

Playable, Portable, Pretty?: Gender in Nintendo DS Lifestyle Software

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers how the Nintendo DS (2004) helped to both break from, and reinforce the barriers of feminized time, spreading casual gaming into women's everyday life through so-called 'lifestyle software' (*jitsuyō sofuto*). The paper is a work-in-process that presents the concept of lifestyle software on the Nintendo DS as ludic media that constructed, inflected, and censured both a "female" subjectivity, and a "female" body through productive play.

'LIFESTYLE SOFTWARE'?

Although the Nintendo DS was marketed as a gaming console, the Japanese game industry also developed and sold software for the DS that challenged the conventional boundaries of 'games.' One key feature of lifestyle software was its expansion of the industry's core demographics of children and adult male players (*Gēmu sangyō hakusho* 2007). Perhaps the best-selling game of the time was released overseas as *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* (2005)—the translation of brain teaser books marketed to stave off the effects of aging and based ostensibly on a medical doctor's research. However, a significant percentage of 'lifestyle software' also targeted women between their late teens and middle age, thus growing female player demographics beyond preteen girls and women's romantic simulation (e.g. *otome* game) players (*Gēmu sangyō hakusho* 2007).

Whereas today, this type of software is widely available on smartphones, DS lifestyle software developed in its moment in dialogue with the expanded functionality of Japan's early networked cellphone ecosystem (Steinberg 2019)—an ecosystem that ultimately would go on to inform the development of the global platform architecture currently in use through Apple's App Store or the Google Play Store. Amidst the rise of social networking games on phones in Japan (Matsui 2021), the DS was successfully sold to women between their late 20s and 30s (*Gēmu sangyō hakusho* 2007). For this reason, we consider lifestyle software a key point within the genealogy of smartphone

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technology, and as a mold for the current moment wherein games and ludic media are treated as a service instead of stand-alone products (Dubois and Weststar 2021).

While existing research has considered the portability of the DS outside of Japan (Tobin 2013; Tussey 2018), the specificities and breadth of the domestic market has escaped the attention of Anglophone game studies. In fact, lifestyle software saw Japanese game designers dissecting feminized lifestyles, and inserting playful interfaces into gendered activities. The resulting plethora of products released predominantly in Japan spans a diverse number of lifestyle situations. For instance, *Esse kakeibo DS* (IE Institute 2007) created a gamelike interface for family budgeting—conventionally the purview of the female domestic partner in Japanese families. Other games tracked workout and diets, like *Teku Teku Enjeru Pocket* (Hudson 2006), while yet others, such as *Ano ne DS* (Three Ten 2009) worked as a communication aid designed for players with autism or learning disabilities.

PORTABLY FEMININE

As these examples illustrate, lifestyle software took shape within the imagination of female all-age mobility, and the DS as a kind of digital companion platform; or, indeed, a portable microcomputer. In our paper, we attend to two facets of lifestyle software. We perform close-play analyses of three selected lifestyle software pieces on the DS based on field work in Japan: *Face Training*, *An an kanshū josei jikara kinkyū appu!* [*An An Supervised: Feminine Wives Emergency Training*] (Bandai 2007), and *Dokodemo rakuraku! DS kakeibo* [*Anywhere, No Stress DS Household Account Book*] (Bandai Namco 2006). Whereas the first game quite literally features didactic play that maps and rehearses facial expression, the other two games rehearse the feminized roles of (fashion) consumer and housewife via digital play. We show how lifestyle software shapes and disciplines the female playing subject, orienting it towards the idea of feminine productivity in terms of expression, body, and self-organization of activity.

In so doing, we would further like to consider the ways that the DS pushed the boundaries of the gamic in a way that created a biopolitical media ecology around the player, attending not just to feminized consumption but also the reformation of her quality of life and body. This ecology aligned ludic media with normative rhythms and patterns of Japanese femininity, orienting female players through play towards dominant codes of middle-class consumption, feminized performative etiquette and dispositions of the body. We will show how the software is designed for women audiences with the purpose of multiplying productive play, which, according to Whitson and French (2021) can take the shape of reinscribing gender roles or encourage weight loss and physical activity (22).

In this connection, we situate lifestyle software within the rise of casual gaming around the 2000s—a phenomenon boasting popularity among female players (Juul 2010, 28). In fact, game marketing slowly turned to women and girls as potential audiences for SNGs on social networking sites and on the smartphone (Chess 2018, 106). We draw upon Shira Chess' insights that the conflation of women's work and leisure time has embedded concepts of productivity in female leisure (2018, 110). Chess shows that campaigns for the Nintendo DS aimed specifically at women audiences advertised the console as 'Do something with your nothing,' to fill in time between other productive activities, showing that "all time must be spent in some productive way" (2011, 236). Additionally, we build on scholarship that foregrounds the affective work of "simulated productive play" within the fragmentation of this female leisure time (Wirman, Chess, Albrechtlund and Enevold, 2009, Soderman 2017).

While some of Chess' game examples overlap with our definition of lifestyle software—such as *Brain Training*—Japanese products not released in Euro-American

markets are absent from her observations. Specifically, we draw attention to a category of products meant not simply to fill time productively, but also to create spatially agonistic activities that transform play time into a form of (re)producing normative femininity. We therefore supplement Chess' observations with our own to provide a more rounded understanding in how this software shaped feminized leisure and productive time within a Japanese social context.

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