MECHADEMIA

メカデミア

VOLUME 6

User Enhanced

FRENCHY LUNNING, EDITOR

MECHADEMIA 6

User Enhanced

Mechademia

An Annual Forum for Anime, Manga, and Fan Arts

FRENCHY LUNNING, EDITOR

Mechademia is a series of books published by the University of Minnesota Press devoted to creative and critical work on anime, manga, and the fan arts. Linked through their specific but complex aesthetic, anime, manga, and the fan arts have influenced a wide array of contemporary and historical culture through design, art, film, and gaming. This series seeks to examine, discuss, theorize, and reveal this unique style through its historic Japanese origins and its ubiquitous global presence manifested in popular and gallery culture. Each book is organized around a particular narrative aspect of anime and manga; these themes are sufficiently provocative and broad in interpretation to allow for creative and insightful investigations of this global artistic phenomenon.

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Mechademia 2 *Networks of Desire*
Mechademia 3 *Limits of the Human*
Mechademia 4 *War/Time*
Mechademia 5 *Fanthropologies*
Mechademia 6 *User Enhanced*

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Frenchy Lunning, Editor

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS MINNEAPOLIS • LONDON

http://www.mechademia.org

Spot illustrations by Barbara Guttman

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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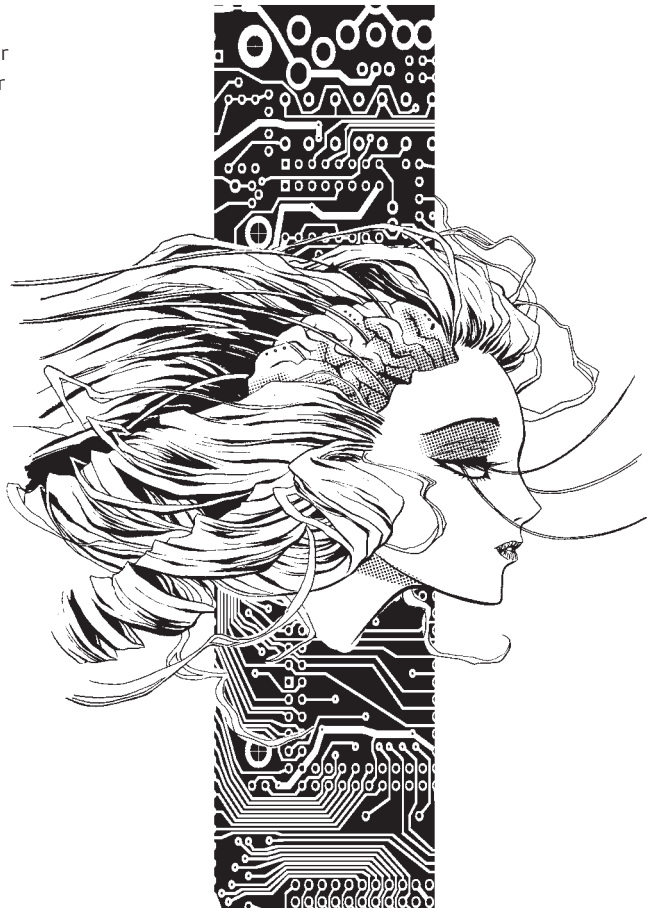

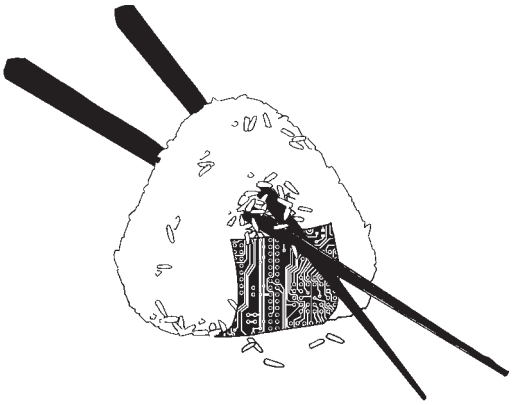

Contents

ix Introduction
THOMAS LAMARRE

Countering Domestication

3 Under the Ruffles: Shōjo and the Morphology of Power
FRENCHY LUNNING

21 Girliness Next to Godliness: Lolita Fandom as Sacred Criminality in the Novels of Takemoto Novala
BRIAN BERGSTROM

39 Beyond Domesticating Animal Love
CHRISTINE L. MARRAN

52 Exploited and Mobilized: Poverty and Work in Contemporary Manga
MATTHEW PENNEY

Commodity-Life

69 Tezuka Is Dead: Manga in Transformation and Its Dysfunctional Discourse
ITŌ GŌ
TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MIRI NAKAMURA

84 How Characters Stand Out
MIYAMOTO HIROHITO
TRANSLATED BY THOMAS LAMARRE

93 Manga Translation and Interculture
CATHY SELL

110 Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life
THOMAS LAMARRE

Photo Play

139 Out of the Closet: The Fancy Phenomenon
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RIO SAITŌ
INTRODUCTION BY FRENCHY LUNNING

Desiring Economies

153 Anatomy of Permutational Desire, Part II: Bellmer's Dolls and Oshii's Gynoids
LIVIA MONNET

171 Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women's Male–Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan
KUMIKO SAITO

193 The Sacrificial Economy of Cuteness in *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space*
EMILY RAINE

211 Flower Tribes and Female Desire: Complicating Early Female Consumption of Male Homosexuality in Shōjo Manga
JAMES WELKER

Untimely Effects

231 Transformation of Semantics in the History of Japanese Subcultures since 1992
MIYADAI SHINJI
TRANSLATED BY SHION KONO
INTRODUCTION BY THOMAS LAMARRE

260 The Logic of Digital Gaming
ADEN EVENS

271 Tsuge Yoshiharu and Postwar Japan: Travel, Memory, and Nostalgia
YOSHIKUNI IGARASHI

287 Implicational Spectatorship: Hara Setsuko and the Queer Joke
YUKA KANNO

Review and Commentary

304 War for Entertainment: *The Sky Crawlers*
ANDREA HORBINSKI

306 Volition in the Face of Absurdity
BRIAN RUH

309 The Past Presents the Future: *Toward the Terra*
PAUL JACKSON

トレンド Torendo

312 Wherein the Author Documents Her Experience as a Porcelain Doll
LISA BLAUERSOUTH

317 Contributors

319 Call for Papers

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Introduction

THOMAS LAMARRE

Everybody is making things today. Cosplayers are making costumes, book readers are writing and sharing fictions, gamers are making mods and machinima, manga readers are producing "amateur" manga or scanlations, and anime viewers are fansubbing and even making animations. Everybody is exchanging opinions, writing reviews, and making or contributing to databases. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that the term "consumer" has begun to drop out of use. Or, when it is used, rather than carry connotations of passivity, "consumer" has come to feel somehow active or at least neutral, akin to "receiver" or "user." And, even though a great deal of this "user activity"—fan fiction, fansubs, scanlations, amateur manga, mods, machina, fan forums, and databases—appears organized around a product or commodity, everyone knows that buying the product is not the point, not the beginning and end of things. Rather it is the product world that counts, the worlds that unfold from the product. Consequently, the term "product" also begins to feel inadequate to this situation. It's not a matter of commodity-objects to be consumed and then forgotten, but of commodity-events to be dwelled on, lingered over, prolonged, enhanced. And this is what everyone is doing today: prolonging worlds from commodity-events in circulation.

At the same time, unless you've mastered easy flight to other planets, you've surely run up against signs of increasing anxiety about the effects of capitalism in today's world: wealth disparity, poverty, unemployment, war for profit, environmental degradation, and criminalization of immigration. Regardless of what you think about capitalism, it's hard to escape a sense of disparity between the genuine creativity of consumer activity

today—prolonging events, carving out worlds, doing things yourself—and the contemporary crises of capitalism. And, even though it is always tempting to think that more and better consumption will resolve the problems of capitalist production, the relation between consumption and production today is just too complicated for simple answers. Their relation has always been complicated, but today has its added wrinkles, so to speak.

Such are the questions that motivated the topic for *Mechademia 6: User Enhanced*. In the context of editing *Mechademia 5: Fanthropologies,* a volume that proposed not merely to conduct an anthropology of fans but more importantly to ask what was at stake in studying fans today, we were surprised, given the range of concerns evidenced in the submissions, by the scarcity of discussions looking at otaku in terms of consumerism, commodification, ideology, capitalism, or hegemony, which had long been key terms in cultural critique. Rather, where sociological description gave way to critical concern, submitted essays tended to gravitate toward problems of identity, toward the marginalization of fans, negotiations of gender and sexuality, or cultural difference and national identity. The same is true for discussions of otaku in Japan, albeit in a different register: even though the terms "consumption" and "consumer" are generally used in Japanese accounts of otaku, the overall emphasis is more sociological than economic. The trend is to speak of social transformations across different generations in Japan, rather than to link otaku consumers to transformations in capitalism or to a critique of capital.

The general critical focus on negotiating identities and characterizing generations (rather than resisting ideologies or exposing the social contradictions of capitalism) seemed to us in keeping with the general transformation described above. Because the consumer today is user, negotiator, prosumer, interactor, or creator, our discussions of consumers, our discussions of fans, have shifted dramatically. It no longer seems possible to assume that fans are passive recipients, duped by ideology, deceived by mass cultural industries, or unilaterally shaped by capitalism. Still, new questions arise. Without wishing to force analysis back into received frameworks for understanding consumption and production, and adopting the somewhat neutral term "user" instead of consumer or creator, we nonetheless wished to address some fundamental questions: "How do commodities work today, now that we have become active users (transformers or even creators) of culture rather than passive consumers of it?" and "What are the implications of this transformation?" Thus we arrived at "the user enhanced," which refers at once to "user-enhanced commodities" (commodity worlds) and to "the enhancement of the user" (at once the cultural enrichment and the social empowerment of consumers).

There is a simplistic and rather cynical way of understanding the user enhanced. One might conclude that, because it is after all the producers, usually corporations, who turn a profit and accrue capital, the intense activity of users in, say, fansubbing, scanlating, reviewing, exchanging, circulating, and modifying commodities, ultimately amounts to nothing more than promoting or adding value to commodities, at the expense of consumers and for the ultimate profit of producers. In other words, corporations are profiting from the consumer's self-deception of being a creator, when in fact the consumer is an unpaid marketer and distributor. Simply put, the user is used, working for free. The user enhanced is but value added to the commodity. This is a sort of "mass deception" theory.

There is some truth in this understanding of user activity, or at least something crucial to be gleaned from it. For instance, in the wake of government policies in Japan promoting Akihabara as a tourist destination and championing otaku culture as a new national paradigm for economic prosperity, some otaku were quick to point out that the prosperity of otaku culture was built by otaku, not by government policy makers or corporations. It was otaku prosperity, and otaku wanted not only credit for it but also their share of it. Such a response returns to and deflates the mass deception theory. It demonstrates not only the increased significance of user activity but also an increasing awareness on the part of consumers about their role in the generation of value in the context of commodity-worlds. As such, even as user enhancement results in value-added commodities, the value of those commodities, taking the form of commodity-worlds prolonged both by producers and consumers, is not solely the property of corporations. And the questions of "To whom does a commodity-world belong?" and "Who belongs to it?" are becoming a site for the construction and contestation of social paradigms. It was in the hope of addressing such transformations that we wished to extend the insights of *Mechademia 5: Fanthropologies* into *Mechademia 6: User Enhanced*.[1]

There are a number of ways to approach these questions. The essays under the heading "Commodity-Life" approach user-enhanced commodity-worlds from the angle of the commodity itself, finding in the form and structure of commodity the key to understanding the ground for the user enhancement of products into worlds.

Itō Gō explores how manga characters lend themselves to the production of worlds. Challenging the received emphasis on story manga and Tezuka Osamu, Itō's work has offered a complete reconsideration of the relation between narrative and character, showing that Tezuka's story manga and the

associated lineage of shōnen manga tend to subordinate character to narrative. But Itō sees this lineage as the exception rather than the rule, arguing that because manga criticism is biased toward such manga, it cannot deal with the actual dynamics of manga form and reception today, which entails expanded media worlds. In this excerpt from his influential book *Tezuka Is Dead,* Itō looks at current trends in manga, in particular its implication in the worlds of anime and video games, to highlight how manga criticism has tended to enclose manga within a literary paradigm of understanding, thus avoiding the broader field of character-based interaction.

Miyamoto Hirohito's entry traces the dynamics of contemporary manga characters back to a specific set of relations between manga readers and characters that emerged in the 1920s, which paved the way for the production of characters with a sense of autonomous existence and life. In the form of manga characters, he finds the sources for the contemporary user-enhanced manga-character worlds. My own essay also considers of the vitality of manga characters, situating their sense of life in the context of wartime ideologies of racial cooperation and harmony in order to address the politics of animal characters in Tezuka's postwar manga. It is in the cuteness of little animal characters that we find a catalyst not only for user interaction but also for a politics of life, where commodity-worlds become entangled in biopolitical formations. Cathy Sell's essay presents a shift in emphasis from character to other features of manga. Beginning with the difficulties in translating manga into European languages, and analyzing non-Japanese-language manga that strive to prolong the world of manga, Sell calls attention to the persistence of nonlinguistic structures and a-signifying forms across manga in different languages. In such features, Sell detects the emergence of an interculture, the evolution of something new that is not wholly attributable either to a Japanese cultural field or the local culture.

Across these essays, we see various ways in which the manga commodity is organized around formally or structurally open elements that serve to catalyze user enhancement. Exploring such features of manga, these essays find not the inertia of a commodity-object but the stirrings of a commodity-life that sparks interactions that may be prolonged into a cultural paradigm or social field. As such, they also contribute to delineating the specific features of the media mixes, patterns of serialization, and forms of reception and power related to Japanese cultural industries.

The essays in the section "Desiring Economies" approach the user enhanced from the perspective of desire. Emily Raine considers how the animated film *Tamala 2010* extends the critique of consumerism beyond the