

Rewriting Your Own Narrative: *Isekai* as a Contemporary Coming of Age Tale

Fatuma Muhamed

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2020

Committee:

Davinder Bhowmik

Justin Jesty

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Asian Languages and Literature

©Copyright 2020

Fatuma Muhamed

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Rewriting Your Own Narrative: *Isekai* as a Contemporary Coming of Age Tale

Fatuma Muhamed

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Davinder Bhowmik

Department of Asian Languages and Literature

Within the last 10 years *isekai* (other world) stories have exploded in popularity in the Japanese young adult fiction market. In these tales, economically and socially disadvantaged protagonists are teleported away from modern-day Japan and into a fantasy world, where they embark on heroic adventures and lead fulfilling lives. Often criticized as escapist wish fulfilment, *isekai* stories reveals the disparity in socioeconomic conditions that plague Japan's youth, and the malaise they experience as a result. By examining the shift in post-bubble Japan's economic landscape, we see that old modes of life-making that privilege lifetime employment are less available to Japanese youth. Thus, *isekai* stories serve as a coming-of-age tale updated for the current era that reflect the lived realities of young people in Japan today. I also analyze the popular light novel series *Re: Starting Life in Another World from Zero*, to illustrate the way *isekai* stories further reveal anxieties and social concerns that face many Japanese youth.

## Rewriting Your Own Narrative: *Isekai* as a Contemporary Coming of Age Tale

Children's literature and young adult fiction can play an important role in identity formation, for both its protagonists and its readers (Gamble, 2013). Many classic tales such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series depict journeys to strange and unfamiliar worlds as catalysts for growth. Standing on their own two feet for the first time, removed from all they know, these young heroes must establish their developing sense of self.

In Japan and abroad, a particular strain of this genre, *isekai* (other world) stories, enjoys massive popularity. Major publishers like Kadokawa publish hit works such as *Sword Art Online* (2009 – 2020), a series that, as of 2017, had over 20 million copies in circulation, and has been translated into thirteen languages (*SAO: Daininki ranobe*, 2017). Between 2012 and April 2020, 44 *isekai* light novel series were adapted into anime and manga, while overseas publishing houses such as J-Novel Club and Yen Press translate many of the most popular series into English.

Shungiku Okapi defines the modern *isekai* as a story in which an “average Japanese person is teleported to another world, where they achieve all different kinds of success (*samazamana seikou wo osame*). They achieve a lofty status, fame, treasures, power, and a fulfilling life (*yūtakana seikatsu*), in which everything is smooth sailing (*junfū manpan*)” (p. 319). In addition to the otherworldly journey, a tale of sudden, extreme growth has become a hallmark of the genre, one that fans actively seek out; web novel sites such as *Shōsetuka ni narō*

(*Let's Be Novelists*) feature tags such as “strongest protagonist” (*shujinkou saikyō*) and “overpowered” (*ore tsue*)<sup>1</sup>.

*Isekai* mediates this rapid growth of its young heroes through fantastical worlds, in which young Japanese men find their ostensibly immature hobbies validated, free of any pressure to conform. They are allowed to prove themselves on a stage where the rules make sense to them, and where they find the validation, fulfilment, success, and companionship that they could not at home. These worlds are familiar not because of their resemblance to modern-day Japan, but because they draw heavily from anime, games, and manga.

*Isekai* stories feature most prominently in light novels (*raito noberu*), a loosely defined category of novels aimed at teens and young adults (Shinjō 2006; Hatōka 2013). The name is a portmanteau of the English “light” - both “frivolous” and “light reading” - and “novel” (Hatōka 2013). The name connotes a portable paperback that provides a quick, easy read. Anime- and manga-style illustrations adorn the cover, with more black-and-white full-page illustrations interspersed throughout the text. Similar to a manga volume, light novels often begin with introductions of the main characters featured in that volume, drawn so that readers can clearly visualize the characters as they read.

Like the dime novel, the light novel has historically been relegated to the status of literary “junk food”, especially when compared to “pure literature” (*junbungaku*) (Hosoya 2004). The light novel is also characterized by frequent releases, affordable prices, lightweight portability, and easily digestible content.

---

<sup>1</sup> Written as 俺 TUEEE, a corruption of *tsuyoi*, meaning “powerful”. A slang term used to describe overpowered protagonists, similar to how game fans describe overly strong player characters, or unfairly difficult boss characters. Sometimes appears in light novel titles such as *Kono yuusha ga Ore TUEEE sugiru kuse ni, shinchou sugiru* (Tuichi Light, Kadokawa, 2016).

*Isekai* stories, like other works of mass culture also often receive criticism for being overly repetitive “escapism” (*genjitsu tōhi*, “fleeing from reality”), where men who would amount to nothing in the real world are showered with success and romantic interest they could never realistically hope for (Shunjiku, 2018). Furthermore, their protagonists commonly consume anime, manga, games, and light novels as their primary hobby into adulthood, a trait which is the target of considerable scorn for adult men (Nakamori 1983; Azuma, Saito, Kotani 2003; Galbraith 2014).

However, do *isekai* readers bury themselves in fantasy worlds simply because they cannot face reality? What “reality” are they running from, and why? And is escapism purely a passive, dysfunctional reaction of a generation who refuses to grow up?

I argue that *isekai* consumption is not merely an ill-advised coping mechanism, or a sign of a failure to launch in Japanese youth. Instead, the *isekai* boom functions as a new type of coming-of-age tale for the modern Japanese youth, one in which they themselves rewrite the terms of maturation. It exposes a rupture between the expected, normalized lifestyle that was established before the economic collapse of 1990 and the changed socio-economic conditions that followed, in which normative modes of adulthood are becoming increasingly unattainable. The genre provides an alternate route to adulthood for its readers who have realized this gap.

Gary Westfalh lists “assertiveness” as one of the characteristics of long-running juvenile literature series (2000, p. 39). Young protagonists like the Hardy Boys “chafe under the restrictions imposed by older authorities” and in doing so, achieve success on their own terms; the readers, in turn, find satisfaction in reading about their boldness. Similarly, I believe that *isekai* can be read as a resistance, a coming-of-age tale that reveals and rejects the unrealistic expectations that exist in the “real world” of contemporary Japan.

Although *isekai* take place in fantastical worlds that are at first glance highly unrealistic, they serve to emphasize the feeling of despair both its protagonists and young readers feel toward the worlds they do live in. By setting these new coming-of-age tales outside of Japan, *isekai* makes the bold assertion that these youth cannot find success in their world, but that they can in another - that it's the very structure of 21st century Japan itself that holds them back from achieving the greatness that lies unrealized within its young protagonists, and by extension, its young readers.

I will first define the *isekai* genre before describing its function and importance. I argue that the genre's current popularity is not mere coincidence, but that it performs an important function for its readership. Instead of forcing readers to accept the world around them as is, *isekai* provides a new proving ground for its heroes, one that operates on rules more familiar to the reader-as-protagonist, empowering them to complete an alternate rite of passage free from the constraints of an often contradictory and frustratingly unfair power structure. These worlds filled with "game-like" elements - superhuman strength, quests, a clear enemy - can feel more real to their genre-savvy audience, who have given up on comparing their media, laden with potential, to their lived experiences. (Azuma 2011).

In order to illustrate the need for such modernized youth fiction, I will provide a brief history of the changes in Japan's labor landscape following the 1973-74 oil crisis. The demise of the vaunted lifetime employment system (*shūshin koyou*) and the growing economic dependence on unstable part-time labor caused a rupture between the lived realities of young Japanese and expected normative modes of life making. Ann Anganost summarizes the change as follows: "[N]ot only are the forms of life inhabited by their parents in terms of secure employment and benefits no longer available to them, but, more importantly, they may no longer seem desirable

in the transfigured imaginings of what it means to make a life” (2013, 2). I believe *isekai*’s rise in popularity shines a light on this need to reassess assumed notions of adulthood and success.

I will conclude with an analysis of the popular light novel series *Re:Zero kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu* (translated by Yen Press as *Re:Zero - Starting Life in Another World*), by Nagatsuki Tappei. *Re:Zero* functions as a microcosm of *isekai* as a whole, while simultaneously providing a framework with which the genre can push its embedded social critique even further.

Though tales of exploring unfamiliar realms are enjoying a renewed popularity, the subject matter is not at all new to Japanese literature. Tales of journeys to mysterious worlds can be found as far back as the *Kojiki*, in which the god Izanagi journeyed from the newly-formed kingdom of Wa to the underworld to bring his wife, the goddess Izanami, back from the dead.

Yanagita Kunio, a scholar considered to be the earliest scholar of *minzokugaku* (Japanese folklore studies), compiled folk legends from the titular town of Tōno in *Tōno Monogatari* (1910). Several of the legends involve people slipping from contemporary Tōno and into mystical parallel worlds (Mori 1980).

Current *isekai* predominantly tell tales of young men and women (though the latter is less common), but tales of young heroes and heroines stumbling into an unfamiliar world is not new, either. From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (1950-1956), young men and women have been suddenly finding themselves in parallel worlds for hundreds of years. Children’s literature researcher Nikki Gamble defines this kind of story, which she calls the *voyage-return* or *home-away-home* as follows:

[T]he hero/ine may stumble unexpectedly into the new world. The journey may take characters to an imaginary or magical realm as it does in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Essentially the hero or heroine travels away from familiar surroundings, the

journey usually includes a threat or entrapment and in the final stages of the story the hero/ine escapes and returns to the familiar world (2013, p. 123).

Gamble then identifies three stages of the voyage-return: the *anticipation stage*, in which the hero/ine, often bored with his or her everyday life, responds to the voyage with fascination and an open-minded curiosity; the *frustration stage*, when the oddities of the other world make it difficult to communicate or anticipate future events; and the *nightmare stage*, where the hero or heroine faces life-threatening peril that he or she must overcome before returning home.

However, unlike Gamble's definition, the protagonists in *isekai* stories do not always return home, nor do they follow these three stages exactly. Unlike its Western predecessors, the *isekai* boom of the last 15 years features few stories where the plot hinges on finding a way back home. *Re:Zero*'s protagonist Natsuki Subaru does not wonder when he will return home for several volumes, nor does he ever attempt to make the journey back. Not only do many *isekai* heroes find themselves unbothered by the sudden voyage, most embrace it. Yū Kamiya's light novel series *No Game No Life* (2012 - 2018) tells the story of two twins, Sora and Shiro, both recluses that spend all of their waking hours playing games. When they receive an email invitation a world decided by games, they are both all too eager to leave behind the world that they cannot understand:

How do you two feel about the world you live in? Is it fun? Is it easy to live there? ...

Imagine a world where anything and everything could be settled by playing a simple game... A world like a game board, with clearly-defined objectives and rules... What would you do if I told you a world like that actually existed? (1:8).

I thus define the *isekai* as follows: a story in which the protagonist, typically a male between the ages of 15 and 35, is sent by some contrivance from modern-day Japan to a separate

world. This other world is often a fantasy world heavily patterned after Japanese role-playing games (RPGs), which are heavily influenced by Western fantasy tales and Chinese epics like the 16<sup>th</sup> century novel *Journey to the West*. The mechanism of transfer may or may not be explicitly explained, but largely falls within one of three categories: transference (*ten'i*); summoning (*shoukan*); or reincarnation (*tensei*).

In transference stories, the hero or heroine may be transported via an enchanted book, (*Fushigi Yūgi*, Watase Yū), swept away in a magical storm (*The Twelve Kingdoms*, Ono Fuyumi), or may simply appear unexplained in the new world (*Re:Zero*). The earliest Japanese light novel to use *isekai* in the title was the transference story *Isekai no yūshi (Brave Warrior of Another World)* (1979), and it contained several elements prominent in today's *isekai*. It tells the story of a modern-day high schooler who has terrible luck in love. One day, he is suddenly teleported from Japan to a fantasy land full of demons and ghouls. There, he receives a legendary sword and undertakes the dangerous goal of rescuing a nation's princess from mortal peril. Even the cover, which depicts the hero atop a hill in a grim world, hand on his sword and the other arm around the princess's waist, is the same scene of masculine heroism that can be seen on the cover of today's *isekai* light novels. Transference stories comprise the vast majority of *shōjo isekai* tales, where the mechanism is almost always explained and utilized multiple times, as seen in the series mentioned above.

Summoning stories are characterized by a character in the parallel world who summons the protagonist into their own world, often to help defeat evil or act as a hero. The hero's arrival is often a legend in the other world, as in Dojyomaru's *Genjitsushugi yūsha no ōkoku saikenki (How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom, 2015 - present)*. These protagonists often feature in

the legends of the world they arrive in, and thus receive a warm welcome and a vital importance to the entire world as soon as they arrive.

In reincarnation stories, a protagonist dies and is reborn in the *isekai* – usually, but not always, as a human. The reader might follow his reincarnation from birth, as seen in Rifujin na Magonote's *Mushoku tensei: Isekai ittara honki dasu (Jobless Reincarnation: I'd Give it My All in Another World, 2012-2015)*. The hero, an unnamed NEET<sup>2</sup> in his mid-30s, dies saving a pair of children from a speeding truck, and awakens as an infant in the other world. Other times he is reborn as a teen or young adult, as in *Death march kara hajimaru isekai kyōsōkyoku*.

Reincarnation-type *isekai* enjoyed massive popularity on the popular web novel site *Shōsetuka ni narō (Let's be Novelists!)*, with nearly twice as many reincarnation stories published on the site in 2015 as teleportation stories (see figure 2).

While the method of transporting the protagonist between dimensions remains discrete, all three types of *isekai*, both *shōjo* and *shōnen* alike, share the same quality: their heroes assume a role of vital importance as saviors beloved and respected the world over. *Isekai* worlds are commonly plagued by an imminent, large-scale threat: a hostile neighboring nation, or a villainous band conspiring to destroy the world. Some heroes accept this destiny after some initial hesitation; others, especially in series from the last decade, quickly grasp the situation and eagerly anticipate the adventures that await them.

In Western *isekai* stories, male and female protagonists figure more or less equally, but we observe a shift in the gender of *isekai* leads in Japan over time. *Isekai* once featured prominently in *shōjo* manga through the 1990s, where it was much more commonly seen than in

---

<sup>2</sup> Not in Education, Employment, or Training. The term originated in the United Kingdom, coined by the Social Exclusion Task Force in the report "New opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training." (1999)

*shōnen* or *seinen* manga aimed at young boys and men. Male-led *isekai*, on the other hand, took root in the light novel.

Today's *isekai* are typically set in lands of swords and sorcery, governed by monarchs, where heroes traverse pastoral countrysides, small villages, and bustling royal capitals. Popular, long-running RPG series such as *Dragon Quest* (1986 - ) and *Final Fantasy* (1987 - ) are well known for such settings, and *isekai* often abound with the types of monsters, quests, and villains that abound in these games. *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* drew heavy influence from the tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons*, published in 1974 by American game designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players create their own characters and embark on an adventure in a fantasy world, making up a story together as they go.

In turn, the creators of the tabletop game said they were influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) (Gygax 2000). The game also features a vaguely medieval European setting, and shares several fantasy races from the novel, such as elves and orcs. Light novel *isekai* borrow heavily from this setting. Many of the fantasy races found in *Lord of the Rings* and *Dungeons & Dragons* live alongside humans; knights, sorcerers, and demonic evils are locked in near-constant battle.

Indeed, one of the earliest examples of a light novel *isekai* series, Mizuno Ryō's *Rōdosu-tō senki* (*Record of Lodoss War*), is in fact a transcription of one of the author's *Dungeons & Dragons* gaming sessions. Such "replays" are still read today, often sitting on bookstore shelves alongside the *isekai* works they influenced.

*Record of Lodoss War* was serialized in the Japanese gaming magazine *Comptiq* from 1988 to 1993, then published as a light novel series by Kadokawa. Mizuno served as "dungeon master", the game organizer who directs the course of the players' unfolding story, and the

“events” of the party’s fictional adventures are chronicled across nine volumes. The series gained immense popularity: in addition to selling over ten million light novel copies<sup>3</sup>, it also spawned two anime series, several spin-off manga, and ten video games between 1988 and 2016. Though novelizations are more common than replays like *Lodoss War*, its success and influence can still be felt in today’s *isekai*.

The *isekai* hero’s most remarkable and common trait, according to Shungiku Okapi, is their “lack of individuality” (*botsukosei*) (2018. p. 319). In their normal lives, the *isekai* hero or heroine embodies a mundane mediocrity that causes them to blend into the background of 21st-century Japan: schoolgirls with sub-par grades, jobless college graduates, and gamers still living at home all of whom bear little resemblance to average notions of heroism.

I agree with Shungiku’s belief that this allows the reader to identify with the hero and share in his sense of accomplishment more easily. The modern-day male *isekai* hero does not embody the traits found in the *shōnen* hero, the model of masculinity that it shares space with. The latter is driven, fiery, and exhausts himself in order to grow stronger. The former, on the other hand, is characterized by a sense of aimlessness and malaise; high school dropouts, shut-ins, and overworked salarymen whose struggles are turned inward, devoid of the burning drive expressed by other male manga and anime protagonists. This similarity extends even to their appearance; many protagonists often sport brown or black hair and eye color, natural to most Japanese.

Many *isekai* heroes begin their tales as *hikikomori*, individuals whom psychologist Tamaki Saitō defines as “those who become recluses in their own home, lasting at least six months, with onset by the latter half of the third decade of life, and for whom other psychiatric

---

<sup>3</sup> Sales numbers on the cover of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Shin Lodoss Tousenki* (2005, Kadokawa).

disorders do not better explain the primary symptom of withdrawal.” (2013). Hypothesized causes include a declining work ethic, lack of drive among the youth, and lax parenting (Hattori 2005; Ogino 2004).

Saito, however, observed an intense internal turmoil in his subjects: “The majority of *hikikomori* do not choose on their own to keep living that way just because they want to. They want more than anyone else to escape from their withdrawn situation, but they simply are unable to do so.” (2013, p.93). Though they may seem carefree on the surface, the fear of failure or harsh criticism paralyzes them, keeping them trapped in a cycle of damaging behavior (Ogino 2004).

Game designer Jane McGonigal asserts that one reason video games can be satisfying is because they fulfil an inherent need for *meaningful* hard work (201). The difference between games and work is that many employees rarely see their efforts rewarded. Unlike manual labor, which yields tangible results, the office jobs that define the esteemed *shakaijin* (person of society) can seem like little more than running down the clock. This type of work ends up feeling “more surreal than real” (Crawford 2009). The type of work that games such as RPGs provide is both stimulating *and* fulfilling. Games like *World of Warcraft* are filled with tasks that yield satisfying results; players have incentives to log in, grow their player characters, and effect noticeable change on the world around them. It is this kind of satisfying work that many *hikikomori* yearn for, and that many young people in Japan today are unable to find (Genda 2001).

In stark contrast to his average appearance and less-than-heroic position in life, the *isekai* hero’s journey is one of explosive growth. Yamaguchi Noboru, the author of *Zero no tsukaima* (*Zero’s Familiar*), nods to this trend in the name he gives the male deuteragonist, Hiraga Saitou

(平賀才人). The first character of his surname means “ordinary, average”, but his given name, when read as *saijin*, can be translated as “gifted person”. Though he is often helpless after arriving in the new world, he soon manifests a hidden ability, or a sudden affinity for combat (Shungiku 2018). Through this, he spends the series mowing through enemies and growing from strong to unbeatable.

To compensate for his (understandable) inability to defend himself in a world of magic and swordsmanship, *isekai* protagonists routinely receive a decisive skill or ability, called “cheats” (*chiito*), which allow them to grow leaps and bounds in a very short amount of time (Shungiku 2018). Just as cheats in video games give players an unfair advantage, *isekai* conventions dictate that heroes will often receive an advantage to make up for their lack of ability. Genre-savvy protagonists like Natsuki Subaru quickly grasp the situation they are in, and eagerly anticipate this sudden leap in ability:

“[S]ince the beginning of time, in stories where humans are summoned to other worlds, those humans tend to be able to wield some kind of superpower. If Subaru had been summoned to this world under the same conditions as the stories he was familiar with, it was very likely that he had been given some sort of power. With that thought, Subaru felt that his body was a little lighter than usual.” (*Re: Zero kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu* vol. 1, p. 8)

Light novels draw heavily from a shared pool of character designs as well as story beats, and these design elements are often consumed in isolation, enjoyed separately from the narrative via character goods and fan works (Azuma 2011). Within the world of the work, they serve to stand in for characterization (Azuma 2007, 2011; Hatōka 2013). The quiet, shy *meganekko* (girl with glasses), the fiery girl in pigtails, and the cool, collected sword wielder are instantly

recognizable as such even before the narrative displays their personalities; consumers well-versed in the database will recognize their personalities and anticipate their reactions based solely on their physical descriptions. Thanks to the illustrations interspersed between light novel pages, readers don't have to imagine these descriptions - they can look at the illustrations and predict their characterizations before reading a word.

Kawakami Nobuo, the Representative Director of the media company Dwango, and the "hikikomori pro blogger" Umitsubame discussed this "power fantasy" element of *isekai*. Umitsubame remarked that the genre draws criticism for heroes who succeed without putting in effort (*dōryoku shinaide shōri wo suru*, 2014). Both he and Kawakami agree that even in the real world (*genjitsu no sekai de*), working hard does not necessarily ensure results, while many others move up in the world through no effort of their own.

In *isekai*, obstacles exist for the hero to mow them down. This is another way in which *isekai* draw inspiration from video games, where player characters mow down waves of weaker enemies. In *Re: Zero*, protagonist Natsuki Subaru does not respond with fear when he is mugged, although he has no means to defend himself. *Isekai* heroes are frequently fed similar "low-level" threats as fodder. "You're only here so I can pull experience points off you, you scum!" (1:12). In many stories, such as Yusagi Aneko's *Tate no yūsha no nariagari (The Rising of the Shield Hero*, 2012 - 2015), strength and experience are quantified in exactly the same manner as in an RPG: defeat enemies, receive experience points, level up, and repeat. Just as structural imbalances render older modes of life-making inaccessible to today's youth, most ordinary people would stand little chance of surviving the perils of *isekai*'s fantasy worlds where skilled swordsmen and powerful magic abound. Thus, the cheat skill works to erase this disparity, resulting in great feats of strength and magic with relatively little effort from the hero.

In short, *isekai* realms are often tailor-made to ensure the hero succeeds with minimal discomfort or confusion, but to readers, this does not feel any more unfair than in the “real” world, where hard work can and does go unrewarded. In this way we can read *isekai* as a turning of the tables; as we will see, the odds of success are often stacked high against the youth of today.

This aspect of the genre is stated outright in the popular light novel series *Overlord* (first posted on *Shōsetuka ni narō* in 2010), in which an unnamed salaryman is trapped in his favorite virtual online RPG. Now stuck in the body of his max-level player character, Ainz Ooal Gown, he is already peerless by the time the story begins. Moreover, he has a group of retainers who both serve him and fulfil his emotional needs. They are designed to provide him undying loyalty, unwavering companionship, and even romantic desirability - Ainz reprograms one of his retainers to fall madly in love with him. Another subordinate compares the game world to a “box of jewels” that Ainz is “meant to adorn [him]self with”, to which Ainz agrees, “Perhaps this untouched box of jewels exists to be mine for the taking” (*Overlord* 1:110). This quote is an on-the-nose description of *isekai* settings, and one that *Overlord* exemplifies.

Like many of today’s *isekai* heroes, Ainz almost never finds himself in significant danger. Any conflict he runs into is quickly smoothed over; obstacles in the story seem to arise only to emphasize his complete superiority. In the climax of volume 3, an opponent brainwashes one of Ainz’s strongest subordinates, Shalltear, and sends her to kill him. The explosive fight that ensues is the first time Ainz’s victory is not a foregone conclusion. As one of Ainz’s few companions, he is hesitant to use lethal force against her, and she appears to have cornered him.

This disadvantage, it turns out, never existed in the first place: Ainz had been reading Shalltear’s every move from the start, and after reciting a single incantation he quickly defeats

her. Addressing her with “absolute conviction and unshakeable confidence” he declares, “Ainz Ooal Gown doesn’t know defeat” (3:253).

*Isekai* works are often criticized for unabashedly exalting its protagonists, while failing to develop them past the everyman into which readers can read themselves. Preserving this relatability (*kanjō inyū*) is crucial, as many readers feel that hardship and negative outcomes dampen their enjoyment of the story (Shungiku 2018; Tsuta 2019; *Naze ima dōryoku shinaide seikō suru*). In their efforts to provide their audience with a necessary catharsis and vindication, *isekai* can overcompensate for the barriers that stand in the way of Japan’s youth by completely leveling any and every obstacle in the protagonist’s path, while keeping that protagonist as blank a slate as possible. His trajectory can only be upward, so as not to impart the depressing twists and turns that readers must also face in their own lives.

When compared to coming-of-age tales of the past, today’s *isekai* authors do not provide as steep a climb on the road to heroism, but I believe this only serves to emphasize just how stifled its target audience has felt before discovering an outlet in *isekai* literature. As I explore in the next section, *isekai* has historically served to uplift these identities that lie on the fringe of acceptable adulthood. When did the modern *isekai* first emerge? Ōuryōji Shizuka’s *Ijigen kishi Kazuma* (*Parallel Dimension Knight Kazuma*), published in 1988, is one of the first works to assemble many of the genre’s hallmark characteristics. The titular hero is transported back in time (in the middle of receiving his first ever love confession) to a world resembling “the world of *The Three Musketeers*”, according to the back of the first volume. Though the tale involves time travel rather than a completely different realm, its setting, based loosely on medieval Europe, has become a part of the modern *isekai* “template” (Shungiku, 2018).

Although current *isekai* stories predominantly feature male protagonists, the genre received its first wave of popularity in Japan in *shōjo* manga. The manga series *Ōuke no Monshō* (*Crest of the Royal Family*) began in 1976, a decade which Toku Masami calls “the golden era of *shōjo* manga” (2007, p. 25). and still runs to this day. The series tells the story of Carol, an American teenager who is sent back in time to ancient Egypt. There, Carol becomes a major asset to the kingdom with her ability to predict the future, becoming entangled in a love triangle with the young pharaoh.

In *shōjo* *isekai*, too, we see the genre fulfilling the function of highlighting a socially marginalized group - typically “un-ladylike” girls. Toku notes that *shōjo* authors often craft their heroines with feminine ideals in mind, both in their looks and their character. To be a girl, according to early *shōjo* manga, is to be “cute, innocent, and patient (...), but with strong wills to change their tough lives to be happy or successful” (p. 23)

In uprooting these girls from their mundane worlds, however, *isekai* also lifts them out of the social constraints that paint them as somehow inadequate. These heroines go on to receive mystical powers, a grand destiny, and catch the eye of at least one male romantic interest in the process. Despite their perceived shortcomings, they achieve greatness and hold immense value in the eyes of those around them.

Watase Yū’s manga series *Fushigi Yūgi* features one such example of typical *shōjo isekai* progression. Middle schooler Yūki Miaka feels out of place compared to her female peers: she struggles to pass her classes, loses her temper easily, has never been asked out, and constantly craves large amounts of food. Her best friend Hongo Yui, on the other hand, excels in her studies and is quick to chide Miaka for her unbecoming habits. Yui serves to reinforce Miaka’s apparent

shortcomings and reproduces concerns about maladapted *shōjo* by reminding her of the areas in which she is lacking by serving as a contrast.

Miaka and Yui open a magical book, *The Universe of the Four Gods*, which transports them into the world of the novel. There, an emperor tells Miaka that she is the Priestess of the god Suzaku, and her destiny is to gather seven Celestial Warriors to summon their kingdom's god. All seven warriors are handsome men who find themselves drawn to Miaka; she and the warrior Tamahome fall in love, the emperor Hotohori becomes Tamahome's romantic rival, and the other five devote their lives to protecting her. From romance to unconditional acceptance, Miaka finds much in this new world that she did not receive back home. Initially hesitant to embrace her new role and occasionally longing to go back home, Miaka becomes wholeheartedly invested in her destiny and the well-being of her guardians as the series goes on.

Works like *Fushigi Yūgi* show how *shōjo isekai* of the 1990s laid the foundation for what is now an embedded feature of the genre: both feature protagonists who stand at the critical turning point of adolescence, in danger of social failure.

Similarly, the *shōjo* functions as a site of great potential, where young girls are taught the traits that will allow them to be molded into well-established, "safe" categories - ideal consumers (Lukács 2010), model housewives (Shamoon 2012), or objects of sexual desire (Kotani 2002). The notion that a girl might emerge from adolescence without fitting into one of these categories causes considerable anxiety, which gendered magazines such as *Ribon (Ribbon)* and *Shufu no tomo (The Housewife's Friend)* manage by providing models of femininity through fashion advice, lush manga illustrations, advice columns, and reader submissions (Frederick, 2006; Shamoon, 2012). These magazines are positioned as "companions" or "manuals" to guide

women correctly through their transition from adolescence through adulthood. *Fushigi Yūgi* ran in one such magazine - *Shōjo komikku (Shōjo Comic)* from May 1992 through June 1996.

The *shōjo isekai* overlaps considerably with the magical girl subgenre. Indeed, they bear a striking resemblance; heroines like those in Clamp's *Magic Knight Rayearth* don magical outfits tied to their mystical weapons, and their detailed outfits continue to evolve as their powers grow.

I believe *shōjo isekai* performs a similar function through different means, turning girls into heroines but without demanding they transform. Feminist critics such as Susan Napier (2005) and Kotani Mari (2006) argue that the transformative nature of the genre holds the potential to empower its subjects and subvert gender norms, as seen in anime like *Cutey Honey* (1973 - 74) and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997). However, I believe the magical girl genre tethers its heroines to the real world through its adherence to gender norms. Functioning in much the same way as the above “companion” magazines, the magical girl genre seeks to guide young girls toward normative expressions of femininity.

Perhaps the most apparent example of this is in the genre's strong correlation between a girl's physical appearance and her strength. The magical girl cannot wield magic in her “everyday” form; the genre demands she transform in order to access them. In the 1980s, anime such as *Magical Princess Minky Momo* (1982 - 92) and *Creamy Mami* (1983-84) featured young girls who would physically transform into adults to wield their powers. From the 1990s onward, the heroine physically remained as her usual, everyday self. The anime adaptation of *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon (Bishōjo senshi sērā mūn, 1992-97)* features lengthy transformation sequences in which middle schoolers are transformed into glamorous soldiers: their sailor uniforms grow frills and pink bows, and each girl receives a touch of lipstick. Anne Allison

contrasts this with the costuming sequences in male-lead battle-group series, observing that for the magical girl, “the process is more a ‘makeover’ than a power-up” (2006, p. 138).

Though she saves the day on a regular basis, the magical girl’s efforts often go unnoticed by the public, conducted under a secret identity. She is a secret hero, whose efforts are only known to those within her inner circle of fellow magical girls - if she has one at all.

Social constraints also demand that the magical girl heroine’s status as a fighter is relegated to a secret identity. Saitō Kumiko notes that this renders the *shōjo*-as-heroine aspect of the subject subordinate to her feminine duties, as “the virtual experience of maternal duties is a component that consistently intervenes in the battle heroines’ everyday life” (p. 157). In the manga series *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1996-2000), Kinomoto Sakura wields immense magical powers, but still frets over her chores mid-combat. *Sailor Moon*’s Usagi, the most powerful Sailor Scout in the universe, worries whether her alter ego will ruin her chances with her love interest, Mamoru. Saito calls this a “highly schizophrenic” brand of female empowerment, one that poises its precarious subjects on the brink of two identities, only just scraping by in both aspects of their lives (p. 157).

While the magical girl of the 1990s can purportedly “maximize their power by simply being themselves - cute and carefree students”, the genre’s emphasis on transformation and traditional gender roles places heavy conditions on said power. “Given that cuteness is a concept associated with youth, passivity, femininity, and, overall, powerlessness,” says Saitō, “the recent brand of magical girls - cute battle heroes - is a sheer paradox of claiming power in powerlessness”.

The *isekai* heroine, on the other hand, is quite literally removed from the social context that ties down the magical girl. By positioning her outside contemporary Japan, she is thus

removed from the above paradox. The plight of the other world becomes the central focus of the *isekai* heroine; even in tales where she can move between dimensions, the bulk of the plot takes place in the fantasy world. She becomes something of a celebrity, one whose center of power is located within her very being. Residents of the fantasy world eagerly await her arrival, sometimes for generations, and she is recognized wherever she and her companions go.

Though her appearance is plain by fantasy standards, she is allowed to attain status and strength without the plot demanding she beautify or sexualize herself. She is often the only one in the world dressed in a school uniform or jeans, and compared to her pastoral, historically inspired surroundings, her ordinary appearance conversely makes her exotic.

Moreover, the *isekai* heroine's power is innate, without the need for a wand or a transformational makeover sequence. Her unaltered existence is what promises to save the world. *Inuyasha*'s Kagome is the reincarnation of an immensely powerful priestess, and as such, is one of the few people alive who can detect the fragments of the ancient jewel the heroes are searching for. Even before she manifests any ability to fight - and her magic is indeed fearsome - her presence itself is indispensable.

Certainly, *shōjo isekai* manga can and often do reproduce gender norms no work can exist separate from the times in which it was produced, and to completely buck the trends of *shōjo* would risk removing it from the genre entirely. The attempt to remove its heroines from such constraints itself points to a desire for deviation from these norms.

Indeed, this may perhaps be the *shōjo isekai*'s most lasting legacy: to reveal the value inherent in its young heroes, who struggle with their self-worth when measured against those around them. The *shōjo* manga *isekai* of the 1990s shone a spotlight on girls who were ordinary precisely *because* they failed to fit an ideal, as ideals are rarely achievable by most. Despite this,

they have an inherent worth, mediated by a fantasy storyline of grand destiny and manifested via love, friendship, and success on the world stage. *Isekai* promises its readers that they too might have what it takes to achieve greatness - if not in this world, then perhaps in another. It creates space to question the “real world’s” capacity to nurture the inherent capabilities present in all young men and women by removing them from a world that attempts to pigeonhole them.

Takahashi Rumiko’s *Inuyasha* (1996-2008) told the story of middle schooler Kagome, who discovers a portal at the bottom of a well which leads to a magical version of feudal Japan. Unlike most *isekai*, Kagome freely travels between the two worlds, alternating between her normal life at home and her destiny as the reincarnation of a powerful priestess. Like *Fushigi Yūgi*’s heroine Miaka, she has a fierce temper and often laments her lack of a love life (or is teased about it by her younger brother; Miaka, too, is often teased by her older brother over this). The world on the other side of the well provides an outlet for Kagome’s temper.

Despite its massive popularity, selling 45 million volumes in Japan alone (*Shogakukan*), the long-running series also marked the end of the 1990’s *shōjo* manga *isekai* boom. However, its ending also marks a transition into what would become a common feature of 2010s *isekai*: the protagonist choosing the other world over their original one. Kagome returns to her world and finds that the well no longer leads her to Inuyasha’s world. They are separated for three years in which Kagome graduates high school and continues to live life as she did before her otherworldly adventures. One day, she discovers that the well’s seal has been broken, and she returns to Inuyasha’s world. The two marry, and Kagome commits herself to learning about life as a priestess and the world she now calls home. *Inuyasha* is a turning point for the genre, marking the end of its time in the world of *shōjo* manga while providing a new direction for the

*isekai*. Even now, *isekai* works are characterized by their long serialization (works with over ten volumes are common) and a marked preference for their new world rather than Japan.

Though today's *isekai* protagonists are often male, the demographic - between middle and high school aged - remains the same. Male adolescence in Japan has often served as a resource for various causes: the war effort (Fukuzawa 2001; Furuichi 2017), scholastic success (Arai 2013), and the economic revival of the nation (Takeyama 2016). Japan has called upon the *shōnen* to shape the nation's future, so his failure to rise to these expectations carry social, economic, and national repercussions. (Fukuzawa 2001; Genda 2001).

The end result of the *shōnen*'s failure to properly "graduate" from adolescence often manifests as identities that overlap with social or economic failure. (Azuma, Saito, Kotani 2003; Kosugi 2008). As we will see in the following sec, the former often manifests as a consumption of otaku culture and other non-normative interests, atypical of those who should have "outgrown" them (Galbraith 2014).

If the standard *isekai* protagonist's (lack of an) occupation reflects the economic worst-case scenario for the Japanese male, then their hobbies - manga, anime, games, and light novels - reflect their perceived social failure, as seen in the introduction to 2012's *The Rising of the Shield Hero*:

My name is Naofumi Iwatani, and I'm a sophomore in college. I'm also aware that I am more of a nerd than the rest of my classmates. Ever since I first became interested in video games and anime and other otaku pastimes, I've given them more of my time than I gave my actual studies.

My parents know this about me, and so they gave up on me early on. (1:1)

The term “otaku” was first applied to fans of anime and manga in the June 1983 issue of *Manga Burikko* where cultural critic Nakamori Akio published the first installment of his column ““Otaku” Research: The City is Full of “Otaku”” (*“Otaku” no kenkyū: machi ni wa otaku ga ippai*). He began the column after observing science fiction fans at the Comic Market – a biennial convention in which fans buy and sell self-published works (*doujinshi*). Nakamori takes note of the way in which many attendees refer to each other by a second-person form of address, “otaku”. He then applies this label to a broad category of people: attendees of the Comic Market, train enthusiasts, science fiction buffs, idol fans, and cosplayers alike are all painted by the otaku brush. To Nakamori, who observes them with disdain, what they all share is a similar level of social failure.

Nakamori narrows his definition in the second installment, published in *Manga Burikko*'s July 1983 issue and titled ““Otaku” Research 2: Can “Otaku” Love Like Normal People?” (*“Otaku” no kenkyū 2: “otaku” mo hitonami ni koi o suru?*). Here, we see more precisely the kind of social failure that Nakamori is looking down upon – romantic failure. These men, who “definitively lack male skills”, turn to fictional “beautiful girls” (*bishōjo*) because they cannot bring themselves to talk to real women. Instead, they develop a “two-dimensional complex” and content themselves with posters and images of characters from *shōjo* manga and anime. To Nakamori, feeling such a strong affinity for fiction is only for those who have been “warped” (*kussetsu shite*) by a history of social failure and *bishōjo* consumption, which manifests in a “strangely faggy” (*myō ni okamappoi*) enthusiasm for anime, manga, and *doujinshi*.

Eji Sonta, a known member of Nakamori's circle, also attributes the otaku's affinity for fictional love to a fundamental immaturity, both sexually and socially. An otaku's “creepy” (*bukimi na*) desire is proof of his refusal to grow up and enter the world of adult responsibility –

presumably, a responsibility to marry and father children, goals which are postponed by the otaku's preference for fictional partners. Their refusal to enter this world of reality, according to Eji Sonta, exhibits more initiative than the passive rejection Nakamori sees as the seed of their 2-D complex. To Eji Sonta, otaku also have a problem with reality (*genjitsu mondai*) – implying that otaku are also willfully rejecting reality as it rejects them.

The Miyazaki Incident was a seminal moment in forming perceptions of otaku identity, establishing a link between their interests and their morality. Between August 1988 and June 1989, Miyazaki Tsutomu murdered and molested four elementary school-aged girls, and the incident sparked a flurry of speculative media coverage as to the reason for his crimes. Pictures of his bedroom appeared in newspapers and magazines, displaying his extensive collection of horror film tapes and *lolicon* manga (a contraction of Lolita complex, slang for people with an interest in fictional young girls) – both of which many pointed out as potential motivators. Here, we see a terrifying reproduction of Nakamori and Eji's fears of sexual deviancy resulting from consumption of otaku works. Although journalists at the time did not label him with the relatively new term “otaku” (Kamm 2015), the connection between socially maladapted young men, otaku hobbies, and horrifying crime left its mark on the public consciousness. Many who engage in the discourse of otaku culture and its social implications point to the Miyazaki incident as a seminal moment in shaping public perceptions of otaku (Azuma 2009; Saitō 2011; Galbraith 2015).

Anime, manga, and games have lost much of their image as an impetus for violence. Works such as the popular film and live-action drama *Densha Otoko* have served to humanize the otaku, normalizing his desires and bringing them back within acceptable bounds (Galbraith 2014). The national project Cool Japan, a form of soft power, utilizes world-famous cultural

exports like Hello Kitty to “indirectly influence behaviour or interests through cultural or ideological means (Yano 2009, p. 683). Anime, manga, and video game franchises also perform significant cultural work, popularizing and normalizing these stigmatized media to an extent. However, the stain of social failure remains, and for many, to be interested in these cultural objects still connotes that “problem with reality” that Eji lambasted in the 1980s. Though this stigma has weakened, enthusiastically consume anime, manga, and light novels enthusiastically still carries some connotation of social failure.

“...A stupid game with no clear rules or goal. Seven billion players all taking their turns whenever they wanted. Penalized if you won too much... Penalized if you lost too much... There was no way to tell the goal, read the stats, or even identify the genre. Even if you followed the rules that were laid out, you'd be punished - and worst of all, those who just ignored the rules stood at the top.” (*No Game No Life*, 1:15)

In the wake of Japan's 1990 economic collapse several new labor-centric identities rose to the forefront of national discourse: the NEET; the *hikikomori*; and the freeter, part-time employees whose name stems from a hybrid of the word “free” and the German word “*arbeiter*” (*worker*) (Lukács 2010, p.159).

Employment status – what company one works for, whether one holds a job, and how ardently they are searching if they do not – are all markers of status in the public sphere, and in Japan, to hold a “proper” job is not only important financially, it is also an important marker of one's “graduation” into adulthood; some parents fear their children opting for part-time work over full-time jobs (Yūji 2001, p. 181). For the Japanese man, who is still widely expected to occupy the role of breadwinner, to hold anything less than a full-time, salaried position can be emasculating. (Mai 2007).

Between the bubble's collapse in 1991 and 2002, the unemployment rate climbed from 2.1% to 5.3% in 2002, two years into what is known as the Lost Decade (*ushinawareta jūnen*) (Mitani 2011). While the freeter population doubled from 200,000 in the 1980s to around 400,000 in 1997 (Dasgupta 2005). The Ministry of Labor, Health, and Welfare defines the NEET as an unmarried person between the ages of 15 and 34 who is neither working, seeking work, nor in education, a population that rose from 440,000 to 640,000 between 2000 and 2005 (MHLW 2007). In addition, working for a *burakku kigyō*, ("black company") - businesses notorious for overworking their employees, sometimes to the point of death or suicide - or finding no job at all, add to the dismal possibilities awaiting Japanese youth (Marioka 2004).

I argue that because of the historical significance placed on securing employment—first as the indispensable architects in Japan's rebuilding, then as the maker or breaker of one's own fortune – labor has become intrinsic to the formation of the self in Japan. Changing conditions in the labor landscape, however, demand a serious re-thinking of this value judgement. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of these changes in order to situate the *isekai* boom in the socioeconomic structure both its readers and authors experienced. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the “reality” from which *isekai* purportedly provides an escape, and how this conception of reality does not always match up to the lived realities of post-bubble Japanese youth, especially young men.

Postwar Japan was faced with a massive national project – not only to rebuild, but to modernize. This all-encompassing project required the support of all citizens, and in the economic sphere, this manifested as a need for a large, stable, and loyal labor force. In exchange for their cooperation, ample benefits were provided for employees – health care, seniority benefits, lifetime employment, and a pension that awaited hard workers once they retired.

Working for one company one's whole adult life, from college graduation until retirement, became the expected life course of male adulthood. (Genda 2001; Mitani 2011; Takeyama 2016). In particular, the salaryman came to be known as something of a heroic figure in the public consciousness. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of the “salaryman film” genre (Raine, 2007); Regain, an energy drink, featured commercials in the 1980s and 1990s portraying salarymen as heroic and masculine figures (Robertson, 2005; Kakihito 2020).

Japan’s system of lifetime employment (*shūshin koyou*) came to be known as one of the characteristics of its postwar economy. (Lukács 2010). Male college students could expect to receive job offers even before graduation, and after decades of working at the same company, they could retire with an ample pension, but by the 2000s, such opportunities had become considerably harder to find. (Mitani 2011 citing Kondo 2007; Genda et al. 2008). However, even in the 1980s (Japan’s economic peak), this normalized life course could not be assured. In a 1984 study of the lifetime employment system, Koshiro Kazutoshi notes that “[t]he success of Japan's economy tended to promote myths” about the system, presenting it as still wholly intact. Instead, Koshiro calls it a “‘gentlemen's agreement’ [that was] not guaranteed by statute or collective bargaining agreement” (p. 34). The expectation to secure employment and maintain it until retirement remained, but even before the 1991 collapse of the bubble economy, the 1973-74 oil crisis resulted in even large corporations reducing full-time positions. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries cut 10,000 full-time employees, paying them severance packages and hiring part-time employees to take their place.

Akiko Takeyama also points to the oil crisis as the start of significant changes in Japan’s labor landscape, which in turn had significant effects on the expectations set for young adults. She notes that the above practices picked up steam into the 1980s: the government deregulated

the national economy, many forms of social welfare were privatized, and the government began to “dismantle the vaunted Japanese-style management system” (2016, p. 7) in favor of flexibility toward the shifting trends of globalization.

Jesook Song draws upon Michael Foucault’s concept of neoliberalism as a “regime of truth” (1976) to define it as a twofold system: economic system of privatization and free-market policies on the outer surface, and a spirit of total autonomy without government intervention, one in which an individual actor is the sole agent in shaping their own future. (2013 cited Foucault 1991; Rose 1999; p. 148).

We see this reflected in the *1999 Economic Council Report*, in which the ideal vision for Japan was “to create a socioeconomy where individuals can have hopes and dreams and actively seek to make them come true” (Takeyama 2016 citing Keizaishingikai 1999, p. 35). In the name of neoliberal tenets such as “labor flexibility” and reduced government intervention, opportunities for secure employment and reliable benefits continued to vanish. (Anagnost 2013; Genda 2001).

To this end, and with the government’s blessing, corporations continued to slash full-time positions in favor of part-time and contracted labor. Because these positions did not include health care or pensions, businesses could save money, while framing these new flexible positions as “enhancing individual freedom of choice”, according to Takeyama (emphasis mine):

This new framework promised the fulfillment of one's dreams in the form of a highly commodified urban lifestyle that one could also achieve should they succeed.

Neoliberalism's double-edged blade, however, also insisted that **one's failure to secure the job(s) necessary to purchase these dreams was an individual failing** – not an inherent flaw of the system. (2016)

Here we see the negative impacts of the ostensibly liberating variety of choice that neoliberalism promises. If Japan's youth cannot achieve the postwar masculine ideal of the salaryman, he now has the choice to pursue the self-entrepreneurship that the service-based, globalized economy began to espouse. However, this is not as stable a path as it presents itself to be, and should the individual fail, the blame falls entirely on their shoulders, with little attention paid to the rapidly shifting economic conditions that are out of their control.

However, the reality of Japan's socio-economic system places these aspirational lifestyles out of the reach of its very audience: young people. Trendy television dramas, though they are set in modern-day Japan and ostensibly more closely reflect life in modern Japan, are no more "realistic" than *isekai*, reflecting aspirational lifestyles that are also out of reach for many Japanese youth (Lukács 2010). Dramas and the "Disneyfied" cityscape itself are but a series of "highly stylized fantasy images"(Takeyama, p. 27). Such images fail to account for rising youth unemployment, rapidly vanishing full-time job positions, and the dismantling of the welfare system.

After the collapse of the bubble economy in 1991, Japan saw a sharp rise in laborers who only worked part-time or in contract positions, so-called *freeters*. In 1991, the Labor Ministry defined the term in its annual Labor White Paper as those "between the ages of 15 and 34, unmarried women or men who had never stayed in the same job longer than five years, and who understood themselves to be part-time workers" (Driscoll 2007). Author Kosugi Reiko described the public image of the freeter as "those between fifteen and thirty-four who aren't students and aren't married, and who self-identify as part-time workers, or who are unemployed but only seek part-time work" (2008).

While many housewives also take up such work, the image of freeters is predominantly youthful, unmarried, and untethered. In public discourse, freeters are often either vilified as leeches responsible for the crumbling pension system and falling birthrate (Yamada Masahiro, 1999) or portrayed as free-spirited youth who refuse to pledge loyalty in exchange for their freedom. As Mark Driscoll notes, “comparatively 'good' and upstanding' freeter[s] [have] appeared on the stage of the society of the spectacle” in the form of public figures like author Kanehara Hitomi, who rose to prominence after winning the Akutagawa Prize for *Hebi ni piasu* (Snakes and Earrings) in January 2004.

However, while the latter depiction typically emphasizes freeters’ agency in a more positive manner, I argue that it still veers too closely to neoliberalist rhetoric in that it uses palatable words like “freedom” to obfuscate the structural inequalities at play:

Today, being a *furitā* no longer allows Japanese youth to freely choose (or not choose) their source of fulfillment through alternative work styles. Instead, they are often the *only* alternative and usually involve tacit consent to job insecurity, meager social welfare, and little hope for upward mobility. (Takeyama 2016, p. 33)

While statistics suggest a much smaller female *hikikomori* population - some estimates place the male-female ratio at 4:1 (Naoji Kondo, 1997; Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2003) - these figures are unreliable for a similar reason. In a study of a *hikikomori* recovery facility conducted by Ramsay Ismail, one of his female informants explained that women in her situation were rarely considered *hikikomori*; an unmarried woman at home helping her parents was not only more socially acceptable, but an expected life phase between graduation and marriage (2019). Due to the difference in discourse of male and female freeters and *hikikomori*, the public image of these identities remains predominantly male. Yet, the gendered nature of

both economic identities simultaneously emasculates these men.

Even if one avoids economic failure and achieves the now-outdated ideal of the regular employee (*seishain*), even more demoralizing factors await them: the rigors of forced overtime, office politics, and the lack of stimulating work, to name a few. (Genda 2001). In *Overlord*, the main character and his gaming group mates are all *seishain* (full-time, regular employees) that frequently break one of the game's unwritten rules to keep their work lives separate from their online fantasy lives. Once one player begins to complain about work, the others pile on their own long list of grievances:

“Sounds rough. Are you doing okay?”

“My health? It's pretty much in tatters. Not doctor-visit level, but pretty close.

Ugh. I really wanna just run away from it all. But I gotta eat, so I'm working my ass off and getting whipped like a slave.” ...

Their gripes about their jobs in reality gathered steam: how their subordinates had no communication skills, how the spec documents were liable to change from one day to the next, how their bosses would grill them if they didn't meet their quotas, how they could barely ever go home because there was too much work, their abnormal weight gain caused by the crazy hours they kept, the increasing number of pills they took.” (1:10-11)

The very demographic that is trapped between these impossible choices- young Japanese men in their teens and twenties - are the target demographic for *isekai*, as well as the most common age and gender of its protagonists. On top of the unforgiving structural inequalities, their preference for other worlds is accused of being little more than escapist, unrealistic wish fulfillment, when the “reality” they fail to inhabit? has itself become uprooted from the actual lived experience of millions of Japanese.

By positioning such historically “undesirable” identities as heroes, *isekai* stories demand a rethinking of the prevailing (outdated) mode of life-making – from university, to lifetime employment, to marriage and family life until retirement. They find success, companionship, romance, and fulfilling lives despite their “undesirability” as defined by the conventional, “realistic” paradigm. In fact, many *isekai* heroes are successful precisely *because* of their ostensibly useless hobbies such as gaming, watching anime, and reading manga and light novels. They leverage knowledge and skills gleaned from these “immature” hobbies to great effect in the worlds they are sent to.

*Isekai* stories can be read as a rejection of normative modes of “graduating” from adulthood by illustrating those individuals who are perceived to have failed in the real world yet find themselves vital in another world. By openly embracing their socially and economically marginal identities, these protagonists should not be read as passive receivers of such identities. Instead, they actively reject the outdated model of adulthood precisely because they can see it is no longer viable to them; they refuse classification as failures, because society failed them first.

On the production side, we can also observe authors forsaking not only these cultural, socio-economic norms, but also typical conventions of literary success. Henry Jenkins discusses the power of the fan-as-producer, who practices textual poaching, transforming passive consumption into active production of fan works (2013). Textual poachers use elements of existing works as the building blocks to craft new narratives that suit their desires. This process also occurs among Japanese fans, where fan-produced works are referred to as “derivative works” (*niji sousaku*). (Azuma, 2007). The largest hub of fan-produced derivative works is the bi-annual Comiket, short for “Comic Market”, which sees tens of thousands of visitors.

However, if participatory fan culture turns fans into “secondary producers”, according to Jenkins, then in *isekai* we can observe fans becoming primary producers. The light novel publishing industry enjoys many of the benefits of *isekai*’s current popularity, but publishers themselves did not create the trend. Instead, many of *isekai*’s extensive multimedia franchises began online, penned by amateur authors calling themselves “online novelists” (*onrain sakka*).

The website *Shōsetuka ni narō* (*Let’s be Novelists!*), launched in 2004, allows writers to register and upload their works for free, and all works are also free to read. The site boasts over one billion page views per month, more than the top four Japanese newspaper sites combined. The vast majority of works are updated serially, in a practice reminiscent of the serial novels that once? were an important part of said newspapers.

Several major authors in the scene, such as *Sword Art Online*’s Kawahara Reki, debuted at a time in which most authors kept their own private sites; there was not yet a sizable hub for enthusiasts to post and share their original stories. *Shōsetuka ni narō* has since risen to fulfill that need. Boasting 1,789,272 members and 724,246 works uploaded, it is far and away the largest platform for aspiring authors.

Meredith Suzanne Hahn Aquila notes that the fan’s ability to “create new choices for themselves that better meet their needs and desires for mass media” frees them from the binary of either choosing or rejecting a work (2007). Although Aquila’s focus is on fanfiction, this quote perhaps applies even more to the light novel scene, the primary medium for the current *isekai* boom. Through *Shōsetuka ni narō* fans inspired to create their own unique works can do so and achieve great success. The site’s power as a medium for propelling fan-producers into the realm of simply “producer” is perhaps an even greater realization of the fan’s inherent power.

Norton Juster, author of *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961), wrote a coming-of-age tale set in a strange world to mediate his own sense of alienation after leaving the Navy and his childhood feeling of inadequacy when compared to his sibling. “The first line, ‘There was a boy named Milo who didn't know what to do with himself, not just sometimes, but always,’ was exactly me,” he said in an interview. “As I wrote the book, I began to get more of a sense of what I was like as a kid, and consequently, where I was going. So it was kind of a cathartic experience for me” (Horning 2011).

Today's *isekai* authors can also work through their anxieties by setting these coming-of-age tales in a world of their own design. Just as video game players experience a sense of “perfect and powerful control over a ‘microworld’ on the screen” (McGonigal 2011, p.41), authorship allows the youth to exercise a measure of control over the structural inequalities by crafting worlds, stories, and life courses that redefine what it takes to be an adult in the world today. Outside of their tales, these online authors come to represent a passion that leverages undervalued bodies of knowledge and can result in tangible success.

Yamaguchi Noboru's *Zero no tsukaima* (*The Familiar of Zero*), one of the first online novels to land a major publishing deal, helped to establish this model. *Zero no tsukaima* is said to have started as a fanfiction of an unidentified series. Published as a series of light novels by Kadokawa in June 2004, the franchise went on to include an Original Video Animation (OVA), four TV anime series, five manga series, and another two spin-off light novel side stories.

Since then, online novels, and especially those hosted on *Shōsetuka ni narō* are synonymous with *isekai*. Of the works posted on the readers' site, *Shōsetuka wo yomō* (Let's Read Novels), over 136,000 - nearly 20 percent- are tagged as *isekai* stories. Publishers, including industry giants such as Kadokawa and Shūeisha, have released over 1500 series from

the site as light novels, and of those, roughly 47 a percent are works from the *isekai* category. Furthermore, of the 20 best-selling light novels that found their start on the site, only one series is *not* an *isekai* story (*Narō shosekika rankingu*).

Though some authors, like Kawahara, cease to update their stories serially online upon receiving a publishing author, many continue to post new entries online. In either case, though, authors maintain close ties to the communities in which they gained popularity, and as Kawahara says below, to be an online novel author can be an end goal in and of itself:

To tell the truth, I still don't feel totally prepared to write as an occupation (*shokugyō to shite shōsetsu wo kaku*). Even now as I'm writing [Sword Art Online] in March 2009, even after the contests results were announced and I received my award [for my first book, *Accel World*], and even after it's been published as an award-winner. That's because for seven whole years, I was an 'author of online novels' (*Dengeki bunkōban "Soodo aato onrain" no oshirase*, 2009).

The lack of barrier to access means that anyone at all can try their hand at writing the next successful multi-media franchise, which generates an aspirational attitude toward the endeavor rather than a cynical one. There are also several how-to books advising would-be light novel authors on how to pen the next hit series. One such book is Wakatsuki Hikaru's *Jinsei keiken wo ikashite shōsetuka ni narō! Ima sugu tsukaeru shippitsu mesoddo 36 no kakikata/uridashikata* ("Use Your Life Experience to Become an Author! 36 Writing and Marketing Tips You Can Use Right Now"). Published in 2017, after *Shōsetuka ni narō* had already yielded several media-mix hit series, the title recalls the web novel site in several ways, the most overt being the appearance of the site's title in the book's title. A light novel author and former temp worker himself, Wakatsuki urges writers to utilize their own life experience, and the

genre's heavy influence from hobbies such as games and anime show that *isekai* authors are not afraid to do so.

In the world of *isekai* story writing, one can easily transition into the role of producer, with a tangible, proven sense that success is within reach - all without the demand to conform or hide aspects of oneself. On the contrary, these shared interests form a vast database that allows readers and authors to engage in a shared language. (Azuma 2007, Hatōka 2013) Self-referential humor, repeated story beats, and stock characters embed *isekai* with several layers that reward media-literate readers, and which the fan-turned-author can include as a knowing nod to their readers. This "shared context" (*kyoyū no bunmyaku*) connects the authors to readers, while also enabling said readers to utilize the context? and produce their own works, keeping the cycle alive (Shungiku 2018).

Nagatsuki Tappei's series *Re:Zero kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu* (*Re:Zero - Starting Life in Another World*) captures virtually every characteristic of the contemporary *isekai* story, both in terms of production and literary content. Nagatsuki first began uploading chapters of the work to *Shōsetuka ni narō* in April 2012. Although the series received a publication deal from Media Factory in January 2016 under their light novel imprint MF Bunko J Nagatsuki continues to update the story online first, chapter by chapter.

*Re: Zero* tells the story of 17-year old Natsuki Subaru, who is mysteriously whisked away after returning from a late-night trip to the convenience store and finds himself in the fantasy kingdom of Lugunica. On the surface, the premise differs little from other works in the genre, but in fact *Re:Zero*, utilizes all of the typical narrative hallmarks of the genre, but prioritizes character development over power fantasy. Both the readers' and the protagonist's

expectations are revealed and then swiftly dashed as Subaru must learn to learn from the consequences of his actions rather than rely on a magical ability.

I believe that *Re:Zero*, as a whole, can be read as a response to the more compensatory power fantasies that popularized the genre. Through his subversion of genre conventions and his use of third-person narrative, Nagatsuki prefers to illuminate the protagonist's psychological and emotional state, exploring their impact on the hero. Though many *isekai* authors write in the first person, these narratives tend to read as straightforward accounts of the hero's actions in which he rarely thinks deeply on *why* he is so quick to leave behind his older world.

Nagatsuki, however, uses a third-person narrator who is intimately aware of Subaru's character, using this insight to interrogate aspects that readers may take for granted: why does he immediately assume himself to be the hero? Why does he want to be a hero at all? He does not shy away from the embarrassment, shame, self-loathing, inadequacy, and the craving for purpose that plague young men in Subaru's position and fuel their desire to effect change in their new surroundings. These features make *Re:Zero* a work that provides a useful framework for *isekai* as a whole, one through which the genre can evolve and push its inherent social critique even further.

The narrative immediately highlights its hero's decidedly unheroic lifestyle and outlook in its first scene:

Subaru Natsuki was an extremely ordinary boy, born on Earth, the third planet in the solar system, to a middle-class family in the nation of Japan.(...)

Placed at a fork in the road of life, such as “whether to pursue a college degree or jump straight into the workforce”, people are generally forced to make a decision one way or the other. That sort of decision-making is something everyone has to deal with

and part of what we call life, but in Subaru's case (you might call it his specialty) he was a bit better than the average Joe at running away from things he did not like. In avoiding such a decision, the number of his unexcused absences had piled up, and before he knew it he was a bonafide truant, the kind parents weep over. (1:8)

Rarely is the *isekai* narrative so openly critical of its heroes. *Hikikomori* and NEET identities are generally affirmed by the narrative, either through the hero's general upward trajectory, or externally by sympathetic readers. *Re:Zero* uses third-person narration, but the reader will soon come to see how its critical comments are echoed by Subaru himself, imparting the work with a sense of metatextual self-awareness that is also common to the genre. As we will see, Subaru frequently uses self-derision to make light of his deep-seated sense of inadequacy; both the narrative and Subaru himself, "who realized at this point in his life what a loser he was" (1:139), illustrate the low sense of self-worth he possesses. The third-person narrative often reads as though written by Subaru himself, who is not only well-versed in the *isekai* genre, but is also painfully aware of his own faults.

In keeping with another convention of the genre, Subaru is a self-aware protagonist; as soon as he finds himself spirited away, he remarks that this must be "[o]ne of those so-called 'I've been summoned to another world' (*isekai shoukan*) deals, right?" (1:8). He uses the exact same phrase to describe his particular flavor of *isekai*, unfazed even as "an oxcart-like vehicle pulled by a giant lizard-like thing crossed in front of him" (1:8). Even as he is held at knifepoint by a trio of bandits, Subaru assumes that they are merely token obstacles in "the first chapter of [his] glorious future" (1: 8).

Here we see one of the earliest examples of *Re: Zero*: highlighting one of the genre's conventions before swiftly subverting it. It is here, faced with imminent danger, that many *isekai*

heroes would awaken to their hidden, devastatingly powerful cheat skill, but Subaru receives no such luck; he is instead quickly overpowered by the bandits. The narrative introduces another chance for the story to return to form, as a young woman bursts onto the scene. Subaru's waning hope is rekindled and then quickly dashed:

He was waiting for this kind of development.

The girl, in her well-worn clothes and unclean appearance, had stumbled upon this attempted murder and robbery in the act! What would surely happen next was that with an overflowing sense of justice this girl would save Subaru's life, right from the clutches of death...

“Whoa! You look like you're in quite a pinch there, but sorry! I've got my hands full right now! Good luck! Live life to the fullest!”

“Wait, what?! Are you serious?!”

The girl raised her hand in an apologetic sort of gesture and didn't slow down as she continued racing down the alley. (1:11)

This sets the tone for the stark difference between *Re:Zero* and the rest of the genre: the world of Lugunika simply does not revolve around Subaru. He does not conveniently manifest new abilities, nor was the young woman here placed in his path to save him. She has her own agenda, one which Subaru plays no part in.

This sense of insignificance weighs even more heavily on Subaru than his impending death: “It wasn't fear that overwhelmed him; it was more the feeling of emptiness that this would all end without him accomplishing anything.” (1:13). We see here that the “extremely ordinary” Subaru craves a sense of accomplishment, and his sudden appearance in Lugunika seems to be his chance. To have that opportunity taken from him is what causes him despair.

As the bandits turn on Subaru once more, they are interrupted again by yet another woman. Emilia, whose beauty stuns Subaru into silence, is positioned as the requisite heroine; the world seems to stand still upon her entrance, as her voice “shook the very foundations of the world” (1:13). This time, she does help Subaru, dispatching the bandits quickly with ice magic.

Although she appears just in time to save Subaru from both mortal peril and hopelessness, Emilia, like the first mysterious woman, only does so as an aside to her main goal. In search of a stolen badge, she stumbles upon the scene, rescues Subaru out of her own personal sense of justice, and leaves him as soon as she ascertains his safety.

Subaru, however, is far less willing to let her go. As the person who saved him from a despair worse than death, Emilia represents hope: he sees their chance encounter as the opportunity to form a meaningful connection with someone. “*I’m gonna do my best to cling to this relationship and not let go..!*” (1:30) So Subaru thinks to himself as he chases after her.

Subaru frequently refers to her as the “heroine” (*hiron*) of what he considers to be his personal story, a term used in anime, manga, and light novels to refer to the male main character’s female love interest. Subaru is clearly taken with her from their first meeting, and often muses on her beauty and her endearing mannerisms. At first glance Emilia appears to fall into the common *tsundere* archetype common to anime and manga, one who hides her true feelings behind a cold, often hostile façade (Azuma 2009).

Emilia defies this characterization, however, a fact made apparent very early on. She does not secretly reciprocate Subaru’s budding affection for her; her interest in the strange young man is little more than idle curiosity about his behavior. His metatextual, self-referential jokes are only met with bemusement, and she quickly glosses over them. Emilia also maintains a palpable distance between them, refusing to tell him why she is searching for the stolen badge, details

about herself, or even her true name, instead giving him the pseudonym “Satella”. Emilia’s coldness is not a front, but a sign that she has goals that have nothing to do with the self-presumed hero of the story. She displays interiority but does not allow Subaru access to it, and rather than “joining” the hero’s party like an RPG party member, it is Subaru who tags along after her.

The two, accompanied by Emilia’s spirit familiar, Puck, discover the whereabouts of her badge. The young woman who was the first to find Subaru in distress, a thief by the name of Felt, had indeed stolen Emilia’s badge and stowed it away in her hideout in the slums. They find her hideout dark and seemingly vacant. Although it is Emilia and Puck who wield powerful magic, the comparatively defenseless Subaru puts on a brave front and insists on investigating first. Not only is Subaru’s protectiveness unnecessary, but also by feeling such emotion over what turns out to be an alias, the narrative emphasizes just how little he truly knows about Emilia:

“I’ll go take a look. I don’t think I’ll be gone too long, but you can go ahead and eat without me.”

“Oh, stop being so stupid. Be careful, okay?”

“Gotcha. Also, Satella? Don’t come in until I call for you, got it?”

The courage Subaru built up to prepare himself to enter the cellar had pushed him just enough to say her name. Up until now, he had felt too embarrassed to say it and had hesitated. After clenching his fists together and? excited he was able to finally say it, he looked back at Satella.

Nagatsuki Tappei further highlights Subaru’s shallow affection and misguided heroics in Emilia’s response, which defies his expectations:

“...What’s wrong?”

Satella was looking at Subaru frozen, with her eyes open wide. This reaction was far different from any that Subaru expected, and so he tilted his head in confusion.

“I’m sorry... It’s nothing. Once we get my badge back, I’ll apologize properly.”

(1:63)

She clearly knows something he does not, but humors him nonetheless. Subaru tells her he would prefer words of appreciation over an apology, which she laughs off, an expression he makes sure to “burn into his memory” (1:63). As he ventures into the dark, he vows to make her smile again once they recover her property.

Subaru skips over any potential for imminent danger and takes his safe return to be a foregone conclusion. Presumably, the reader assumes the same, as the scene takes place less than a third of the way through the first volume. *Re:Zero*, however, refuses Subaru the easy *isekai* hero’s journey. Subaru steps into an ominous pool of mysterious liquid as his eyes fall on two dead bodies lying in the dark den. A woman’s voice chides Subaru for stumbling onto the scene of the crime, and deals him a single, fatal blow before he can fully process the situation. Lying immobilized on the floor, he hears Emilia enter in behind him, only to see her fall right in front of him just as quickly. It is then that Subaru realizes he, too, is dying.

In the span of two and a half pages, the hero of the story is killed without any chance to fight back. Furthermore, he has failed to defend his heroine, a mistake he seems to regret even more than the loss of his own life:

Her white hand fell, powerless. He lightly grasped it in his own bloodstained grip.

He felt the fingers of her hand move slightly to grasp his own.

“Just you wait...”

He seized his fading consciousness, pulling it desperately back around to buy a bit more time.

“I’m going to...”

*...find a way to save you.*

In the next instant, he - Subaru Natsuki - lost his life.

Subaru’s brazen heroics belie a deep-seated wish to be useful to someone. Emilia, as the woman who saved his life and his only connection to this new world, is more than just the token female lead. She also represents hope for Subaru - a chance for him to break the cycle of inaction and disappointment and effect some positive change. Unfortunately for Subaru, this *isekai* adventure is not one that exists to roll out the heroic red carpet for him; both he and the reader are made aware of just how dangerous such situations would be for the average young man.

Fortunately for Subaru, and unbeknownst to him, he had indeed received a special ability upon his arrival in Lugunica. When Subaru dies, he travels back in time and is revived in the recent past, retaining all his memories of the events before death. Just as video game characters are returned to a “save point” upon defeat, death for Subaru is not permanent, but a chance for him to learn from his mistakes and try again.

After his mysterious and abrupt death, Subaru finds himself back in the marketplace where he first arrived in Lugunica, still unaware of his power. As he struggles to grasp how he arrived there alive and well, Emilia is among the first of his thoughts. Subaru is forced to come to terms with the fact that as a magic wielder, she is much more capable of defending herself than he is:

Subaru didn't have any positive qualities, and he couldn't make himself useful at all. He was something like a mob character [low-level enemies in video games, which the player must defeat by the hundreds in order to level up], or at best the comic relief character, and yet he was still alive. (1:71-72)

Though he witnessed her death, Subaru believes that if someone as weak as he could have survived, then certainly the more capable Emilia and her familiar Puck must have made it out alive, and he sets off to find them.

He returns to the hideout where he meets its two occupants, the thieves Old Rom and Felt; he recognizes the latter as the young woman who left him to fend for himself shortly after he arrived in Lugunika. Subaru also learns that Felt was the culprit behind the theft of Emilia's badge, and that she had arranged to sell it to a client who would visit the hideout that evening.

Here, Subaru attempts to leverage another trick of the *isekai* trade: knowledge from a more technologically advanced civilization. Lugunika, like many other *isekai* worlds, is a rustic kingdom where merchants barter for coins in open-air marketplaces and dragon-drawn carriages serve as the main form of transportation. Magic exists, but does not play a significant role in the lives of most commoners.

Subaru offers his cell phone in exchange for Emilia's stolen badge. He takes Felt's picture and shows it to her, but despite his attempts to mystify her, her "incredibly indifferent" (1:92) reaction falls short of his expectations.

He meets the badge's buyer, a woman named Elsa, and as the deal quickly takes a turn for the worse, Subaru learns that it was she who killed him in his previous visit to the hideout. She attacks the two thieves before turning upon Subaru, who is forced to experience death once more.

After reviving for a second time, Subaru finally grasps the situation he is in, and dubs the power “returning by death” (*shini modori*). He muses on the nature of his newfound power in comparison to the heroes of the video games and manga he has consumed: “If the heroic thing to do was to come back from the brink of death and win the day, then getting a chance to do things over after you’ve lost felt more like something a cheat would do” (1:132).

Though Subaru compares this power to the cheat abilities that other, “overpowered” protagonists receive, his power is more passive than heroic. Though the ability to learn from one’s mistake and try again grants him a sort of cheat-like invincibility, Subaru has no control over this ability, nor can he actively rewind time without suffering death - as he bitterly thinks, “The fact that it’s a power that assumes you’re going to lose really makes it fitting for me, doesn’t it?” (1:132).

It would not be incorrect to say that Subaru’s only power in *Re:Zero* is the ability to grow and learn from his mistakes, an ability he could only have received in Lugunica. Unlike his contemporaries who are granted the strength to mow down opposition, make fast friends, and find love almost without trying, Subaru is as out of his depth as one would expect an average person from our world to be in a world of swords and magic.

At every turn, the narrative denies him the conventional advantages granted to *isekai* heroes, and he must instead face the consequences of his fatal mistakes, learn painful lessons, and struggle to understand the way the world around him works. This world does not exist to exalt him, which author Nagatsuki Tappei acknowledges in the afterword of volume 1 where he describes his “bullied protagonist” in comparison to the *isekai* genre:

I think that a fantasy world of swords and magic is one that everyone, if you're a boy, or at least some of the population if you're a girl, has dreamed about. This work's protagonist is an ordinary Japanese boy who has shared that dream too.

He can't use a sword. He can't use magic. He does not have the wit or the physical strength to win a fight. So this is a story about someone who, when pressed on all sides, uses only his inability to give up as a weapon. So it is a story about not giving up. ...

Now by doing all of that, what does he gain in the end? For that answer I invite everyone to follow along and see for yourselves. (1:230)

In this sense, despite the high-fantasy setting, *Re:Zero* exhibits a strong sense of realism - Subaru must put in the effort and learn through trial and error. However, contrary to the situation for many young Japanese, Lugunica grants Subaru the opportunity to struggle *and* see the fruits of his labor. It is in the fantastical otherworld, not in Japan, where he receives the motivation to exert himself and the positive feedback that he has been yearning for. *Isekai* does not radically alter Subaru's personality, changing him from an underachiever to a hard worker, but it addresses the underlying lack of motivation and personally relevant stimulation that fueled his *hikikomori* state.

Subaru finally succeeds in his third and final attempt to recover Emilia's badge and survive. He leverages the knowledge of his past two lives to successfully warn Old Rom, Felt, and Emilia, who has tracked down the thieves on her own. With the advance notice, they successfully ward off Elsa's attacks for a time, but she proves to be a formidable opponent; Felt escapes to find help, and Elsa eventually incapacitates everyone but Subaru. It is Subaru's cowardice that keeps him out of her range, not any innate fighting capabilities. Nor is he

impervious to the trauma of experiencing death twice over: “As Subaru thought of the pain and spilling of blood [Elsa’s knives] would bring, the blood he would vomit, a scream rose in his throat” (1:197). Even after realizing his abilities, Subaru is no reckless action hero. He still fears death, perhaps even more so after experiencing it.

In the end, it is not Subaru who miraculously saves the day, but the knight Reinhardt whom Felt found in her search for help. Reinhardt boasts the sort of inhuman strength that *isekai* heroes often achieve, but the tale’s true protagonist can only sit and watch as the knight handily dispatches the enemy that had overwhelmed the entire group.

In volume 2 of *Re:Zero*, Subaru’s circle of acquaintances expands as Emilia brings him along to the Roswaal mansion where she lives under the patronage of an eccentric margrave. Subaru meets twin maids Rem and Ram, clad in outfits that are anachronistic for the world of Lugunica, but which may not seem terribly out of place to fans of anime, manga, and light novels.

After some deliberation over what to do with their strange new guest, Roswaal allows Subaru to stay on as a guest, but Subaru insists he hire him as another servant. Over the course of the next few days, Subaru struggles to keep up with his far more capable co-workers who grow to respect him more as they see just how hard he works. His hapless determination endears him to Rem and Ram, and he learns more about the relationship between the acerbic Ram and the shy Rem; though the latter is (technically) younger and more capable, she admires her sister greatly.

Here, we see another way in which *isekai* stories provide for their previously disadvantaged protagonists: by giving them a new place to belong (*ibasho*) in their new world. They find fulfilment not only through action and excitement, but through friendship, love, and an acceptance that the protagonist lacked in their home world.

Unfortunately, the above course of events is marred by several more deaths. At one point, Emilia even agrees to accompany him to the village alone, which Subaru sees as a date; the next morning, he awakens to find that he had died in his sleep, with several days' worth of emotional progress completely erased. The mansion appears to be under a mysterious attack, and at one point, Rem suspects that Subaru is responsible, having harbored suspicion for him even as Subaru believed they were becoming friends, and takes it upon herself to eliminate the perceived threat twice. In one particularly painful scene, Subaru, already near-death, dies just as he is about to tell them how much their time together has meant to him.

Subaru learns that he cannot tell anyone about his power; when he tries, an unseen hand grips his heart so tightly that the pain prevents him from forming the words, making it all the more difficult for Emilia to understand him.

She offers him what comfort she can, acknowledging how exhausted he appears and acknowledging at least some of his efforts. "Have you been having trouble?" she asks him, and he brushes off her kindness with half-hearted jokes. She persists. "It's been hard for you, hasn't it?" (3:27). Her persistent care and concern cause Subaru's front to crumble:

All the powerful emotions he'd tried to keep bottled up hadn't gone away in the slightest and came rushing out.

"It was...hard. It was really, really rough. I was really scared. I was really sad, enough that I thought I was gonna die. It hurt so much...!"

"Yeah..."

"I-I tried. I really tried. I did everything I could. I desperately tried to do everything right...! I did! Really, really. I've never tried so hard at anything in my life!"

"I know..."

“It’s because I like it here... This place, it’s precious to me...! ... I was so afraid to see that day again...and I hated it. I hated myself for that!” (3:27)

Without any of his usual joking or bravado, Subaru openly admits the frustration and grief that his ability to return from death has caused. Far from allowing him to cheat death without consequence, Subaru’s adventures leave the kind of deep emotional and mental scars that one would expect a person in his situation to experience.

However, Subaru’s growth is not purely linear, nor is he always the sole victim of circumstances outside of his control. His desire to protect the place and people that mean so much to him rekindles his hero complex, though he cannot provide more help than the information he gleans from his multiple deaths. Subaru learns that Lugunika is without a monarch, and that Emilia is one of five candidates chosen to compete for the throne; he thus takes it upon himself to make sure Emilia ascends to the throne. Subaru’s heartfelt desire to help the people he loves stems from the deep desire to feel needed: he believes that he is only of use when something is happening, so in order to stave off the danger of uselessness, he insists on inserting himself in her candidacy.

Emilia, on the other hand, sees Subaru as a problem child she must keep on a tight leash, not her gallant knight. When they arrive at the royal capital she insists on holding hands, not for the reasons Subaru hopes for, but because she is certain he will get himself into trouble if she lets him out of her sight. Her suspicions prove to be right, as Subaru bursts into the castle and declares himself Emilia’s knight before the candidates, Lugunika’s interim leaders, and the royal army, where esteemed, actual knights like Julius take great offense at his brazen claims. Fueled by jealousy and the fear that he might not actually be of use to Emilia, he stubbornly insists even as she begs him to stand back, and accepts a duel with Julius.

Subaru's insecurities and anxieties are given attention without becoming an excuse: it is clear that his insistent efforts to insert himself into the proceedings cause more harm than good to himself and to the woman he claims to defend. Emilia neither needs his help nor does she especially want it; though she has softened toward Subaru, she is still very far from returning his affections, and her primary concern is keeping *him* safe from trouble. She knows a great deal more about the royal selection than Subaru, and as his disastrous duel with Julius reminds the reader, he cannot defend himself physically either. By all accounts, we see Subaru's worst fears come true. No one is impressed with him, no plot contrivances come to his rescue, and worst of all, he cannot help Emilia at all.

As Subaru recovers from his duel with Julius, Emilia comes to visit him insisting on an explanation for all his broken promises. Subaru wants to tell her what he truly intended: to give her "happiness", to help her achieve her goal of becoming Lugunika's next ruler, and to "protect [her] from everything that makes [her] sad" (4:214). He cannot bring himself to speak the words, and had up until now believed that "his efforts would convey his feelings stronger than any words" (4:214). From Emilia's perspective, his actions appear self-serving, as she never asked him to do anything more than stay at the inn and out of the royal selection.

Subaru must come to terms with the fact that because of his several trips backward through time he and Emilia have spent relatively little time together from her perspective. Subaru cannot adequately explain how he felt saved from danger and from his own hopelessness, and in his frustration, blurts out that she owes him for the part he played in the dangers they had faced. Unable to properly explain himself, Subaru realizes that Emilia has given up on understanding him:

"The me inside your head is really something, isn't she?"

That one sentence was filled with enough distance and isolation to make him cry. ...

“She understands it, all of it, without even having to ask. Your pain, your sadness, your anger - she feels all of them as her own. ... If you don’t say it, I can’t understand, Subaru.”

He’d been rejected. He’d been smashed to bits. His illusion crumbled into dust.

The one thing he truly thought he could believe in since falling into that one world vanished. ... And so, his arbitrary utopia, one that had never existed, crumbled without a sound. (4:220)

Having failed to confront his self-loathing and properly communicate his feelings, Subaru loses what little trust he had built with Emilia. In his desperate attempts to cling to the person who saved him from despair, and his misguided attempts to save someone who never asked to be rescued, Subaru ends up pushing Emilia away rather than winning her heart. For once, the *isekai* hero has lost.

As it is an ongoing series, Subaru’s fate is not yet written. While the two eventually reconcile, I believe the lessons themselves that are the most notable aspect of *Re:Zero*. Its emphasis on growth through mistakes and interpersonal conflict stands out in a genre where subjecting the protagonist to any unpleasant developments is said to ruin readers’ enjoyment (Tsuta 2019). Subaru’s greatest enemy is not an external villain, but himself: he must do battle with his own expectations and deep-seated fear of worthlessness in order to carve out his own *ibasho* in his new world. He must work hard to find his *raison d’etre*, and he must learn to find it within himself, rather than through dramatic combat.

Nagatsuki Tappei's *Re:Zero kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu* uses a self-aware protagonist and a familiar *isekai* setting to explore the impact that such a journey might have on Japan's youth. As Nagatsuki says in the afterword of volume 1, Subaru's adventures are filled with physical, psychological, and emotional struggle, far from the "life of smooth sailing" (*junfū manpanna seikatsu*) that typically characterizes the *isekai* hero's journey (Shunjiku 2018, p. 319). Such journeys have their place in the genre, but often fail to account for *why* such narratives are desired in the first place. *Re:Zero*'s narrative directly confronts and exposes the underlying sense of defeat, self-loathing, and desire for a meaningful life that underpins the *isekai* protagonist's demographic, which provides a useful model for future *isekai* works to follow.

The *isekai* genre continues to evolve and spawn new sub-genres, the most recent of which is known as the *akuyaku reijō* (villainous princess) story. Named after a stock antagonist character common to *shōjo* manga and *otome* (maiden) games<sup>4</sup>, *akuyaku reijō* heroines find themselves occupying this role in the world of an *otome* game. The main character of these stories must avoid a "bad end" in which she is killed off by the game's narrative. The *akuyaku reijō* subgenre enjoys a growing popularity thanks to hit series such as *Otome geemu no hametsu furagu shika nai akuyaku reijō ni tensei shiteshimatta...* (2017 - ), translated into English by J-Novel Club as "My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!". This hybrid of adventure elements, game influences, and *shōjo* archetypes serves as both a return to form of sorts, as well as a refreshing change from the male-dominated *isekai* of the past decade.

---

<sup>4</sup> Story-based video games marketed toward women. Though the plot can range from action-adventure to school life, the main draw is the romantic element, in which the heroine must choose from a cast of suitors. For more information, see Kim, 2009.

More and more reincarnation-type *isekai* choose to give their protagonists a truly fresh start, as opposed to series such as *Knight's & Magic* (2010 - ), in which the reincarnated protagonist retains his knowledge of otaku media to become a successful robot pilot. In Kazuki Miya's *Honzuki no gekokujō: Shisho ni naru tame ni wa shudan o erandeiraremasen* (2013 - 2017, published in English as *Ascendance of a Bookworm, I'll do Anything to Become A Librarian!*), protagonist Motosu Urano dies and is reincarnated into the household of an impoverished family. Her new name is Myne, and she grows up as a sickly child who rarely leaves the house. She retains her memories and love for books, but in her new world, only the wealthy elite can own books. She must come up with ways to learn how to read and acquire books since her overprotective parents do not see the value of literacy and the community at large thwarts her at every turn. Her age and frail condition impede her progress, and though her passion is strong, it is often not enough to overcome these obstacles. Like Subaru, she must learn how the world around her works; knowledge of her past life and world are of no use.

Salarymen *isekai* heroes are also beginning to emerge in stories such as *Arafō Eigyō-man, isekai ni tatsu!: megami pawaa de jinsei nidome no nariagari* (*Salesman in Your Forties, Arise in Another World!: A Second Shot at Life with Goddess Power*). Though these may not serve the same function as new coming-of-age tales, as the title above suggests, *isekai* may symbolize a fresh start, free from the rigors of overtime and dwindling regular employment.

Though *isekai* is often criticized online by anime, manga, and light novel fans as mere wish fulfilment and escapism, I believe it is important to interrogate these terms. What are *isekai* fans escaping from in these works, and what is it about these works that they find fulfilling? Amidst ever-shrinking economic opportunities in which societal expectations have not yet caught up to the lived realities of many Japanese youth *isekai* provide an escape from a world of

little promise into one with the guarantee of success, affirmation, the chance to work hard, and contentment. *Isekai* adopted the otherworldly journey from classical texts and the coming-of-age fantasies adapting them to speak directly to the socially and economically disadvantaged youth of Japan today. The genre possesses yet more potential to evolve and address the concerns of even more of the Japanese readership.

## Works Cited

- Allison, A., & Cross, G. (2006). Fierce Flesh: Sexy Schoolgirls in the Action Fantasy of Sailor Moon. In *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, pp. 128-162. University of California Press. Retrieved May 09, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppk4p.10](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppk4p.10)
- Anagost, A. Introduction: Life-Making in Neoliberal Times. In Anagost, A., Arai, A. and Ren, H. *Global futures in east Asia: Youth, nation, and the new economy in uncertain times*. Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Aquila, M. "Ranma ½" Fan Fiction Writers: New Narrative Themes or the Same Old Story? *Mechademia*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 34–47.
- Azuma, H., Saitō T. and Kotani M. (2003). Gyarugē no sekushuariti: Otaku no jendā panikku futatabi. In: Azuma, H., ed. *Mōjō genron F-kai* [Modern discourse final reform]. Tōkyō: Seidōsha, pp. 197-220.
- Azuma, H. (2007). *Gēmu-teki riarizumu no tanjō* [The birth of game-like realism]. Tōkyō : Kōdansha.
- Azuma, H. (2009). *Otaku: Japan's database animals*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dasgupta, R. (2005). Salarymen doing straight: Heterosexual men and the dynamics of gender conformity. In *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* (pp. 168-182). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Driscoll, M. (2007). Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan: On the Two Freeters. *Cultural Critique*, 65, 164-187.
- Frederick, S. (2017). *Turning pages: Reading and writing women's magazines in interwar japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Gamble, N. (2019). *Exploring children's literature : Reading for knowledge, understanding and pleasure* (Fourth ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality In Foucault, M., Burchell, G., Gordon, C., & Miller, P. *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality : with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furuichi, N., & Mahtani, Raj. (2017). *The happy youth of a desperate country : The disconnect between Japan's malaise and its millennials* (First ed., Japan library (Shuppan Bunka Sangyō Shinkō Zaidan)). Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

- Galbraith, P. W., Kam, T. H., & Kamm Björn-Ole (Eds.). (2015). *Debating otaku in contemporary Japan: Historical perspectives and new horizons*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Galbraith, P. W. (2017). *The Moé manifesto: an Insider's look at the worlds of manga, anime, and gaming*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.
- Genda Y. (2006). *A nagging sense of job insecurity: the new reality facing Japanese youth*. (J. C. Hoff, Trans.). Tōkyō: International House of Japan.
- Gygax, Gary. (2000, May 20). Creator of Dungeons & Dragons [Interview]. *TheOneRing.net*. [http://archives.theonering.net/features/interviews/gary\\_gygax.html](http://archives.theonering.net/features/interviews/gary_gygax.html)
- Hattori, Y. (2005). *Hikikomori to kazoku torauma* [Hikikomori and family trauma]. Tōkyō: Nihon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai.
- Hatōka, K. (2013). *Ranobe no naka no gendai nihon: poppu botchi nosutarujia* [Modern Japan within light novels: Pop, loneliness, nostalgia]. Tōkyō: Kōdansha.
- Hōkō, T. (2019). *Naze "isekai tensei" wa wakamono ni uketsuzukeru no ka?* [Why is "other world reincarnation" so popular with young people?]. *Gendai.ismedia.jp*. <https://gendai.ismedia.jp/articles/-/64174>
- Horning, Kathleen T. (2011). The buddy system: How two talented unknowns (Norton Juster and Jules Feiffer) broke all the rules and created an instant classic--The Phantom Tollbooth. (Interview). *School Library Journal*, 57(10), 38.
- Hosoya, M. (2004). *Raito noberu kanzen dokuhon : Dokusha ga erabu raito noberu ninki rangu happyō* [Light novel complete reader: Light novels ranked by readers]. (Nikkei bīpī mukku). Tōkyō: Nikkei BP Sha.
- Ismail, R. (2019, June 3-5). "Rentaru" ni yotte "nyū sutāto" e: Hikikomori heya kara no dasshutu [From rental visits to new start: How hikikomori come to leave their rooms]. Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Study Presentation Conference, Yokohama.
- Jenkins, H. (2013). *Textual poachers : Television fans and participatory culture* (Updated 20th anniversary ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Kawahara, R. (2009, March 30). Dengeki bunko-ban "sōdoato onrain" kankō no oshirase [Notice: Dengeki bunko version of "Sword art online" published] [Blog post]. Retrieved from [http://wordgear.x0.com/novel/sao\\_osirase.htm](http://wordgear.x0.com/novel/sao_osirase.htm)
- Kawakami, N. & Umitsubame. (2014). *Naze ima, doryoku shinaide seikō suru monogatari ga hayaru no ka? Hikikomori no puroburogā Umitsubame-shi ga gesuto no "gēmā wa motto keiei-sha o mezasubeki!" Dai 17-kai* [Why are stories where someone succeeds without effort so popular among the youth nowadays? Guest Hikikomori pro

- blogger Umitsubame says, "More gamers should strive to be managers!" #17]. 4Gamer.net. [https://www.4gamer.net/games/236/G023617/20140509083/index\\_3.html](https://www.4gamer.net/games/236/G023617/20140509083/index_3.html)
- Kim, H., & Yoshimi, S. (2009). Women's games in Japan: Gendered identity and narrative construction. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(2-3), 165-188.
- Koshiro, K. (1984). Lifetime Employment in Japan: Three Models of the Concept. *Monthly Labor Review*, 107(8), 34-35. Retrieved May 01, 2020 from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1984/08/rpt4full.pdf>
- Kondo, N. (1997) Hiseishinbyōsei hikikomori no genzai [The present conditions of non-psychotic psycho-social withdrawal cases]. *Rinshō Seishin Igaku*, 26(9), pp. 1159–1167.
- Kosugi, R. *Escape from Work: Freelancing Youth and the Challenge to Corporate Japan*. Trans Pacific Press, 2008.
- Kotani, M. Metamorphosis of the Japanese Girl: The Girl, the Hyper-Girl, and the Battling Beauty. *Mechademia*, vol 1, 2006, pp. 162–169. doi: 10.1353/mec.0.0090
- Kotani, M. (2003). Otakuin wa, otakuia no yume o mita wa [The otaqueen dreams of the otaqueer]. From *Mōjō genron F-kai* [Modern discourse final reform], pp. 115-27. Tōkyō: Seidosha, 2003.
- Keizai Shingikai [The Economic Council]. (1999). Keizai shakai no arubeki sugata to keizai shinsei no seisaku hōshin [Ideal state of social economy and policy for economic revival]. Retrieved 23 April 2019 from <https://www5.cao.go.jp/99/e/19990705e-keishin-pamph.html>
- Letendre, G., & Fukuzawa, R. (2001). *Intense Years: How Japanese Adolescents Balance School, Family and Friends*. Routledge.
- Lukács, G. (2010). *Scripted affects, branded selves : Television, subjectivity, and capitalism in 1990s Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mai, L. (2007). Women and work in contemporary Japan: Deconstructing the "crisis" of the gender order. [Unpublished Honours Thesis]. University of Sydney.
- Mantan-Web. (2017). *SAO: Ninki ranobe ga 8-nen de shirīzu ruikei 2000 manbutoppa dai 1-kan ga 100 man-bu* [SAO: Popular light novel series exceeds 20,000,000 copies in circulation, first volume exceeds 1,000,000 copies]. Mantan-Web.jp. <https://mantan-web.jp/article/20170404dog00m200029000c.html>
- Marioka, Koji. Work Till You Drop. *New Labor Forum*, 13(1), pp. 80- 85

- Maruyama, K. (2016). *Ōbārōdo* [Overlord]. (E. Balistreri, Trans.). New York: Yen Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken : Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare. (November 12, 2007). 10-dai, 20-dai wo chūshin to shita 'hikikomori' wo meguru chīki seishin hoken katsudō no gaidorain [Community mental healthintervention guidelines aimed at socially withdrawn teenagers and young adults]. 2003. From <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2003/07/tp0728-1.html>
- Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare. (June 18, 2009). Nīto no jōkyō ni aru jakunensha no jittai oyobi shiensaku ni kansuru chōsa kenkyū hōkokusho [Report on the actual conditions and support measures for young people who are NEETs]. 2009. From [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2007/06/dl/h0628-1b\\_0021.pdf](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2007/06/dl/h0628-1b_0021.pdf)
- Mitani, N. (2011, October 13-14). *Structural unemployment in Japan*. 26th Pacific Economic Community Seminar: Examining the Mid- and Long-Term Structural Unemployment in Asia-Pacific, Taipei. From <https://www.pecc.org/resources/lab-or/1873-examining-the-mid-and-long-term-structural-unemployment-in-asia-pacific-session2-japan-united-s/file>
- Mori, Kōichi. "Yanagita Kunio: An Interpretive Study." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2/3, 1980, pp. 83–115.
- Nagatsuki, T. (2016). *Re: zero kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu* [Re:starting life in another world from zero]. (ZephyrRz, Trans.). New York: Yen Press.
- Nakamori, A. (1983). "Otaku" Research: The City is Full of Otaku. *Neojaponisme* (April 2, 2008). <http://neojaponisme.com/2008/04/02/what-kind-of-otaku-are-you/>
- Nakamori, A. (1983). "Otaku" Research: Can Otaku Love Like Normal People?. *Neojaponisme* (April 7, 2008). <http://neojaponisme.com/2008/04/07/can-otaku-love-like-normal-people/>
- Napier, S. J. (2005). *Anime from Akira to Howl's moving castle: Experiencing contemporary Japanese animation*. (Updated ed., [rev. ed.]. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ogino, T. (2004). Managing Categorization and Social Withdrawal in Japan: Rehabilitation Process in a Private Support Group for Hikikomorians. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 13(1), 120-133.
- Prough, J. S. (2011). *Straight from the heart: Gender, intimacy, and the cultural production of shōjo manga*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- Robertson, J. (2001). *Takarazuka: Sexual politics and popular culture in modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University.
- Saitō, K. Magic, “Shōjo”, and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73(1), 2014, 143–164. From [www.jstor.org/stable/43553398](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43553398).
- Saitō, T. (2013). *Hikikomori: adolescence without end*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shamoon, D. (2012). *Passionate friendship: the aesthetics of girls culture in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Shida, Y. (2018). *Narō shosekika rankingu* [Narō novelization ranking]. Mypage.Syosetsu.com. <https://mypage.syosetu.com/mypageblog/view/userid/863026/blogkey/1992143/>
- Shinjō, Kazuma. (2006). *Raito noberu “chō” nyūmon*. Tōkyō: Sofutobanku kurieitibu.
- Shungiku, Okapi. (2018). Isekai tte nan nan da yo to omotte narō shōsetsu o yonde mitara isekai ten'i mono ni ore dake ga dohamari shita: saikyō x hāremu ni mo jitsuwa iroiro arimashita (dai ichiwa) [“What is isekai”, I wondered. When I tried reading narō novels, only I got hooked on isekai transference stories: As it turns out, there’s more than power fantasies and harems]. (January 01, 2018). *Firukaru: Philosophy & Culture* 3(2), pp. 318-345.
- Steinberg, M. (2012). *Anime's media mix: Franchising toys and characters in Japan*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Takeyama, A. (2016). *Staged seduction: selling dreams in a Tokyo host club*. Stanford (Calif.): Stanford University Press.
- Toku, M. “Shojo Manga! Girls' Comics! A Mirror of Girls' Dreams.” *Mechademia*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 19–32.
- UK Government: "New opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training." (1999). *M2 Presswire*, p. M2 Presswire, July 14, 1999.
- Yano, C. (2009). Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(3), 681-688. doi:10.1017/S0021911809990015
- Yoda, T. A Roadmap to Millennial Japan. *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*. Tomiko Yoda; Harry D., Harootunian. Duke University Press, 2006.

Yū, K. (2015). *Nō gēmu nō raifu* [No game no life]. (D. Komen, Trans.). New York: Yen Press.

Yusagi, A. (2018). *Tate no yūsha no nariagari* [The rising of the shield hero]. (Trans.). New York: One Peace Books.