

# What (Meta)Games We Played: Early Gaming Fandoms and the Politics of Childhood in 1980s Japan

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 1980s Japan, gaming had a paradigmatic player—an unthinking and uncritical child, vulnerable to the predations of the medium. This figure’s digital play was often unruly, and their behavior confusing to adult commentators, including early stakeholders in game culture. Yet, for all the commentators who puzzled over players, few reflected on how children’s and adolescents’ actions spoke to a conscious, even political, engagement with the emerging norms of digital play.

This paper excavates the multiple meanings and sites of contestation around these norms, foregrounding the child as a game fan. It does so by attending to a subset of “metagames,” or those forms of play that eventuate “about, within, around, and without videogames” (Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 25). Specifically, it looks to the development of *urawaza* (secret techniques), a term that spoke to a mixture of cheats, exploits, glitches, and easter eggs. These metagames opened a space of negotiation between fandoms and the industry: how were games to be played, properly? As with elsewhere in the world, the industry and its broader media environment laid out a series of normative modes for engaging with games (Kirkpatrick 2017). Fans, conversely, sought to reclaim play from these predetermined forms.

This act of reclamation occurred through metagames, evincing many of the dynamics shown in studies of cheating (Consalvo, 2007), hacks (Bailey, 2008), and glitching. Metagames, in other words, allowed “for complex negotiations related to ownership, visibility, game production, and the role of the player” (Meades 2013, 80). These dynamics emerged in some of the most famous metagames, whether the so-called “*Nagoya uchi*” technique for *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), the host of urban legends around *Xevious* (Namco 1983), or the secret-world producing tricks for *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo 1985). That early players found complex ways to play with these games in communal formations speaks to how metagames functioned as fan texts

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that allowed children to “to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” (Jenkins 1988, 87).

The paper makes this case by considering a wide variety of what fan historian Kathy Fuller-Seaton calls “cultural intermediaries,” the commentators who lauded, criticized, and otherwise puzzled over fan behaviors from outside of fandoms (2025, 95). Intermediaries noted the centrality of *urawaza* to both early arcade and home console gaming fandoms, highlighting how fans were playing with games; that is, transforming them into diffuse constellations of “playthings” that were not necessarily identical with the parameters of game design (Sicart 2022). The inventiveness of children’s metagames—reconfigurations of playthings—demonstrated a degree of agency and a critical engagement with gaming at the level of digital play. Cultural intermediaries’ arguments to the contrary replicated longstanding attempts to pathologize fandoms as childish (Hunting 2019); that is, to dismiss their significance by equating childhood with a lack of critical capacity.

Consequently, the paper deploys the lens of fan studies to show how the negotiations around the early medium and what should constitute “normative” play eventuated through metagames. Here, narratives of children’s childishness worked hand-in-glove with problematizing and pathologizing a fan-atical approach to the medium, and, in turn, sought to validate the mature authority of the industry qua its juvenile players. By drawing on existing research on early gaming fandoms and their histories in Japan (Kawada 2009; Kawasaki 2015; Tominaga 2019), the paper ultimately makes the case that any approach to the early medium cannot brush away childhood but rather must consider it as an intersectional factor driving how play is always political.

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