvas (See [Fig. 1], *Army of Mushrooms*[2003]); the irrepressible character DOB can be found time and again, in both the fine art and souvenir works created by Murakami and the team at his Kaikai Kiki studios. Like all SuperFlat art, the premise of *We Love Katamari* is hyperconscious of its broader cultural context. In the first *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) the drunken King of All Cosmos has irresponsibly destroyed the heavens, knocking the planets and the stars from their fixed positions. As his son, you are charged to recover those stars and thus restore the cosmic order. This is achieved by rolling a *katamari* (a sticky clod or ball) around your world. Collecting more objects into the *katamari* leads to an increase in its size, meaning that further objects can be collected. Sometimes you collect indiscriminately, other times you look for particular things, sometimes avoiding certain
things altogether. With enough time and the right trajectory, all the world’s flotsam and jetsam are synthesized into the *katamari*, and the world is ‘grazed’ flat. When the sticky ball of commodities that constitute the *katamari* reaches a certain size and density, it transcends its chaotic absurdity to become a sublime star, and the world loses depth and complexity in the process. This is the core mechanism of the first *Katamari Damacy* in the series, directed by Keita Takahashi.

We *Love Katamari*, the second game for PlayStation 2, moves the scenario forward in a curious, self-referential way. The back cover description is of particular interest: “Ever since the King replaced the stars with the Prince’s *katamaris*, He has been the people’s favourite. Each day, the fans have bigger and bigger hopes for their dreams. ‘I’d like more things to be rolled up! I want to be rolled up too! Roll something up with this!’ So, the Prince has gone into a *katamari*-rolling frenzy to thank fans, and the new *katamaris* will shine brightly for them as stars in the cosmos” (Namco, 2005). Suspicious of the potential of videogame sequels, Takahashi remarks that he hadn’t planned a sequel to the first *Katamari Damacy*, but that,

> Ultimately, I was amazed that folks out there had so much fun with this rough, small-minded game – and [so] decided that I would participate in this sequel project. ... I wanted to do the kind of stuff that we only do in a sequel ... I mean, there are many games that can launch a sequel. A title name like *We Love Katamari*, a game system based on fans, or the Japanese packaging – these would have been impossible with a brand new game (Takahashi quoted in Leone, 2005, np).

*We Love Katamari* is a comment on contemporary game fandom, in which Takahashi points to the dialectical relationship between developers and players. Even games that ostensibly promote a sense of freedom and exploration are still the product of imaginary negotiations between designer and player that take place in both the game, and among all of the distributed commodity manifestations that constitute an immediate context.

To understand the hidden richness of Takahashi’s gameworld we must venture into the otaku fan culture it caricatures, the contemporary art movements of Japan and innovations in its videogames design. Echoing around these different spaces is the discourse of SuperFlat, both a social description and an aesthetic mode; Murakami originally conceived SuperFlat with a dual purpose in mind. First, to describe the ‘one-dimensional’ subjectivity of contemporary media consumerism, embodied in the archetypal figure of the *otaku*, withdrawn connoisseurs previously characterized as a deviant underclass of obsessive fans, nerds and perverts. Secondly, SuperFlat traces the continuities between pre-modern Japanese arts and crafts and the contemporary pop culture forms of videogames, *manga* and *anime*. Murakami’s description highlights the reflexivity of Japanese material culture, which recalls the fact that postwar economic success was driven by a process of American ‘domestication’ while under occupation (1945–1952). This contradictory state of modernity has in turn defined both internal and external perceptions of the nation, “...the basic truth about Japanese
In the postwar period, the regeneration of Japanese culture was sparked by a robust economy, which owed its revitalization largely to the U.S. occupation. This economic spark provided the conditions for a regeneration of the cultural economy, a development that was shaped and tempered by the latent, and occasionally explicit, discord within Japan over its heritage, its immediate military past, and the values associated with Western modernity and, in particular, American culture. The conflict created a “disjunctive modernity” that was defined by the juxtaposition of a persistent imperial order and elite culture with an expanding, industrially driven, mass culture (Merewether, 2007, p. 2).

Videogames are characteristic manifestations of this latter “mass culture”, perhaps more so than *manga* and *anime*, since they explicitly foreground computer technology and thus Japan’s techno-industrialisation, and reinforce the conceit of Japan as metonymic of ‘faceless’ technological modernity. These media also define the generation to which both Takahashi and Murakami belong,

...[a] generation of artists who enjoyed the fruits of Japan’s postwar recovery and its emergence as an industrial superpower. Unlike their grandparents, who suffered through the war and built the base for reconstruction, and parents, who pulled Japan into its commercial leadership condition, this generation of artists born in the 1960s grew up with the time, money and access to phenomena of popular culture as mass-produced toys and comic books (*manga*), movies and television, pop music and Disneyland (Friis-Hansen, 1999, p. 33).

The association made between videogames and other pop cultural forms throughout the 1970s and 1980s nonetheless produced potent images of an exotic, coherent and sovereign media culture. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, Japanese videogame aesthetics have become conspicuously interwoven with Murakami’s SuperFlat discourse. This is understandable, since games have figured largely in Murakami’s successive speculations since its inception in 1999 in the *DOB in the Mysterious Forest* exhibition, and the publication of *Super Flat* in 2000. *DOB* is Murakami’s original trademarked character; a meditation on the great survivors in the age of information-capitalism—industrialised, mass-produced characters. *DOB* is “an inquiry into the ‘secret of market survival’, or the ‘universality’ of characters like Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog, Doræmon, Miffy, Hello Kitty” (Murakami quoted in Steinberg, 2003: 101). I have previously written that the “…‘meaning’ of Mickey, and his iconic status in contemporary culture, relates primarily to his merchandising, rather than his classic cartoon appearances” (Surman, 2004b, pp. 67-68).

Videogames are one of the many cultural commodities that emerged in the postwar industrialization of Japan. The national promotion of popular entertainment forms such as *manga*, *anime* and videogames have come to define the internationalized, dominant image of contemporary Japanese culture in place of the prior picture of a faceless technological superpower. Though the creation of the contemporary Japanese media infrastructures are the consequence of receptivity to postwar Americanization while under immediate occupation, nonetheless, the rise of such forms have individuated and flavoured Japanese cultural production on the world stage (Iwabuchi, 2004). As such, narratives within those media forms have intermittently (and self-referentially) commented on this
issue, begetting a mode of consumption that locates meaning in the miracle of commodities, like the Prince’s eponymous *katamari*, and the interpretation Marker conjures of the voracious *Pac-Man*.

**From Disney to Character Art**

Games design and SuperFlat are the latest in a tradition of Japanese pop cultural forms to emerge from a dynamic negotiation with American values and domestic practices. To better understand this, it is important to note the formal continuities between the American cartoon and early *manga* and *anime*, and it is also crucial to consider the commoditization of screen media. In the postwar reconstruction of Japan’s major urban centres, Disney’s pioneering use of merchandising to extend the visibility of his intellectual property further inspired the shape Japanese popular culture would take. Recognising the radical potential of merchandising, Disney secured a contract for the publication of *The Mickey Mouse Book* with New York publishers Bibo and Lang, and a newspaper comic strip to King Features Syndicate. By the end of 1932,

> ...more than eighty major US companies, including General Foods, RCA, and National Dairy, were selling millions of dollars of Disney-related merchandise, which resulted in a $300,000 windfall for the studio. Disney received about half, which accounted for one-third of the studio’s entire net profits (Eliot, 1994, pp. 65-66).

The synthesis of the twentieth century culture of designer characters and formulaic merchandising begins with Disney, whose animation was imported while under American occupation in the period immediately following the Second World War, and significantly influenced the early pioneers of *manga* and *anime*, most famously, Osamu Tezuka. This relationship is frequently described in purely formal terms, with Tezuka precisely adapting and revamping the semiotics that ran through Disney cartooning, with *Astro Boy* as his heroic denouement. Susan Napier writes,

> Tezuka himself was a strong admirer of Disney animation, as were many of Japan’s pioneer animators. Even today Japanese animators are strongly aware of American animation. But, virtually from the start, postwar Japanese animation has tended to go in a very different direction, not only in adult orientation and more complex storylines but also in its overall structure (Napier, 2000, p. 17).

Napier is keen to shift focus from the primacy of American domestic influence to highlight the autonomy of Japanese *anime*. The distribution of popular culture plays an instrumental role in redressing the changing landscape of globalization; American hegemony is challenged by the proliferation of Japanese media, and its success in finding receptive consumer bases. Mizuko Ito observes, “...the latter half of the nineties has seen a rise in what Douglas McGray has called Japan’s ‘gross national cool’ and others have tied it to a resurgent Japanese techno-nationalism” (Ito, 2004, p. 13). The controversy concerning the increased visibility of previously underground *otaku* subcultures (provoked by and including SuperFlat) has been matched by a shift away from the critique of the Americanization of Japanese culture in the postwar period. Instead, the preference has been to reassert the continuities between the contemporary Japanese postmodern experience and its premodern Edo counterpart (Matsui, 1999). Nuanced historical commentary is replaced by an internal receptivity to the Orientalist construction, resolutely focused on the
contemporary and the nostalgic, which Murakami impies to when he places ‘Japan’ in quotation marks, thus emphasizing its manufactured status (Friis-Hansen, 1999, p. 31). Hiroki Azuma writes:

Their preference toward the association between the 80s postmodern society and the premodern Edo can be easily explained once you recognize the abovementioned process of “domestication” of the postwar American culture. In the mid 80s, many Japanese were fascinated with their economical success and tried to erase or forget their traumatic memory of the defeat in World War Two. The re-evaluation of Edo culture is socially required in such an atmosphere (Azuma, 2001, np).

For example, later sections of Marker’s transcript support Azuma’s commentary; he writes of the encroachment of Americanized mass culture on Japan’s indigenous religious culture: “At dawn, toppled into the modern world. Twenty-seven years of American occupation, the re-establishment of a controversial Japanese sovereignty, two miles from the bowling alleys and the gas stations the Noro continues her dialogue with the gods” (Marker, 1984, p. 329). Later he writes that in modern Tokyo they’re celebrating the young women’s coming of age ceremony; again there is a collision of old and new symptomatic of the attitude Azuma criticises. Marker’s description perfectly captures the sentiment of the ‘Japan’ Murakami questions; his description emphasizing the sheer simultaneity of old and new characterizing the “disjunctive” modern Japanese experience.

But what gives the street its color in January, what makes it suddenly different, is the appearance of kimonos. In the street, in the stores, in offices, even at the Stock Exchange on opening day, the girls take out their fur-collared winter kimonos. At that moment of the year other Japanese may well invent extra–flat TV sets, commit suicide with a chainsaw, or capture two-thirds of the world market for semi-conductors – good for them! All you see are the girls (Marker, 1984, p. 331).

Placing a relatively unknown videogame in precariously broad cultural context might seem incongruous, but this particular game speaks to, and is spoken by, these contexts. In We Love Katamari the cultural commentary evolves around the reciprocal relationship between the aesthetics of postwar entertainment and the rise of commodity fetishism. Disney’s exploitation of the power of merchandizing ensured the longevity of his economic, as well as aesthetic dominance. As a consequence, the potential of merchandise (and its limitations) informed the subsequent aesthetic development of characters with a design and appeal easily transferred to material commodities; they acquired what we might call a “serial aesthetic”, recalling Benjamin’s suggestion that: “To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 218). The irony of his position as “master animator” is noted by Marc Eliot in his suggestion that “…Walt Disney’s reputation as the world’s most famous animator had resulted less from his abilities as an artist than as a merchandiser” (Eliot, 1994, p. 66). In an interview for Giant Robot magazine, Eric Nakamura asks Murakami, “Is it important for you to create a legacy for your art?” to which he replies,

I certainly don’t wish to be enshrined and sit around in a private museum. What would be ideal is if copyrights became stronger – like Disney – through national ordinance, and to be able to survive economic dangers, changing executive positions, and the outbreak of internal conflict (Nakamura, 2006a, p. 45).
While the institutional dominance of the Disney company has diminished, the cultural impact of its various economic and aesthetic turns throughout the twentieth century nonetheless resonate through the proliferation of character-based popular arts in contemporary digital culture. In SuperFlat art and culture, the vectored, contoured, planar surface of 2D animation intermingles with Japan’s indigenous premodern pictorial traditions. The mode of appreciation anticipated by such works emphasizes extreme anamorphic and contradictory patterns of contemporary media consumption (see Azuma, 2000).

Midori Matsui’s description of the features of Japanese Art share many consistencies with early Disney animation, when she writes of a “strong inclination towards autonomous pictorial spaces independent of laws of verisimilitude and the functional use of decorative details as structural elements in the pictorial design...playfully transforming human and natural figures with decorative distortions” (Matsui quoted in Curreri, 2001, p. 15). Murakami himself suggests that the work collected in his first Superflat exhibition in Shibuya demonstrates a “very typically Japanese engagement with the visual sense that wants resolutely to remain planear [sic]” (Murakami quoted in Lamarre, 2004, p. 153). Included in the show was a variety of work created from professional artists like Murakami himself, through to otaku amateur crafts, like vinyl kit made character models. Murakami’s claim to an inspired connection between his art and premodern “typically Japanese” indigenous arts is often read as a market strategy, following the approach of the American Pop Artists of the 1960s. Doug Harvey observes,

> It finally occurred to me that ‘Superflat’ is directed at the Japanese art establishment, in a bid to legitimate manga inspired art in a notoriously conservative and jealously guarded Artocracy of cherry-blossom watercolors and tea-ceremony dishware. Like Lichtenstein and Warhol before them, Murakami and his colleagues are lobbying for legitimacy, using the strategies that worked for the Pop artists. And more power to them. (Harvey, 2001, p. 53).

Game critics and researchers have similarly emphasised a ‘long history’ in relation to classic board and social games, in an effort to promote the artistic legitimacy of the form. Thus to consider Katamari within SuperFlat emphasises both its ‘art’ and ‘game’ antecedents. I want to negotiate the connection between pre- and postmodern Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, while at the same time, incorporate the impact of postwar occupation and its subsequent cultural effects. An interdisciplinary consideration of these aesthetics is highly productive in helping to explain We Love Katamari. In Murakami’s (2000; 2005) historical construction the focus is resolutely popular; the scopic regime of premodern Japanese painting informs the popular culture of today, and as suggested thus far, contemporary Japanese popular culture is politicized by the broader cultural issue of wartime defeat, American occupation and its influence in national economic recovery. Underpinning this history, the ideals of industrialization mould the aesthetic form of the new commodities of postwar Japanese popular culture: anime, manga, toys and videogames. SuperFlat’s headfirst confrontation with the centrality of the postwar condition in mass culture recalls artist Tarō Okamoto’s exclamation “Art is an Explosion!” that

> ...harks back to the exhibition Tarō Explodes, at Matsuya Department Store, Tokyo, in 1968. The word explosion,” which exemplified Okamoto’s philosophy of art, no doubt is closely connected to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To solve the thorny riddle of
how to live with the nightmarish memory of nuclear holocaust in a way that anyone could understand, he boldly declared, ‘Art is explosion!’ (Murakami, 2005, pp. 3-4).

The kaleidoscopic and eccentric mise-en-scène of We Love Katamari is SuperFlat art. It has a mass appeal and an immediacy directly drawn from Okamoto’s philosophy (both Murakami and Takahashi cite Okamoto as their foremost artistic influence). Mindful of postwar industrialization and the surreal trappings of a globalized consumer lifestyle, Takahashi decorates his gamespace with serialized forms that foreground their manufacture, and draw attention to the fetish of potential customization or detail. The ‘Cousin’ characters within We Love Katamari are the denouement of this aesthetic. They surreptitiously recall the power rangers with their rainbow coloured bodies and outlandish design, the Cousins come to save the day, rolling up the sea of lost junk and objects into a singular, synthetic, manageable whole. All SuperFlat texts emphasize the reduction of the total image to its constituent parts, by both revealing the logic of its reproducibility and anticipating the pattern of its subsequent consumption. Following Disney, Murakami’s oeuvre is distributed and serialized through a range of commodities. Kitty Hauser writes that,

Never has a self-proclaimed art movement had better market coverage from the outset or more successful niche marketing at every level. Murakami’s assault on the Western art world was calculated for maximum cultural impact and profitability (Hauser, 2004, p. 129).

Following in the factory style praxis of Warhol, Murakami’s ‘Kaikai Kiki LLC’ initiative comprises a number of business advisors, as well as student apprentices, who assist in the production and manufacture of works. The works of his various protégés are then further developed and exhibited as part of his annual GEISAI festival and competition; such democratic vision marking the distinction between Murakami and Andy Warhol (Myers, 2005, p. 57). Murakami is explicitly concerned with the marketability of the GEISAI work, and Eric Nakamura has commented that when,

...it came to picking judges Murakami was a smooth operator. Most were print journalists who would write about their experiences. The remainder were gallerists who could possibly pick up an artist for a future exhibition, or at least talk up the event to the right people (Nakamura, 2006b, p. 46).

At Kaikai headquarters, initial sketches created by Murakami are developed iteratively across a wide variety of media, including painting, sculpture, as well as merchandise including key chains, and through his collaboration with designer Marc Jacobs, a Louis Vuitton limited edition series of handbags. He has even said that the litigious language of the secret contract he signed with the fashion label’s president Yves Carcelle might be, in his words, “the most important piece of art I ever made. In other words, I think that collaboration was the best means of achieving the deepest levels of artistic communication for me” (Nakamura, 2006a, p. 43). Paintings, figures, toys, handbags: these various objects acquire a treatment that makes them continuous with one another, conceived singularly under a branded identity defined by Murakami, and yet still quizzically different. On the other hand, Takahashi seems reluctant to be seen as a games designer, and is publicly ‘confused’ by the commercial viability of his videogame designs for Namco. In an interview with Gamasutra where he was asked “Are you comfortable with the success of Katamari Damacy in the US ?” he replied,
It’s pretty mysterious. Yesterday at the Game Developers Choice awards, I got one nomination, and everybody cheered. It was pretty amazing to me. I wondered why they were so excited... it seemed kind of strange (Sheffield, 2006, np).

Perhaps Takahashi never expected that the attendees of such awards would resemble the introspective-yet-excited fans portrayed in *We Love Katamari*. Like Okamoto’s expression “Art is an Explosion!” Takahashi has often stated (for example, in slides at the game developer’s conference 2005) that, “We are Videogame Romantics!” – harking back to Okamoto’s impassioned phrase, and forward to a future game’s culture. His statement implies the emotional and deeply felt connection to media Murakami seeks to capture in his conceptualization of SuperFlat. Both Murakami and Takahashi use characters to achieve their artistic vision, and understand that the transmission of those ideas in contemporary culture means the exploitation of the commercial channels through which a character achieves its peculiar life. Each in their own way plays a curious game of cat and mouse with their public image, oscillating between the poles of artist, manufacturer, otaku connoisseur and businessman to sustain the potent image of the Romantic. Cultivated qualities of naivety, surrealism, ambiguity and incongruity pervade the characters and worlds they each evoke in their own way. Both employ a complex system of reference to connect their art to legitimating antecedents that seek vindication both from the elite of contemporary art and popular culture. In what follows, I would like to explore the world of the videogames romantic further.

*Otaku* Connoisseurship Connects SuperFlat Art and Videogames

In the UK, connoisseurship for novel Japanese games is often seen as synonymous with a deep commitment to games culture, and knowledge of such games form a sort of cultural capital. This deep interest follows the changing contour of Japanese fan subculture since the 1980s, the subculture of *otaku* connoisseurship, a phenomenon often received in the West as the pejorative and fearful “Japanification” of youth culture. Koichi Iwabuchi describes the economic sentiment underpinning such fears, Japan’s hitherto odourless cultural presence in the world has become more recognizably “Japanese” as computer games and animation from Japan have grabbed large shares of overseas markets. Japan’s success in exporting cultural products that are unmistakably perceived as “Japanese” have evoked a sense of yearning and threat overseas, including fear of cultural invasion (Iwabuchi, 2004, p. 59).

Persistent rhetorics of fear and desire intermingle in Iwabuchi’s account, and define the cult image of the ‘fanatical’ *otaku*, a term which refers to the collective of fans of various media including but not limited to videogames, animation, Japanese *anime* and *manga* comics. Ito connects fears around *otaku* culture to the changing politics of childhood and media perceived as ostensibly for children; the qualities that appeal to both *otaku* and young people are precisely those that concern certain adults—“entrepreneurism” and “connoisseurship” (Ito, 2004, p. 12). Murakami identifies as *otaku*, and emphasizes the communal creativity of *otaku* culture through the technological sensibility implied by SuperFlat. His portrait of *otaku* culture champions the various creative practices emerging from such fandom: fan art, vinyl kit model making, videogame “modding” and so on. The predominant understanding of *otaku* through the 1990s was negative, and Thomas Lamarre’s
explanation of the term highlights this: “The term otaku itself derives from a form of address with connotations of detachment and isolation: ‘you’ as ‘your residence’. To refer to someone as ‘your residence’ implies a distanced, highly formalised relation. To be otaku thus implies formal, potentially empty relations” (Lamarre, 2004, p.163). Iwabuchi adds that the “…fear in the West is of contamination and contagion: importing Japanese anime and computer games will turn Western youth into otaku” (Iwabuchi, 2004, p. 59). The kitsch escapism of Murakami’s work is often highly criticized in Western art criticism. The nihilistic sentiment of some perspectives on otaku and SuperFlat are epitomized in the tone of this review of Murakami’s 2002 touring show:

**Sixties Pop Art reflected a simple belief in happiness resulting from mass consumption. Nowadays, the converse is true, and there is growing distrust in consumerism and globalisation in contemporary society, with Japan suffering from a long lasting economic crisis. PoKu may therefore be seen to point toward a masochist escape from reality via even more consumption, the Otaku resembling the drug addicts who take more drugs to forget the drugs are killing them (Baralhe, 2002, p. 146).**

*We Love Katamari* pastiches this fervent brand of fandom, and through its design, takes the qualities of SuperFlat into gamespace. Beginning the game proper, you are dropped into “the meadow”, a surreal and democratic space resembling a child’s drawing. Standing around in this beautiful nowhere are numerous fans of the *Katamari* series, who hail you (the player) to aid them in their pursuits. Upon approaching them with your player-character, The Prince, each fan begins a nostalgic diatribe about their appreciation of the previous game *Katamari Damacy*, telling tales of skipping school, hardcore play and collector culture.

These NPCs are a reminder of the work of Volker Grassmuck (1990), who conducted interviews in an effort to describe the inner life of otaku culture. His first example is Riku Kushida, a passionate videogames collector who identifies as otaku. Her comments to Grassmuck resemble those of the “fans” in the meadow of *We Love Katamari*: “‘Space Invader’ … created a whole generation of game-addicts... Talking about the birth and rise of the game phenomenon Kushida is taken with sentimentality. In those days she dreamt of games. But, she says, it was not the games which took over her imagination, but her imagination originally lead her to the games” (Grassmuck, 1990, p. 2). He adds that: “Today Kushida is 20 and studies philosophy. No, she does not find that choice of field surprising. The game world includes the ‘real world’ and vice-versa. So, there is certainly a relation to philosophy and games, but a very complicated one that she can’t quite explain, she says, and laughs” (Grassmuck, 1990, p. 2). This sentiment directly corresponds to a comment by Takahashi regarding the development of *We Love Katamari*:

*This is something that is sort of abstract to me... a big part of it was that I found it quite interesting that this game was received so well beyond our expectations. But aside from that, I did wonder if it wasn’t possible to somehow link reality and the world of games together. In doing so, I didn’t really know what it would be or how it would go, but for me having them find some sort of common ground was natural (Takahashi quoted in Leone, 2005, np).*

Kushida, Takahashi and Murakami see the confusion of everyday and pictorial/screen realities as an opportunity for a re-imagining of the terms of not only aesthetic experience, but also its relationship to everyday subjectivity. *We Love Katamari* sidesteps the ostensible nihilism of the otaku context it speaks
to, and from which it emerges, to become a celebration of key pop cultural tropes found in SuperFlat. Its everydayness assumes the ubiquity of this discernibly Japanese aesthetic. Within his stern critique of the namesake exhibition SuperFlat, Harvey concedes that, “I had trouble guessing who the audience of the show is supposed to be and what ‘boundaries’ are being bridged. In the age of Pokémon, is anyone in the West unfamiliar with this aesthetic?” (Harvey 2001, p. 53). According to Matsui, this participatory subculture is having a particular impact on the priorities of occidental seeing, through a sophisticated use of reflexive formal tropes, “metonymic chains” of fragmented imagery, and through the use of decorative forms (Matsui, 1999, p. 28; cf. Lamarre, 2004). The decorative in art finds a new voice in the PoKu movement (PoKu is a contraction of ‘Popular Otaku’), having been systematically repressed through an appropriation of Western modernism’s emphasis on efficiency and cleanliness of form. Matsui surmises that,

Murakami’s tapping of the resources of otaku culture is consistent with his efforts to revive traditions of playfulness and connoisseurship that existed in Edo popular culture, which operated in the strictly unacademic but hermetic language of craft. Otaku is the contemporary counterpart of the Edo tsû, the well-versed amateur, having emerged in the early 1980s as a generation of pop culture enthusiasts equipped with detailed knowledge of comics, animation films, garage kits and other underground obsessions. Formerly marginalized as a negative embodiment of Japanese postconsumer materialism and infantilism, otaku is now hailed as a prototype of new cultural connoisseurship (Matsui, 1999, p. 27).

Like Ito (2004) and Lamarre (2004), Matsui points to a changing view of the participatory culture and communal creativity of fandom epitomized by the otaku. As previously suggested, Azuma has criticized the historical continuity endorsed by Matsui; he writes that the constructed continuity between pre- and postmodern Japan obfuscates the period between the Meiji reforms of the late 19th century through to the atomic conclusion of the Second World War. He explains that Western discourses had sought to position Japan as the simultaneous realization of mixing pre- and post-modernity: “This kind of ‘Orientalism’ was imported back into Japanese society in the 1980s and since then the Japanese themselves began to explain their postmodern reality based on their premodern tradition going back to the Edo era” (Azuma, 2001, np). Recalling my previous citation from Marker, William Gibson’s works have been instrumental in building a picture of Japan as simultaneously pre- and postmodern. The image of the cyberspace hacker looms large in the cultural perception of the otaku, the “nerd gone bad”, whose use of intimate technical knowledge to structure and redefine reality, perpetually ostracized from mainstream culture.

For Lamarre, the discourse propagated by otaku culture relies on its distinction from normative culture, for fear that if such collective connoisseurship went mainstream, “…the discourse on anime simply becomes a discourse on the nation, and the Gainax discourse[7] might inspire an especially potent brand of nationalism” (Lamarre, 2004, p. 163). When asked whether otaku culture has political potential, Murakami suggests that,

…the otaku are part of a great revolt against society, and in some ways, against reality. And similar to the English nerds, they are an ostracized group of society. Because of this, they have no choice but to be passive. It’s the same as when American nerds dress up in Star
Wars outfits and wield light sabers. They are not real weapons. Society won’t let them have real power (Murakami quoted in Bellini & Leoni, 2006, p. 84).

The Prince in the world of Katamari is similarly powerless, standing only centimeters tall – alongside his monumental father he is miniscule. After first entry into the gameworld, he is barely there, the size of a coin or a crayon. Through the drive to collect and synthesise “junk” (the core gameplay mechanic), the Prince performs the primary act of the otaku in his relationship to whichever niche aspect popular culture evokes a passion. “Collect, collect, collect!” or as Murakami has titled several works in his DOB series, “And Then, And Then, And Then”. The otaku Prince cannot attack in any conventional manner; he can only grow the katamari in increments, and by extension, impact upon his world with increasingly totality. Once the katamari has reached a certain size, objects which where previously obstructions become more integrated into the growing sphere. Depending on which game in the series you play the process though which the katamari becomes a star or planet or island encapsulates the aesthetic heart of the game. The Prince finds salvation, pleasure and identity through the seemingly purposeless and absurd collecting of objects together into a common form. In a recent column for the Observer, William Gibson writes of the Japanese in Portobello market, and his words evoke similarities to the world of Katamari:

I like to watch the Japanese in Portobello market. Some are there for the crowd, sightseeing, but others are there on specific, narrow-bandwidth, obsessional missions, hunting British military watches or Victorian corkscrews or Dinky Toys or Bakelite napkin rings. The dealers’ eyes still brighten […] the Japanese are likely to buy, should they spot that one particular object of otaku desire. Not an impulse buy, but the snapping of a trap set long ago, with great deliberation (Gibson, 2001, np).

The precocious energy of the Prince rolling the katamari conjures, in its own optimistic and surreal way, the otakus scouring the table-spread of merchandise and curiosities described by Gibson. He later adds that,

Understanding otaku-hood, I think, is one of the keys to understanding the culture of the web. There is something profoundly post-national about it, extra geographic. We are all curators, in the post-modern world, whether we want to be or not (Ibid.).

While otaku fandom may become a transnational phenomenon, reflexive stories about otaku life and subjectivity originate in the main from Japan, where the aesthetic and social practice has been more completely woven into the popular consciousness. In the final section of this paper, we shall look more closely at We Love Katamari, and explore how it deploys conventions established within SuperFlat aesthetics to create an ironic and inclusive pastiche of otaku games culture.

We Love Katamari

In the world of the Katamari series, we are swamped in a carnival of lost commodities. The diminutive Prince is metonymic of the resolve of the otaku generation; this meaning is most powerfully revealed in play as he fanatically collects objects by rolling his katamari over them. They are held together by some invisible magnetism, the power of the serial aesthetic, the aesthetic of relations between forms, characters created to be collected. The low polygon graphics and repetition of exact copies of
commodities in the world (a stack of umbrellas, a flock of seagulls, a nest of paperclips) bring us back to the game experience at its most SuperFlat. The introduction to the main game is interesting insofar as it explicitly discusses both the plot of the first game and its commercial success as a game:

Tossed unceremoniously to Earth, the valiant Prince rolled the katamari entrusted to him by the King, rolling up more things than you can count: vaulting boxes, pencils, erasers, postcards, ramen, robots, cows, sheep, this girl, that boy, moms and dads, bicycles, motorbikes, homes, buildings rainbows, clouds, islands, hopes, dreams. The Prince rolled them all up, rolled and rolled, until the katamari was big enough to be lifted up to Space to replace the shiny stars that were so grievously [sic] lost. And that, my dear friends, was the plot and purpose of the fabulous game called: Katamari Damacy! (Namco, 2005).

In the introduction, the enumeration of objects in the world of Katamari has the effect off flattening them, in anticipation of play. The player is primed to collect, instead of seeking the value of singular objects. The flat, graphic surface of the computer-modelled world emphasizes the limitations of videogame graphics, and so challenges the dominant realist imaging of mainstream videogames. They are not the pure manifestation of perfect computer logic, and certainly not the hyperreal renditions that emerge from the ideals of information capitalism. The things stuck to the katamari represent the revival of the decorative through pattern and repetition, the absurd volumes of commodities whose assemblage we understand as a consensus reality. The humour of “metonymic chains” and arrangements pervade Takahashi’s gameworld. Rolling up the bits and bobs that litter the streets of We Love Katamari mean that quickly the katamari grows to such a size that you are able to roll off people, then cars, then houses. Humans scream and flee from the katamari as it approaches, to no avail. In this moment, the Tôhô Tokusatsu[8] (Special Effect) films are recalled with a hilarious and slightly unsettling effect. The populace run from the oversize katamari, shrieking in fear, pastiching the fear evoked by the indomitable Godzilla.

The most interesting and evocative trope is the ‘designer character art’ of We Love Katamari, specifically at the Cousins [Fig.2], who are collected in the course of playing the game, and who can be subsequently played as selectable player characters (they are hidden within the levels as Easter Egg content). The theme of family and the inheritance of characteristics become the common thread connecting Murakami and Katamari; the post-human family of the otaku networks. We can look at the relations between these simplified caricatured forms, and describe the means through which they communicate. To do this, elsewhere in my research, I have outlined two criteria with which to examine caricature in animation. Both the system of caricature and serialization relies on two interrelated qualities which, following Gombrich, I call the “permanent” and “impermanent” traits. The corresponding motifs or “cues” of a particular caricature – the rabbit ears and tail of Bugs Bunny for example – “anchor” the character, and are integral to the cognition and plausibility of the design. Recalling the theories of comic-strip inventor Rodolphe Töpffer, Gombrich refers to these character aspects as the “permanent traits.” These constant elements of Bugs’ design define his character, though not his expression. The “impermanent traits”, signalled by the animated performance of expression, “align with those permanent aspects to constitute the character as a whole” (Surman, 2004b, p. 72). Thus the dynamic relationship between permanent and impermanent traits defines the new seriality of SuperFlat.
Looking at the Cousins, we can see how the facial design (a beige square with simple black eyes and an inexpressive nose and mouth) remains a feature for all the various Cousins. Similarly, the golden aerial that juts from their heads is constant throughout. These consistencies define the Cousins as a series, continuous with one another, mass-produced. They certainly mark them out as something to be collected. These elements are the permanent traits, which act to unify the larger design. Counterbalancing this element is the impermanent trait, the bodies of the various Cousins, which come in all manner of shapes and sizes. The body marks difference and encases the repetition of the face. Like Murakami’s early Randoseru Project (1991) – identical children’s backpacks varied only by the animal skins used to produce them – the cousins are “meaningful” insofar as they are considered both collectively and separately. They exist to shine for a moment on their own, and then to be subsequently filed away, like butterflies pinned alongside one another in a Victorian museum. While butterflies are “natural”, the aesthetics of collecting are wholly synthetic, and their ordering represents a transformation analogous to the chaos into simplicity of the rolling katamari.

The Katamari Cousins are a mass-produced phenomena, and also idiosyncratic. Through the concept of permanent and impermanent traits, we can compare Murakami’s Army of Mushrooms [Fig.1] with Takahashi’s Katamari Cousins. The Mushroom works bridge the space between Murakami’s DOB related works and his more contemporary pieces. In Army, the eyes of the mushrooms become the permanent trait. The green iris within the white of the eye remains consistent throughout all its multiplicities. In each and every eye are two reflective highlights. These flecks are not the result of some off-screen light source, since the positioning of the mushrooms do not suggest they are co-arranged within a singular reality—their alignment follows no fixed system.

This anamorphosis recalls the manufactured doll eyes described in Brophy’s discussion of Osamu Tezuka, in which the construction of the eye is more sign than image, indicative of the otaku-like fetish for the deepening of detail, free from real world reference (Brophy, 1997; cf. Azuma, 2000). Multiple realities are implied in the course of reading the eccentric composition of the painting, and yet the Mushrooms become a serialized singularity through the permanent trait of the eye. They recall the arrangement of objects in the wunderkammer, the seventh century curiosity cabinets, which contained eccentric groups of objects arranged together in the construction of pseudo-logical multiple realities. In We Love Katamari, the gameworld is a Super Flat wunderkammer, containing everyday objects sometimes grouped into an appropriate area or region, sometimes caricatured objects from history (samurai march on a hill overlooking a modern town filled with pizza delivery boys).

As the katamari grows larger, nation states are caricatured like picture postcards, serialized into forms decoratively arranged across the landscape. A field of identical pyramids mark out an Egyptian region. Still larger, gods and goddesses and fictional monsters roam the landscape in groups, roaming the space like mythic line dancers. The influence of Murakami in marked in the importance of scale in both Murakami’s Army of Mushrooms and Katamari. Perhaps the immediacy of differences in scale is the most affective impermanent trait. The use of changing scale combines with the constancy of Murakami’s eye sign and the faces of the Cousins to create a powerful sense of ubiquity, so large, like
Okamoto’s *Tower of Sun* that it defines the horizon, so small, like Pokémon, they permeate the many recesses of culture.

Most important however are the fans. Otaku fandom is the lifeblood of the worlds conjured in both Murakami’s gallery exhibitions and Takahashi’s gamespaces. Toward the end of the introduction to the game, the narrator explains,

> Its [We Love Katamari] popularity recognized no boundaries or borders and it rolled right out of the game to bundle away the many and sundry ills that blight the modern world. Overnight, the King found himself a superstar. The adulation of the crowd knew no limits.

Fan #1: ‘I want to meet the King!’

Fan #2: ‘I think he should be bigger!’

Fan #3: ‘I think the King is so cool!’

Fan #4: ‘I want to roll up more stuff!)

Oh dear, such a chorus! Fans crying out from all over the world for the magnificent King to do his thing! (Namco, 2005)

The statements of the four archetypal fans are the perfect metonym for the circulation of debates around any of the many objects of fascination celebrated by contemporary otaku connoisseurs. Immanent to the critique of contemporary media is the assumption that the agendas of consumers will figure into subsequent designs. This determines the special status of videogame sequels. Such is the mutual intelligibility enjoyed by designers and fans in games culture, whereby fan voices are often registered, and so adding extra significance to the cultural value of game sequels. Takahashi understands the significance of the sequel format to games, and takes the opportunity in *We Love Katamari* to hold a carnival mirror to the otaku culture that inspires it.

In this essay I hope to have introduced some general notes on concepts that shape the *Katamari Damacy* series, and perhaps some common issues for the contemporary Japanese videogame more generally. SuperFlat art plays a significant role in the conceptualization of *manga*, *anime*, Japanese contemporary art, and here, for the first time after Murakami, videogames. Further, I hope to have taken some steps towards introducing the game *otaku* subculture to which SuperFlat, in its various semblances, speaks. Through my notes on Keita Takahashi and Takashi Murakami, I have hopefully shown the depth of interdisciplinary scope achieved in this ostensibly “popular” game art.

As we play games, we become sensitive to the rhythms and cadence of the gameworld structure, particularly in games that emphasize action and repetition. Seriality creates this structure. In order to achieve a refreshing sense of differentiation, two aspects complicate seriality, the permanent and impermanent trait, which fold difference into the repetition and so create a sense of iterative progression. This is a conceptual formal consideration, remote from the player’s conscious thought. Subtle variations (and works limited to and inspired by series like the Prince’s erstwhile Cousins) speak to the...
By entering into a discussion on this essential trope, both Murakami’s artwork and Takahashi’s Katamari game series move beyond the tropes of games, contemporary art and merchandising, to the discourse SuperFlat and the explosion of otaku art. The reflexive use of repetition and difference, permanence and impermanence bring the player to a simultaneous awareness of game logic and social logic, the structure of images and the specificity of postwar Japanese society. *We Love Katamari* is an extraordinary game, which surrounds the apparent simplicity of its core mechanic with a compelling synthesis of contemporary movements in art and social commentary. My contextual interpretation of this game through the multifaceted lens of SuperFlat has hopefully sensitized the reader to the value of relational and convergent aesthetics that sit in the spaces between games, players and merchandise, to be brought together in the imaginary.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Emily Flynn-Jones, Dr Larissa Hjorth and Professor Tanya Krzywinska for their invaluable comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this essay appeared as ‘Otaku Connoisseurship and the New Serial Aesthetic in Contemporary Japanese Games Design’ in the online proceedings of the Game in Action conference, Gothenburg, Sweden, 13th – 15th June 2007.

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Notes

[1] In order to remain consistent with the numerous journalistic references used in this paper, I use the Westernized naming convention of “first name then surname”, rather than the traditional Japanese “surname then first name”, in order that the text remains consistent as a whole.


[3] DOB in the strange forest took place at the Parco Department Store Gallery, Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan, in April of 1999.

[4] The iconicity, design and ‘feel’ of a character are largely overlooked in the academic critique of games, which is currently biased toward higher level functionality, narrative and users. Interdisciplinary histories and considerations of design shed new light on Japanese games, which has likewise been something of a white elephant for Game Studies.

[5] The arrest in 1989 of serial child killer, Tsutomu Miyazaki, significantly impacted on the public perception of otaku culture, and the distribution of the photograph of his apartment (which had the characteristic serial collections of videotapes, manga and commercial anime) generated moral speculation about the otaku lifestyle.


[7] Lamarre’s use of the phrase “Gainax discourse” refers to Murakami’s emphasis on the work of the anime studio Gainax, founded by an otaku group of amateur animators headed up by Toshio Okada, and including Hideaki Anno. Lamarre’s Gainax discourse encapsulates the particular relationship of anime to SuperFlat and is useful for delimiting the differences between anime from other media celebrated by otaku.

[8] “Tokusatsu, an abbreviation of tokushu satsuei (special filming). Denotes special effects techniques used by Japanese filmmakers mainly from the 1950s onwards. Films in such tokusatsu-heavy genres as science fiction, fantasy, horror and monster movies are themselves called tokusatsu” (Murakami, 2005: 42).

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