

Otakus

The Cyberpunk Project

Japanese word "otaku" means "you". Otakus are mainly Japanese computer nerds who live in front of their computers and playstations surfing the Net and playing computer games, totally alienated and isolated from the outside world. Otakus are usually also fixated to manga and anime cartoons.

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Three years ago, the serene Tokyo bedroom community of Hanna was shaken by a series of grisly crimes. Four pre-teen girls were abducted, molested and mutilated in a serial killing-spree *The New York Times* described as so "un-Japanese". But the perpetrator, who had sent bone and teeth fragments to the grieving families, couldn't have been more Japanese.

The murderer enticed the children to his six-mat in Saitama, then molested and murdered them, recording the gruesome details of his deeds on the hard-drive of his computer.

When police finally caught up with Tsutomu Miyazaki, they found the 27-year-old living in two realities. By day he was a sullen apprentice at a local print shop. By night he lived out the fantasies he had internalized from avidly watching his collection of more than 6,000 slasher videos and pornographic manga, or Japanese comic books.

In defense of his warped client, Miyazaki's attorney claimed that video and reality had merged; Miyazaki couldn't tell gory fact from gory fiction. After Miyazaki's much-publicized trial, one thing was clear : a new generation of anti-social, nihilistic whiz-kids had arrived.

Dubbed the otaku-zoku, or otaku for short, these are Japan's socially inept but often brilliant technological shut-ins. Their name derives from the highly formal way of saying "you" in Japanese, much like calling a friend "Sir".

First identified by *SPA!* magazine in 1986, the otaku are Tokyo's newest information-age product. These were the kids "educated" to memorize reams of context-less information in preparation for filling in bubbles on multiple-choice entrance exams.

Now in their late teens and twenties, most are either cramming for college exams or stuck in cramming mode. They relax with sexy manga or violent computer games. They shun society's complex web of social obligations and loyalties. The result : a burgeoning young generation of at least 100,000 hard-core otaku (estimates of up to 1 million have been bandied about in the Tokyo press) who are too uptight to talk to a telephone operator, but who can kick ass on the keyboard of a PC.

Zero, 25, is a self-proclaimed otaku who flunked out of Keio University's math department because he didn't like being ordered around by teachers to whom he felt superior. "They couldn't deal with someone like me", he recalled. "Now I'm independent and I don't need to deal with anyone like them".

Zero's life now revolves around computer games. He only ventures out of his six-mat in Kawagoe to acquire new game-boards, the green, maze-like "minds" taken from commercial arcade games like Galaga or Space Invaders. At home, he plugs these circuit boards into a special adapter on his own console, analyzes and dissects them for bugs and flaws that allow one, for example, to glimpse a Space Invader's after-image as it scuttles across the screen or to change the color of a yellow Ms. Pac-Man to purple.

Zero often dresses in a plain white T-shirt and ill-fitting jeans rolled up about six inches. He doesn't look you in the eyes when he talks; he answers quietly with his face to the floor. His face possesses gentle features, but it is sickly pale.

He makes his living as a software trouble-shooter, looking for problems in new software before it hits the market, earning 350,000 yen (about \$2,800) a month. He works in his murky home, where the windows are permanently covered with yellowing newspaper to block out the sunlight.

"I've always liked playing games. As a boy, I preferred video games to other kids", Zero offered. "So I understand technology. I'm more comfortable with computers than human beings.

Finding the malfunction of a computer program or game is thrilling because I'm basically exposing the phony computer experts who invented the game in the first place", Zero says.

He threads his way over the tatami floor, which is a high-tech junkyard of old computer circuit-boards, obsolete monitors, archaic disc drives and a spluttering coffee-maker. He strips down to a white T-shirt and striped boxer shorts - dressed for company, though you wouldn't know it.

Zero sits on a swivel office chair and clicks on his Quadra 900 Macintosh PC with 240 megabytes of storage attached to a keyboard which Zero has remodeled to conform to his own idea of how a keyboard "should have been laid-out in the first place". As he waits for the computer to boot, he scans the rolls of newly arrived faxes.

The first is from his "buddy" Kojack. It's a chart of a mid-seventies Bay City Roller tour of Japan, including tour dates, attendance and play lists. Zero is impressed. Another, from Piman in Aomori, announces he is selling a rare 1978 edition of "Be Bop High School" for 50,000 yen (\$400). Zero thinks it's overpriced.

Zero casts them aside to read one from Batman in Nagoya who claims that the Thunder Dragon and Metal Black video games employ the same game-matrix with different graphics and scoring systems. Seventeen pages of notes support this hypothesis. Zero is not impressed. He's known this since Metal Black hit the market way back last Tuesday.

Zero gets busy. He disseminates a warning through his computer modem that flashes on terminals from Hokkaido to Kyushu. He warns other otaku on the Eye Net computer network to be on the lookout for some poser named Batman pushing stale info. For those few moments - as Zero's invisible brethren attentively scan and store his transmitted data - he is no longer a wimp. He's a big gun, a macho man in the world of the otaku.

Information is the fuel that feeds the otaku's worshiped dissemination systems - computer bulletin-boards, modems, faxes. For otaku, the only thing that matters is the accuracy of the answer, not its relevance. No piece of information is too trivial for consideration : for instance, for a monster otaku - an otaku into TV and manga monsters - the names of the various actors who wore the rubber suits in an Ultraman episode where Ultraman is conspicuously shorter than in other shows is precious currency. For military otaku, it's the name of the manufacturer of 55mm armor-piercing ammunition for the PzkIII Tank. For idol otaku - fanatics who follow the endless parade of cute girl pop singers - it's the specific university the father of darling idol Hikaru Nishida attended. Anything qualifies, as long as it was not previously known.

Although Zero spends most of his waking hours exchanging information with fellow otaku-zoku, Zero only knows his tribe through the computer bulletin board. He has never met any of them. He doesn't even know their real names.

Zero speaks of Kojack, who he has also never met in their five-year, fax-driven "friendship". Besides being a computer-game otaku, Kojack is an idol otaku. Idols, those interchangeable performers, are the bread and butter of the music business. Every year, 40 or 50 idols appear from nowhere to satiate pre-teen musical tastes. Some, like singer Seiko Matsuda, become fantastically successful. Others quickly vanish.

But Kojack isn't interested in the successful idols. Nor does he care that idol music sucks. All he really wants is all the information he can get about Miho Nakayama - a cute-as-a-button, up-and-coming idol. Of course he needs to know the obvious data like her star-sign, blood-type, favorite foods and what her father does for a living. But he will delve much further for arcane and perverse factoids like her bra-size (75A - relatively small), any childhood diseases she may have had (Chicken Pox), or which assistant sound engineer would have been used on the "Sugar Plum" single if he had been available.

Kojack scours celebrity magazines, he accesses a "Nifty Serve" bulletin board which may carry idol information deposited there by other otaku and he desperately seeks a way to hack into the mainframe of Nakayama's record company with a code-cracking program he designed himself. There, in the company computer, he imagines he will find tons of choice tidbits such as upcoming record store appearances or release dates for new singles. These will make him a real idol-otaku king after he transmits them over the computer networks to other idol-loving otaku.

The point for Kojack will not be the relevance of the information, nor the nature of it, but merely that he got it and others didn't. That's what makes the information valuable and will elevate Kojack's status as a computer stud.

Their obsession with gathering may, at first glance, seem no different than the fanaticism of collectors of rare books or ukiyoe woodblock prints. But it is as if instead of trading actual items, book collectors were to trade only information about a particular novel ("Did you know that Hemingway's original manuscript of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was returned because of insufficient postage?").

The objects themselves are meaningless to otaku - you can't send Ultraman or a German tank through a modem. But you can send every piece of information about them.

"The otaku are an underground (subculture), but they are not opposed to the system per se", observed sociologist and University of Tokyo fellow Volker Grassmuck, who has studied the otaku extensively. "They change, manipulate and subvert ready-made products, but at the same time they are the apotheosis of consumerism and an ideal workforce for contemporary capitalism.

"The parents of otaku are from the sixties generation, very democratic and tolerant. They want to understand their children", Grassmuck continued. "But the kids purposely look for things their parents can't understand. In a sense, the parents themselves are immature and childish. In Japan there is probably no obvious image of what a grownup is".

Grassmuck believes that this communication barrier between parents and children led to a series of killings of parents by their sons. The Kinzoku Bat Murderer, for instance, bludgeoned his mother and father to death with a baseball bat in the early eighties. Five or six other kids - who, Grassmuck said, would probably be called otaku today - carried out copycat crimes in the following months.

Then there's the murderous Miyazaki, but he had communication problems of a different sort. He was an outcast of the otaku community as well as with his own family. Every otaku emphasizes that Miyazaki is the strange exception to an otherwise peaceful, constructive movement.

"Miyazaki was not really even an otaku", says Taku Hachiro, a 29-year-old otaku and author of *Otaku Heaven*, who appeared on the scene to offset the negative otaku image which the Miyazaki case had created. "If he was a real otaku he wouldn't have left the house and driven around looking for victims. That's just not otaku behavior. Because of his case, people still have a bad feeling about us. They shouldn't. They should realize that we are the future - more comfortable with things than people", Hachiro said. "That's definitely the direction we're heading as a society".

Many otaku make their living in technology-related fields, as software designers, computer engineers, computer graphics artists or computer magazine editors. Leading high-technology corporations say they are actively recruiting otaku types because they are in the vanguard of personal computing and software design. And some otaku-entrepreneurs have already made it big. Self-proclaimed "Otaku Mogul" Kazuhiko Nishi is the founder of the ASCII corp., a software firm worth a half-billion dollars.

"Many of our best workers are what you might call otaku", explained an ASCII corp. spokesman. "We have over 2,000 employees in this office and more than 60 percent might call themselves otaku. You couldn't want more commitment".

However, Abiko Seigo, a manager with the same corporation, complains that while they excel in front of the computer, otaku-types easily lose sight of company goals beyond the project before them.

They can also be lousy team-players, unable to communicate verbally with their non-otaku co-workers - and in the corporate world, the team mentality still pervades.

If Taku Hachiro is right, and the otaku are the men of the future, how will these chronically shy people reproduce ? What about the sex-lives of people who admit their terror of physical contact with another human being ?

"Masturbation is better than conventional sex", claimed Hachiro, a self-admitted virgin. "I guess I'm frightened of sex. I watch a lot of videos and read manga, and that's about as far as I want to go. I don't know if it's fear so much as a matter of getting along with objects better than people", Hachiro said. "If it were possible to have sex with objects, then that would be a different matter".

It is therefore unsurprising that otaku are fascinated with new technology such as virtual reality or digital compression as it connects to pornography. The sales potential for techno-driven, ultra-real pornographic and violent experiences via the computer is so great that computer engineers - freelance otaku as well as corporate programmers - are furiously designing software that will satisfy an otaku's "sexual" needs.

Although some otaku wait - no doubt breathlessly - for the development of sexy technology they can plug into their underwear, black-market programmers already sell "seduction" and "rape" fantasy games through otaku networks. In December, a software company in Osaka, whose product was deemed "obscene" by the powers that be, was raided and their stock of ultra-graphic pornographic "games" was confiscated.

Perhaps police have good reason to worry. International computer networks like CompuServe are already online as efficient and low-risk international smuggling routes for sexually explicit pornographic images - showing pubic hair is illegal under Japanese obscenity laws.

The police are only now beginning to crack down on this type of smuggling. A spokesman at the Osaka Police Department says plans are on the board to increase monitoring of computer bulletin boards used to distribute and sell illegal pornography. But he is not optimistic.

"Much obscene material is already being transmitted by facsimile over phone-lines and is therefore virtually impossible to monitor", the spokesman explained. "However, we believe that we can choke distribution of some pornography if we can censor the bulletin boards".

The Osaka police department has considered one strategy to clamp down on otaku porn networks : hire otaku policemen. "We would probably be more effective in combating crime if we could train reformed otaku", the spokesman said. "But unfortunately we don't have the budget right now".

The police believe the Tsutomu Miyazaki case was an exception, not an omen for the future. But, for the time being, the case has ensured that the growing ranks of the otaku will likely remain a fringe group perceived by the public as anti-social computer kooks, or worse yet, potential serial killers.

But as things stand, the otaku are indeed making their mark as work-loving employees in high-technology industries. And, as the constant stream of new hardware and software becomes crucial to competitiveness in all business fields, the ascension of otaku may be inevitable.

Or, as Zero confidently predicts from his gloomy lair in Kawagoe : "One day, everyone will be an otaku".

Otaku Styles

The different flavors of otaku fetishism :

Manga Otaku

Specialize in collecting and trading underground, hard-to-find manga like angel, uncolored, cupid or blind logic. Hangout : the haga bookstore in kanda.

Monster Otaku

Love everything about godzilla, the smog monster, gamara, rodan, ultraman and that one with three heads, green scales and wings. Most elusive factoid : who or what exactly godzilla mated with to produce baby godzilla.

Military Otaku

Construct models of everything from F-15 fighter planes to WWI british infantry issue chipped-beef rations. Special treat : surrounding themselves with plastic ship models and watching videos of *Tora! Tora! Tora!*.

Tropical Fish Otaku

Can distinguish between the life-span of an angel fish in captivity in the northern and southern hemispheres. Favorite pastime : memorizing the latin names of 150 fish species, without ever owning a goldfish.

Imperial Otaku

Debate the lengths of the Meiji and Showa reigns down to the second. Most coveted item : a fax of

Princess Michiko with a blemish on her forehead.

Cartoon Otaku

Believe that somehow, somewhere, the "Hello Kitty" cartoon character has a mouth. Raging debate : Chibi Maruko-Chan's favorite foods.

Idol Otaku

Believe that it really matters who was the assistant sound engineer on Harumi Inoue's b-side *You Me and Taro*. Wildest dream : to see all the way up Miho Nakayama's skirt.