The Cultural Economy of Ludic Superflatness

Dean Chan
Edith Cowan University
Perth, Australia
d.chan@ecu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the situated play aesthetics of Japanese digital games with reference to what Takashi Murakami calls Japan's superflat visual culture. According to Murakami, superflat visuality is born out of imbricated cultural, political, and historical contexts concerning the relationships between high art and subculture, between Japan and the United States, between history and contemporaneity. In this paper, I examine these dialectical tensions and use superflatness as a hermeneutical tool for examining associated aesthetic forms and ludic properties that are recurrent in Japanese games culture. Key videogames under discussion include *We Love Katamari*, *WarioWare: Mega Microgame$* and *Viewtiful Joe*. My conception of ludic superflatness acts as an interpretive cue for analysing Japanese digital cultural production *in context*. In particular, I focus on how ludic superflatness might be regarded as a complex agentive – and *polemical* – expression of culturally hybrid national identity within the contexts of contemporary digitalised globalisation.

Author Keywords

Superflat, cultural economy, hybridity, history, otaku, 2D, Takashi Murakami

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, there has been increased Japanese interest in articulating the distinctive "Japaneseness" of cultural exports such as animation and videogames. This is in sharp contrast to its immediate post-war history. As Anne Allison notes, "Burdened by a legacy of pre-war and wartime brutality in East and Southeast Asian markets and orientalist dismissal in Euroamerica, Japan adopted a policy in postwar times of culturally neutering the products it exports overseas" [1]. Koichi Iwabuchi similarly acknowledges the post-war mandate to produce "culturally odourless" (*mukokuseki*) Japanese cultural products that either disguise or disavow the specificities of their cultural origin in order to maximise global market potential [7]. However, he observes that this longstanding cultural policy is shifting. Iwabuchi describes the present turn as a shift towards software-oriented, "soft" nationalism [8]. Popular cultural exports now play a significant role in the discursive construction of Japanese national identity. This is symptomatic of a renewed attentiveness to the modalities and practices of nation-specific cultural capital accumulation, and how these might be deployed to circulate and compete in the global economy. Media art theorist Mitsuhiro Takemura uses the term "digital Japanesque" to underscore the local restructuring of cultural and aesthetic soft power on the capital needed in order to create a new Japanese national identity in the age of digitalised globalisation [8]. I posit that a paradigmatic form of digital Japanesque is already present in what Takashi Murakami calls superflat Japanese visual culture.

Such preliminary contextual considerations are important in negotiating the situated play aesthetics of Japanese digital games. My focus in this paper is on the cultural economy of one key paradigmatic aesthetic. Recent games that variously engage with the conventions of planar imagery and 2D spatial rendering, including *We Love Katamari* (Namco, 2005), *WarioWare: Mega Microgame$* (Nintendo, 2003), and *Viewtiful Joe* (Capcom, 2003), act as reference points in my discussion. These games illustrate salient characteristics of Japanese visual culture. As Murakami explains, superflatness denotes "a flattened surface, the working environment of computer graphics, flat-panel monitors, or the forceful integration of data into an image… [It is] a flattened, self-mocking culture. Japan lost the war, and came this far – though not on its own – with its economic growth haunted by a tortured past. I needed to look at what was flat, and why it had to be super" [13]. Superflat visuality is thus born out of imbricated cultural, political, and historical contexts concerning the relationships between high art and subculture, between Japan and the United States, between history and contemporaneity [11]. In this paper, I examine these dialectical tensions and use superflatness as a hermeneutical tool for examining associated aesthetic forms and ludic properties that are recurrent in Japanese games culture. Ludic superflatness therefore acts as an interpretive cue for analysing Japanese games and digital cultural production *in context*.

LIVING AND PLAYING WITH SUPERFLATNESS

"Superflat" is a neologism coined and conceptualised by Takashi Murakami, one of the leading proponents of the

Tokyo Pop contemporary art movement. He has extensively elaborated on the cultural meanings of "superflat" in his artworks, curatorial projects, group exhibitions, publications and public lectures. Murakami's description of the origin and, more crucially, the original impetus of the term provide insight into its ideological foundations: "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 'culture'. *Thus I launched a project under the rubric of Superflat as a critical endeavour to overcome that sales pitch*" [13; italics added]. Accordingly, it must be emphasised that the superflat project was forged in a reflexive cross-cultural encounter. Superflat cultural logic operates in dialectical tension between Japan and the U.S., framed in deeply entangled historical and contemporary terms. Evident from this foundational moment is the positioning of superflat not as an apolitical visual aesthetic but as a decisive critical endeavour.

On one level, Murakami's subsequent conceptualisation of superflatness links the flat picture planes of traditional Japanese paintings and present-day *manga* and *anime*, to the perceived lack of historical distinction between high and low cultures at this locale. At the same time, he believes that post-war conditions in Japan acted as key determinants for the subsequent use and symbolic function of pictorial superflatness in Japanese cultural production. Specific to his concerns are the infantilising effects of Japan's Constitution that has kept it a pacifist country. Superflat may indeed be read as one index of post-war *kawaii* (cute) culture. Anne Allison traces the rise and fetishisation of cute goods and consumptive pleasures in the 1970s and 80s. She argues that: "Cuteness became not only a commodity but also equated with consumption itself – the pursuit of something that dislodges the heaviness and constraints of (productive) life. In consuming cuteness, one has the yearning to be comforted and soothed: a yearning that many researchers and designers of play in Japan trace to a nostalgia for experiences in a child's past" [2]. Murakami extends the psychosocial interpretation of this trope of cuteness with broader reference to cultural history – or its systemic disavowal as the case may be. For him, anguished social truths are stripped of their historical context in the child-like animated forms that have come to serve as the dominant sign in superflat visual culture: a flattening process that releases the populace from grappling with the contradictions of Japan's wartime experience as predator and victim, and post-war status as economic rival of, and political subordinate to, the United States [9]. Accordingly, this paper will address the range of experiential tensions and socio-aesthetic transformations that accompany such

processes of cultural hybridisation. While Murakami's theory might initially appear to allow limited scope for expressing autonomy or agency, I will instead focus later in this paper on how ludic superflatness might be regarded as a complex agentive – and *polemical* – expression of culturally hybrid national identity within the contexts of contemporary digitalised globalisation.

An equally hybridised interpretive approach is warranted. By engaging with the intersections among games design, visual culture and the cultural economy, this paper suggests an interdisciplinary model for a situated analysis of Japanese digital games. Ludic superflatness first and foremost locates aesthetic production as an assemblage of cultural-economic activities. Studies in the cultural economy, as Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke explain, presuppose that "economics are performed and enacted by the very discourses of which they are supposedly the cause" [6]. Recent approaches to analysing the cultural economy focus on the epochal "culturalisation" of industrial practices, that include the current positioning of digital games as a key creative industries initiative, to the extent whereby, following Scott Lash and John Urry, "[e]conomic and symbolic processes are more than ever interlaced and interarticulated; that is…the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and…culture is more and more economically inflected. Thus the boundaries between the two become more and more blurred and the economy and culture no longer function in regard to one another as system and environment" [6]. The binary separation of culture and the economy is rejected as fallacious, while their deeply entangled and mutually constitutive aspects are instead foreground.

LUDIC SUPERFLATNESS

Given the foregoing considerations, what then is the cultural economy of ludic superflatness in the Japanese context? The *Katamari* and *WarioWare* franchises provide entry points for thinking through these concerns. Originally designed by Keita Takahashi, the *Katamari* franchise games that include *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) and *We Love Katamari* (Namco, 2005) for PlayStation2 are consistently identified and discussed in online forums and scholarly writings alike as the quintessential superflat videogames. The *Paper Mario* RPG series might seem a more literal visual example of a superflat videogame – where a planar Mario, who can be "folded" flat or into paper aeroplane or tubular shapes, goes adventuring in a combination 2D and 3D game world. Without wishing to disavow the relevance of games such as *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* (Nintendo, 2004) in the discussion of superflat videogames, I nonetheless want to begin with and privilege a consideration of the *Katamari* series if only to emphasise the point that superflat is not just a pictorial motif. David Surman's exemplary analysis of *We Love Katamari*

considers how visual aesthetics are collusive with contextual ludic practices in producing the superflat videogame [14]. As Surman vividly describes, the basic principle of the game is to roll "a katamari (a sticky clod or ball) around your micro-to-macro world. Sometimes you collect indiscriminately, other times you look for particular things, sometimes avoiding certain things all together. With enough time and the right trajectory all the world's flotsam and jetsam are synthesised into the katamari, and the world is 'grazed' flat" [14]. He finds the beginning of this game to be especially significant: "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" [14]. These preliminary observations undergird Surman's reading of the superflat videogame, firstly, in terms of fandom (specifically that of "otaku connoisseurship", thus highlighting superflat's possessive investment in and positive reclamation of *otaku* fan or subcultural tastes); and secondly, in terms of the "serial aesthetic" of commodity and commoditised relations evident in the invocation of serialised forms in *We Love Katamari* which in turn foreground their manufacture and draw attention to the fetish of potential acquisition and customisation [14]. As Surman summarily puts it: "All SuperFlat texts emphasise the reduction of the total image to its constituent parts through both the logic of its reproducibility and the pattern of its subsequent consumption" [14].

Surman's discussion on the superflat idioms of serial reproducibility and consumptive (fan) pleasures may be extended to the *WarioWare* franchise. For a start, the *WarioWare* (known as *Made in Wario* in Japan) development team members reflexively play up to popular preconceptions of Japanese games culture by coming up with a franchise that they themselves knowingly describe as "acceptably crazy" but not "excessively crazy" [10]. By extrapolation, the superflat videogame is knowingly and self-consciously acceptably crazy. It is in essence a commercial practice premised on marketing a brand of bounded whimsy and irreverence. Like the *Katamari* franchise, the *WarioWare* games appear to revel in a highly calculated, self-referential acceptable craziness in terms of their visual style and game design. The franchise titles basically comprise collections of very short, rapid action "microgames". Each microgame is only present onscreen for several seconds during which time players must quickly trigger the correct action or direction buttons in order to successfully complete that sequence. Each initial game level comprises up to fifteen microgames that are randomly generated thereby providing a crazy element of unpredictability and surprise in each attempted play-through. The microgames borrow heavily and often literally from 2D retro games in terms of their screen aesthetic and game interface. Serial reproducibility and fandom converge in the intertextual pastiches and self-referential borrowings from Nintendo's own archives. Many of the microgames have been sourced from its iconic franchises such as *Super Mario*, *Donkey Kong*, *Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid*. While *Mega Microgame\$* was the first franchise title released in 2003 for the GameBoy Advance SP, many other games have been churned out in rapid succession for different Nintendo platforms including *Mega Party Game\$* for GameCube, *Touched!* for DS, and *Smooth Moves* for Wii. Although the interface is necessarily altered for each platform, the design template largely remains the same in each game. The cultural logic of superflat seriality in videogames is literalised in these examples as an economic practice. For Surman, "[t]he game design process is inculcated with the role serialisation plays in the structuring of gameplay, since it structures difference into the experience. It demarcates like for like, constructing an immediate signifier for social groups, bring cohesion to created assets. Subtle differences within the series then add complexity and depth" [14]. It therefore follows that the serial aesthetic becomes coterminous with a production ethos.

WarioWare, Inc. is a fictional game company owned by the Nintendo character, Wario. The microgames we play are meant to be the consumer products of WarioWare, Inc. in this corporate-world-mirrored-within-the-game-world. Structural pastiche in the franchise extends beyond intertextual reference to mimetically infer its core production ethos. The *WarioWare* design team provides a telling account of these connections: "When talking about the story of the original *WarioWare* game, which sees Wario gathering an assortment of contrasting characters to reinvent videogaming and turn a quick buck in the process, [game producer] Sakamoto is unabashed in admitting that the story in the game is the story of the game. 'That's what it was like,' he says. And that story, under [company president] Iwata, is Nintendo's vision of the future. New ideas, accessible games, quick development" [10]. Such corporate ideology of cultural production coincides with Murakami's formulations on superflat cultural logic and aesthetic practice. It is no small coincidence that these microgames are games spelled with a dollar sign in the *WarioWare* franchise titles. More to the point, their overt commercialism brings to mind Murakami's frank and almost matter-of-fact admission of why he has chosen to position his superflat art projects in such close association with what he calls "Poku" (Pop plus *otaku*) culture: "It is sophistry in order to market my work by doing presentation regarding subculture" [15]. This declared sophistry belies Murakami's marketing nous and underpins the success of his varied commercially-savvy projects that range from the

art objects manufactured by his Hiropon Factory production workshop to his collaboration with fashion designer Marc Jacobs in redesigning the Louis Vuitton monogram in vivid colours for a range of bags and accessories. Elitist preconceptions of the uniqueness and preciousness of Art are simultaneously debunked and rejected through these operational gambits. Murakami declares a three-point trajectory for his career: "1. First, gain recognition on site (New York). Furthermore, adjust the flavouring to meet the needs of the venue. 2. With this recognition as my parachute, I will make my landing back in Japan. Slightly adjust the flavourings until they are Japanese. Or perhaps entirely modify the works to meet Japanese tastes. 3. Back overseas, into the fray. This time I will make a presentation that doesn't shy away from my true soy sauce nature, but is understandable to my audience" [4]. Ever mindful of processes for cultivating global brand recognition and navigating contextual sociocultural pressures, Murakami adroitly harnesses the persistent local/global dialectic as a marketing strategy for Japanese cultural production. Implicit in this procedure is the centrality of cross-cultural negotiation and intercultural hybridism. Superflat's "true soy sauce nature" is similarly contingent and subject to contextual repositioning. At base once again is the seemingly inextricable connection between the U.S. and Japan. Recalling superflat's etymology in the Los Angeles gallery, the ideological positioning of Murakami's project as a critical endeavour deserves further elaboration at this juncture. This is key to appreciating the hybrid polemic and polemical hybrid agency inherent in the cultural economy of ludic superflatness.

SUPERFLAT HYBRIDITY

Superflat's hybrid provenances must always be historicised. Margrit Brehm characterises superflat texts as "hybrid conglomerates" that "radiate proximity and strangeness in equal measure. Though the works are thus a result and a reflection of the global information society, they also have a specifically Japanese perspective which can only be understood against the history of Japan, from the modern era to the present, and thus in the light of a process of westernisation and the various methods employed to integrate these manifold influences into its own system" [5]. Many scholars have demonstrated how post-war aesthetic developments of pictorial flatness have been mutually constitutive between Japan and the U.S. in media content production contexts such as animation [11, 12, 14]. Creative cultural hybridisation is at the core of this process. Murakami acknowledges this undeniably generative aspect, however as previously mentioned he is resolutely against presenting an uncritical, romanticised – and perhaps above all, dehistoricised – celebration of hybridity as a simplistic mode of "East meets West" intercultural fusion. Indeed, if anything, the superflat project invests aesthetic elements with historical and aesthetico-political dimensions. Japanese superflatness has an explicit polemical orientation.

Hiroki Azuma, Murakami's longtime associate and fellow writer-theorist, describes Murakami's and by extension superflat's complex relationship with the U.S. through the figure of the *otaku*. He states: "Otaku culture is the result of Japanization of American pop culture. However, Murakami intends here to bring it back to its origin, that is, re-Americanize otaku culture, re-Americanize the Japanized American culture. 'Superflat' is not an authentic successor of [American] 'pop' but its hybrid, mixed, fake bastard" [3]. Thus, if anything, Japanese superflatness encapsulates the range of discursive vacillations and experiential tensions that undergird processes of cultural hybridisation – its proclivities, paradoxes, and productivities.

Viewtiful Joe (Nintendo, 2003) plays to these understandings. Let's begin with the title. On one level, it reads as the deliberately quirky (mis-)naming of a pop cultural character. On another level, its "Japlish" tonality, firstly, alludes to the persistent legacy of Western stereotypes of the Japanese pronunciation of English words and, secondly, asserts the strategic reclamation of such "incorrect" language as a legitimate vernacular idiom. Hybridity can indeed be localised and indigenised; its cultural meanings become folded into everyday social praxis. As a hybrid game-text that draws on different cultural sources and is open to multiple interpretations, everything is not always as it initially seems in *Viewtiful Joe*. As a side-scrolling fighting game, the franchise has an ostensible "old school" retro look and feel; yet it revels in its contemporary superflatness. The franchise runs the gamut of acceptable craziness with incredibly diverse, and often hilarious, intertextual references that include movies like *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Jaws* and *Last Action Hero* as well as videogames like *Devil May Cry*. Western audiences might engage with the transformation of "Average Joe" into "Viewtiful Joe" as a classic superhero matinee or cartoon trope. Japanese audiences might similarly enjoy the clever intertextual references to such well-known movies that of course have been an integral part of their pop cultural consumption as well. These audiences may equally appreciate how the franchise also draws heavily on Japanese *tokusatsu* superhero television programmes of the 1970s such as *Kamen Rider* and *Kaiketsu Zubat*. Just as these television programmes represented attempts to indigenise the American superhero template into localised Japanese expression, American-made movies such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* appropriate and borrow extensively from Japanese paradigms. Based on these observations, *Viewtiful Joe* reflects transnational cultural flows and hybrid contemporary realities, and encapsulates Murakami's own previously discussed three-point trajectory for successfully marketing products to accommodate local and global tastes. It would appear that in the case of this franchise all three points seem to converge in the one product. Nevertheless, the superflat videogame invariably has at least one sting in its tail: despite their colourful

cartoon and child-like appearance, the *Viewtiful Joe* games require a high level of skilled gameplay. In fact, the first game in the franchise was notoriously difficult, so much so that subsequent re-releases required the addition of an easier "Sweet Mode" option. At issue here is the polemical hybrid agency imbedded in superflat hybrid polemic.

Murakami acknowledges the hybridism implicit in superflatness while simultaneously positioning the latter as intrinsically Japanese. These associative links are neither contradictory nor incompatible. This is because he proffers superflat as "an original concept of the Japanese, who have been completely Westernized" [13]. Superflat thereby represents his programmatic attempt to posit the hybridised Japanese particular against the often taken-for-granted hegemonic Western universal – for Western audiences as much as for Japanese audiences. In this respect, the superflat hybrid is at once an empowering point of differentiation and identification. Murakami celebrates the transformative potential implicit in embracing such cultural ambivalence; and he declares: "[W]e venture into uncharted territory, a new context-in-progress, ever freshly transformed and deformed. We seek a new Japonisme – or perhaps an escape from Japonisme" [13]. As a term referring to the Western fad for Japanese culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century during the Meiji era, Japonisme infers a process of cross-cultural engagement and exchange located within a framework of insidious enforcement and voluntary participation. Superflat's main polemical significance – that putative sting in its tail – lies in its endeavour to harness the continuing legacies and material realities of cultural history into a transformative contemporary practice.

CONCLUSION

Just as Murakami's framework of superflat art extends to include many artists and their very different styles, my discussion of superflat videogames has likewise attempted to reflect their diverse plurality. Through the examples discussed in this paper, superflat theory and practice merge into superflat *praxis* – specifically in the form of ludic superflatness. These games embody ludic superflatness in aesthetic, gameplay, commercial and polemical terms. Games such as *WarioWare*, *We Love Katamari* and *Viewtiful Joe* echo Murakami's positioning of superflatness as "a sensibility that has continued to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture as a worldview, demonstrating that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future" [13]. Superflatness connotes a reflexive historicity. It is a complex aesthetico-political practice deeply embedded in particular historical contexts but simultaneously responsive to newly emergent socio-economic conditions. Yet, at the same time, the business of ludic superflatness can be precarious. Despite critical acclaim and modest sales for the *Viewtiful Joe*

franchise, Clover Studio was officially closed by its parent company Capcom in 2007. The increased pressure to franchise as well as to repeat the successful *Katamari* series saw designer Keita Takahashi parting company with Namco. Nevertheless, most of these designers are still continuing to work on independent videogame projects. In sum, ludic superflatness remains an important cultural project. It represents a key attempt at reconciling the conflicts between nationalism, local identity, and transnational capitalism.

REFERENCES

1. Allison, A. "The Cultural Politics of Pokemon Capitalism," 2002. Available at http://cms.mit.edu/conf/mit2/Abstracts/AnneAllison.pdf.

2. Allison, A. "Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness: Pokemon as Japan's New Global Power," in *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2003), pp. 381-395.

3. Azuma, H. "Superflat Japanese Postmodernity," 2001. Available at http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en1.html.

4. Brehm, M. "Takashi Murakami: A Lesson In Strategy (Morphed Double-Loop)," in Brehm, M. (ed.), *The Japanese Experience – Inevitable*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002, pp. 36-40.

5. Brehm, M. "The Floating World That Almost Was," in Brehm, M. (ed.), *The Japanese Experience – Inevitable*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002, pp. 8-19.

6. Du Gay, P., and Pryke, M. "Cultural Economy: An Introduction," in du Gay, P., and Pryke, M., (eds.), *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, Sage, London, 2002, pp. 1-19.

7. Iwabuchi, K. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.

8. Iwabuchi, K. "Soft" Nationalism and Narcissism: Japanese Popular Culture Goes Global," in *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 26, no. 4 (December 2002), pp. 447-469.

9. Lubow, A. "The Murakami Method," (April 3, 2005). *The New York Times Magazine*. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/03MURAKAMI.html?ex=1270267200&en=7f2505d23b302648&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland.

10. "Made in Nintendo," in *Edge*, No. 148 (April 2005), pp. 72-79.

11. Minami, Y. "Takashi Murakami Strikes Back," in Murakami, T. (ed.), *Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Die?* Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2001, pp. 58-63.

12. Munster, A. "Compression and the Intensification of Visual Information in Flash Aesthetics," in *Proceedings of MelbourneDAC2003* (2003), pp. 135-143.

13. Murakami, T. "Superflat Trilogy: Greetings, You Are Alive," in Murakami, T. (ed.), *Little Boy: The Arts Of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, Yale University Press, London, 2005, pp. 151-161.

14. Surman, D. "Ota-Kings, Brat Princes and Copied Cousins: Katamari in Context." Available at http://www.learnit.org.gu.se/digitalAssets/889064_surman.pdf.

15. Wakasa, M. "Takashi Murakami" [Interview], in *Journal of Contemporary Art* (2001). Available at http://www.zenitin.com/archive/TakashiMurakami.