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(出版者 / Publisher)
The Institute of Comparative Economic Studies, Hosei University
(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)
Journal of international economic studies / Journal of international economic studies
(巻 / Volume)
32
(開始ページ / Start Page)
117
(終了ページ / End Page)
137
(発行年 / Year)
2018-03
(URL)
https://doi.org/10.15002/00014853

Journal of International Economic Studies (2018), No.32, 117–137

Maids in Akihabara: Fantasy, Consumption and Role-playing in Tokyo.

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> Culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved. Making sense of anything involves making sense of the person who is agent in the process; sense making dissolves differences between subject and object and constructs each in relation to the other. Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure.
>
> (Fiske 1989, 1)

Introduction: Maids and Maid Cafés

The genesis of this article was a discussion, started in an Irish pub in Kyoto during a workshop reception in April 2006, about the meanings of the Japanese word *otaku* and the different ways it has been translated into other languages.

While discussing the different scholarly attempts to establish a typology or definition of *otaku*, often translated into English as 'nerd', 'geek' or 'enthusiast'[1], we decided it was best to visit Akihabara, which have been described and marketed as 'the *otaku* Mecca' (Galbraith 2010) and '*otaku* town' (Morikawa 2012). Akihabara is a district in Tokyo well known for its many shops specialising in electronics, computers, video games, *anime* (animation), *manga* (comic books) and figurines related to both *anime* and *manga*. In particular, we turned our attention to *maid cafés* (*meido café* in Japanese) that at the time were presented in the media as increasingly popular meeting places for "*otaku*" within Akihabara. One of us remembered a television news programme from the beginning of 2006 which introduced this popular new style of café in Akihabara to a wider audience. In maid cafés, waitpersons dress in uniforms inspired by those worn by the young maids who served Victorian English upper-class households, uniforms that are filtered through the lens of contemporary Japanese *manga* and *anime*. According to the news reports, customers enjoyed playing cards or taking Polaroid pictures with the maids while having lunch. One colleague recalled a failed attempt to visit one of these cafés: she selected a place that was well represented on television and had an attractive webpage, but when she arrived she found a long queue and was told she would have to wait three hours for a table.

The maid cafés started to frequently appear in Japanese media in 2000, after the first temporary maid café, Pia Carrot Restaurant (*Pia kyarotto resutoran*), was opened in 1998 by the studio Broccoli [2] which produced a game software set in a family restaurant (Galbraith 2011). Maids and maid cafés

[1] *Otaku* originally is a polite form of the second-person address 'you'.
[2] http://www.broccoli.co.jp/

are often described as meeting point for *otaku* or related to the so-called *moe-culture*[3]. However, after television news and popular magazines started to present maid cafés as an original and unique phenomenon, they became an increasingly popular place for tourists and families to visit. In the light of the media attention, the slightly negative image of the maid cafés as closed places for *otaku* rendezvous has changed considerably. But are all *maid cafés* offering the same experience? Or the image promoted in the media is only related to a specific concept of maid cafés, which might be different from earlier versions of these businesses?

To enter a maid café, customers are required to follow a set of rules or conditions, including written rules visible at the café and tacit rules of interaction between customers and waitpersons. In some ways, these rules are similar to those given on a notice board in an amusement park, or to the requirements for attending a traditional performance such as a tea ceremony. In other words, the service can be offered and can be received only if both performers and customers understand and follow the same rules. The maid café is a space that can provide pleasure and entertainment to people who are able to *read* the space correctly; consequently, only people who understand the meaning of the space and the ritual and who agree to respect the rules can fully appreciate it. From this point of view, a maid café can be considered a space where the relationship between 'givers' and 'receivers' (or 'producers' and 'consumers') creates a unique standard and experience of café service.

But why do maid cafés require customers to follow rules? What is special about the consumer-maid relationship? What is attractive in the fantasy world of maid cafés?

In this article, we argue that what is consumed in maid cafés goes beyond simple food and drink. Maid cafés offer a value-making service based on the role-playing rules shared by customers and staff. The innovative aspect of maid café service is in the *symbolic* value of the product. What matters in the maid cafés is not only the ways in which the product functions, but also the way it involves, and indeed creates, emotional content for the user. Maid cafés are spaces where a role-play is performed between people who enjoy *anime, manga* and video games. In this space customers who are often on the outside of mainstream Japanese culture can enjoy an extra-ordinary experience based on a fantasy world and become involved in what we define, borrowing Aden Roger (1999) words, as a 'symbolic pilgrimage'. Furthermore, we argue that the consumption process of immaterial goods in maid cafés needs to be understood in relation to the wider *moe* culture, to the *otaku market* and to the historical transformation of the Akihabara district.

Study on *Maid Cafés*

Extensive body of literature have been published on *otaku* and its definition (or, using Okada (1996)'s definition, on *otakuology*) in both Japanese and English (Okada 1996 and 1997; Azuma 2001 and 2009; Galbraith and Lamarre 2010, to name a few). However, academic research on *meido café and meido* has been very limited. When we conducted our fieldwork in 2006 research on *meido café* and *moe* was non-existent. The only publications available were advertising brochures printed by businesses themselves, photographic collections of different costumes of individual cafes (for example, Fujiyama 2005) and few non academic books on the newest trends in Akihabara. During the period of popularity of *meido cafés* in 2006-2007 few texts were published on economic potential

[3] According to the Nomura Research Institute (2005) the word *moe* was created by combining changing the Chinese character *moeru* (to burn) with 'moeru' (to sprout) in expressions like 'jōnetsu wo moyasu' ('burning passion') and 'hāto wo moyasu' ('burning heart'). In origin it seems it was used to refer to *manga, anime* and also to the quality of some actors' voices. Around 1993-1994 word games based on substituting kanji with the same readings were very popular among computer users and it seems *moe* was used as a word to express such feelings as *kawaii* ('cute') or *kandō suru* ('be moved', 'be impressed'). On the definition of *moe* see also Galbraith 2009; Macias and Machiyama 2004; Narumi 2009.

of these types of establishments (Akahori 2006; Hayakawa 2008). More recently Galbraith (2011) conducted a study of *maid* cafes as an example of 'alternative intimacy' emerging in contemporary Japan, while Sharp (2011) investigates the icon of maid in the discourse of eroticisation and commodification of female figure. Our study aims to offer a different prospective, focusing on how the workers at *maid cafés* perceive their role and how they negotiate the interaction with customers.

The People and the City: *Otaku* and Akihabara

> The area is not large- a few city blocks minutes away from central Tokyo by subway. By any standard, the buildings are not impressive; they include five-and six- storey structures covered with flashing lights and perpetually glowing neon signs, and old wooden ones seemingly on the verge of collapse. The stores are not exactly typical of Japan's ultra-modern department stores, The merchandise is piled high, the clerks are anything but hospitable. […] This is Tokyo's Akihabara- a two billion dollar microcosm of Japan's futuristic electronic world. (McMillan 1996, 3)

Akihabara, also known as Akiba or Akihabara Electric Town (*Akihabara Denkigai*) is a small area in Central Tokyo, located less than five minutes from Tokyo station on the circular Yamanote train line. The official area named Akihabara is part of Taitō district, while the area known colloquially as Akihabara (including the train station of the same name) is officially called Soto Kanda and is part of Chiyoda district. During the Edo period (1603-1868) the area was just out of the *Sujikai gomon* city gate (the actual Mansei bridge), one of the city gates of Edo (as Tokyo was then known), a gateway to northern and north-western Japan, on the way to the temple of Kan'ei, located in the nearby city of Ueno. Traders, artisans and lower-class samurai lived in the area. The entire district was destroyed by a vast blaze in 1869 and the local authorities transformed the area into a large open field in order to prevent any future fires from reaching the inner city. A small Shintō shrine was erected where the deity (*kami*) Akiba or Akiha, popular as a deity who could control fire, was believed to be enshrined. The zone was therefore called 'Akiba no hara' or 'Akibappara', which means 'Akiba's square'. In 1890, the railway was extended through the district. During the first decades of the 19th century, the train station was mainly used for cargo transport, but when the passenger service started in the 1920s, Akihabara became an important transfer point. During the 1930s a market related to electronic equipment, especially radio, started in the area and Akihabara began to develop its distinct identity. Immediately after the World War II, the Kanda district was the centre of black markets and black market of 'Akihabara Electric Town' was again associated with radio and electronics parts. During the 1960s, Akihabara became the town of household electronics, with a high concentration of shops selling refrigerators, washing machines, and black and white televisions. In this period, Akihabara also became the symbol of Japanese economic growth.[4] As household electronics began to lose their appeal, entertainment products started to appear in shops. Later, stores in Akihabara began to specialise in personal computers. In the 1980s, the concentration of computer-related shops attracted in the 1980s what Morikawa calls an 'unusual geographic concentration of computer nerd[s]' (2003, 17). In the 1990s, a number of stores specialising in *manga, anime* and figurines opened in Akihabara and Akihabara's streets are flooded with *anime* and *manga* icons, electronic gadgets, *amateur or* 'DIY' *manga* (*dōjinshi*) stores and figurines shops (Fig.1&2). Today, the driving force of Akihabara is consumption based on content and entertainment. Advertisements for new *anime* films and for video arcades are visible everywhere.

[4] On Akihabara history see Morikawa (2003); a timeline of Akihabara history can be found at: http://www.akiba.or.jp/history/

Figure 1. Cosplayers at Winter Comic Market, 2006. Photo by Erica Baffelli.

Figure 1. Advertising poster on @home Café building. Photo by Erica Baffelli.

Otaku originally means 'your home' and by association 'home', 'you' and 'yours'. Since the 1980s, the word was used as a slang term by amateur *manga* artists and fans to refer to someone who has difficulties in communicating and interacting with peers and who spends most of his or her time alone at home (Kinsella 1998, 311). The term gained a wider and more pejorative use in 1989 when Tsutomu Miyazaki was arrested and accused of abducting and killing four young girls. After Miyazaki's passion for *manga, anime* and computer games was exposed in the media, he became known as 'the *otaku* murderer' and an *otaku* (sub)culture, and a subsequent *otaku panic*, was created, mainly with a negative image, by the media (Kinsella 1998). *Otaku* became synonymous with problematic youth, 'embodying the logical extremes of individualistic, particularistic and infantile social behavior' (Kinsella 1998, 294). The term is currently used to refer to a subculture group and this use is attributed to Nakamori Akio who is said to have invented it in 1983 (Azuma 2009, 122; Kinsella 2000, 128). According to Azuma: "Simply put it, it is a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on" (2009, 3).

According to Morikawa, Akihabara is an extension of the *otaku's* bedroom into the wider city, which has far-reaching consequences:

> *Otaku taste* which had traditionally been cherished only in private rooms of *otakus*, is here displayed in the city streets with an unprecedented density. The loss of articulation between public and private is only a part of the phenomenon. Personal taste has emerged as a power to restructure the city. (Morikawa 2003, 3)

Compared to such ethnic enclaves as Chinatown or Little Italy (Morikawa 2003; Faiola 2005), Akihabara's 'geek ghetto' (Faiola 2005) attracted people who didn't feel accepted by mainstream society because of their tastes and hobbies. The people who transformed Akihabara weren't related by ethnicity or social class, but by personality and lifestyle. What they shared was a fantasy world and the 'tendency to confine themselves in artificial realms' (Morikawa 2003, 8). Therefore Akihabara became the space where "reality mimics the cyberspace created by computers" (Morikawa 2012, 152)

A decade after the Miyazaki affair, new attention is being paid to the *otaku*, due largely to a number of studies which have demonstrated conclusively that comic books, videogames and *anime* play a significant role in the Japanese economy. In 2005 the Nomura Research Institute released a paper claiming that 2% of Japanese population (2.85 million people) can be categorised as *otaku* and arguing that 'businesses should not treat enthusiastic consumers merely as "loyal customers" but rather study their consumption behaviour' to better serve them and to be more successful (Itabayashi 2004, 2). The Institute valued the 2005 *otaku* market at an estimate 290 billion yen.

Otaku has now been transformed from a youth-related social problem to an 'economic and cultural solution' (Yang 2005) and the word itself has been re-shaped by economists who define an '*otaku* market' and an '*otaku* industry'. Originally mainly based on the *manga* and *anime* industries, the *otaku* industry has expanded into a wider mix of mass media and technological realms, including *manga* and *anime* related magazines, video games, and figurines and other collectables. Nowadays, new products are usually launched together with their 'secondary products', which focus on specific characters from the content industries. Large collective events, such as the Comic Market[5] or the Wonder Festival[6] , are now promoting the industry and its products, reinforcing innovation and competitiveness for the industry and its consumers.

The Otaku industry is constantly expanding, with the Comic Market, Tokyo's Comic Market held twice a year in August and December, reached in December 2008 more than half a million visitors over three days (fig.12-15), more than Tokyo Motor Show. The emerging interest in the economic and cultural impact of fan or hobby-related consumption has transformed the *otaku* from the 1990's stereotype of the reclusive, antisocial male nerd into the image of the 'enthusiast consumer' who plays an important role in the contemporary economy.

A few comments about the specific character of the *otaku* market are necessary before we continue with our discussion. The *otaku* is in turn of very specific kind of consumer who is identified at least partially by the 'consumption of products geared toward fantasy' (Taylor, p.203). Their consumption driven by admiration and sympathy for particular products, these 'enthusiast consumers' are often less price sensitive than their counterparts in other areas of the economy. Many *otaku* engage in a variety of practices related to their consumption, ranging for the creation of online and offline communities of people with similar interests. In relation to *manga*, consumers create their own secondary products, participating in fanzine (*dojinshi*) publishing (Itabayashi 2004, 3) or writing amateur *manga* themselves.

In these and other ways sense, these consumers are comparatively active agents within the

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[5] http://www.comiket.co.jp/

[6] http://www.kaiyodo.co.jp/wf/index.html

larger structure of the content industries. Many *otaku* are eager to share their own thoughts and idea about products, which in turn generates the need for producers to work with a quickly adaptable and highly flexible marketing strategy. Such active consumption practices have other, far-reaching consequences. The *otaku* market is significant not only in cultural and economic terms, but also in driving technological innovation in the sector. A number of firms associated with high technology and with the content industries opened their own offices in Akihabara and the shops in the area are often the first place where new computer games or computer-related products are tested before being sold to the wider market. For these firms, Akihabara offer a place where new products 'can meet an informed and trend-sensitive group of consumers' (Nobuoka 2008, 20). Nowadays, few people live in Akihabara, but it is the place where people buy, sell and meet others with similar interests. The Akihabara AGC (Animation Games Comic) market is in constant flux and in constant need for new products and content. As in the past, Akihabara is still and heterogeneous space, a crossroads where both high-tech companies and consumers 'contribute to its creativity and innovative dynamics' (Nobuoka 2008, 12). *Otaku* consumers construct and re-construct the city when they use it for shopping, work and entertainment.

In parallel with the economic development of the *otaku* market, a new chapter in the history of the Akihabara district began in 2005 with the major redevelopment of the train station and by the opening of a new high-speed rail line with Tsukuba in Ibaraki prefecture. The attempts to re-invent Akihabara's image has provoked negative as well as positive reactions. In June 2008 around 1000 people joined the 'Akihabara Liberation Demonstration', demanding respect for *otaku* and protesting against the building of new department stores, which would destroy, according to the participants, 'the authentic spirit' of Akihabara.[7]

In a further move of Akihabara towards the mainstream, guide books are including the district as one of the 'must see' places in Tokyo and thousand of tourists from Japan and overseas visit Akihabara as an informal amusement park for new technologies and popular culture products, including the *otaku* themselves. Just as Harajuku, a popular shopping district in western Tokyo, is presented as the 'Holy Land' of 'Gothic-Lolita culture' (Gagné 2008, 139), Akihabara is now described as the perfect point to see an *otaku*.

Akihabara maid cafés

Since about 2000 and until around late 00s , maid cafés have been a growing attraction in a part of Akihabara, as one of the new businesses related to the *otaku* industry. On the Internet, there can be found many websites dedicated to different cafés as well as maid's blogs and sites with maid-related event information. Magazines on maid style and maid café guide books are countless[8], as are TV shows, TV dramas and Internet dramas featuring maids or catering to maid café customers.[9]

Basically, a maid café is a type of 'costume café' where a specific type of 'cosplay' (costume play) is performed. Cosplay, a contraction of 'costume' and 'role-play' (or simply 'play'), is most commonly used to describe the act of dressing up and performing like *anime, manga* or video game characters (Taylor 2007, 203; Newman 2008, 83). Cosplay cafés are places where employees

[7] See the demonstration official webpage: http://akiba630.moemoe.gr.jp/.

[8] See, for example, *Akiba moe makkusu*, 2005; *Meido Café seifukuzukan*, 2005; *Moe meido san no hon*, 2005; Akahori, T. 2006. *Meido kissa kaigyō manyuaru*; and Monthly Hirotatsu: a free newspaper promoting Akihabara's events and maid culture published by Otaba Inc.

[9] See *Maid in Akihabara* (http://web.archive.org/web/20051230010030/http://akiba.netcinema.tv/), a six-episode web-based drama released in February 2006. It is about a young girl, Saki, who goes to work in a maid café called *Meido no miyage* (Maid's gift) after leaving her job as waitress in a hostess club.

(waitpersons, managers, chefs) dress up and act as specific *anime* or *manga* characters. In the maid cafés, the cosplay is based specifically on a particular image of the proper behaviour of the generic character of the maid. In the simplest terms, maid cafés are cafés where the waitpersons are dressed as *manga*-style maids. These maids look like something out of a nineteenth-century story set in the home of a French or English aristocrat. Importantly, the maids also *act* like storybook maids. Cosplay cafés were first created in late 1990s and maid cafés are by far the most successful subset of this kind of business.

Cosplay contest and events are often organized at comics or fan convention and originally the manufacture of the costume was on integral part of the culture (fig.1). Additionally, cosplay and computer games are related in complex, intriguing ways. The relationship of cosplay in the material world and the *manga, anime* and computer games that inspire such play is not a simple unidirectional relationship. In fact, the interactions between the two are highly complex and dialectical in that each informs and influences the other.

An example of this cycle of influence would perhaps be helpful at this point. A café called Pia Carrot Restaurant (*Pia kyarotto resutoran*) opened in Akihabara in 1999.[10] The design of the restaurant was based on a popular visual novel (*bijuaru noberu*) and dating simulation game called Welcome to Pia Carrot (Pia♥kyarotto he yōkoso), released in 1996 by Cocktail Soft and which was later transformed into an animated series that aired on television between 1998 and 2002. The set of the game is a restaurant called 'Pia Carrot', and the main characters are restaurant employees. At the Pia Carrot Restaurant in Akihabara, closed in 2000, waitpersons dressed as the game's characters and the café was decorated to resemble as closely as possible the fictional setting of the series. Adding an additional layer of complexity to the formation of the cosplay café, Pia Carrot's waitpersons outfits recalled uniform used at Anna Miller's café,[11] a chain of café and restaurants imported to Japan from Hawaii in 1973. Anna Miller's (*Anna mirāzu*) waitpersons wore white, orange or pink jumper dresses with a matching apron and a heart-shaped name tag, a uniform that was very likely used as a model in the design of several comics and visual novels set in, or featuring restaurants. Thus, the waitress costumes in the physical world inspired those in the fictional world, which in turn inspire a new generation of physical creations which have deep roots in an idealised, fictional universe.

Akihabara maid cafés can be seen as the most recent example of this recreation of virtual spaces in the physical world. There is a distinct set of gender rules at play within these places. At maid cafés, the most visible members of the staff are female and male employees are usually limited to kitchen help and management duties, staying largely out of sight. In most cafés when a customer enters, the maids[12] give an extraordinarily humble greeting such as *'Welcome home, Master'* and, in order to enhance the illusion that the customers are indeed their masters, they often continue to serve them in a very humble fashion.

The figure of the maid is in fact a very complex cross-cultural construction. The character of the maid is not simply a reproduction of the housemaid of Victorian England and neither the aesthetic of the café nor the refreshments on offer have any historical or iconographic references to nineteenth-century Europe. In the final analysis, the maids are rather a recent creation of content industries, including *manga, anime*, games, collectible figurines and 'light novels' (*raito noberu*), books mainly targeted at teens and young adults characterised by short paragraphs, manga-style illustrations, and a heavy reliance on dialogue.

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[10] See http://sotokanda.net/his_cafe.html#1998

[11] See http://www.annamillersrestaurant.com/

[12] The word *maid* is used in this paper to refer to maid cafés' employees.

The character of the maid which inspired the maid cafés first appeared in videogames and then in *manga* and animated films. Among the large numbers of *manga* and *anime* featuring maid characters, there are a number of titles which have had a particular influence on the maid cafés, including *Mahoro Andō* (*Mahoromantic*), a *manga* series by Ditama Bow and Bunjūrō Nakayama, originally serialised in *Gum Comics*. In 2001, the *manga* was adapted into two *anime* series by Gainax, the massively influential studio behind such *anime* as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. *Mahoro Andō* is a science-fiction comedy *manga* and *anime* series about a former female android soldier called Mahoro V1046, who decides to dedicate her life to serving the son of her late commander as a maid. *Ema* (*Victorian Romance Ema*), a 2002 *seinen*[13] *manga* by Mori Kaoru,[14] which was also adapted in a television *anime* series by Studio Pierrot in 2005, is another product that has had a heavy influence in the world of the maid cafés. Set in Victorian London at the end of the nineteenth century, *Ema* tells the story of a maid who falls in love with a member of the gentry, but the boy's family disapproves of his relationship with a girl of a lower class. Likewise, *He is My Master* (*Kore ga Watashi no Goshujinsama*), a comedy *manga* by Mattsu and Tsubaki Asu in 2005, and produced as television *anime* series by Gainax, is of particular importance. A fourteen-year-old boy inherits a big house after his parents' death in an accident. After firing his parents' former maids, he hires three young girls, Izumi, Mitsuki and Anna, to serve him. Finally, *Hanaukyō Maid Team* (2001, also known as *Maid in Hanaukyō*), is an *anime* and *bishōjo* ('beautiful young girl') *manga* created by Morishige that has influenced the formation and aesthetic of the maid cafés. *Hanaukyo Maid Team* is about the adventures of Taro Hanaukyō, a young boy who inherits a grand house and hundreds of maids from his grandfather.[15] In *manga* maids are usually represented as young, attractive girls who address their employers deferentially as *goshujinsama* ('master') or *ojōsama* ('miss'), the latter generally used for employers' daughters. Maids are often comical characters who are forced to deal with employers with bizarre personalities who irritate them in various ways.

'Maid café' is used as a label in Akihabara for mainly three different types of business:[16]

1) *Maid cafés* or 'first wave' maid cafés, which includes the first maid cafés which opened in Akihabara around 2000. These cafés cater to regular customers, the atmosphere is usually quiet and photos or games with the maids are forbidden. Cure Maid Café[17] and Jam Akihabara[18] are some examples of this type.
2) *Tourist- oriented maid cafés*. @home Café (fig.4)[19] was the pioneer of tourist-oriented maid café and its former president, Miha Kawahara, declared she was aimed at changing the image of maid cafés. In an interview on the café website, Kawahara explains that her aim was to take a space that was traditionally reserved for *otaku* and make it accessible to everyone, in particular women, families and children. She said that usually people feel uncomfortable in maid cafés because of their atmosphere. She then created a bright space where people can enjoy maid-master role-playing. Most maid cafés appearing in mainstream media (especially on television) belong to this group. In the case of 'idol style' maid cafés, the management concept is clearly business-oriented as they strive to create an environment

[13] A *manga* genre usually targeted at young male audience.

[14] Mori Kaori published also other *manga* on maids' stories, for instance *Shārī* in which characters and setting are very similar to *Ema*.

[15] See Clements, J. and H. McCarthy (2001).

[16] See Morinaga 2006, 143.

[17] http://www.curemaid.jp/

[18] http://www.jam-akiba.com/

[19] http://www.cafe-athome.com/

with a theme park-like atmosphere which customers can enjoy much like an amusement park.

3) *One-on-one service maid shops*. A new typology including massage parlours, beauty centres, laundries, home cleaning services, fortune telling shops, mah-jong parlours and sex business. This group is clearly separate from the other two and their advertising doesn't usually appear in the same magazines. Most of the young girls handing out leaflets in front of Akihabara station wearing a maid uniform are working for one of these shops. They are considered very different from 'genuine' maid cafés and both customers and employees at maid cafés strongly distinguish these places from the others.

In addition to maid cafés, there exist a variety of related types of costume cafés, including cosplay restaurants or cafés, where waitpersons are dressed as *manga* or *anime* characters; butler cafés[20] (*shitsuji café*), where waitpersons are young boys dressed as old-style butlers; and *dansō* cafés, such as B:Lily Rose, where waitpersons are women who dress and act as men and are called *garçon*. Finally, in January 2007, The Sweet Trip,[21] a maid café for woman only, was opened in Akihabara. These types of costume cafés are more prominent in the Ikebukuro district of Toshima, in the northern part of Tokyo. Otome Road (lit. 'Maiden Road') is a nickname for a street in Ikebukuro with several shops specialising in *'otome kei' anime* and amateur *manga* (*dōjinshi*) aimed at women. Many customers in butler cafés and *dansō* cafés are female. Indeed, the 2005 film *Densha Otoko* (*Train Man*) presented Otome Road as the female counterpart of Akihabara. The first butler café, Swallowtail, opened in March 2005[22] and the business now includes a patisserie.

Costume cafés and the maid café concept have been exported from Akihabara and maid cafés have been opened all over Japan, for example, in Nipponbashi in Osaka.

The Starting Point: Exploring Akihabara's Maid Cafés

For our first visit on the evening of 11 May 2006, we chose a place called @home Café,[23] which was considered the most popular *maid café* in Akihabara, ranking first on Goo.jp as the 'The maid café people want to visit'. When we first visited the café, we were put on a waiting list and asked to wait in the shop downstairs. Most maid cafés have limit customers to a one-hour stay that can be reduced to thirty minutes during peak hours. The shop at @home Café has with seats and a juice vending machine for waiting customers. In addition, the shop sells the café's original merchandise, which includes pictures and posters of the "maids", cookie boxes with maid's illustrations, towels, CDs and DVDs. It also sells *manga* and *anime*- related action figurines. The café had also created a pop music group called *Meidoru*[24] who had become quite popular in the Akihabara scene. Videos from their concerts are showed in the café and the walls are decorated with the group's posters. The café creates culture in other, more surprising ways as well; @home Café maids' pronunciation of the word *'moe'* (as 'moee~') received the Ucan Shingo Ryūkōgo prize as the most popular new word in

[20] http://www.butlers-cafe.jp/
[21] http://sweettrip.biz/
[22] See Mainichi Shinbun 2007.
[23] http://www.cafe-athome.com/athome/
[24] The name is a combination of *meido* (maid) and *aidoru* (idol).

2005.[25] In the shop/waiting area, customers can also play with *gachapon* (capsule toys) or watch DVDs.

At the entrance, a poster explains the café's rules. These rules include the right of refusing entrance when the café is full or to reduce the period of stay. The poster also sets out in detail the role of the customer and the rules they must follow in order to enter the café. Taking photos of maids with mobile phones or digital camera is prohibited, as is touching the maids, asking them private questions, asking for their phone numbers or their working schedule. Customers are also forbidden to wait outside for the maids to finish their shifts.

As soon as you enter the café, a group of young girl wearing pink and brown maid-like uniforms welcome the customers with their characteristic greetings of 'Welcome home, master' (*okaerinasaimasen goshujinsama*) and 'Welcome home, miss' (*okaerinasaimasen gojōsama*). They also perform more mundane duties such as confirming the number of customers, asking if they prefer smoking or non-smoking seats, and taking them to their table. Then they bring hand towels and water to the table with the menu, later coming back to take the orders, all the while maintaining the expected deference and extreme politeness. At @home Café, the maids' uniforms are modelled on *manga* costumes, with dresses featuring exaggerated frills and flounce ribbons on the apron and a white cap. The dominant of pink and white and the combination of hat styles, hair accessories and small pieces of flair create the self-consciously 'cute' (*kawaii*) character of the maid café maids.

The childlike impression of cuteness is echoed in the overall aesthetic of the café. A big screen shows image of Meidoru's live concerts and the wall are decorated with posters of the maids and magazine articles about the café. The interior colours are white and beige, creating a light atmosphere decorated with star shapes in pale blue and pink, recalling nothing less than a kindergarten classroom. The menu and the posted list of games the customers can play with the maids are colourful, hand-written using rounded characters (*marumoji*)[26] and illustrated with childish illustrations drawn by the maid themselves. The menu includes the teas, coffees and hot chocolate usually served at cafés as well as beer and cocktails, but we noticed, though we didn't understand why at first, that most of the customers were drinking tea or coffee. As we didn't know any of the tacit or unspoken rules of the café, we ordered cocktails. They accepted our order politely, but, as we discovered later, we were immediately identified as 'tourists'.

Most customers were young men; at a rough estimate, there were four male customers for every female customer. Many were office workers wearing suits. The differences between what we are calling 'tourists' and regular customers were immediately evident. 'Tourists' usually come in groups, sat at a big table, and spent most of their time talking amongst themselves. Regular customers, by contrast, were usually by themselves, seated at the counter and, when not talking or playing with the *maids*, they read comics, sent emails by mobile phone and tapped away on their computers. For the most part, the regular customers drank tea or coffee rather than alcohol. It is quite normal to see groups of regulars sitting at the same table without talking to each other, but reading, working on computers, or looking at their mobile phone screen. They gave the impression that the café was an

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[25] http://singo.jiyu.co.jp/index.html The Ucan corporation offers a continuing education programme. In partnership with Juyukokumin publisher, who publish *The Encyclopaedia of Contemporary World*. Every December, an event is held to award the most popular new word of the year. The Ucan-Juyukokumisha prize started in 1984 and receives wide attention by the media every year.

[26] The *marumoji* style is also known as *garu moji* (girl character) is a style of handwriting in which the edges of characters are rounded-off. It started to be used in mid-1970s and become widely used in 1970s and 1980s, especially among school girls (Yamane 1986). It was mainly used in informal writings, such as personal letters, and it is considered close to informal language. Being a non-standard form on writing, it is often been seen as inappropriate by education authorities.

extension of their private living space more than a meeting place.[27]

The first time we visited @home Café they gave us counter seats in front of a small stage that is used for occasional performances or for taking Polaroid pictures with the maids. The costumers can choose from different poses for their photos, such as those imitating a cat's paws or cat's hair, where the maid places her hand on top of customer's head. The customers receive a personalize Polaroid pictures with their name and some illustrations drawn by the maids. At the time, the price for each picture was 500 yen (around 4€) and some customers had several pictures taken while posing in different ways. There are, again, some unspoken rules about how to act when taking pictures and when playing games with the maids, rules that the regular customers know very well. An example; the @home Café has invented a unique rock-paper-scissors game, called *'moemoe janken'*, with specific rules and wording. If you need to ask about which words to say and the meaning of the gestures, you immediately reveal yourself as to be a 'tourist'. As he looked like a regular, we asked a young man sitting next to us to explain us some of the basic rules. He told us that customers usually order coffee or tea because the maids offer sugar and milk and will chat with the customers while stirring the drinks. Similarly, meals such as the rice omelette (*omuraisu*) are very popular because customers can ask the maids to write a personalised message or draw a simple picture on top of the omelette with ketchup (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. A popular hand-decorated rice omelette at Jam Akihabara. Photo by Keiko Yamaki.

After our first visit to the café, we immediately understood that the place was very different from a restaurant, but also from the 'adult entertainment' business, which maid cafés are often compared to in the media. Our first impression was more of a place where people were having fun engaging in maid-master role-play. But because we didn't understand the implicit rules of interaction that were in place, our behaviour was largely inappropriate and we felt not only isolated, but also in important ways *illiterate*. Simply, we were unable to read the café properly and were thus not able to take pleasure in consumption. We left the place determined to continue our research into maid cafés and their particular practices of consumption.

After extensive research on the Internet and in magazines and other publications dedicated to the maid cafés, we returned to Akihabara and visited several other cafés during June and July of

[27] See Morikawa 2003, 6 for his definition of 'private room extended to the city'.

2006. We made our first visit to @home Café's Don Quixote Café,[28] which includes also a maid laundry and a maid fortunetelling shop. The café concept is entirely different from the main @home Café, and is very similar to a fast food restaurant, with plastic cups and loud music. The laundry and the fortunetelling shops seemed to attract far fewer customers than the café.

At Cure Maid Café,[29] which opened in 2001, making it one of the oldest maid cafés, waitpersons wear long black dresses, explicitly imitating the comic book *Ema*. Cure is thus highly specialised, something that is underlined by the fact that the café is almost impossible to find without the website map, as there are not any signboards outside the building itself. The atmosphere was very calm and relaxed, with customers working at their computers and little interaction between customers and waitpersons. The café also sells original merchandise such as teacups and cookies.

Café Mai:lish[30] is famous for *cosplay* events, but in the café games with maids are banned. The café serves alcohol, has large bay windows and pastel coloured walls (white, beige, pink). Uniquely, this café has a guest book where customers can write short messages to their favourite maid or comments about their outfits. Maids often reply to the comment with personalize messages such as 'Glad to see you Mr/Miss…' or ' Miss/Mr … is lovely'. The same day we visited also Mia Café[31] which incidentally is the only place where we met a non-Japanese waitress. Finally, we visited a new café in the @home Café chain, called @home Sabō, where waitpersons wears *yukata*, a casual cotton kimono, and the whole of the café's concept is oriented towards creating an image of a 'Japanese' maid.

During our visits to different cafés, we came to realise that each café has a different concept and hence a different and often very specific set of rules that customers must follow. The greetings the maids offer differed in each café. In some places it is forbidden to take pictures with waitpersons, while in others it is encouraged. In some places, it is possible for customers to play games with the maids, or pay for a chat, while in others, game-playing is forbidden. In practical matters there is likewise a degree of diversity; in some places we had to pay different cover charge depending on where our table was located. The stereotypical mass media image of the maid as a young girl in pink or white dress, talking in a childish voice and playing with customers, is not universal and appears to be mainly the creation of the most successful maid cafés, namely the @home Café group.

However, there are some common points of similarity in these places. First of all, all of the waitpersons we saw were dressed as *manga*-style maids. In all of these places, the experience of interacting with the maids took precedence over the quality of the décor, which can appear quite cheap, or the quality of the food and drink, which can be quite poor. In many of these places, regular customers receive point cards which allow them to receive original products and which encourage them to return time and again to the same café. Finally, and most importantly, all cafés have a notice board with rules and regulations regarding customers' behaviour. On the Internet, maid café websites introduce café concepts and display images of the café and its maids. In addition, many maids have their own blogs. However, the information these blogs offer is often steeped in fantasy; maids claim to have been born on a different planet, for instance, or that they live in a flower garden.

Jam Akihabara Fieldwork

We had decided early on that ethnographic methods such as participant observation, informal conversation and formal interviews were the most useful tools for gaining a deeper understanding of

[28] http://www.cafe-athome.com/athome_donki/

[29] http://www.curemaid.jp/

[30] http://www.mailish.jp/

[31] http://www.mia-cafe.com/

how the customer-waitperson relationships were structured in maid cafés. We also wanted to learn how both sets of agents – customers and waitpersons – connected to the place, and in what ways they felt themselves connected to it. Thus, the first problem we had to consider when starting our fieldwork was the accessibility of the field, particularly how to contact and interview maid café employees. After an unsuccessful attempt to contact the @home Café manager and staff, we had the opportunity to be introduced to the manager of Jam Akihabara, one of the oldest maid cafés in Akihabara. After our initial visit to the café in September 2006, the manager agreed to help us in our research and in November we started interviewing the manager as well as a number of waitpersons. All of the interviews were conducted at the café, sometimes during working hours and sometimes in the morning, before opening. The informants used only their work nickname, and most of them did not give us any personal information or contact details, though one of them give us her blog addresses and mobile phone numbers, which we used to contact her outside the café.

Jam Akihabara

The café, which opened on July 20, 2004, is located close to Chūō Street, in an area well known for computer and amateur *manga* shops. It is located underground and a sign on the street indicates the stairs. Business hours are from 12:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. on weekdays and until 5:00 a.m. on Friday, Saturday and on national holidays. There are 52 seats and the café serves an average of 200-300 customers daily during weekends and holidays and 100 customers on weekdays. Among the customers, who come alone, in couples, or as part of larger groups, roughly sixty percent are men and forty percent are women. In total, there are twenty-seven young women employed as waitpersons, with three or four working in the café at any given time. The two managers work mostly in the kitchen in order to keep out of sight. The café sells also original merchandise (stickers, file-holders, figurines of the maids) and amateur *manga* about the café, written by customers (Fig. 4). Furthermore, there are free magazines on Akihabara *maid cafés*, maid style, *manga* shops, figurines collections, and flyers for Akihabara *manga* or *anime* events available at the entrance. The café serves a variety of coffees and teas and also alcoholic beverages as beer and cocktails. The café also offers some main meal dishes, but the most popular meal is the *yōsei moemoe omuraisu* (literally, 'fairies' moe moe rice omelette'), a rice omelette on which the fairy (the nickname for waitpersons at Jam Akihabara) will draw a customer's favourite *anime* or *manga* character or a deliberately cute image

Figure 4. Maid related merchandise at Jam Akihabara. Photo by Erica Baffelli.

of a kitten or puppy (Fig. 3).

The purpose of our interviews was to investigate what services, either implicit or explicit, were offered in maid cafés and how the relationship with customers was perceived by the waitpersons. In the interviews we asked waitpersons to explain why they decided to work in a maid café, what they liked or disliked about the job, their relationship with costumers and their definitions of 'hospitality' in maid cafés. We also asked what the maids' relatives and friends thought about their jobs. Lastly, we asked the maids about their plans or dreams for the future.

All off the maids we interviewed were in their late teens or early twenties and they were all working part-time. Most of them are university students and others define themselves as 'freeter' (*furītā*), someone with a 'sometimes job'. Usually the maids' families do not know that they are working in a maid café, but their friends and classmates do.

When asked why they had chosen to work at the café, most of our respondents answered that they liked *manga, anime*, or cosplay. One of our informants was an amateur *manga* author. Only one girl said that she wanted to work as a maid because it was in itself an enjoyable part-time job. All of them chose Jam Akihabara because is a relaxed place (*ochitsuiteiru*) and is different from 'idol' style maid cafés, that is place as @home Café where maids became 'idols' and frequently appear in the media. They like to talk to customers, but dislike giving entertainment performances such as singing, taking pictures or playing games. Regarding their relationship with customers, they clearly separate regular customers from tourists, (*kankōkyaku* in Japanese). According to them, because of the recent boom in both Akihabara and the maid cafes, the numbers of customers have increased, but that some of the new customers misunderstand the rules of the café and behave incorrectly, asking the maids, for example, to sit by them and talk with them as in a 'hostess club'.[32] To the contrary, regular customers clearly understand the rules of the role-play, with customers playing the part of master and the staff playing the part of the servant. Waitpersons declared that they prefer to work with customers who know how to behave in the café. According to the employees' accounts, the most unpleasant part of the job is to explain to insistent customers that in Jam Akihabara they cannot play games or take pictures with maids, as is usually shown in TV programmes or in magazines about maid cafés. If the customers are too insistent, they are asked, if very politely, to visit other cafés.

In the matter of the definition of maid café 'hospitality', the key ideas seem to be 'communication' and 'answering to the customers' needs'. Aki, a twenty-four-year-old informant who wrote amateur *manga* and had been working as a maid for six months, reported:

> The customers come to maid café not just for food. They want to talk. Me too, if I go to a maid café and I can't talk to anyone, I feel quite sad. When I have time, I try to speak to customers and ask them something. I do the same both for regular customers and new customers.[33]

Most waitpersons are interested in Akihabara cultures themselves, so the conversation is full of shared interests. Mau, a twenty-year-old university student who had worked as a maid for a year and a half, said:

> We can communicate with customers much more than in "ordinary" restaurants or bars. I am myself an *otaku* and if we find some shared interest, I can talk about a lot of subjects. I enjoy it and I think it is very challenging.

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[32] Hostess club are night time entertainment business where staff (mainly female) entertains customers drinking and chatting with them.

[33] All translations from the original interviews by the authors.

The shared interests are related to *manga, anime*, video games and, in general, events and activities related to *otaku* culture (Azuma 2009). According to our informants, it is also important to adapt their behaviour to customers' needs and expectations, even stressing their performance to please 'naïve' or 'just like tourist' customers. Aki told us:

> With new customers I use more exaggerated service manners than with regular customers. I create for them a 'maid-like' and 'cute-like' (*kawaiippoi*) impression. They came here with a dream. I raise the tone of my voice and I do it. We cannot take pictures with them, but I think that it is fair to live up to their expectations to a certain extent.

Similarly, Ayuka, a nineteen-year-old 19 university student who had been a maid for a year, said, 'During the time customers, both regular customers and new ones, are here, I serve them politely.'

In summary, by their own accounts, the role of maids in Jam Akihabara seems to be aimed at making customers' dreams come true.

Jam's manager, Msan, is twenty-five years old and had been working at the café for a year and half. Before this time, he had also worked in a cosplay-hostess club. At Jam, working behind the scenes in the kitchen, he is in charge of recruiting staff, managing the practical affairs of the café and of managing the café's public relations, which consists mainly of liaising with local media. Usually, he doesn't appear in front of customers, the only exception being when he is forced to help waitpersons with impolite or difficult customers. According to his explanation, the concept of Jam is as a place where people can discuss things in a relaxed atmosphere. They don't aim to emulate 'idol' style maid cafés and they carefully select which magazines to appear in, refusing, for instance, to appear in any magazine with explicit sexual content.

According to Morinaga (2005), the maid café job market is highly competitive: only 20 out of 100 applicants will successfully be employed in the most popular cafés. Employers can thus afford to be very selective about who they hire. The first criterion used by employer appears to be the ability to cooperate and work in a team, while the personal interest in cosplay and *manga* culture seems to be secondary. The former president of @home Café said in an interview that she wants to teach her maids customer service skills based on her own personal experience of working as a waitress.[34] Msan, the manager of Jam Akihabara, confirmed that the café wanted to hire people that know how to work properly in a café. The employees, then, need to learn the basic *kata* (forms, Minamoto 1989 & 1992) that are essential to performing as maids. These *kata* include first of all the characteristic greeting, 'Welcome home, Master', which is distinct to the maid cafés. The conversation with clients is regulated by specific *kata* rules, which maids must also learn during their training.

Consuming Maid Cafés I: Role-Playing, Pleasure and Fantasyscapes

The interaction at maid cafés is based on a very specific role-play. In the fantasy world of the maid café, customers, acting as 'masters' are not visiting the café, but they are instead 'coming home' to a wealthy home where they are greeted by respectful, deferential servants. The rules of interaction are based on a multiple communication structure between maids and customers which consists of a number of different communication strategies: a) direct interaction at the café; b) online interaction through maids' blogs, forums and social networking; and c) mediated interaction through guest

[34] Degiper home page, 'Special interview with Kawahara Mika' www.digiper.com

books at the café. Online discussions focus mainly on shared interests such as *manga, anime*, computer games, light novels, and events related to these sorts of content. In their blogs, maids don't reveal their name or any authentic personal information, but by telling their customers what they did during the day or what comics they are reading, they allow the customers to enter somewhat into their own worlds and thus feel closer to them. In the guest books, the conversation between maids and costumers is asynchronous and based on a mix of language and pictorial images, drawn by both customers and maids. This conversation reinforces the fidelity of customers, who will come back to the same café to read a maid's answers to their comments. At the same time, the guest books allow shy costumers to express appreciation and admiration for their favourite maids. The tacit rules of interaction include the protection of maids' real identity. Asking maids personal information is inappropriate and will compromise the role-play performance. The tension between the desire to know more about maids and the rules of the game is an active enticement for customers' curiosity and for their continuing involvement in the role-play.

When customers enter a maid café to meet 'the cartoon women of their dreams' (Kelts 2006, 72), they enter into a different space and world. If we consider the highly regulated interaction between maids and customers as – to borrow Alexander's language – 'a performance that makes a transition away from the everyday world to an alternative context within which the everyday life is transformed' (1997,194), this interaction can be seen as a *ritual* in which the greeting 'Welcome home, Master' helps customers to make a transition to an alternative world. The maid-master role-play creates virtual community, constructed by a shared, standardised language which creates the feeling of being part of a wider group, the *Akiba kei*, or the 'Akiba type'. As our own experiences have shown, the fantasy world created by maid cafés need not be perfect and expensive designed to be effective. To the contrary, the food and drinks on offer are largely unspectacular comfort foods which are sold in a manner that underlines their associations with childhood or a 'general cuteness', if we can use such an unscientific term. For example, onomatopoeic words, such as *fuwa fuwa* (soft) and *toro toro* (simmer) are commonly used for the food and drink names in the maid cafés. Similarly, the crockery in these places is very simple and inexpensive and the larger interior design consists mainly of hand-made paper decorations. According to some regular customers we met during our fieldwork, maid cafés are similar to school parties or events. The handmade feeling is perceived by regular customers as both comfortable and familiar. Furthermore, the origin of maid cafés is related to cosplay culture, in which homemade customs are an important aspect to enjoy the identification with the favourite characters.

In maid café customers and maids enjoy role-playing being both audience members and performers simultaneously, being both 'performer and observer of the same show' (Goffman 1959, 86). But both participants know that is a game and that there are rules, shared and accepted by participants. The relationship between customers and the *fantasy* world they create can be understood only if we consider the subcultural background which they share. In particular, customers enjoy this brief fictional entry into the *manga*-world, a fantasy place where they can meet their heroine or particular popular *moe characters*. *Moe* originally means plants spouting, but since the late eighties its meaning has developed an added nuance. The new meaning of *moe* is entirely caught up in issues surrounding hobbies and personal taste. Specifically, *moe* means to be attracted to a specific *manga* or *anime* character and to have strong feelings toward this character. *Moe* suggests the condition of being infatuated with one character or thing and implies an image of someone burning with desire. (Macias and Machiyama 2004, 50).

Jam Akihabara type maid cafés are specifically targeted at customers who enjoy certain kinds of content and who want to share information with or talk with maids in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere. The employees themselves define the place as 'a café for traditional/classical *otaku* to

go' and often they share common interest with their customers. It is important to keep in mind that the 'maids' themselves are both producers and consumers of *otaku* culture at the same time. They produce the maid product, but at the same time they consume the same commodities as their customers. On the other hand, @home Café style cafés are based on a different concept, focusing on a more lively interaction between maids and customers. The aim is to create a café which works and feels like an amusement park, where everyone, including families and children, can feel comfortable and appreciate the entertainment on offer. To enjoy and *consume* Jam Akihabara space, customers are required to understand the common background of specific content cultures, while in @home Café style spaces, the consumption is based on a direct interaction with the maids through singing, playing games and taking pictures. In both places, the fantasy (in the sense of 'making visible', from the ancient Greek *phantasia*, 'appearance' or 'image' and *phantos*, 'visible') of the consumer is materialised with the help of the maids and the rules which govern the behaviour of both parties.

We can look to contemporary theoretical work to help us flesh out our picture of what is happening in the maid cafés. Susan Napier expands on Arjun Appadurai's work on contemporary cultural flows to argue that the ludic interaction with the world of fantasy have led to the development of what she calls 'fantasyscapes':

> In the fantasyscape, play and setting are the two most important elements, creating a plethora of forms of virtual reality such as the densely constructed entertainment worlds of Disneyland and other theme parks, the intense involvements of video or online gaming, or the short-term but highly engaged gatherings of fan conventions. Fantasyscapes are inherently liminal worlds, temporary alternative lifestyles that exist parallel to the mundane, which people enter and exit when they please.
> (Napier 2007, 11)

Following Napier's definition, maid cafés can be considered as 'concrete fantasyscapes', places 'in which the participants lose their world identities … to indulge in ludic pleasures in a space securely outside mundane time and activities' (Napier 2007, 12). In short, consumers take pleasure in consumption of the emotional experience, play and identification process related to maid-master role-play.

Consuming Maid Cafés II: The Symbolic Pilgrimage

The aim of the former president of @home Café, was to create an amusement-park-like café'. She declares that before @home Café was opened, the atmosphere in many maid cafés in Akihabara was unpleasant and was limited to a small number of regular customers. Her idea was to create a place where staff and customers can have fun in a bright, lively atmosphere that could attract customers from outside Akihabara. She declared that '@home Café is not selling only drinks, but also time and space. Customers pay to enjoy their time in this entertainment space and I want them to feel they can profit from it. I want them to go home and want to come back again'. The added value of @home Café is created by the rigorous selection and training of its maids, who have to learn how to perform their role as an @home Café maid. The president designed the maid uniforms and trained her waitpersons to create an image of maid-idol (*meidoru*) and presented this image to the media as well as to her customers. She instituted very strict rules to control the relationship between the maids and their customers: it is forbidden to take pictures with ones' own camera; it is forbidden to ask maids for any personal information, such as their real names, street address, or phone number. Waitpersons can speak with customers, but for just a few minutes and even then they must stress their performance, speaking in a childish voice and acting in an exaggerated *kawaii* manner.

The @home Café concept has proven to be successfully based on events and media strategies, allowing maid cafés to be exported beyond Akihabara. At the same time, the image of cute and polite maids of @home Café became the stereotypical image of Akihabara maids, changing the outside perception of *otaku* as antisocial male nerds and transforming Akihabara's gloomy and 'geeky' image into something more palatable. The maid café experience, however, for customers who enjoyed it before the 'Akihabara boom', is based on the borderline experience between the virtual world and the real world and on role-play based on communication with maids.

In the case of 'first wave' maid café, such as Jam Akihabara, regular customers usually come to cafés after shopping in *manga* and *anime* shops, or at computer shops or even in well-known figurine shops such as Volks or Kaiyōdō. People living outside Tokyo often visit Akihabara after attending *manga* exhibitions, such as the Comic Market and Comic City. A maid café is a place where they can rest comfortably during shopping, a place where they can find someone who they can talk to about what they have bought and where they can bring themselves up to date on the latest news concerning Akihabara events or amateur *manga* contests. They don't come to maid cafés necessarily to find someone sharing same interests, but it a place where they know their interests can be understood. From this point of view, we can think of the maid cafés as places where the Akihabara 'community of interest' (Morikawa 2003) – defined as a community that does "not depend on shared geographical locations or blood ties" (Morikawa 2012, 152), but is based on shared interests and taste - can feel at home in a public setting.

Because of business like maid cafés and one-on-one service shops and because of media influence, the original image of maid café as a meeting place for people sharing similar interests and hobbies has been transformed into something altogether different. Originally the maid café was a place in *which otaku* could find people who shared their values and their love of specific kinds of media. Most waitpersons liked cosplay or were amateur *manga* writers. For many consumers, the visit to the café is part of a larger tourist 'sacred journey' (Graburn 1989) to Akihabara, which included shopping and enjoyment of the other places and commodities in the area. The sacred journey to Akihabara allows customers to create their own sacred landscape and to make an escape, performing what Aden Roger defines as a 'symbolic pilgrimage':

> Rather than embarking upon a 'real life' journey to a holy shrine, symbolic pilgrimages feature individuals ritualistically revisiting powerful places that are symbolically envisioned through the interaction of story and individual imagination. That we make such moves individually does not mean that imagining through stories is not a social experience, however, for we are imagining within the context of habitus and recognize that others share some of our experiences and perceptions.
>
> (Aden 1999, 9-10)

If we define making the rounds of hobby shops as a fantasy tour, we could consider going to a maid café several times as a stop over, a break in the pilgrimage (Fig. 5).

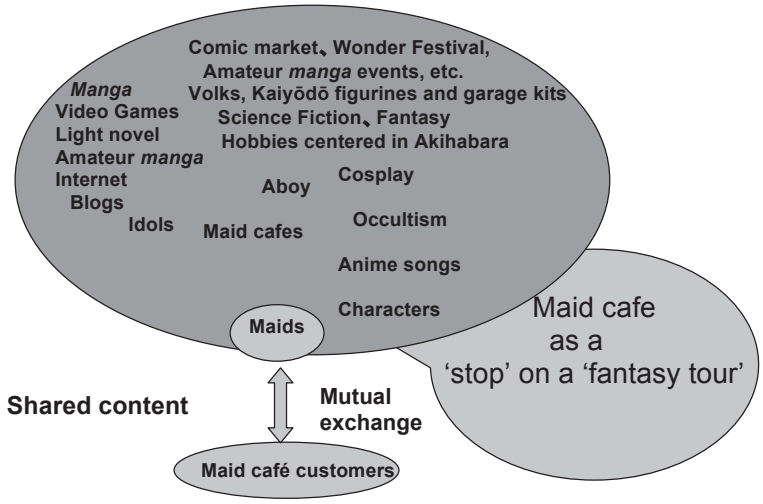

Figure 5. *Otaku* market/*moe* market

To understand the meaning of enjoying maid cafés, we cannot consider only maid cafés themselves. Instead, we need to consider them as part of a wider culture and market centred around Akihabara and around specific content industries. If 'the interconnection between fantasy and reality is a key element of *otaku culture*', as Taylor argues (203), maid cafés offer *otaku* the possibility to have a contact with their fantasies.

Concluding Remarks

Akihabara is a heterogeneous space where new technologies are not only created and tested, but also linked to entertainment and lifestyle in complex and at times mutually reinforcing ways. The content industries market in Japan, far from being a small business, has transformed the image of the district and of the people defined as *otaku*. As is true of all the products in Akihabara, the main characteristic of the maid cafés is their *fluidity*. Products change rapidly and new popular spots are opened following customers' need and customer's ability to create and re-create their fantasy worlds.

The popularity of cosplay restaurants and maid cafés has spread to other regions in Japan such as Osaka's Den Den Town as well as other Asian countries, such as South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand. A maid café was opened in Canada and the Maid Café CCO Cha was one of the most popular attractions during Japan Expo 2006 in Paris. In some countries business regulation laws make it difficult to export the maid café model, but the image of Akihabara's maids has been spread through the *manga, anime* and figure-collecting subcultures. There are many signs that *otaku* culture is entering the mainstream of respectability and acceptance. The artist Takashi Murakami's works transformed comic books' cute imagery into modern art exposed *otaku* interests and aesthetics to a worldwide audience. In 2004, parts of Akihabara's Radio Hall, a building where you can rent small, transparent cubicles to sell or show off personal collections of merchandise, were recreated by Kaichiro Morikawa at the Venice Biennale.[35] Through the innovative practices of 'enthusiast consumers' and the businesses that cater to them, such as the maid cafés, which only could have developed within the specific cultural matrix of Akihabara, the *otaku* has been

[35] http://www.jpf.go.jp/venezia-biennale/otaku/j/index.html

(unapologetically) transformed from the symbol of disturbed youths driven to isolation and even violence by the pressures of their culture into a powerful symbol of Japanese cool.

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