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Article

Idols you can make: The player as auteur in Japan's media mix

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Abstract

Japan has recently seen an upsurge in idol *ikusei* (nurturing) games: networked mobile games where one nurtures and produces an idol pop group. These games are a significant part of Japan's contemporary 'media mix', influenced both by virtual pet games and by discourses of nurturing surrounding the production of 'real' girl idol groups by male producer-auteur figures. Previous analyses have considered affection for simulated or virtual girl idol figures as a detached longing for stylised characteristics (*moe*). This article uses a case study of a mobile game at the centre of the *Love Live!* girl idol-nurturing simulation franchise to suggest that we cannot only speak of players' affection for nurturing games' characters in terms of postmodern disembodiment; we must also consider how in playing idol-nurturing games, players take the place of real male producer-auteur figures in Japanese popular music production, where discourses of gendered nurturing abound.

Keywords

anime, girls, idols, J-Pop, mobile games, popular music, virtuality

Introduction

The size of the market for idol pop groups in Japan has grown to the extent that the past decade has been described as a 'warring states period'¹ for the industry (Okajima and Okada, 2011: 112). Meanwhile, a related phenomenon has grown to a billion-yen market in recent years (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 2013) and has made a noticeable dent in the Japanese pop music charts: idol-nurturing (*aidoru ikusei*) franchises. These franchises, linked by a story about young people trying to make it in the popular music industry that

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may be portrayed canonically in anime or manga, have notable game adaptations that allow the player² to take the position of an idol producer figure, and to direct the characters that they have come to know through other iterations of a model of transmedia practices in Japan known as the ‘media mix’. For example, the *Aikatsu!* idol-nurturing franchise earned its makers over \$130 million in just the first quarter of 2014, and a film based on the *Love Live!* franchise topped the Japanese box office for a number of weeks in June 2015 (Galbraith, 2016: 237). Not only does the music released from idol-nurturing franchises compete with the ‘real-life’ idol industry and the performative growth that boys and girls go through on the stage, but as the player participates in simulating idol production, they mirror real-life idol producers. We know that consumers follow the work of popular music producers across texts as ‘intermediary’ fans (Hills, 2014); but what might it mean for a player, drawing on powerful popular cultural tropes, to become the nurturing producer as a character?

The most prominent of these producers in Japan are men who are known for their idiosyncratic approaches to creating and marketing girl idols. In this article, I take a mobile game at the centre of one of these idol-nurturing franchises (*Love Live! School Idol Festival*) as a case study to argue that players of idol-nurturing games are taking on the role of these producers, whose practice is steeped in discourses of nurturing that blur the boundaries between the real and the simulated or virtual. This article argues that idol nurturing games should be analysed not only as windows on virtuality and simulation, but as reflections of the complex exchange of tropes of nurturing (*ikusei*) that bind Japan’s popular media landscapes; tropes which reflect both social anxieties about youth and the dominance of producers as auteurs in Japanese popular music. The game I am using as a case study for this article, *Love Live! School Idol Festival* (KLabGames, 2013) (hereafter, *SchoolFes*, an anglicised version of the game’s usual Japanese nickname) is a mobile game for iOS and Android that places the player in a high school where a group of girls are trying to succeed as school idols, fictionalised amateurs who practice pop performance skills as an extra-curricular activity, but may become stars in their own right. The game is situated in a wider fictional universe and franchise called *Love Live! School Idol Project* (hereafter, *Love Live!*).

First, I will provide some background about the role of idols as a particular category of pop star within the Japanese entertainment industry and outline how idol-nurturing games fit into the industry’s continued development. Second, I will detail how and why I have chosen to focus on *SchoolFes* as a case study of players as auteurs, situated within an evolving model of Japanese transmedia franchising described as ‘media mix’, media mix being both a set of strategies used by popular cultural producers to create profitable media worlds, and a term to describe the particular network of relationships between the iterations of these franchises and their consumers, all of which idol-nurturing games are an increasingly central component. Third, I will give my own account of gameplay, focusing on the intertextuality of nurturing tropes that centre the player as a producer figure in the tradition of the Japanese idol industry. Finally, I will elaborate on some of the gendered implications of discourses of nurturing in *SchoolFes* that treat aspiring girl idols as pets, eggs, athletes or even objects of romance. Throughout this article, I will be using the Japanese term *ikusei* (nurturing) to refer to these auteur-led nurturing discourses that permeate Japanese popular media of all kinds, and without which any analysis of idols within the media mix is incomplete.

Dimensions of Japanese idols

Love Live! and similar franchises are part of a tradition of media practice in Japan that plays with mixed reality, and the image of a type of Japanese pop star called an idol. The term ‘idol’ to describe a type of pop performer ‘defined by an industrial approach to production and marketing’ (Condry, 2011a: 242) applies to describe a teenage (or teenage-acting) girl- or boy-next-door pop star originating in the 1970s. Many teen idols were brought into the public eye on TV talent shows, headed by famous male pop music producers like Aku Yū. As Ōta Shōichi argues, Aku Yū’s privileging of auditionees who were ‘clumsy yet intriguing’ over those who were ‘talented yet dull’ (Ōta, 2011: 38) led to the archetype of an imperfect pop star who is always in production, whose goals must be ‘forever unattainable’ (Ōta, 2011: 22). Thus, idol singers were distinguished by being constantly, publicly nurtured, as well as being young, omnipresent throughout media and advertising, and not necessarily particularly skilled or typically attractive (Sakai, 2014: 16). This produced immaturity came to represent a form of idealised adolescence as a popular cultural trope, fit for a country that was not only in its own golden of television and TV advertising, but one whose first generation of young people nurtured through a shared experience compulsory high-school education were beginning to step out into society.

From the 1980s, however, young women idols in particular became not only more ubiquitous, but more visibly self-aware. Matsuda Seiko, the emblematic idol of the 1980s, took the sweet girl-next-door persona to a new extreme with frills and puffy sleeves, a sort of ‘fake acting . . . accepted as a “mutual agreement”’ (*o-yakusoku*) with the audience (Kijima, 2012: 151). Koizumi Kyoko, another 1980s idol, released a song called *Nantetatte Idol (I’m an Idol Through and Through)*, about the contradictions of an idol hiding a relationship form her fans but maintaining a pure persona, effectively playing a ‘game’ with fans that acknowledged her produced nature (Ōta, 2011: 158). *Nantetatte Idol* was penned by a male lyricist and producer called Akimoto Yasushi whose star was on the rise. Thus, tensions between the real and the fake have been woven into the fabric of idol-ness over time, most apparently by male producers shaping young women as performers. As of 2020, the two most prominent and prolific auteur-like male producer figures in the Japanese girl idol industry are Tsunku (who is known for producing the idol group Morning Musume) and Akimoto Yasushi (mentioned above, but now associated with idol group AKB48). Their prominence as male personifications of Japan’s *jimusho* system, where one agency controls the scouting, management and production of its performers, and often the publishing and licencing of content (Marx, 2012: 37).

Both Tsunku and Akimoto Yasushi frequently place their own names prominently on CD releases and are fiercely protective of their own ‘brands’ and styles of idol production. Tsunku (2015) was a rock vocalist known for his discovery of pop stars on the 1990s TV talent show *Asayan*. In his autobiography, *Dakara, ikiru* (What I Live For), Tsunku points out that in contrast to other producers who have delegated vocal recording and mixing, ‘in order to have the feel of the song and those subtle nuances in technique just how I wanted them, I had no choice to do it all myself’ (Tsunku, 2015: 102). Meanwhile, Akimoto Yasushi is known for both his involvement of ‘everyday’ school girls in the girl idol group Onyanko Club in the 1980s, and for more recently innovating the concept of girl idols you can ‘go and meet’, producing groups with dozens of

members (Kiuchi, 2017: 32), such as Nogizaka46, who may be present in yet more forms of media at any one time. Both producers are celebrities in their own right, appearing regularly on Japanese television and giving interviews to the press. This archetype of the male producer-auteur in Japanese popular music is so present and powerful that it filters through all parts of the Japanese popular media, and creates a role to be filled by the players of *SchoolFes*.

‘Virtual’ idols in Japan have taken this playful approach to reality into the digital. The label of ‘virtual idol’ most commonly refers to personified voice synthesisers, with Crypton Media’s ‘Vocaloid’-branded synthesiser *Hatsune Miku* being the most commercially successful of these. Hatsune Miku sports ‘blue-greenish pigtails, attached with floating futuristic ribbons’, and her voice is the synthesised voice of a real singer called Fujita Saki (Lam, 2016: 1108). A peer-production licence means that anyone can ‘non-commercially transform and recreate Hatsune Miku’s image’ (Zaborowski, 2016: 116), so that while Miku is used to advertise an array of products, she also serves as a vehicle for the creations of amateur producers on video-sharing sites. These same video-sharing sites are now home to a new brand of virtual idol called Virtual YouTubers, or V-Tubers (Otmazgin, 2020). V-Tubers are real people behind the computer-generated graphics, but in this case the robot-like nature of the character is generally de-emphasised, and the creativity and individuality of the character’s personality is at the fore (Bredikhina, 2020).

I use the term ‘simulated idols’ to distinguish the characters in idol-nurturing franchises from personified voice synthesisers and virtual YouTube idols. Inoue (2014: 3) notes that *THE iDOLM@STER*, the pioneer of idol-nurturing franchises that began in 2005, is characterised by its well-established rapport with fans, its powerful multiplatform branding, its use of voice actresses who strongly personify fictional idols and by sheer volume of CD releases. My case study, the mobile game *SchoolFes* located within the *Love Live!* franchise, is very much in this tradition. It followed manga and anime which established the characters of the two school idol groups μ ’s (pronounced ‘muse’) and Aqours (pronounced ‘aqua’). The members of these two school clubs work hard to establish themselves as amateur idols on a national level, facing many hardships along the way. Far from consuming these stories of the nurtured characters as anything approaching a ‘simulacrum’ (Baudrillard, 1988), the player is encouraged to fictionalise themselves as a version of a pop music auteur, a figure who is known for their real-life command of *ikusei* narratives, whereby young pop stars shine thanks to their charismatic production.

Idol-nurturing games at the centre of vast franchises such as *Love Live!* are important to analyse, because they represent some of the most recent and most profitable ventures of the historic titans of the media mix model. The media mix is a practice ‘whereby media are conceived and deployed in franchises’ (Steinberg, 2019: 37) from the outset, often by alliances of media companies called *seisakuinkai* that can comprise publishers, animation companies, toy manufacturers and TV stations, among others (Joo et al., 2013: 12). At the same time, the media mix as a marketing strategy is bound up with what Ito, 2007: 91) describes as ‘technologies as imagination’, where networked media franchises result in ‘an exploding network of digitally augmented cultural production and exchange’ that may have no particular locus. Put differently, Steinberg (2012: 141) contrasts the

planned media mix as a marketing strategy, with what he calls ‘the anime media mix’, which ‘has no single goal or teleological end; the *general* consumption of any of the media mix’s products will grow the entire enterprise’. The ‘development of the character-world relationship’ arising out of anime franchising in the 1960s is considered to be a key milestone in the anime media mix’s inception (Steinberg, 2012: xvii).

Companies involved in *Love Live!* include Bandai Namco, whose parent company Namco began as a toy company that entered the arcade game market (Consalvo, 2009: 136), and Kadokawa, a conglomerate which started out as a publishing company, and has used the term ‘media mix’ to describe its own business model that dates back to the 1970s (Steinberg, 2012: 149). The most recent incarnation of this model pioneered by Kadokawa, and to which the *Love Live!* franchise and other idol-nurturing brands arguably owe their existence, is ‘organized . . . around magazines; proliferated across a wide range of media forms, including manga, video games, anime, and novels’ and ‘based around exploitation of existing or new micromarket segments’ (Steinberg, 2012: 174); in other words, people who already consider themselves fans of idols or of animation and understand the tropes that circulate between the two, of which auteur-style production of teen girl stars as archetypes is just one. Unless otherwise specified, the use of ‘media mix’ in this article refers to the latter model, and associated practices of play and consumption. References to ‘real’ or ‘3D’ idols indicate human idol performers who are not preceded by a fictional or simulated iteration.

Mobile gaming has been a part of Japan’s media mix since the mid-2000s (Chan, 2008). In the case of idol-nurturing franchises, popular music and voice-acting agencies are heavily involved, as they provide the voice-actors who personify the characters through high-charting CD releases and through ‘2.5D’³ concerts, voice actors who may be celebrities in their own right (Yamasaki, 2014: 199). Gough (2020: 73) argues that due to the predominance of media mix, when analysing contemporary Japanese popular culture, we must ‘look beyond the scope of a single text’; for this reason, my approach to analysing *SchoolFes* places intertextuality at its centre. Intertextuality is perhaps not the perfect term to describe the minutely planned nature of idol-nurturing franchises, where cross-referencing of characters and stories is planned before a single element of the franchise has come into being, and boundaries between ‘texts’ as potential avenues for reception are fuzzy. Here, intertextuality will be used less to point to specific characters or stories, and more to describe how broad gendered tropes of *ikusei* are bounced between different iterations of *SchoolFes*, and throughout Japanese popular media as a whole.

Studying idol *ikusei* games

Practically speaking, my approach to studying *SchoolFes* has been to play the game as a beginner, albeit a researcher of Japanese popular culture. I played the game three to four times a week for 30 minutes at a time, for 5 months spanning February 2020 to July 2020. I acknowledge that only having access to the English-language version of the game may have obscured some of its more Japan-specific aspects and language, but I have attempted to mitigate this by considering the game in the wider context of its Japanese-language franchise. Indeed, English-speaking players in many parts of the world do consume Japanese popular music as part of a wider package of Japanese popular culture, including

animation (Mōri, 2014: 217), such that though *ikusei* tropes may have a particular grounding in Japanese society, their intertextuality is understood and interpreted by those outside of Japan. I took screenshots to record aspects of gameplay that I saw as significant to my study of nurturing archetypes (I had hoped to include those screenshots in this article, but was unable to do so due to copyright issues). In Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) model of qualitative game analysis, the approach of this article is closest to a 'Gameplay Log', in that it seeks to analyse 'emergent behaviour or situations, the larger game world or system, and intertextuality as it is constituted within the game'.

Although I will describe the other aspects of games that Consalvo and Dutton point to (the interface, the objects within the game, and the mapping of interactions) to better familiarise the reader with what kind of game *SchoolFes* actually is, my objective in introducing *SchoolFes* as a case study is to show how it fits into the idol media mix that centres nurturing by a male producer-auteur figure, so any description will be in service of accounting for how the game connects to a 'larger game world' or 'intertextuality' that has auteur-led *ikusei* (nurturing) at its core. Not only is my analysis of idol-nurturing games intertextual, but in considering the 'representational layers' of the game alongside the gameplay, I aim for what Mäyrä (2009: 4) calls 'the inherent interdisciplinarity of game studies': the possibilities arising from studying both interaction with the game, and the wider representational world to which it belongs. This is not a study of audiences, and as such I cannot hope to account for the wide range of interactions that players all over the world have with *SchoolFes*, some of which may be far removed from gendered nurturing tropes. I contend that studying the game as a nexus of intertextual tropes is a valuable exercise in complicating current understandings of nurture and virtuality.

The *Love Live!* characters comprise composites of archetypes of fictional girls that are not supposed to evoke real girls, with these archetypes described by Azuma (2009) as 'moe-elements' (p. 42). For example, the energetic tomboy character Hoshizora Rin concludes each sentence she speaks not with a standard sentence-ending particle, but with the word *nya* (meow), and Kunikida Hanamaru is from such an old-fashioned family that she is fascinated by the technological advancement of automatic hand-dryers. These elements are detachable, where necessary; *Love Live!* character Yazawa Nico's catch phrase 'nico nico ni' has become so emblematic of cute Japanese characters that a Japanese member of a Korean girl band was asked to perform it on a Korean TV programme (ALL K-POP, 2016). As Ishida (2019, 286) argues, in anime 'voices . . . are a means as important as movement to animate', and without voice, the catchphrases and quirks of *Love Live!* characters that involve the player in *ikusei* would not be carried through televised animation, animated films, online content and of course, *SchoolFes*.

Where Ōtsuka (2010: 107) sees play with tropes as evidencing a seeking of smaller narratives within Lyotard's 'grand narrative', Azuma believes that the abundance of detached *moe* elements in Japanese popular media shows how a grand narrative is, in fact, absent from franchises like *Love Live!* (Azuma, 2009: 94). Condry (2011b: 274) argues that both of the aforementioned frameworks miss the 'embeddedness' of fictional elements of character 'in larger social worlds', and I would like to additionally suggest that they neglect the embeddedness of *moe* in powerful archetypes of popular music production, especially that of the producer-auteur, most often a man who is the driving force behind the spectacle of *ikusei*. There is pleasure to be derived from grouping

together of *moe* characteristics in games to fulfil this archetype on the part of the player, which may (but not necessarily) take on a concerningly sexualised tone in the context of the junior relationship of the girl characters to the male-coded producer-auteur.

Idol-nurturing simulation games make it easy for players to involve themselves in the game as auteurs precisely because the characters are not completely realistic, and because they give the player even more choices from a ‘menu’ (Mōri, 2016: 228) of favoured traits presented to consumers than if they were choosing and supporting their preferred member of a 3D idol group. They are not characters, but *kyara*. Citing Itō’s (2005: 94–5) distinction between *kyarakutā* (characters) and *kyara*, Lamarre (2011) describes *kyara* as being ‘ontologically prior’ to character, and ‘able to generate new worlds wherever its user sees fit’ (p. 129). The characters in the *Love Live!* franchise are *kyara*, in as much as 3D idols are *kyara*, affected personas that provide an emotionally impactful starting point for potential growth, but are not necessarily realistic.

But we should not mistake lack of realism as lack of connection to real life conventions of popular music production, just as it is important to interrogate the stereotype of the dedicated fan of media mix properties (in Japanese popular media parlance, an *otaku*) who is detached from the real world. That fan or player may equally self-identify as a navigator of ‘intertextual connections’ (Lamerichs, 2016: 255). By considering how the fictive production of these girl figures relates to the real production of girl images (who are themselves playing characters), I will provide a more comprehensive picture of the contemporary Japanese media mix, and of how the player participates (whether they are aware of it or not) in the perpetuation of gendered tropes of pop music production.

The case of *Love Live! School Idol Festival (SchoolFes)*

The school setting of *SchoolFes*, where the characters use the power of idols to fight to save their ailing institution, foregrounds the ‘growth’ of characters (Inoue, 2014: 4). The premise of the earliest storyline in the *Love Live!* franchise, as was portrayed in *Dengeki G’s* magazine, and later continued in an anime, was that of a group of girls at a public high school in Tokyo. The fictional high school is at threat of closure due to Japan’s declining birth rate, and the appeal of rival private schools. Upon discovering that one local private school is attracting students due to its idol group, the protagonist, Kōsaka Honoka, seizes on the opportunity to create her own school idol group. In Japan, closures are currently mostly affecting public primary schools, although at a 2009 peak, 110 public high schools were axed (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2019). Nonetheless, the spectre of high school closures speaks to the anxieties over the lost potential of young people due to recession (Allison, 2013), meaning lost opportunities to become *shakaijin* (working members of society) (Brinton, 2011: 3). I argue that in this landscape of lost potential, the player as producer-auteur has an opportunity to harness the perceived ‘spontaneity and refreshing unpredictability of high-school girls’ (Kinsella, 2002: 233), and to quite literally fight back against societal pressure.

SchoolFes itself is a combination of a rhythm game, a digital trading-card game and a type of game called an *ikusei shimiyurēshon gēmu*, usually translated as a raising-simulation game. I prefer the term nurturing-simulation game, as I believe it better conveys

the different types of being that the player may nurture, which may range from race-horses to fantasy creatures (Iwano et al., 2012: 3). As the cast of high school girl characters band together to compete against rival school idol groups, the role of the player is to both follow the story of the game through animated one-sided interactions with the characters, to 'train' the members through the rhythm game, and to collect and improve members like trading cards through in-game events.

Because girls within the game act like trading cards, with different strengths and weaknesses, the player must become familiar with the gameplay to work out how to 'level up' those characters, or how to be rewarded with new characters. The player may be awarded a new school idol after a 'performance' (a short rhythm game where the player must tap along to a song sung by the characters' voice actresses), or through in-game lotteries. Some songs only become playable once a player has assembled a school idol group with enough points. At the outset of the game, the protagonists themselves train you to do this through tutorials, dropping hints and tips, and encouraging you to move from the role of a fan into the role of a producer. As the game progresses, you are treated more like an expert who observes and shapes the girls from afar.

The making of idols within the game results from the ability of the player to combine characters with particular attributes to attain a goal, training those members to improve their performance skills in the rhythm game. Each character (in-game trading card) comes in multiple themed versions, some rarer than others, echoing the practice of collecting cards of members in traditional 3D idol CD releases. Though the mobile game is free to play, and in-game currencies may be earned through gameplay, buying currencies allows for much quicker progression through the game, towards rarer or more powerful collectible girls who allow for better performance in the rhythm game. The songs featured in the rhythm games have particular significance to the arc of nurturing of certain characters in the canonical anime and manga storyline, and these songs are in turn released as digital and CD singles or compilations and performed by voice actors at concerts. Here we see another typical feature of contemporary media mix practice at play: the importance of physical commercial space to the embodiment of popular cultural franchises in Japan, such as has been shown in studies by Benson (2019) and Larsen (2019).

By involving themselves in *SchoolFes* as a student who helps organise the school idol club, players become nurturers. Narratively speaking, players do not have many obvious choices to make in moving the story in a particular direction, as interactions with protagonists are one-sided; choices are more to do with which aspiring girl idols they favour and invest in-game resources into. This is not to say that players lack agency; players are 'concerned with participating in a fictional world where (their) decisions and actions are incorporated meaningfully into that fiction' (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, 2009:6), in this case the story of a group of schoolgirls who aspire to stardom as pop idols, where the player naturally fills the role of a producer-auteur. *SchoolFes*' musical content and characterisation are the result of an investment of fans in the creation and nurturing of characters that both precedes and exceeds the bounds of a mobile game; The wider *Love Live!* franchise has been distinguished by how fans were given a voice in how the manga story played out, able to vote for the names of new groups, or who would star in the next CD release, just like the Akimoto Yasushi-produced AKB48, a 3D idol group whose members can be promoted based on the votes of fans) (Inoue, 2014: 4).

One of the first things the player must do in the game is to choose a character to feature on the home screen of the game, the screen that the player most frequently returns to. The choice of this character, from a cast of ‘school idols’ from the *Love Live!* franchise, has been expanded over the years to include characters from all the newer stories in the series. The player is encouraged to pick their favourite girl, reflecting the concept of the *oshi*, or favourite member in idol fandom. Although the term *oshi* literally means ‘push’, and originates on the production side, where a producer might allocate more company resources to favoured performers, it has now been adopted by idol fans (Hirayama, 2019: 3), to describe committing emotional and financial resources to a favoured performer from a consumer perspective.

Thus, the presence of a favourite member on the home screen of *SchoolFes* represents the ambiguous role that the player is expected to take on as a fan and a producer. The chosen member encourages the player with set phrases recorded by the character’s voice actress. Throughout the one-sided character interactions in the ‘story’ element of the game, protagonists confide their everyday worries, extoll the virtues of ‘working hard without ever slacking off’ and describe how they are ‘moved as anyone by the sight of people working hard to achieve a goal’. These discourses of effort partly serve to decentre the efforts of the player as producer auteur, as much of the characters’ potential for growth and achievement as school idols comes from their potential as young people, especially as young women. However, the player is still encouraged take heart from the independent effort of the protagonists, and to plough that inspiration back into their own nurturing efforts within the game.

Though Black (2012, 220) rightly argues that the player’s interactions with idol-nurturing games are indeed ‘partaking in a fantasy of production’, explored in the following section, I would disagree that this is necessarily a ‘fantasy of ownership’, despite the obviously ‘gendered power relations’ that all idol-nurturing games are framed by. Nurturing is done from the canonical in-game position of the high-school peer, whose gender is not specified, but in a setting dominated by girls, the enthusiastic and emotional support given by characters to pursuing their shared dreams draws on tropes of ‘passionate friendship’ in girls’ culture (*shōjo bunka*), where girlhood forms a liminal space to work within, or even against societal conventions through homosocial relationships (Shamoon, 2011). Characters like Sakurauchi Riko are even implied to have a romantic interest in other girls, so it is important not to frame *ikusei* as a necessarily heterosexual or misogynistic trope. But nurturing within *SchoolFes* does proceed in accordance with a variety of unspoken and overlapping gendered archetypes, and an associated ‘male gaze’ of which all fans, but especially women and queer players, cannot help but be aware of (Dearden, 2018).

Media mix archetypes of *ikusei*

If *SchoolFes*’ players who have the potential to become in-game auteurs take their cue from real-life producer-auteur figures, then to what are we to compare girls, of any reality, who have the potential to become idols? According to star idol producer Tsunku, the answer is chickens. In conversation with Akimoto Yasushi on a variety show, he mused, ‘It occurred to me that idols (before Akimoto Yasushi came on the scene) were like

battery hens in western cuisine. They'd spend a few years in training and then come out singing and dancing' (Fuji, 2010). Tsunku elaborates that, in contrast to previous idol groups made up of those who had been through some form of strict entertainment industry training, Akimoto Yasushi's first idol group Onyanko Club whose selling point was that they were genuine amateurs, were 'free range'. The trainees in Tsunku's girl idol entertainment agency Hello! Project did in fact used to be nicknamed Eggs, and the word *tamago* (egg) remains a popular way of referring to acts in agency training in the Japanese popular music industry. Though the term 'egg' has long referred more generally someone in training, or who is just beginning to show potential, I argue that the term takes on a specific significance in the context of the player as idol-nurturing auteur. Seeing girls as requiring a certain minimum standard of skilful incubating (by a single producer, or farmer in this analogy), this discourse of nurturing the 'natural' potential of idols finds its way into *SchoolFes* in tutorial requests from the protagonists for the player to offer guidance in the everyday setting of a street, or of a school corridor.

On the other hand, Akimoto Yasushi himself prefers to compare putting together a hit girl group to the act of cooking a delicious meal. In a promotional interview for a TV Show called *Last Idol*, which set out to audition members of the 'ultimate' idol group, he invokes the image of browsing the shelves of a supermarket, explaining that 'in this case, I already had the dish in mind, and was looking for the right ingredients' (Nakamura, 2018). These discussions of girls as eggs or ingredients, as imperfect and incomplete, yet appealing and fascinating in that imperfection, are part of the gendered drama of adolescence and nurturing that players participate in when they play *SchoolFes*. In the world of traditional idol production, girls do not possess the knowledge to reach their true potential without a male producer-auteur figure. The structured freedom that players have to become auteurs and balance the attributes of their in-game idol groups is a part of that. In addition, when fans voted for the name and composition of *yunitto* (sub-groups) of simulated idols in the franchise, they were given keywords such as 'pure', 'cute' or 'energetic' that read like a shopping list of traits for simulated girls.

Many have drawn comparisons between how mixed-reality play allows one to nurture fictional young women to an ideal, and the myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with his animated sculpture of an ideal woman (Saitō, 2011; Sondheim, 1999; Sone, 2017). In light of the above discussion by Tsunku and Akimoto Yasushi, I would like to consider another comparison: that of the simulated idol as a virtual pet. The Tamagotchi, the most famous virtual pet, and an iconic toy of the 1990s in Japan and around the world, has triggered discussion about the postmodern condition, a 'personification of a machine' that people are happy to form impersonal relationships with (Bloch and Lemish, 1999: 293). Tamagotchi, a pocket, egg-shaped, digital pet, like the girls in *SchoolFes*, is purposely not supposed to be 'real-life', as while the 'owner' gives into the device's demands food and water, their enjoyment comes from knowing that the image is virtual (Iida, 2000: 429). Is this the conscious faking of subjectivity (Pettman, 2009: 201)? The symptom of a 'crisis in reproduction' whereby people are encouraged into one-sided relationships with virtual creatures and then shamed for the unproductivity of those relationships in wider society (Allison, 2009: 89)?

Virtual pets have become 'scapegoats' of sorts for anxieties about what it means to exist in a postmodern world, where we appear to be moving away from 'human-ness'

(Wrye, 2009: 1055). But the nurturing of a character small enough to fit in one's pocket, be that in the form of an egg-shaped toy, or a fictionalised portrayal of a girl idol in a smartphone game show a very human need to make sense of oneself through the growth and development of another. Here, the girls in *Love Live! School Idol Project* are close to 'real' idols in how they provide a measure of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991: 169) in the player, through allowing them involvement in that growth. They are, for better or worse, Tamagotchi girls (though without the real-time interaction typical of Tamagotchi). My comparison of simulated idol production in idol-nurturing games to Tamagotchi is made not to reduce the performers themselves to robotic pets, as much quasi-orientalist discourse in western Anglophone media often does, but instead to draw attention to how talk of nurturing can remove the subjectivity of girl idol performers to suit the media-mix archetype of the male producer-auteur.

In another sense, the story of *Love Live!* is no different to a standard sports club anime, where a group of young people (usually young men) fight against the odds to assemble a high school sports team while facing their own personal struggles. These stories are all about nurturing and growth, and one could argue that school settings, and the presence of school uniforms, are the ultimate signifier of *ikusei* within the idol-nurturing media mix, with the school being a symbol of adolescence and its potential for nurture. Yoshida (2016: 147) even suggests that the first 'virtual idols' originated in an anime adaptation of a sports manga called *Star of the Giants*, and draws an explicit parallel between the 'effort on display in sports . . . and an idol's effort to win the fierce competition with other idols'. Moreover, the appeal of the everyday effort, of finding hope in the struggles of adolescence, rather than the *love lives* of the characters, is indicated to by Uno (2015) as a new feature of media, called *kūki-kei* (atmosphere-type). In Uno's thinking, there is now a proliferation of franchises such as *K-on* and *Lucky Star!*, where the player enjoys the mundane, quirky lives of high-school girls in a carefree, atemporal fashion, with no potential heterosexual romance to trouble the heterosexual male viewer's immersion in the world of girls, meaning that 'it is youth itself, with its club activities and times with friends that becomes the object in and of itself' (Uno, 2015: 121). The player is further empowered by literally gaining control of adolescence, as the producer-auteur, while remaining a peer of the girls within the game, and the growth of the girl performer becomes an 'allegory of celebrity for growing up female' (Kennedy, 2014: 226).

Then again, in topic and style, *SchoolFes* resembles a *bishōjo* game, games where the player taps through a storyline, romancing one or multiple beautiful young women, with considerable 'passivity' (Galbraith, 2011), in pursuit of erotic content. The 'story' aspect of *SchoolFes* is indeed passive (despite lacking erotic content), and the original story of the franchise was written by famed *bishōjo* game writer Kimino Sakurako. The player can find out more about the characters' struggles and friendships by building a better rapport or 'bond' with them. But the world of *SchoolFes* is more than simple romance of the idealised adolescent everyday, consumed only by heterosexual men. For one thing, Hirose (2013: 19) rightly disputes that these stories set in girl-dominated school settings are completely stuck in the everyday, arguing instead that temporality is inherent to the characters themselves, for whom graduation looms.

As discussed above, it is not only men who consume different iterations of the *Love Live!* franchise. In a survey carried out by Japanese telecoms company KDDI, although

self-identifying *otaku* men were more likely to declare *Love Live!* to be their favourite franchise, it was still in the top 20 favourite franchises of *otaku* women (Yokota, 2018). Girls in the contemporary media mix, and in idol-nurturing games who pursue their dreams are admired by 'both girls and young adult men' and many other people besides, and though these depictions 'maintain part of gender norms' (Sugawa-Shimada, 2019: 190) through the canonical figure of the producer, media mix tropes are not hard and fast rules, rather parameters for play. If *Love Live! School Idol Festival* combines the objectification of disembodied characteristics and characters found in a *bishōjo* game, and the curated ordinariness of 'atmosphere-type' stories, then the figure that bridges the two is the player as the producer-auteur. Though they play a 2(.5)D game, they live and interpret said game in a 3D world populated by discourses where the act of nurturing girls is discussed as if it were as easy as hatching an egg.

Conclusion

Just as fans 'make' virtual idols like Hatsune Miku, players who engage with *SchoolFes* as a part of the wider *Love Live!* world are creative even as they play passively. The creativity of play for those who play in Japan, or for those who come to *Love Live!* through matrix web of localised 'Cool Japan' content, is largely the creativity of the male-coded producer-auteur figure, within the constraints of the franchise; you are invited by the characters, and by the in-game prompts to become a Tsunku, or an Akimoto Yasushi. The drive to nurture simulated teenaged girls as if they are beloved pets or children cannot be separated from the 'real' world, where fans adopt favoured members and groups and watch them grow, and where producer-auteur figures discuss girls as if they are yet another iteration of 'contents'. What I am not arguing is that all producer-auteur figures in Japanese popular music are men, nor that all players must identify with these figures as they play; rather, that gendered *ikusei* tropes should not be discounted as a frame for understanding connections between Japanese popular media and their potential engagements.

But are simulated idols real because human idols are, or do franchises like *Love Live!* illuminate the essentially fictional nature of human girl idols? Because the notion of the girl idol as we know it today is based on playing with fictions of nurturing (Galbraith, 2012: 193), I would argue that idol-nurturing franchises, especially games, are the perfect medium to extend that play in the context of contemporary media mix models. Since the 1980s, the fictionality of idols' performance has been accepted as a part of that performance; and since the 1990s, consumers have developed heightened awareness of the production apparatus that creates that performance. By practicing production at the level of a fictive amateur, the player can bring all their 'real' awareness of the 'fake-ness' of the idol industry to bear on their participation in the idol-nurturing game. Just as *Love Live!* mirrors AKB48, Hirayama (2019: 3) even describes AKB48 as a 'real' version of an idol-nurturing games', illustrating just how complex the notions of 'real' idol performance and 'real' idol production have become. Here there is a story; though perhaps that story of nurture itself is in the process of becoming a trope, bounced between the 2D, 2.5D and the 3D.

The characters in the most profitable stories of simulated idol production are girls, and I have suggested that the nature of how idol *ikusei* games are produced means that the player is coded as male. However, the enormous reach of the *Love Live!* franchise means that we must consider what it could mean, in the context of a male-dominated media mix, for a woman to assume the role of the producer-auteur in a game like *SchoolFes*. Moreover, as the idol-nurturing simulation game market continues to grow, researchers with an interest in their position within media mix practices should turn their attention to the increasing literality of the *ikusei* tropes in newer idol-nurturing franchises such as *Uma Musume (Horse Girls)* (Cygames, 2021), centred around a game where players train girl/horse hybrids to win races and become star idols. Future scholarship should additionally consult players themselves of all backgrounds, including those playing in ‘transcultural’ contexts (Chin and Morimoto, 2013), to see what role those players envision themselves as taking on when they produce a simulated idol group within a game, and how that role may or may not conflict with their position as a fan/*otaku*. For idol-nurturing games, like the music that fills them, are not only a matter of the player accepting or rejecting roles or conventions; the player as auteur is left using the ‘real’ world conventions they are familiar with to empower themselves within another.

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Notes

1. ‘Warring states period’ is an analogy for a saturated Japanese popular music market, where many idol pop groups are battling for prominence. The term references a period of historical civil war in Japan that itself takes its name from a period of Chinese history during the 5th century BCE.
2. ‘The player’ is not a specific person or set of attributes, but rather a putative person who interacts with the game and ‘plays’ with transmedia tropes of nurturing.

3. '2.5D' refers to productions where 3D (human) performers take on the roles of 2D characters. Lu (2019) finds that the stars of such productions, including stage shows and concerts, are promoted in manner akin to traditional (3D) idols.

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