The transformative power of subversive subcultures in Shibuya through *Jet Set Radio* and *NEO: The World Ends With You's* Interactive Metaspaces

William Helmke
University of Illinois
1924 S Orchard St Apt D
Urbana, IL 61801
whelmke2@illinois.edu

Keywords

Jet Set Radio, NEO: The World Ends with You, Henri Lefebvre, Urban Space, Interactive Metaspace, Youth Cultures, Fashion, Graffiti, Shibuya

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, many games have presented highly detailed reproductions of real-world physical spaces. Tokyo has been the subject of several games' spatial reproductions, including the *Yakuza* series and *Persona 5*. In the latter's case, the reproduction of suburban Tokyo led to fans becoming a nuisance to locals within the area (P-Studio, 2017). This analysis focuses on two games tied to Tokyo's Shibuya district and its youth subcultures: *Jet Set Radio* (2000) and *NEO: The World Ends with You (2021)*. While both games reproduce other parts of the city (Shinjuku and Harajuku, respectively), a significant focus of both games is Tokyo's Shibuya district, and its distinctive youth cultures inspire both games. Although the two titles were released 20 years apart, both share striking similarities in their representations of youth in Shibuya and their practices in space. Both games center graffiti/street art, youth fashion, music, and, to varying degrees, rebellion against conformity and authority within their gameplay and narratives. This similarity, coupled with their shared space of Shibuya, prompts a fascinating question: how are these games reproducing the connection between Tokyo spaces and youth identity, and how might they be appropriating these same spaces to comment on the challenges and struggles of youth in the city?

SHIBUYA'S HISTORY OF YOUTH SPATIAL PRODUCTION

For my analysis, I draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1991/1974) theory of socially produced space as a framework, considering how each game's reproduction of Shibuya draws on and reinterprets the district's spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space, presenting what I call "Interactive Metaspaces." To establish Shibuya's spatial production, I first present a brief exploration of youth culture in Tokyo and Japan more broadly, exploring how the production of Shibuya space developed a strong relationship with youth identity. Following in the footsteps of

modernology research developed by Wajiro Kon (2016/1927), Kaichiro Morikawa's (2012) work discussing the spatial history of Akihabara, and Shunya Yoshimi's approach to studying the city as text (Tamari, 2006), this history weaves through three significant trends within Shibuya. A diverse assortment of youth fashion cultures during the 20th century began to form in Harajuku as youth flocked to its shops selling Western fashions starting in the 1950s. These youth fashion cultures eventually spread to Shibuya by the 1980s (Keet & Manabe, 2016). These fashion subcultures also overlap with the second trend, the area's underground music scene, as the *Shibuya-kei* music scene sprang up in the 1980s and also shaped Shibuya fashion and led to a growth of music stores in the district, including the now well-known Tower Records store in 1995 (McClure, 1995). Then, noting specific subcultures such as *gyaru/gyaru-o,* I discuss how these subcultures' attraction to "delinquent" behavior is also likely connected to Tokyo's graffiti subculture trends, which started in nearby Shimokitazawa in the 1990s (Yamakoshi & Sekine, 2016). Business interests in Shibuya have further reinforced this connection with youth culture through their efforts to appeal to them, even as some spatial practices remain in tension with the authorities attempting to control and regulate the use of space. Even graffiti has been adapted for specific commercial goals (Pan, 2015).

SHIBUYA'S YOUTH CULTURE REPRODUCED IN VIDEO GAMES

Each game's reproduction of Shibuya draws from and contributes to these existing understandings of the district and how youth who spend their days and nights inhabiting Shibuya shape and "claim" the district as their own space. Specifically, I note a difference in philosophy between the ways that the youth in each game "claim" Shibuya as a space to call their own: with *Jet Set Radio* focusing on graffiti (as well as pirate radio broadcasts and illegal skating) as an explicitly anti-establishment act that allows youth gangs to claim parts of the city as their "turf," while *NEO: The World Ends With You* frames capitalist consumption as something that can be used as a form of expression and identity, expression that is enabled by the space of Shibuya. *NEO: The World Ends with You* also promotes an ideal of developing connections with others around you to claim that space for oneself. I then discuss how these representations reflect the norms of youth culture in Shibuya and build upon them within these games' reproductions of Shibuya. I also note how these differences might illustrate a difference in attitude in youth cultures in the 20-year gap between the two games' releases.

CONCLUSION

Both *Jet Set Radio* and *NEO: The World Ends with You* reproduce elements of the spatial production of youth in their gameplay and narrative. However, they present very different (though in certain ways complementary) perspectives. *Jet Set Radio* presents disenfranchised youth rebelling against society through their use of graffiti and pirate radio broadcasts, while the youth in *NEO: The World Ends with You* instead seek out a sense of place and identity by wearing specific brands and connecting with other youth with shared interests.

REFERENCES

Keet, P. & Manabe, Y. (2016). *Tokyo Fashion City : A Detailed Guide to Tokyo's Trendiest Fashion Districts*. Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing.

Kon, W. (2016). What Is Modernology (1927, I. Adriasola trans.). *Review of Japanese Culture and Society, 28,* 62–73. https://doi.org/10.2307/44649886

Lefebvre, Henri. (1991/1974). *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

McClure, S. (1995). Tokyo Tower has record sales. *Billboard*, *107*(12), 44.

Morikawa, K. (2012). Otaku and the city: The rebirth of Akihabara. In D. Okabe, I. Tsuji, & M. Ito (Eds.), *Fandom unbound: Otaku culture in a connected world* (pp. 133–157). New Haven: Yale University Press.

P-Studio (2017). "Persona 5 kanren chiki houmon (seichi junrei) ni kansuru onegai [A request concerning Persona 5-related location visits ("sacred place pilgrimage")]. Persona Channel. https:/p-ch.jp/news/823/

Pan, L. (2015). *Aestheticizing Public Space: Street Visual Politics in East Asian Cities*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd.

Smilebit. 2000. *Jet Set Radio.* Sega Dreamcast Game. Sega Corporation.

Square Enix Creative Business Unit I and h.a.n.d. 2021. *NEO: The World Ends with You.* PC Game. Square Enix.

Tamari, T. (2006). Cultural Studies in Japan: An Interview with Shunya Yoshimi. *Theory, Culture & Society, 23(7–8)*, 305-314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406073232

Yamakoshi, H. and Sekine, Y. 2016. "Graffiti/street art in Tokyo and surrounding districts." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art,* edited by J. I. Ross, 345–356. New York, USA: Routledge.