



Playing with character information - Akihabara's  
bishōjo-visual novel ludo-mix.

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## INTRODUCTION

This presentation will approach Akihabara and its ludo-mixes, envisioning Akihabara as an ensemble of physical and virtual spaces centered on a distinct type of transmedial character: the *bishōjo*, and its female audience-focused *bishōnen*. Akihabara encompasses not just physical and virtual spaces, but also industries, fan practices and preferred modes of consuming and reproducing content, forming what can be called a distinct cultural domain. The *bishōjo/bishōnen* transmedial character serves as the intersubjective communicative construct (cf. Thon 2016) for Akihabara: it references Akihabara's mannerisms, aesthetics, modes of reception and practices of non-static conventional reperformance (cf. Suan 2017), serving as the minimum shared to establish commonality of reference towards the cultural domain. The presence of a properly (re)performed *bishōjo* character within any media product connects it to Akihabara, rendering it a part of the cultural domain.

*Bishōjo/bishōnen* characters are hierarchical sets of conventionalized design elements (Bruno 2019), whose creation and reception are made in a gamic fashion. They evoke potential narratives and different user experiences on the basis of the audience's personalized engagement. This engagement is metatextual, meaning derived not just from the text in which the character resides, but also via the conventionalized descriptions shared across Akihabara. The playfulness of parsing a character and its design elements lies in the potential for character (re)contextualization onto a variety of transmedial contexts. This creates a shared and yet personal experience in users as they parse *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters by employing their knowledge of Akihabara's subcultural dynamics.

This generates the need for a specific literacy in how elements should be parsed and projected, as the possible combinations - and relative network of interplay and self-referentiality - are hundreds (cf. Kagami 2010, Galbraith 2017) and constantly in flux. By parsing character design elements, users project character information onto potential narratives, (re)conventionalize design elements and relate them to other characters and medial contexts. To engage with a *bishōjo* character is to enter into a gamic space in which Akihabara's cultural (re)performance conventions are now in force. In other words, it means interfacing with Akihabara's ludo-mix.

This tendency of (re)performance of convention is even more evident if the development of the media-mix (transmedial) production paradigm by the Kadokawa publishing conglomerate is brought under attention. By focusing on creative hobby-related micro market niches (cf. Steinberg 2015), emphasis was put on the playful (re)production and (re)performance of genre conventions and characters. By

connecting with fans through dissemination of information about characters and niche genre and establishing way of playfully engagement through fan feedback, Kadokawa led the reshaping of the role of the audience, no longer passive recipients but active participants in shaping media-mix franchises and connected cultures.

Japanese visual novel games, as a game genre structure around and through *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters are tightly connected to this production paradigm and connected discussions about ludo-mixes. Visual novel games' themes range from the fantastic to the science fiction but are never bereft of *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters. Also, it is important to highlight their mode of distribution, which is largely confined to specialist stores, both physical and digital, on a circuit separate from the rest of Japan's video game market.

Stores and store chains (examples include Gamers or Toranoana or online game shop DLsite) representative of this category dominate Akihabara as a both physical location and as virtual space where physical goods and meanings circulate. This is further tied to the home computer serving as the primary platform for the consumption of visual novel games. This in turn leads to the formation of a media ecology which is parallel but distinct from other ecologies centered on production conglomerates such as Shūeisha's *JUMP* line of magazines and related content.

This separate media ecology differs from the screen-based apparatus described by Thomas Lamarre in *The Anime Ecology* (2018). Neither fully horizontal nor completely vertical, it does not site its focus on a canon of works or a particular author or production ensemble. *Bishōjo/bishōnen* characters are a structure which express conventionalized design elements, leading to the activation of gamic spaces as audiences interface with characters. Together with visual novel games and its related media ecology, it is possible to observe a peculiar ludo-mix whose fulcrum lies in playful engagement with characters based on shared conventions and procedures for their (re)performance, rather than passive top-down content reception.

What comes of the *bishōjo*-visual novel ludo-mix? What kind of playful activities does it entail? What are the peculiarities of this particular media-ecology, rooted in character design information and seemingly connected across media by *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters? How these affect the culture of play within Akihabara?

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