drop on a character's head to symbolise embarrassment or bemusement, are defined as Japanese because they accrue their meanings in a Japanese context – to put it another way, it is the way these visual cues are coded as symbols and propagated in Japanese culture which enable them to produce meaning (Leong 50).

The disinclination by some fans to specify examples of Japaneseness in itself was revealing. One fan felt that the "scope is just too big" and it would be "like trying to list the elements of American culture that appear in Hollywood films" (Leong 51). Yet even in articulating the difficulty of defining Japaneseness, such a comment draws attention back to the observation that anime is first and foremost an "original product of the concatenation of circumstances that have created the culture of modern Japan" (Napier 2005: 27), thereby reaffirming the link between anime and Japanese culture.

My scholarly study of non-Japanese anime fans, therefore, demonstrates a conceptualisation of Japaneseness that is diverse in its scope, whether as textual features or as an evolving concept, according to their frequency or prominence in anime narratives, in comparison to Western cultural paradigms, and even in explications of the difficulties of delimiting a discourse of Japaneseness (Leong 46-53). In Mittell's terms, Japaneseness here can be constituted as a genre through the way these individual fan interpretations are linked into "clusters of cultural assumptions" (16) in anime fandom. Hence, rather than downplay the Japaneseness of anime to account for its global popularity, its formulation as genre within a cultural studies framework allows for a more sophisticated negotiation of the complex mix and also an exchange of transcultural values and flows which characterise today's global climate.

Works Cited

Akage no An. Dir. Isao Takahata. 50 episodes. Fuji TV. 7 Jan. – 30 Dec. 1979.

Allen, Matthew, and Rumi Sakamoto, eds. *Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*. Oxon: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI, 1999. Print.

"Anime." *Oxford Dictionaries Online*. Web. 12 Apr. 2011.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Print.

Bainbridge, Jason, and Craig Norris. "Hybrid Manga: Implications for the Global Knowledge Economy." *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*. Ed. Toni Johnson-Woods. New York & London: Continuum, 2010. 235-52. Print.

Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn. By Naoko Takeuchi. Dir. Junichi Sato. 46 episodes. TV Asahi. 7 Mar. 1992 – 27 Apr. 1993.

Bleach. By Tite Kubo. Dir. Noriyuki Abe. Ongoing. TV Tokyo. 5 Oct. 2004 – ongoing.

Bryce, Mio, Jason Davis and Christie Barber. "The Cultural Biographies and Social Lives of *Manga*: Lessons from the *Manga*verse." In *SCAN*: *Journal of Media Arts Culture* 5.2 (2008). Web. 28 Apr. 2010.

Burgass, Catherine. "Postmodern Value." *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Niall Lucy. Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000. 347-59. Print.

Hagane no Renkinjutsushi. By Hiromu Arakawa. Dir. Seiji Mizushima. 51 episodes. Mainichi Broadcasting. 4 Oct. 2002 – 2 Oct. 2004.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.

Leong, Jane. "Selling the Sweatdrop: The Translation of 'Japaneseness' in Manga and Anime Fan Fiction." Diss. University of Western Australia. 2010. Print.

Mittell, Jason. *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Montgomery, L. M. *Anne of Green Gables*. Boston, MA: L. C. Page, 1908. Print.

Napier, Susan J. *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

---. *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. Print.

Neale, Steve and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

One Piece. By Eiichiro Oda. Dir. Hiroaki Miyamoto, Munehisa Sakai, and Konosuke Uda. Ongoing. Fuji TV. 20 Oct. 1999 – ongoing.

Oshii, Mamoru, Kazunori Ito, and Toshiya Ueno. "Eiga to wa jitsu wa animeshon data." *Yuriika* 28.9 (1996): 50-81.

Patten, Fred. *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 2004. Print.

Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 1993.

---. *The McDonaldization Thesis*. London: Sage, 1998. Print.

Samurai Champloo. Dir. Shinichiro Watanabe. 24 episodes. Fuji TV. 19 May 2004 – 18 Mar. 2005.

Sazae-san. By Machiko Hasegawa. Dir. Hiroshi Yamagishi. Ongoing. Fuji TV. 5 Oct. 1969 – ongoing.

Schodt, Frederick. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1983. Print.

Tenkuu Tenshou Nazca. Dir. Hiroko Tokita. 12 episodes. TV Tokyo. 6 Apr. – 29 Jun. 1998.

Trigun. By Yasuhiro Nightow. Dir. Satoshi Nishimura. 26 episodes. TV Tokyo. 1 Apr. – 30 Sep. 1998.

Tulloch, John. *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Watashi no Ashinaga Ojisan. Dir. Kazuyoshi Yokota. 40 episodes. Fuji TV. 4 Jan. – 23 Dec. 1990.

Webster, Jean. *Daddy-Long-Legs*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1912. Print.

X. By CLAMP. Dir. Yoshiaki Kawajiri. 24 episodes. WOWOW. 3 Oct. 2001 – 27 Mar. 2002.

The *Higurashi* Code
Algorithm and Adaptation in the *Otaku* Industry and Beyond

John Wheeler

How do you kill the player and resurrect them as a spectator? This question haunts those charged with adapting video games from their interactive form to one that puts an insurmountable barrier between media and the individual – an impossible translation taking place on the most basic structural level. The dilemma surrounding the adaptation of interactivity is visible within the Japanese *otaku* industry, where media forms must be constructed to survive fluid translation from one media form to another.

An adaptation between forms tends to function within a hierarchy of mediums: a book is usually awarded more artistic significance than its film adaptation, the film more than its licensed video game form (Hutcheon 4). Yet, in some ways, the Japanese *otaku* industry works outside of this paradigm, with narratives easily and repeatedly crossing the seemingly impermeable barriers between print, film and digital forms without much respectability lost or gained – manga, for instance, carries little more or less cultural significance than anime or the 'light' novel. But as the medium specificity that defines how a form functions and is received cannot be smoothly overcome, one of the innovations of the Japanese *otaku* industry is the way creators either consciously or unconsciously anticipate the inevitable adaptation of their properties on levels of structure, narrative and aesthetic. 07th Expansion's *Higurashi When They Cry* (*Higurashi no naku koro ni*, hereafter *Higurashi*), a major multimedia franchise in the Japanese industry, exemplifies this trend and also reveals ways in which the creators

driving the *otaku* popular culture industry manipulate narrative and structural elements to ease adaptation.

Higurashi began its commercial life as a "visual novel" in 2002 at the Comiket (Comic Market), a large biannual convention in Tokyo that showcases *dōjin* – self-published print comics and video games that are either derivative versions of popular *otaku* properties or, as in the case of *Higurashi*, completely original works.[1] According to the creator of the 07th Expansion's website, from its humble origins as a serialized PC visual novel sold in limited quantities at consecutive Comikets, *Higurashi* expanded wildly over the following eight years, crossing mediums through adaptations into an anime television series, manga, novels, a live-action film and finally returning across the barrier of interactivity as a first-person shooting game for the Nintendo DS video game console.

Each of the *Higurashi* PC games is a self-contained story about the rural, isolated world of Hinamizawa and the encounters of its residents with entrenched familial politics and a murderous Shinto cult. The beginning of each story is always the same: teenager Keiichi Maebara moves with his family from Tokyo to the fictional, rural town of Hinamizawa. He adapts to life away from the city and befriends many of the other students, building an idyllic, contained world far from the madness of the city. The narrative turns on a local festival where the same two adults

1. *Dōjin* producers range from single artists/writers working alone and publishing comics (analogous to American underground "zines") to small independent companies such as 07th Expansion. For an analysis of how Comiket functions within the *otaku* industry, see Azuma 25-26.

are always murdered – the mystery of the murderer and the motive changing in each game, something which alters the progression of the stories so much that the games become shockingly different in tone and narrative. Each story wraps up by the end of the disc, with the murder either solved or left unsolved. The original releases of *Higurashi* were called "question arcs," offering clues but not solutions to the mysteries raised by each story. These were followed by "answer arc" counterparts that explained – though not always neatly – the murders, taking a different perspective from the complementing question arc. When *Higurashi* was adapted into an anime series in 2007, the PC games were similarly divided into loosely connected story arcs running from four to nine episodes.

To understand *Higurashi* as a multimedia property, we must first understand the nature of its original medium: the "visual novel." The visual novel is a hybridized genre of video game that draws on the tradition of text-based adventure games. The player interacts with the game by clicking to scroll text and progress the narrative. Although we will see that *Higurashi* is a unique exception, the traditional visual novel contains a narrative with branching paths that lead to different endings based on the player's input. Hiroki Azuma describes the origins of the visual novel – "novel game" in the translation of his monograph – as a sub-genre of "girl games," which are PC games where the player reads a story and chooses from a series of simple, plot-based questions with pornographic pictures of the female characters as the endgame reward for correct answers (75). "Reading" in the visual novel is supplemented by two-dimensional char-

acters superimposed on a static background. In the case of *Higurashi*, the narrator of each game tells the story from the first-person perspective and is unseen by the player – the view of the other characters in the story, in addition to the background, appearing behind scrolling text, taking on the visual qualities of a first-person camera shot. The text is also supplemented by repetitive sound effects and music which build up atmosphere and trigger shock moments in the narrative.

Higurashi is a unique visual novel from the inside-out: from its deep structuring algorithms to its narrative, it is in critical dialogue with the visual novel genre, exposing its inner workings and toying with them. *Higurashi* as a *dōjin* visual novel series operates as a median between interactive and non-interactive media, and therefore raises questions about how adaptation occurs between two fundamentally different types of cultural products. While *Higurashi* begs to be approached from different positions, this article will focus on how the games function as visual novels and, moreover, how the algorithm underlying the games was translated into animation and other mediums.

Playing the Visual Novel

To understand how *Higurashi* functions as a video game, it is important to first understand how video games themselves function as interactive media. The underlying structural element of a video game is the algorithm – in other words, the code that establishes the rules of the game and binds it totally. The algorithm is the

'alpha and omega' of the game and cannot be transcended by a player within the game-space itself. Some titles, such as those by Will Wright (*The Sims*, *Spore*) or the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997-2009), attempt to create the illusion of an open and malleable game-space by complicating the algorithm to make the experience seem freer compared to traditionally constrained games. In playing a video game, the gamer learns the limits and functions of the algorithm – in *Super Mario Brothers*, for instance, pressing the 'A' button to jump, moving along the side-scrolling screen to the end of the level, touching the axe beyond the boss to defeat

and therefore receive the best ending (i.e. the one where 'the girl of your dreams' gets naked) (Azuma 2009).

If visual novels as a hybrid genre generally employ self-reflexive algorithms that reward the player for obsessively solving them, *Higurashi* instead works differently by removing the ability of the player to interact with the game on anything more than a rudimentary level, thus becoming more novelistic in the process. The game reduces the actual algorithm to an infinitesimally simple code: click the mouse to scroll the text (the embodied interaction becomes very similar to turning pages in a book). No choices arise in

The most important function of the algorithm in *Higurashi* is the lack of freedom it affords the player within the game-space.

him, *et cetera*, are all essential pieces of the algorithm that must be learned in order to ultimately 'beat' the game. Part of the joy of playing a video game is the sheer satisfaction that arises from unconsciously mastering the algorithm. As Alex Galloway writes: "To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel allegorithm)" (91).[2]

The player of a traditional visual novel teaches themselves what types of conventional narrative questions yield correct or incorrect answers, and therefore is able to 'fill in the blanks' regardless of the specific narrative in order to achieve the ending he or she desires. The algorithm creates a simulation of human interaction, whereby the 'real world' action of building relationships with desired women is reduced to a quiz that tests the player's knowledge of common *otaku* character types and conventions. The popularity of the visual novel is a major factor in the development of what Hiroki Azuma refers to as the "database animal" – that is, a new kind of human that has internalized the postmodern insistence on specialized, self-contained narratives, and also compartmentalizes traditional anime and manga story elements in order to solve the algorithms of visual novels

the game asking the player to answer plot-based questions in order to proceed. Although, unlike a print or 'digital' novel, the player is given an "auto" option allowing them to forego even the most rudimentary level of interaction and simply watch the text scroll by. This option even gives the player the ability to 'multitask' at the expense of missing pieces of the story – a 'true' sign of this contemporary age of technology-induced attention deficit disorder.

The most important function of the algorithm in *Higurashi* is the lack of freedom it affords the player within the game-space. In this way, *Higurashi* is nothing like a print or digital novel, which offers the reader freedom to peruse the text and search within it either via an index or by using a digital search function – although *Higurashi* does offer an option to review completed passages (Mitchell 207-9). The interaction with the narrative in *Higurashi* is far more restrictive than an actual novel, ultimately making it more akin to a film or television series. However, even a DVD offers the option to 'skip' chapters on the disc menu or fast-forward; the algorithm of *Higurashi*, in contrast, restricts the narrative to a totally linear path. As we shall soon see, the algorithm of the typical visual novel becomes absorbed into the narrative of *Higurashi* itself, leaving only a skeleton of a structural code behind.

---

2. McKenzie Wark writes about the "allegorithm," the combination of the algorithm and the 'real world' action it represents in *Gamer Theory* (2007). See also Paul Dourish's theories of "embodied interaction," which explains how computer interface systems are embodied with active meaning because they replicate actions and tools from the 'real world'.

The simplification of the code in *Higurashi* is linked to narrative and genre experimentations by its creators, particularly in the individual story arcs "Massacre Chapter" (*Minagoroshi-hen*, 2005) and "Festival Ac-

companying Chapter" (*Matsuribayashi-hen,* 2006). The convoluted yet endlessly repetitive stories about murder in a small town are revealed to exist on the same dimensional plane, with one of the characters (the young girl Rika) aware that she is trapped in a cyclic, ever-repeating yet always altered narrative, and seemingly unable to alter the storyline toward a 'happy ending'. The burden of narrative action is shifted for the first time in the series onto Rika – who moves from a spectator's position in the background to transcend the self-contained world of Hinamizawa – as she attempts to change the outcome of the story so that she and her friends can be saved from their inevitable tragic fate. Although the player can identify with Rika – who is aware of how the 'world' works and of the algorithm that would define it in a normal visual novel – he or she is, however, unable to apply the unbending, flat code in any meaningful way.

The game version of *Higurashi* externalizes the typical visual novel algorithm in its narrative: Rika 'becomes' the player, keenly aware of her presence within a narrative and attempting to 'free herself' of the algorithm by getting the best ending possible. The player on the 'real side' of the computer screen has no power to solve the mystery *within* the 'world' of the game – thus saving each character from their respective fates – so he or she must be content to solve it *outside* of the game-space and click through as each "answer arc" confirms or denies the solution the player has crafted. In fact, according to a frequently asked question listed on the 07th Expansion website about *Higurashi*, there is even a choice presented in the "Massacre Chapter" that seems to be asking for player interaction, but on second glance it is merely a form of dramatic presentation: i.e. that the player should treat the choice presented as one that can only be selected by the protagonist him or herself. The language of the question about this false choice suggests the player's frustration at being unable to interact with a seemingly available choice, "no matter what I do." This irritation is perhaps a result of the way Higurashi alters typical visual novel conventions.[3]

The gaming 'pleasure' of *Higurashi* comes from the same place as a mystery novel, and the inability to affect any change within the game-space, coupled with the serialized nature of the story, puts the burden of solving each mystery into a different part of the mind of the gamer than the space that deciphers solutions to the algorithm of a traditional visual novel. The creators attach a "difficulty" rating to each

3. Text from the *Higurashi no naku koro ni* website, translated from Japanese into English. Q: During the latter half of the "Massacre Chapter," there is a choice I can't choose no matter what I do. A: The appearance of the choice is just for dramatic effect, in reality you cannot choose. Please consider it as that character deciding on the choice for him or herself.

chapter that carries far different connotations from the typical choice from 'easy' to 'hard' that comes with starting a brand new game. When Azuma describes visual novel players as "passive," he seems to forget that while he or she are passive gamers in their interaction with the algorithm, they become far more *active* readers than typical video game players – a trait perhaps best exemplified in the gamer-text relationship found in *Higurashi* (76). In its original form as a PC *dōjin*, *Higurashi* was already a strange multimedia amalgam, with both novelistic *and* cinematic interactions grafted onto a rudimentary gaming algorithm.

Adapting the Algorithm

The major problems inherent in adapting an interactive text into a film or novel are potentially unsolvable because translating the player's living, reciprocal relationship with an algorithm into that of a passive reader or viewer creates a fundamental sense of loss and constraint in someone familiar with the adapted game. As Linda Hutcheon writes: "Transposition to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change, or in the language of the new media, 'reformatting'" (16). As was discussed in the previous section, *Higurashi* occupies a middle ground between interactive and non-interactive mediums. With the clearly demarcated "arcs" of the *Higurashi* television series, which on a strictly narrative level stray little from the original visual novel series, the appeal of 'watching' becomes linked to the 'pleasure' of attaining the 'good' or 'bad' ending in a video game. Other adaptations of visual novels where the action occurs within a single narrative with branching paths based around the choice between a 'harem of girlfriends', tend instead to remove all traces of interactivity by establishing a single, canonical female character for the male protagonist to 'attain'. The 'pleasure' of choosing and solving the algorithm to 'win' each individual character becomes merely *the pleasure of watching the characters*, the interactive choice between female anime character archetypes internalized in the viewer's mind. When the original *Higurashi* question arc, "Spirited Away by a Demon Chapter" (*Onikakushi-hen*, 2002), was adapted into a live-action film by Ataru Oikawa in 2008, it opened up the world of Hinamizawa to a new audience yet also left these individuals without a solution to the mystery that the question arc posed. As few of the background story elements and characters change fundamentally from iteration to iteration, part of the appeal of *Higurashi* as a property becomes the medium-to-medium translation itself, seeing changes in the perspective and style used to essentially tell the same stories.

There is an unbreakable link between the algorithm that defines a game and the narrative, and often the algorithm also manifests itself in the visual aesthetic chosen by the developers to represent their game-space. If the flatness and simplicity of the algorithm underpinning the *dōjin Higurashi* manifests in the visual two-dimensionality of text running over non-animated, two-dimensional characters superimposed on immobile backgrounds, then naturally the adaptation from the static world of the visual novel to an animated world structurally defined by 'cels' rather than 'codes' would change the visual aesthetic of the product fundamentally.

The shift from the aesthetic of a visual novel to an anime series is, therefore, a transition that occurs both on a level of animation and of perspective: the novelistic first-person perspective of the *dōjin* becomes a third-person perspective in the anime, and all characters are visible in front of the camera's lens. Yet remnants of the visual novel's static two-dimensionality remain, particularly in the quasi-deformed character styles and the use of 'shock cuts' instead of camera zooms to move toward characters within the frame. The *Higurashi* anime, therefore, retains some of the static qualities of the visual novel, and a degree of continuity of visual aesthetic is established across adaptations. One of the obvious contradictions between style and substance within *Higurashi*, both as a visual novel *and* as an anime, is the uneasy relationship between the bright color palette and 'cutesy' characters, in addition to the shocking, usually gynocentric violence of the narrative. Interestingly, however, it is in the translation into a manga series – with its transition to 'black and white', and the return to fully static images – that *Higurashi* gains a true visual depth that reflects both the psychological states of its characters and the striking horror of its storyline. Its artists – a different one for each arc adapted – use shadows to greater psychological effect than the anime or the visual novel, thereby conquering some of the 'flatness' defined by the underlying structure and aesthetic of the previous forms.

The transition from visual novel to anime is also abetted by the similarity in sound design between the two forms: both game and series use 'shock strands' on the soundtrack and music to emotionally signal the player/viewer. In the case of the visual novel, this is another departure from the format of the novel – the creators even refer to their series as a 'sound novel', a small and rather vaguely defined sub-genre of visual novels. Nevertheless, this categorization partially works to fundamentally distinguish their work from other visual novels. As *Higurashi* is more about player affect than gamer input, the use of sound, especially the ubiquitous and maddening cry of

the *higurashi* cicadas themselves, is a major means of conveying emotion. The music and effects in the visual novels are simple and oft-repeated in the same way the character animations and backgrounds are, owing much to the limited budget of a *dōjin* game and having the effect of reducing emotional cues to an extremely simple level. As with many elements of the game, we see in the sound design a fundamentally cinematic technique used in the service of the game's more novelistic elements: the conveyance of an unbendable narrative through 'scrolling' text.

Higurashi has proven conducive to fan production, with a *dōjin* released at Comiket composed entirely of fan-submitted narratives turned into games by 07th Expansion. As Hiroki Azuma writes, the small, self-contained narratives that have become the storytelling norm in the *otaku* industry beg for fan input, and in the case of *Higurashi*, the draw of inserting one's own story into the established world and characters of Hinamizawa was a natural byproduct (Azuma 2009). In many ways, the original visual novels created by 07th Expansion were themselves a form of fan production in their independent origins and reliance on *otaku* character tropes. While my research and this article have drawn from a specific example from within the Japanese *otaku* industry, the line between interactivity and spectatorship continues to be blurred by major producers of entertainment around the world. For this type of malleability of medium to succeed, the nature of the gamer and their interaction with the game-space must be reformatted by the algorithm itself. In other words, the gamer becomes the viewer/reader and the viewer/reader becomes the gamer.

Works Cited

Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Trans. Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

Dourish, Paul. *Where the Action Is*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001. Print.

Galloway, Alex. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print

Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni. 07th Expansion, 2011. Web. 28 Apr. 2011.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Mitchell, William. "Homer to Home Page: Designing Digital Books." *Rethinking Media Change*. Ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003. 203-216. Print.

Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.