

JAPAN – OTACOOOL NATION
WORLD TREND SETTERS - JAPANESE OTAKU YOUTH
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“A man who is *ill-adjusted to the world* is always on the point of finding himself. One who is adjusted to the world never finds himself, but gets to be a cabinet minister.”
Hermann Hesse

The Japanese youth are re-defining and re-shaping themselves– physically, mentally and spiritually. What does this new face of Japan mean for the country’s future and how is it influencing the world-wide youth culture’s *lifestyle* and *quality of communications*?

Upon first entering the Japanese society, one perceives a calibrated, well run, oiled machine, with endless checks and balances to assure that all its inhabitants know and follow the time honoured, established *rules*. It is a country of over-lapping *groups* of members who lend support to all within their circle. What happens when some people jump out of their social bubbles, thereby, losing their pre-determined *way* and *identity*?

To find out, I interviewed over 400 young students (computer science, mathematics, physics, science and engineering majors) sympathetic to and naturally aligned with *otaku* (*nerds, geeks*) tendencies. I have thereby assembled a trend, an inertial flow, an undertow running counter to the Japanese *salaryman* and always-in-style young ladies (*oshare garu*) image.

Otaku are driving the engines of Japan’s economy and challenging the ways we connect with others with their refreshingly new *social interaction products*. The *otakus*’ enchantment in *developing anthropomorphic robots, computer generated animation (anime), manga comics, computational intelligence, screened simulated social networks, and non-physical communications* has formed a fantasy world of virtual environments with a highly dedicated, sub-culture infrastructure. Their lifestyle influence has been connected into the world youth mind-set.

Japan is becoming an *otacool nation*. This word I have created from a combination of *otaku* and the intriguingly, fashionable social distinction of being *cool*.

Otacool live and thrive in these parallel simulated environments ‘*where no man has gone before*’...or have they?

COMMUNICATION

The notion that true communication takes place best in a sensory rich environment whereby two people are in each other’s physical presence of seeing, hearing, touching and smelling will, in the near future, continue to be considered vital, yet, merely a subset of what we accept as *interpersonal communication*. In its most general form interpersonal communication would include gestures (physical and non-verbal), writing and verbal speaking. A message, or as I would prefer to frame it, an intention, is directed toward a destination – another person, a group or oneself as in a diary. The quality of the message is determined by the sender’s clarity in transmission of which is inherently bonded to the degree it is clearly and openly received and understood.

What happens to communication when the two parties are not face to face? In not seeing the subtle facial gestures and body movements, nor hearing variations in voice power and inflection, along with removing our subconscious sensing of shifts in the other’s energy field how do we compute, conclude and understand intentions, meanings and inferences?

Let’s explore a variation on this theme of communication by entering the world of the Japanese *otaku*. Within the etymology of the word *otaku* (お宅) is the honorific term for another’s house or family. Yet, it is also an honorable way to refer to the second person pronoun as in *thou* or the singular *vous* in French. Today though, it is a slang word and is thereby written in hiragana (おたく) or katakana (オタク) and refers to a fanatic with the character traits of a geek or nerd.

The word *otaku* went through a negative metamorphosis in the 1980s with the writings of humorist and essayist Akio Nakamori¹. His influence stirred such *otaku* related comments as “*They are the type that generally live in their parents’ basement at 30 years old and have no social life*”, from *Urban Dictionary*, and “*The Japanese have never been good at verbal communication, but the problem with*

¹ Nakamori Akio, *An Investigation of Otaku* (Otaku no Kenkyu), 1983

'otaku' is that they are so engrossed in their own favorite world and don't have the ability, interest, or confidence to interact with other human beings. Their impact on society is enormous", Hiroko Mizushima, a legislator and psychiatrist (*Washington Post*), reprinted in *Japan Today*. From this point the negative stereotype spread through the Japanese psyche and still colors the *otaku* of today. Is this a true depiction? Yet, as the Psychiatrist Carl Jung once said, "Nothing worse could happen to one than to be completely understood." I believe the present day *otaku persona* needs some facial adjustments.

There are many manifestations of the Japanese *otaku*, but this research will focus on the technologically driven and inwardly seeking *gēmu otaku* (video and online gaming), the *pāsokon otaku* (personal computers), *roboto otaku* (robots) and a variety of other virtual reality centered *otaku* and their interaction with the outer world.

What follows are perceptions and opinions, by those surveyed, of *otaku* life today. They include over 400 young students (computer science, mathematics, physics, science and engineering majors) and creative college drop-outs sympathetic to and naturally aligned with *otaku* today. As an added note, the Japanese youth culture is very sensitive to changes in trends that seem to sweep the country in dramatic form and quickly change direction like flocks of birds or schools of fish.

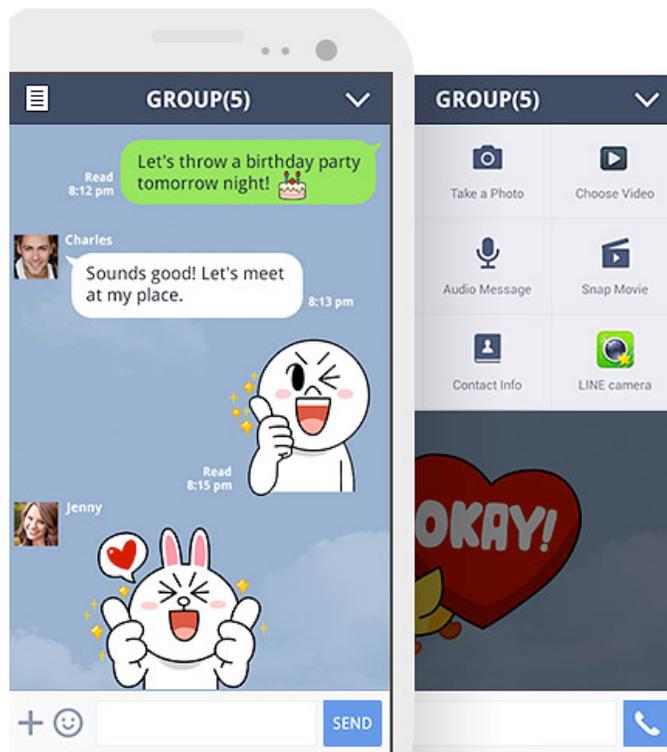
MOE CULTURE – Osaka, Japan



ONLINE GAMES – by Nexon in Tokyo, Japan



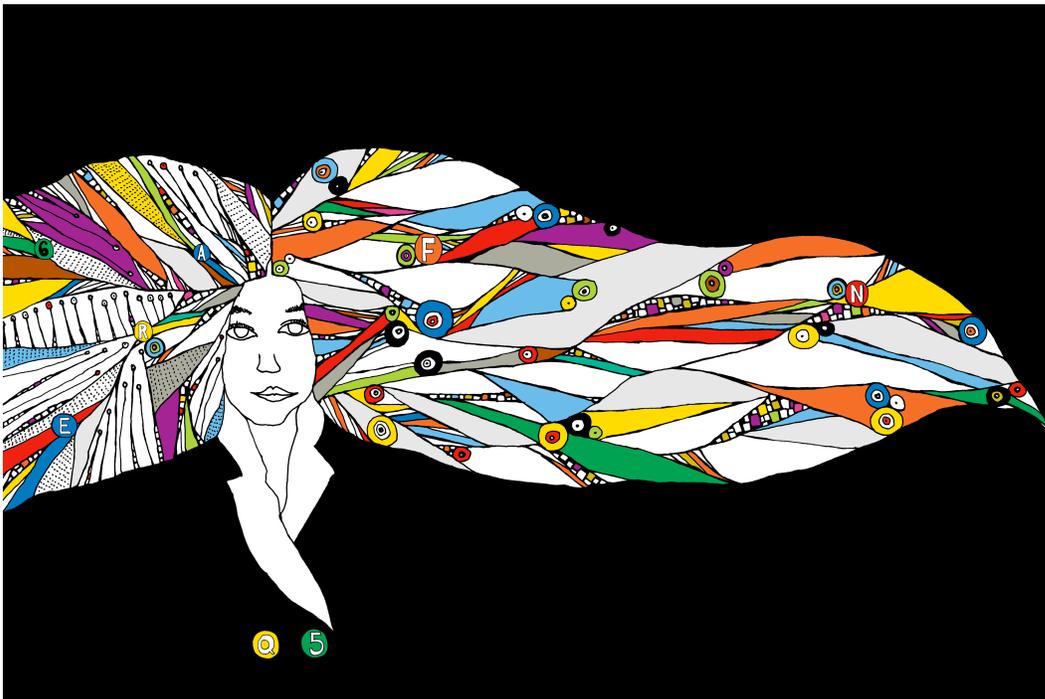
INTERNET SOCIAL NETWORK – LINE, Tokyo, Japan



POP ART by Hazuki Yamawaki 18 years old Japanese



POP ART Metro Girl by Junichi Ono 25 years old Japanese



ANIME – Space Battleship Yamato (aka Star Blazers) Japan



OTAKU NATURE

1. pacifists
2. Buddhists
3. multi-taskers
4. intellectually driven
5. good “short term” memories
6. comfortable with robot companions
7. lovers of anime
8. fantasy seekers
9. gamers
10. prefer virtual, non-physical body worlds
11. sparse with hugging, touching and greetings
12. oblivious to big department store clothing styles and the season; prefer checked or *anime* shirts, chemically washed slim jeans, small back packs, caps and scarves anytime
13. convenient processed, fast food including McDonald’s, Moss Burger, Yoshinoya cheap beef dishes, vending machine “oden kan”, and processed nutrition bars, e.g. Calorie Mate
14. dislike for natto, celery, shitake mushrooms, eggplant and fish (note: these food items seemed to come up frequently in the negative category)
15. collect dolls of idols
16. reluctant to communicate in person with others & very shy with the opposite sex

The above are general tendencies, reference points from where to begin, markers along life's daily unfolding forming a setting from which one may peek into *otaku* nature.

The *way* of the *otacool* is to transfigure accepted patterns of beauty, lifestyle and truth itself. In stepping outside of the Japanese group and, in turn, outside of society's box, the *otacool* touches other ways to be alive. Priorities are set up around ***mind – time***; a time to enter the mysterious realms of the imagination; a time to interact with possibility; a time to bring back never seen treasures from foreign lands. Often entry into these mental spaces is through self reflection, art, science and digitally created virtual environments - all reality testers and shapers. Such is our power to explore wonder.

Among the shy, focused, inwardly drawn *otaku* there is often a desire to explore the gentler, warmer, loving aspect of life, including healthy relationships. Those *otaku* who bring back bright concepts and successfully integrate them into a balanced lifestyle of mind's creativity with earth's sensuality become today's true *otacool*.

Professor Hisao Ishibuchi² of Osaka Prefecture University has focused his research on *computational intelligence* - self evolving decision making machines. His concern is that in the future these "self-evolved" computers may war with each other. This all leads to *otaku mind* where fuzziness prevails. According to Steven Kaehler³, fuzzy logic (FL) engineer, "FL provides a simple way to arrive at a definite conclusion based upon vague, ambiguous, imprecise, noisy, or missing input information. FL's approach to control problems mimics how a person would make decisions, only much faster." Now we've arrived at the ultimate otaku fantasy:

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLEPLAYING GAMES (MMORG)

According to Video console historian, David Winter⁴ the first video TV game was conceptually created by Ralph Baer, an engineer at Loral TV in the USA. A brief history of the highlights follows:

² Professor Hisao Ishibuchi, Dept. of Computer Science & Intelligent Systems, Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka Prefecture University, interview - *Computational Intelligence*

³ Kaehler, Steven, Electrical Engineer, Boeing, Co, Seattle, Washington, *Encoder, Seattle Robotics Society*, FUZZY LOGIC

⁴ Winter, David, *The Pong Story*, www.pong-story.com, 2006

- 1 1951 - first video *TV game*, in conception only, by Ralph Baer
- 2 1966 - first playable *video game*, played mainly in arcades, a chase game, by Magnavox
- 3 1972 - first home video game, *Odyssey*, by Magnavox
- 4 1982 - ushered in new era and level of game playing with Nintendo's *Famicom* (Family home computer games)
- 5 1983 - 1985 Nintendo has nearly complete worldwide control over the video game industry with Famicom (NES). Their first big hit was *Donkey Kong* that included Mario.

1990 marked the beginning of powerful computer driven games whose simulations started approaching real life dramatizations. The major events in this entertainment arena occurred in this order:

- 6 1990 - Nintendo releases their Super Famicom (SNES) in Japan and *Super Mario Brothers*
- 7 1995 - SONY releases *Play Station*, and Sega their *Saturn*
- 8 1995 – Nintendo releases *Pokémon*
- 9 1996 - Nintendo enters the 64 bit market with their “Nintendo 64”

1995 was a monumental year in game development. 30 year old Japanese, Satoshi Tajiri, who as a child was called “Dr. Bug”, created a video game whereby the players could catch, collect, and train hundreds of creatures known as *Pokémon*. *Pokémon* would become a multi-billion dollar franchise empire capturing the video game, anime, manga, card, book, and other media venues. The name *Pokémon* (ポケモン) interestingly came from the French Romanized contraction of the Japanese brand, Pocket Monsters (ポケットモンスター *Poketto Monsutā*).

These *Pokémon* could evolve by learning new and more powerful techniques. They never died, but merely fainted, allowing them to go into combat another day. The evolution and no bleeding aspects were sensitive and critical aspects of game playing for Tajiri. In interviews, Tajiri⁵ has mentioned that as a child, while playing

⁵ Tajiri, Satoshi “*The Ultimate Game Freak: Interview with Satoshi Tajiri*,” *Time Asia*, Nov. 22, 1999, Vol 154

⁶ Tajiri, Satoshi, *ditto*

near the fishing pond or looking under stones he would observe the insects communicating with but also competing against one another. But to his dismay, he would also watch as the trees around his neighborhood were slowly being cut down and the population of the insects decreasing. Tajiri took these ideas and, with Japanese sensibility, created the concept of a communication cable between two players who, like in karate, compete, yet subtly bow to each other in respect. For Tajiri it was important that these *Pokémon* monsters were controllable by the players. “It could be the monster within yourself, [representing] fear or anger, for example. And they are put in capsules. Plus, everybody can give them their own names.”⁶

I would agree with Tajiri’s initial ideas that it is a way for individuals, many of whom are too sensitive to the onslaught of real world violence in fighting and environmental degradation, to *work through these fears and conflictions* of good and evil, right and wrong, the strong and the weak, within the beautiful and the ugly qualities that manifest around us yet live within all of us.

The next major step in video gaming came in the mid-90s with SONY’s Playstation and Sega’s Saturn. Today, this group of industrial cultural mind formers has been joined by Microsoft’s Xbox and Nintendo’s family friendly WiiU.

MMORPG today

Japanese *otaku* are among the leaders in the world of MMORPGs, the intoxicating, exotic, dopamine driven mind rush induced by *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*. Today’s online software uses complex routines that allow the characters to respond to each situation differently. The software today is a form of artificial intelligence. And the processing speed of the hardware is fast, very fast. The characters and their settings look mystifyingly alive and act in what appears to be real time. Upon entering this world, your character can act out chosen personas; and can change at your wish their personality, appearance, name, and the setting. As online gaming commentator Leigh Alexander wrote in *Critical Eye* in November 1, 2013 about MMOs “...they offer fantastic escapes, enticing gamers to play for

hours every week, sometimes for years, in magical universes where strangers become friends and ordinary people become heroes.”

A few of the more popular titles in 2014 are *World of Warcraft* with 7,500,000 subscriber members, along with *Guild Wars 2* with 5,000,000 members, and *Ghost in the Shell*, a futuristic fantasy game by the Korean company Nexon headquartered in Tokyo, Japan.

Nick Yee⁷, online gaming researcher in interviewing 50,000 online gamers compiled the following demographics several years ago and the demographics have but slightly changed today:

Average age – 26; Range in age - all; Teen age boys– 20%; all Female users - 12% depending on the game; Work full time – 50%; Married – 36%; Have children –22%

Yee found that the average gaming time per week is 20 hours, though for many, it is not unusual to play 40 hours a week when the urge arises.

In the world of MMORPGs, typically, a new person will join a guild, a team, comprised of a group of members. Each guild member will take on a certain personality trait that will respond accordingly to the other members and the action at hand. Yee’s research found the characters to be most chosen are: the *tragic* – slain parents, pained lovers; the *zany* – humorous, never tragic; *interaction* – scripted parts gradually developed by other’s response to them; *drama queens* – overly emotional, high strung; *heroes*; and *villains*.

First of all, not all gamers are *otaku*, and not all *otaku* traits are negative. Through my interviews, I’ve come to the conclusion that online role playing games *do not create psychological conditions* in the players such as: withdrawal, depression, anti-social behaviour, and an inability to cope with real world conditions, along with feelings of being misunderstood, not accepted by others, and not being appreciated. Online gaming does not cause but rather *highlights the existing symptoms*, and for many, provides a setting from which it is possible to *nurture undeveloped positive traits*, along with *connecting with others worldwide*.

There is no doubt that many people become obsessed with online gaming - why? For many people, with varying shades and degrees of *otaku* nature, the virtual

⁷ Yee, Nick, PhD *The Blurring Boundaries of Play: Labor, Genocide, and Addiction*, PARC forum (Palo Alto Research Center), July 20, 2006, Stanford University and more recently in the book *Proteus Paradox*, 2014, Yale University Press. Presently, a research scientist at Ubisoft. His research is focused on online gamers and immersive virtual reality.

world is not only a release from the stresses of the real world, but a place to “safely” work out, explore, experiment with, and grow with newly discovered parts of themselves. Actually, *joining a guild* in an online game can be very challenging in demanding *teamwork, communicating decisively with the others, socializing, courage, creativity, maintaining a focus, and at times, leadership skills*. The rewards are the building of prestige as one moves to higher levels of playing, pushing the limits of power, and gaining a sense of accomplishment, along with the virtual accumulation of *loot* (virtual reward items).

“Even when we believe we are free and empowered, our offline politics and cognitive baggage prevent us from changing,” writes Yee. “And where we think we are fully in control, unique psychological levers in virtual worlds (such as our avatars) powerfully change how we think and behave.”

Superman is a metaphorical *otaku* hero figure, an other-world being with dual personalities; the underdeveloped outer person and the bold hero beneath.

MOOC

As popular as the MMORPG have been, the recent online trend among *otaku* is toward MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses. MOOCs deliver learning content online, anyplace, anytime, with no limit on attendance at the convenience of the student. The cost is low, and if independently deciding which courses to take, the choices available, for anyone, are abundantly rich in quality and quantity as many of the top universities worldwide are now providing these options. For the *otaku* who generally prefers to be alone or with a few like-minded individuals, this option is perfect.

A portion of the people who enrol in MOOCs are pursuing a degree, fulfilling a work requirement, or a committed life long learner; they form the active learners group. Most enrollees though, are passive learners or somewhat curious about the subject; and are most likely to drop out of the course or participate on a low level. As *otaku* tend to focus on personal interests, which could range from dropping out of school to post-graduate research, without concern for societal demands and expectations, “...the true challenge of online education will be to identify what

students want to get from their virtual classroom experience and help them achieve those goals.”⁸

MOE CULTURE

“*Moe moee!*” the shout of joy or cheer by *otaku*. *Moe* is slang for a “very cute thing, or lovely thing.” Many of the *otaku* heroes and adored stars come from the characters in *manga*, *anime*, video and online gaming. A girl character that is idolized is given the added name of Tan (たん), the charming and cute child’s mispronunciation of Chan, a name of endearment given to young Japanese girls. Anime characters are often orphaned, yet independent, reflecting how *otaku* often symbolically think of themselves. A massive, extensive industry has been built around this *moe culture*. Shirts designed with *moe* characters, *moe* and *otaku* pants and hats that have now been universally integrated into standard clothing wear, dolls of the *anime* and on-line gaming idols and heroes, *maid cafes*, along with many more games, *manga* and *anime* to be consumed by the ever-loyal *otaku* and now an ever-growing fan base of mainstream followers. 65% of anime worldwide are made in Japan, but S. Korea and China are quickly catching up, adapting a *moe culture* including all the electronic devices and lifestyle items that support it.

⁸ Koller Daphne, Ng Andrew, Do Chuong, and Chen Zhenghao, *Retention and Intention in Massive Open Online Courses: in Depth*, June 3, 2013, Educause Review

The expanding *doll and figurine industry* has been quite a surprise with the famous electronic gadget districts of Akihabara in Tokyo and Nihonbashi in Osaka full of doll stores. Often they are found near the *maid cafes (meido kissa)*, theme cafes that cleverly cater to the special needs of *otaku*. Upon entering a *maid café*, a young waitress dressed in a cute, traditional European maid outfit, teacher or doctor uniform, greets the customer with “Welcome Master” while bowing reverentially deeply. In the café will be found large journal books for the customer to write short letters to one of his favorite maids. As part of her job, she will soon write a response in the journal so that when he returns, he can sit at his table or often a desk, and

leisurely, by himself, eat his desert while reading this letter from his fantasy admirer; and such is their communication.

POP ART

Within the *pop art* venue, I interviewed on several occasions **Junichi Ono**, the teenage pop artist phenom. Time Magazine in 2003, chose him as one of Asia's top ten child prodigies. From an early age he was traveling freely through the world of symbols, images and meaning. In his bright room, private and secluded from the outside, filled with pens, pencils, paper, computers and games, the creations of his lively imagination take shape. At the age of 8, after visiting the Statue of Liberty, he gave his first exhibition of sketches from his impressions of this grand monument. At the age of 10 he published his first book. NHK TV broadcasting company made a documentary on his life that has been aired countless times by request from the viewers. He has held exhibitions in Osaka, Tokyo, New York, Seoul, and by request of Prime Minister Koizumi met with President Bush as an adversary of peace. He has done charity exhibitions for Afghan refugees and victims of the tsunami disaster of 2004. Recently, in 2014, he has been in high demand from large corporations wishing to portray youthful freedom. His artwork is on high fashion clothing, bags, accessories, cups, postcards and TV anime. His colorfully inspired message shines of hope for global peace and friendship.

Although Junichi Ono exhibits *otaku* tendencies, at the ripe age of 25 (in 2014), he is well integrated into society and represents today's *otacool*.

Another, following a similar track to Ono, is Hazuki Yamawaki. In the privacy of her home, at the age of 18, she has become a multi-award winning artistic force in clothing design and art. Her work reflects edgy freshness and individual uniqueness.

LINE

LINE, a Japanese social networking app, offers free mobile phone messaging, voice and video calls. At the time of this paper, it is the number one most downloaded app in 52 countries. It presently has 500 million worldwide users. Although originally a South Korean company, it was in Japan where *otaku*, looking for cheap and unique, latched onto it, and soon became the dominant social media in

Japan, while spreading through-out Asia. This author surveyed 145 university students in Japan and 93% said it is their primary means of mobile connecting.

ANIME

Today, Japanese *anime* (animation) has captured and led the world with its exaggerated features of big bright eyes, wildly colored hair super-heroes male and female, often with supernatural powers, mixed in with love, revenge and power backed by exquisite visual settings and captivating fantasy story lines; all providing a mix that has inspired animators world wide and a frenzy in copying.

For the typical *otaku* to suspend reality and become someone more free, more powerful, more independent, imagining and acting out a life that is way beyond the often strict set of rules for social behavior, *anime* is a perfect fit.

CONCLUSION

I would like to redefine *otaku* and, in turn, society's perception of their nature. I have called this *otaku* tendency **OTACOOOL**. The *otacool* of today are, in some ways, the shadows of *Zen* monks who, over the centuries, have illuminated the mindscapes of thousands of self-awareness journeyers. They withdraw, go into an isolated area, enter the realms of their mind, and face the creations of their conscious and unconscious imagination: fear, doubt, sorrow, pain, wonder, and joy. Deep feelings come forth of survival, sex, power, love, truth, and compassion. These feelings take the imaginative forms of protective deities and destructive demons of idyllic heavens and hellish landscapes. Scenarios from the most mundane to the heroic are played out. Are these *Zen*-like *otacool* the teachers or are they the students? They are *unenlightened teachers by default*, meaning they are traveling in new mental territory without guidance or seasoned wisdom and bringing many others along with them for this ride. The trip is, exciting, exhilarating, creative and at times, destabilizing, scary and, for some, dangerous.

Many *otacool* have had a *major influence* on Japan's society. Though often below the radar screen for observing, they have been prominent drivers in moving Japan out of the economic recession of the 1990s and early 2000s. Many have integrated well into the society. Many have not. Their devotion *to devising, inspiring and using high technology* hardware, software, tools, gadgets, anime, manga, robots,

and games, along with a clothing style that has become mainstream pumped the Japanese economy. Jumping over to the States, one of earliest and most famous *otacool* is Bill Gates, Harvard University drop-out and Microsoft co-founder; a success in *otacool* integration. They have also *changed the way the youth of today communicate*. The network of friends and the amount of daily communications with others has, in general, vastly increased. Although much of this communication is in a virtual, non face to face form, at this point, one cannot say that it carries less feeling or is not as deep and meaningful as pre-internet days. The nature of the transmission of ideas, emotion and information has changed. *The sensory input within a communication exchange has been mitigated, but the importance of words and symbols has been enhanced.*

On some level it may seem that I've completely embraced the *otacool* lifestyle of befriending intelligent computers and withdrawing into fantasy worlds and virtual communication relationships. Actually, I believe in their premise and promise of an enriched life through a deepening and extension of the wonder of our imagination. There are ***three important concerns*** though that I have with the *otacool* lifestyle.

First, as Japan is moving more towards an ***otacool nation*** there is a tendency among young people to *withdraw from the outer real world*, and become physically isolated in a world of their own making. The negative implications could be seriously detrimental to the country, including such areas as forsaking responsible work and an inability to maintain harmony within social interactions.

Second, on the edges of society, there is a *polarization that is growing ever stronger*. Politically, the ultra-conservative far right, that fosters militaristic nationalism, has become more active, threatening and, at times, reactively violent towards people who publicly speak out on issues that run counter to their beliefs. The *otacool*, though not a political force and seem to take little political action, are taking up the ultra left, liberal, anti-war, unobstructed freedom position. Though certainly quite different than the action oriented hippies facing off against the pro-war conservatives during the Vietnam War, the *otacool* are standing against their nemesis figuratively through battles on the virtual playing field.

My *third* concern is *integration*. To be fully functioning, active, healthy, contributing members of society *otacool* must find a balance between living in the

inner and outer worlds. There is a time to go within to collect, to assimilate, to refresh, to organize, and to renegotiate one's relationship with the greater Life. And there's a time to go outward into the world as an integrated whole being. The question is, "Who is willing and who is capable of understanding their special characteristics and needs and, in turn, guide the *otacool* towards confidence, well-being and wholeness?" Such a demand is often beyond the parent's ability, as how could a parent fully understand unless he or she knows their world, experientially or vicariously. For a parent to live in this *otacool* state of mind with a child would not be easily accepted by the child, as it would be perceived as moving into their personal territory. And how many teachers are prepared to pass through the portals of this new land where the winds carry information coded in new forms, relationships are built upon simulations, and guidance is scarce? It's a significant challenge that we are all faced with, and the degree to which we understand it will define the depth of our relationships, the clarity of our communications and the economic health of our society.

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