FLORA and FAUNA: Japanese Games and Traditional Culture
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In every area of the globe we have flora and fauna. An ecosystem consists of different species that live in networked relationship. Certain species are dominant under certain circumstances. A transition of environment or a sudden change of circumstance would make some species prosper, or become rare. But as a whole it is this inter-related complexity of the flora and fauna that sustains life in the area, making the ecosystem continue through generations.

It is the same with our culture. Now our society is networked. Physical distances are diminishing thanks to the Internet, it is said. We will all live as neighbors sharing the global culture, understanding each other. Some people claim that the global network is destroying cultural tradition. Can this be true?

Certainly our ecosystem is changing. But global communication brings increased awareness of cultural biodiversity as well as similarity. Every culture has its own system in the way of thinking and representing. Each new medium a society develops according to such systems. It is interesting to observe what is going on now in Japanese computer game culture . It is a pursuit of traditional esthetics in digital entertainment. When we see Japanese comics and animations, what we have taken from our tradition is visible.

As in Japanese prints, characters look flat and are rendered in mat colors, with unnaturally deformed faces. The proportions of the faces cannot possibly be derived from any 3-dimensional model. Absence of shading and lack of depth is evident in the landscape.

Even though it may not be generally wellknown in the West, the Japanese learned perspective from the West only about 150 years ago. Realism was also brought from the West. Perspective did not originally exist in Asian paintings. Altogether, Japanese perception of 3-dimensional space or body was quite different from that in the West.

One reason why comics and animation have become so successful in Japan might be the fact that they have nothing to do with reality. Flexible use of space in comics coincides with the traditional picture scrolls where events in different time-space can be painted in the same scene. The flat expression of the characters looks more familiar to Japanese eyes than a realistic portrait. When 2-dimensional video games conquered the market it was natural for such characters to populate them. Japanese esthetics in comics and animations seemed to have found its way into digital medium.

Meanwhile, high performance game platforms have arrived. Game designers have had to face a difficult question. More movie, more action, higher interactivity are required, which means the use of 3D computer graphics. Game characters which used to be 2D — often designed according to Japanese comic style — had to be modified into 3D together with their environment. How can flat, non-photorealistic and anti-perspective Japanese traditional taste be transformed into a 3-dimensional world inside a computer, where geometry and optics are the basic rules of visual expression? In addition, it is not only the matter of characters. Animation is another problem.

Virtual Idol Kyoko Date was created last year, based on the know-how of a leading Japanese management company for TV idols known as Hori Pro. The girl character became known as the first "virtual talent" to belong to the company. She had the typical face and body of such an "idol", rendered in an idealistic style, and natural motion produced by motion capture. But

she was a failure. She wasn't charming. Use of motion capture systems is not the right answer, some Japanese animators have started to think. Fuji TV brought up the idea and interface of Bunraku [Japanese puppet] for its TV program, after years of experience in virtual reality and motion capture. We have developed the language of traditional puppetry such as Bunraku. As the language had been refined through history and met our code, it should work with virtual characters better than bringing in the code for human movement.

It is said that motion capturing does not convey emotion. After this experience with Kyoto Date Hori Pro is now promoting a virtual doll — a Japanese version of Barbie. The re-discovery of puppets coincides with what is happening in game design. The animator of a successful game that came onto the market recently, Kowloon's Gate, says he used the language of Bunraku for its animation while he designed the characters [after many experiments] along the delicate interface between reality and what we know from Japanese comics. Since these characters are puppets rather than human beings, they look more natural when properly treated as puppets, he says.

Another interesting feature of Kowloon's Gate is the story itself. It is based on Yin-Yang theory which says that the universe is sustained by the balance of these two features. In the game the user is asked to visit virtual Kowloon to adjust the lost balance. Even though a visitor meets many well-designed freaks and monsters and sometimes fights with them, none of them is totally evil or totally good. The game designer [director] tries to establish a new approach to the role-playing game based on the Asian way of thinking. In fact, some Japanese games can be considered as interactive cinema. Because of the Japanese market structure, multimedia works have to take the form of a game to find their place on the market. Gadget and Gadget Trip by Haruhiko Shono are examples of this. Kowloon's Gate can also be considered as such.

The quest for the Japanese style in digital media will continue. It would be interesting, not only for the Japanese, to watch what comes of this. Because, as I stated earlier, it is not just observing a process of media technology penetrating into a culture. It is a phase of biodiversity that will help to enrich our society as it undergoes changes in a media environment.