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Japan's mobile technoculture: the production of a cellular playscape and its cultural implications

Michal Daliot-Bul

HAIFA UNIVERSITY, ISRAEL

In 2005, KDDI-au, the second largest mobile carrier in Japan, opened to the public a first of its kind, mobile technology funland: the KDDI Designing Studio. According to Natsuko Kimura,¹ general manager of the KDDI Designing Studio, after much debate it was decided that the perfect location for this centre would be Harajuku, Tokyo's busiest and probably best-known urban laboratory of youth popular cultures. The five-storied cylindrical glass building was conceived as an amazing and dynamic space that offers spectacular imagery of a technology integrated into cultural practices – a 'technoculture' (Green, 2002). Beyond the expected hands-on examining of sleek handsets, 3D games, mobile TV, mobile manga and mobile books with special effects, visitors are invited, for example, to create a personal card featuring their photo as well as their contact information and favorite mobile content sites. The latter are encrypted in Quick Response codes (known as QR codes) that can be deciphered by handsets equipped with a QR code reader.² In another 'ride', by merging their photo with an animated cartoon template, visitors create their own personalized graphic representation, their 'avatar', which can be downloaded to a cell phone and sent to friends.

Three mobile carriers were the main players in Japan's thriving mobile communications market in 2005, the year I conducted most of the research on which this article is based: KDDI-au, Vodafone-live³ and NTT-DoCoMo, which revolutionized the mobile communication industry when it introduced the first mobile internet in 1999, and which is still, in 2007, leading the market in number of customers, mobile data users and subscribers to third-generation technology services.⁴ The KDDI Designing Studio is a technocultural centre built to create the KDDI-au brand name, and it signals KDDI's determination to compete for market leadership in Japan. More importantly

for this article, it reflects the dominant market positioning of *keitai*, the Japanese term for cellular phones, as a mass consumer product that is framed by cultures of gadget fetishism, technofashion and technofuturism (Ito, 2005: 9) and is consumed as experimental play. In marketing *keitai*, the main mobile carriers in Japan are producing an image of a product that not only makes users' lives easier and more convenient in highly sophisticated ways, they are also selling a product that 'stimulates the banal everyday life' (*mainichi wo shigeki suru kētai*).⁵ *Keitai* are presented as opening up possibilities to challenge grinding everyday routines, over which people have only limited control, by offering an interactive, spectacular *playscape* that increasingly merges with real life.

The impact of *keitai* on Japanese culture and society is drawing increasing academic and popular interest in Japan and around the world (e.g. Gottlieb and McLelland, 2003; Ito et al., 2005; Ohara, 2002; Okada and Matsuda, 2002; Rheingold, 2002). In this article, I would like to contribute to this area of research by looking into a hitherto neglected focus of inquiry, that of the *keitai* playscape that developed as soon as mobile phones in Japan became a mass consumer commodity. In the following, I reconstruct the developmental trajectory of *keitai* from a technological device into a little friend that is an intensely personal part of users' lives and is an outlet for fun and play-thrills (Daliot-Bul, 2002). *Keitai* technology started in Japan, as in other places, as a business-oriented technology, but was soon 'hijacked' by youth popular cultures (Fujimoto, 2005; Ito, 2005: 9). The social reception of *keitai* communication and the internet by Japan's youth has oriented the shaping of the *keitai* eco-system, and thus its present and future, reflecting a larger cultural context in which youth have become the new cultural avant-garde of urban lifestyles in Japan. A process of social construction and negotiation of mobile technologies among carriers, handset manufacturers, content providers and young people (see Bijker, 1990: 18) has transformed *keitai* from a technological product into something playful, a 'toy-box' (Kohiyama, 2005a). Producers of the *keitai* technoculture are thus adopting play as a favorite interface for the convergence of widely circulating youth cultural forms, cutting-edge technologies and consumerism.

Beyond the packaging of *keitai* as something cool and playful, and the redirecting of *keitai* uses and content toward entertainment applications, the idealization of play within the *keitai* environment turned out to be a strategy with significant sociocultural implications.⁶ By looking at *keitai* as a product 'deeply embedded in the contexts of Japan' (Matsuda, 2005: 38), I argue that the *keitai* playscape was constructed by specific sociocultural circumstances, that it came to be constructive of the *keitai* environment and practices and is ultimately transcending the *keitai* technologies, uses and contents, becoming a mechanism of cultural change. The ubiquity of cellular phones in Japan, and the way they have become for many 'an extension of the self' (see McLuhan, 1994 [1964]), is bringing about the merging of play into everyday life. The cultural borders between play and non-play blur, introducing and spreading new modes of relating to the social, the technological and the urban environments.

From a technological device to a mass consumer product: keitai as a platform of play promoting self-expression

The mid-1990s was a pivotal period in the history of cellular phones in Japan. Until then, keitai was strongly linked with professional organizations; it was a luxury item owned by high executives, professional team leaders and the well-to-do. In 1996, however, the costs of keitai ownership were greatly reduced (Kohiyama, 2005b: 64), and keitai was gradually transformed into a personalized medium that connects individual users. The social reception and popularization of keitai communication was closely related to the embrace of this medium by youth. Before the keitai boom, personal pagers were enthusiastically adopted by Japanese youth as a favorite medium for peer communication. In 1996, several competing keitai carriers introduced a mobile text-transmission application, thereby transforming keitai into a technologically advanced and – more than ever before – reasonably priced alternative to pagers. The recently created pager texting culture was carried over into keitai usage (Okada, 2005: 50–1). Market studies soon pointed out that youth-driven mobile texting picks up at around 10:00 pm, when for most people the day is over (Matsunaga, 2000: 153). Beyond coordinating social life, mobile texting is based on short, phatic communication used for maintaining social contact and conveying feelings rather than exchanging information or ideas. It creates a playful and emotional connectedness among friends. It is about *feeling* and *reaffirming* the connection.

The huge potential in the positioning of mobile telecommunication as a form of play was tapped in 1998 by the advertising campaign of TU-KA, one of Tokyo's local mobile carriers at the time. The company launched an aggressive campaign to promote several of its new services, using as a catchword the English verb 'play', which was sometimes interchanged with its Japanese equivalent, *asobu*. The different ads included variations on the following messages:

1. MOTE ASOBE.⁷ PLAY TU-KA.

Play and have even more fun.

Get even more thrills.

TU-KA's communication is not merely about talking. TU-KA expands the means of transmitting one's thoughts.

Your life will be different from what it was yesterday.

From now on, you will be able to communicate your feelings as they are.

2. Own a voice dial, and play. **MOTE ASOBE. PLAY TU-KA.**

3. Have mail friends and play. Have more friends with TU-KA.

Mail Friends Campaign. MOTE ASOBE. PLAY TU-KA.

The explicit identification of communication technologies with play emphasized interpersonal relations and social bonding. Already in the 1980s, 'play'

had become a favored aphorism for self-fulfillment through consumption that was often evoked by advertising, the media and retailing industries (Kinsella, 1995: 248). The identification of mobile communication with play was now hinting at a wealth of new possibilities for interpersonal communication. According to a Japanese proverb, 'In one match ten years of friendship are earned' (*Ikkyoku shiai – jūnen no chiko wo eru*). In Japan, play, or *asobi*, has long been conceived as the perfect cultural space for verbal and non-verbal communication. According to this cultural conceptualization, play enables interpersonal communication that may not otherwise be possible.⁸ With the popularization of interpersonal communication and multimedia industries during the 1990s, play has come to be identified as the preferred strategy for overcoming the Japanese cultural tendency for restraint in social interactions.

As *keitai* became a personalized medium, an extravagant range of matching accessories filled entire stores. With a variety of hand straps; cute, attachable mini-dolls and cartoon characters; funny, illuminating antennae; carrying bags; 3D stickers to cover up the mouthpiece; full-body stickers; screen holograms; and handmade painting on customer demand, mobile phones became a fashion item of complex and excessive signs play. As early as 1996 ring tones (*chakumero*) came to be a particularly popular feature of *keitai*. Originally, users could use the keypad to input hit songs of their choice note by note. Ring-tone composition books became bestsellers and, before it became possible to digitally sample and replay live music on one's *keitai*, sound chips able to produce complex chords and sound combinations were developed (Okada, 2005: 55). Choosing *keitai* accessories and a ring tone were the forerunners of *keitai* customization practices. Although the forming *keitai* consumption practices were youth driven, the crowd queuing to buy *keitai* accessories was heterogeneous. It included not only teens and university students, but urban strollers of all age groups.

According to one advertisement for mobile telephone full-body stickers from 1998, it was time to 'change clothes!' (*kigaeyou!*) and 'get some personality!' (*kōsei wo get shiyō!*). It was indeed often an individualistic self that would reveal itself in the consumption practices of *keitai*. In the words of Wireless Watch Japan reporter Gail Nakada,⁹ 'back in the 1990s a "salaryman" [white collar employee in a large corporation] who bought for his *keitai* a Hello Kitty charm was also making a statement. It was his little anti-establishment rebellion, his "Che Guevara Hello Kitty.'" Between 1998 and 1999 the industry experimented with different handset designs. In 1999, the first *keitai* models with colour display were introduced. Japanese *keitai* became an emblem standing at the forefront of Japanese consumerism.

This trajectory of *keitai* consumption reflects larger cultural processes in which youth culture forms and images have come to be powerful forces at work in the recession-stricken urban Japanese culture. As other industries grew sluggish during the 1990s, playful teen-centric products and services became the fastest-growing components of Japan's economy (Machiyama, 2004: 15, Rheingold,

2002: 7), reaching a crowd far larger than youth only. Popular youth culture, with its dominant unorthodox styles of playful excessiveness, cuteness and fantasy, has been commodified and reproduced to the point it has become a marked feature of Japan's urban public culture. There are numerous reasons for this contemporary idealization of youth culture. During Japan's recession, urban youth became the most affluent social sector, thus also becoming key players in Japan's consumer culture. Furthermore, many of today's adults in urban Japan were youths during the 1980s, a decade that saw an unprecedented proliferation of youth popular cultures, providing them with the prerequisite aesthetic sensitivities and nostalgic disposition to youth popular culture forms. Some scholars have also interpreted the contemporary popularity of youthful consumer play merchandise in Japan by pointing to their social and psychological merits of relieving loneliness and stress in this moment of economic and cultural anxieties (Allison, 2003: 391). On an even more latent level, youth-oriented consumer play merchandise offers an outlet for expressing in a small and personal way a disenchantment with Japan's post-war conservative institution- and production-oriented values, echoing 'a narrative of recession [that] began to supersede that of [economic] success' in the late 1990s (Ivy, 2000: 820). Japan's urban public culture celebrates alternative cultural forms and lifestyles readily available in Japan's late-consumer culture, which were until recently considered subcultural and even countercultural youth forms.

As befitting every cultural avant-garde, while many cultural forms and styles previously defined as youth-only are becoming mainstream or adapted to fit other age-groups of the population, youth cultural separatist 'avant-gardisme' is renegotiated and redefined among the media, consumer industries and youths. As is clear from observing the keitai technoculture, new youth-only applications and practices, some of which are gender-specific and all of which can be characterized as having a consumer 'play-value' (see Clammer, 1997: 107), are continuously produced, propelling the keitai industry to new technological frontiers and setting the keitai technoculture agenda.

The production of mobile internet as an outlet of play

Probably the most memorable technological and business breakthrough in the history of mobile telecommunication in Japan was the inauguration in February 1999 of NTT-DoCoMo's mobile internet service, known as i-mode. Labeled as 'Japan's Wireless Tsunami' (Beck and Wade, 2003), i-mode's high rate of acquisition of subscribers surpassed all of the most optimistic forecasts (Kridel, 2000) and made internet access an established element of keitai ownership in Japan (Kohiyama, 2005b: 68). While i-mode has been much applauded for its successful technological and business models (e.g. Kunii and Baker, 2000), not as much has been written on the successful marketing design of Japan's first mobile internet as an intensely personalized and enjoyable tool. In her book on the mak-

ing of i-mode, Mari Matsunaga – who was recruited by DoCoMo specifically to develop Japan's first mobile internet content and whose name has since been often associated with the success of i-mode¹⁰ – describes how i-mode was designed to become a 'digital concierge', a service constructed to help coordinate life and make it more pleasurable (Matsunaga, 2000: 83–5). It turned out that the concierge concept ended up directing the use of wireless data in Japan, rather than a more practical business-oriented concept (Beck and Wade, 2003: 156). For Matsunaga, who came up with the brand name 'i-mode', the 'i' in it stands obviously for 'internet', 'interactivity' and 'information', but also for signaling the centrality and individuality of the keitai owner (Matsunaga, 2000: 124). This is an image that reverberates with the late consumer culture advertising ideology of romantic authenticity and emotional fulfillment found in narcissistically pleasing oneself (Featherstone, 1991: 27).

From early on, the wireless industry in Japan was looking for ways to transform keitai and mobile internet services into an indispensable part of daily life (see Hakuohdō seikatsu sōgō kenkyūjo [Hakuhodo Research Institute of Everyday Life], 2001). But the initial key interaction between the new technology and users in Japan that led to the industry formation and that still plays a crucial role was the interaction between entertainment content and young people. At the turn of the millennium, market research showed that Japanese youth expenditure on entertainment had considerably dropped because many young people preferred to spend their pocket money or their wages on their mobile phone bills (Auckerman, 2001). The marketing image of cellular phones as an arena of play and entertainment was aimed, however, at a much larger audience than youth only. An advertisement from 2001 promoting a business partnership between i-mode and PC internet access provider AOL shows Yamazaki Tsutomu¹¹ as a serious-looking middle-aged Japanese man wearing pink-dotted pajamas and holding a sign saying 'playing only when away from home will not do ... one should also be able to play after returning home ...', suggesting that even the most serious segments of Japanese society should by now have embraced mobile internet as an outlet of play. According to NTT-DoCoMo's publications, in 2002, 79 percent of i-mode content access was for fun applications, ranging from ring tones and screen savers to horoscopes, sport, games and more (Funk, 2003).

Since 2000 a growing number of monthly magazines devoted to keitai have been published. Besides introducing new keitai models and comparing prices and technological features, these magazines are structured as guidebooks to 'time killing' (*hima tsubushi*) content. Starting in 2001 *MediaWork* has been publishing monthly a comprehensive NTT-DoCoMo i-mode official guidebook, titled *Let's Play with i-mode! (i-mode de asobō!)*, which focuses on the possibilities of using i-mode services as a platform for gaming and playing. Occasionally, a free supplement to this magazine is distributed, introducing new keitai models and favorite content sites for wallpaper, animated screen savers, ring tones, fortune

telling, matchmaking (*deai*), games and mail rooms organized by animated cartoon characters, as well as convenient sites for weather reports, sports news, public transport and so forth. Most information and news sites also come in more fun customized versions, hosted by an animated interactive cartoon character ranging from Sanrio's Hello Kitty to Mobile Suit Gundam.

Choosing the hosting character for these sites (and also resisting them) reflects the user's taste (Hjorth, 2003) and often becomes part of her self-presentation (her 'Front', in Goffman, 1976: 93–4). It also domesticates and humanizes the technology (Horjth, 2005) by giving it a personality. According to the hosting character of choice the cell phone becomes cute, feminine, manly, funny, morbidly sarcastic and more. It has been noted that when machines display emotions, like an animated interactive cell-phone does, they provide a rich and satisfying interaction with people (Norman, 2004: 194). Users respond by nurturing and caring for this kind of anthropomorphic creature, regardless of whether it has consciousness or intelligence or is simply a toy.

The initial developments in Japan's mobile internet content were informed by an understanding of the basic characteristics of mobile technology, a technology that is personal and time/location specific. The user interface cannot be as complex as in a PC-accessed internet portal, and the content needs to be of the sort to provide quick gratification. The users have to be able to get on a train, push a few buttons on their cell phone, and get what they were looking for before getting off the train at the next station. In 1999, for example, Dwango, a mobile entertainment company, released the mobile fishing game *Tsuribaka Kibun* (In the mood for silly fishing). In this game, the player sends a message to the server that he would like to begin fishing at a certain location with a certain type of lure. After a while, when 'the fish starts to bite', the keitai vibrates and the player can handle the controls until the fish is caught. The game became so popular, especially among young salarymen, that next the company developed a mobile internet fishing community around it. A web forum offers lists of the largest fishes caught, statistics, fishing-aficionado chat rooms and the possibility of betting on the type of fish the player might catch (Kontio, 2004).

Also in 1999, Imahima (literally meaning 'Are you free now?') launched its first product: an application for a mobile instant messaging service that allows users to share their current personal status (location, activity, mood) publicly with all the service subscribers, or privately with only their restricted list of buddies. The potential of Imahima as a matchmaking site for strangers attracted much attention (e.g. Rheingold, 2002: 166). However, according to Neeraj Jhanji,¹² founder and CEO of Imahima, the service was mostly used between friends, being particularly popular among unmarried young people. The marketing vision behind Imahima was 'to celebrate human relationships and communication, by introducing some joy to people's busy lives'.¹³ The Imahima business has been creating and managing media and user communities ever since.

The Imahima community and the *Tsuribaka Kibun* community were relatively early forms of mobile communities. These communities have become another

way of enhancing the user's experience, by merging different technologies and creating a service that explores the boundaries of the potential property of mobile phones as means to carve new groups out of the masses. Rheingold (2002) emphasizes the potential of these new mobile networks in inducing different forms of social activism. I would like to point to the way this fragmentation of the masses into groups induces a paradigm of being in which people come together in temporary play communities that offer a shared experience of intense moments of ecstasy and affectual immediacy. Mobile play communities are temporary, and often inclusive, heterogeneous groups distinguished by their members' shared interests and lifestyles, bringing to mind sociologist Maffesoli's (1996 [1988]) description of the formation of 'postmodern tribes' in late modernity's mass society. These groups network to enjoy 'the power of the life-affirming, Dionysian quality of the transcendent warmth of collectivity' (Shields, 1996[1988]: x).

Whether an entertaining technology that is used to retrieve information and play games, an emotional, interactive technological device, or a technological means to network with temporary play communities, the Japanese mobile internet emerged as a playscape quite different from its PC-accessed counterpart. The popularity of Japan's mobile internet evolved through its colonization of the in-between moments of everyday life, and their transformation into enjoyable, pleasurable breaks.

Emotions as social practice in the keitai playscape

According to Matsunaga (2000: 153), an important feature that contributed to the raging popularity of i-mode was the way the i-mode email service was constructed to enhance the mobile texting experience. While mobile texting has many applications for both the business and private sectors, Matsunaga was targeting youth. At the height of the youth-driven pager boom, the bestselling pager model was one that had the ability to send a cute 'heart mark'. The heart mark feature reverberated in a metonymic way with an already well-established tendency among Japanese youth to adopt stylistically cute (*kawaii*) forms as means of self-expression (Kinsella, 1995). This inspired Matsunaga to introduce several pictorial icon-marks, known as *emoji* (pictograms), which allow more expressiveness in short messages. The popularity of *emoji* has since been so huge that i-mode and its competitors have kept on introducing new *emoji* in new models, and publishing instructions on how to become an '*emoji* master' (*emoji masutā ni narō*) and 'enjoy *emoji* ever more' (NTT-DoCoMo i-mode official guidebook, i-mōdo de asobō! supplement, summer 2002).

Until quite recently, although mobile texting between different keitai carriers was possible, sending and receiving *emoji* was restricted to communication between same keitai-carrier phones. Japan's *kōgyaru* – street-savvy high school girls who are the heaviest users of mobile texting – overcame this obstacle by the ongoing creation of *kaomōji* (emoticons, literally 'face let-

ters'), which they invent by playfully combining punctuation, alphanumerics and other special marks. *Kaomoji* imitate facial expressions and transmit emotions in a world of plain text. Yasuko Nakamura, founder and CEO of Boom Planning, a Tokyo-based marketing company that has employed, since its establishment in 1986, high school girls as informants and sales promoters, conducts much of her communication with her teen employees through mobile text messages. In her fascinating book on the culture of contemporary Tokyo high school girls, Nakamura (2004: 32–3) lists over 50 (!) *kaomoji* that are in current use and their meanings, such as:

Gomennasai (X^X :) (Sorry (X^X :))

Otanjōbi omedetō V(^o^)^V (Happy Birthday V(^o^)^V)

High school girls, in order to create messages that transmit even better their feelings and personalities, have also developed their own encrypted *gyarumoji mērukomi* (girls' writing mail communication). In *gyarumoji mērukomi*, whole messages are written by uninhibitedly combining *kaomoji* with alphanumerics, the indigenous hiragana, katakana and kanji characters, and interchanging what should be written as full-size katakana or hiragana letters with half-size ones, mimicking graphically girlish prosody – pauses, rhythm, intonation – as in the following example (Nakamura, 2004: 34–5):

Gyarumoji mērukomi:

えぬ～！け"ωきレニUてゑ？ (^o^)♪

Standard Japanese with emoticons:

えみ～！げんきにしてる？ (^o^)♪

English translation with emoticons:

Emi! How are you? (^o^)♪

It is thus not surprising that one of the earliest versions of a mobile mail room hosted by an animated character in Japan was most successful in targeting high school girls. The PostPets – eight cute, animated characters that starred in a 1997 email software program designed for PCs – became an instant hit among desktop email users in Japan. In 2000, the same software was adapted to pastel-colored pocket mobile devices with mini screens and

keyboards that plug into cellular phones, enabling the sending and receiving of emails. The user chooses one PostPet that would thereupon settle in a furnished, toy-like, virtual studio apartment in the user's PC or mobile device. Once the user enters a message it is put in a virtual envelope and delivered personally by personal PostPet to the recipient. On the recipient side, the PostPet would enter his fellow PostPet's 'apartment', deliver the envelope with the message, ask to be fed and petted, and even play with the local PostPet. After returning home, depending the kind of reception it got, the PostPet may be happy or reluctant to deliver another message to the same recipient. PostPets can also strike up seemingly self-motivated relationships with other PostPets and decide on their own whim to pay them a visit. According to Kazuhiko Hachiya, inventor of PostPets software, 'PostPets make everything about e-mail emotionally interactive' (cited in Mann, 2001).

Comparative research on mobile texting practices shows that children and young people around the globe have become particularly adept at inventing their own language in text messaging (Plant, 2002: 80–1). What is noteworthy about the evolving Japanese teen-girl texting practices that I have described is the distinguished texting style itself, which tends to capitalize on playful cuteness as an objectification of emotional and individualistic expressiveness, as well as the attentive cooperation of media producers in enhancing this style by providing new means to apply it. In the forming of the girls' texting ecology, emotions have become a 'social practice' (see Boellstorff and Lindquist, 2004). According to Nakamura,¹⁴ high school girls' text messages often portray an unrealistic image of the writer. The writer may seem to be *akarui* (light), *omoshiroi* (funny) and *genki* (assertive), while in reality she is quite *tsumaranai* (boring) – a rather shy and introverted person. This tendency fleshes out the play quality of this kind of text messaging, which is performed in many ways as a 'simulation game' (see Caillois, 1961 [1958]). In this game, players can express their secret wishful subjective worlds, using a specific language of emotional expression.¹⁵

Communication as a ludic experiential commodity

As cellular carriers introduced newer infrastructures with higher speed and data transmission capacity, new interpersonal communication applications were invented. Since 2000, messaging services that include keitai-shot photos and later keitai-shot video footage, have become extremely popular, standardizing a built-in camera as a feature of mobile phones in Japan. Bricolage platforms to personalize messages are enthusiastically received, especially among young people but increasingly among other users as well. The popularity of keitai cameras and of mobile messaging is continuously leading to the creation of new, sophisticated applications that combine the best of all worlds, emphasizing playful and emotional communication.

Following the huge success of keitai cameras, mobile videoconferencing was expected to become the third-generation killer application; nevertheless, it has not captured much consumer interest to this day, in spite of the great improvements in performance since its launch in 2002. In 2005, in an effort to make the service more attractive, DoCoMo i-mode targeted young people when it introduced a new application called *kyara den* (character telephone), in which an animated avatar can stand in for the user during videophone calls. The avatar's expressions and movements are easily controlled by the user with simple keypad operations enabling a 'playful conversation with one's intimate friends' (*DoCoMo kētai denwa katarogu*, July 2005).

The avatar concept of a preferred self-representation (*jibun no konomi no bunshin*) was taken to further playful extremes by a Duogate company¹⁶ application called 'Team Factory'. Users can form a team of friends, which benefits from services such as checking on the present location of each member, coordinating schedules, multi-user online messaging and posting information for all members. The members' communication is mediated through their avatars, which are fully customized from their facial expressions, hairstyle and make-up to their real-life brand-name clothes, shoes and accessories, as well as the thematic backgrounds in which they appear. While some customization items are free for those subscribed to the service, others are sold separately. Users get to keep the items they have purchased for a limited time, and they can store them when not in use in a virtual closet. Team Factory is a hybrid form of Role Playing Video Game (RPG), in which players get to select the character they want to play and how this character would be dressed and accessorized, and real-life communication tools. In this RPG, users play *themselves* in real-life situations and are engaged in playing what Allison (2003: 393) has nicknamed 'a fantasy of consumer brand capitalism'. As a communication tool, Team Factory is the embodiment of the cultural construction of mobile communication technologies as play.

While the Team Factory avatars are clearly a youth-oriented product, they are not played with by youth only. Mapping the demographics of Team Factory users is of course methodologically challenging. However, the Team Factory website allows us a unique glimpse into this matter.¹⁷ The Team Factory website regularly organizes avatar fashion competitions. The owners of the competing avatars fill out a short questionnaire in which they talk about their occupation, taste in fashion, hobbies and future dreams. Browsing through these avatars reveals that most of the users who sign up for the competition are actually *shakaijin*, working adult members of the society. Some of the highest qualifying competitors are *kaishain* (workers in large corporate firms) and *shufu* (housewives) who often attest in their questionnaire to having *atatakafamiri* (a 'warm family') as their hobby.

The rapid spread of mobile media in Japan has been leading to the modification of communication through which the social value and the shape of interpersonal communication are engineered. 'Communications' has come

to be a buzzword and, as such, it is one of the most widely used words in advertising, standing for progressiveness and well-being. Mobile communication – perhaps the most important consumer trend in Japan in the past decade – is designed to be consumed as a ludic experiential commodity and as a vehicle for experimenting with social strategies for communication. The 2005 ‘KDDI Designing Studio Floor Guide’ articulates this clearly by addressing directly its patrons and presenting the technocentre’s concept as follows: ‘In this studio, *you* can share in the joy and excitement of designing new styles of communication. The leading artist is *you*. The future of communication starts here’ (my italics).

Playful futuristic technologies as an expression of progressive lifestyle

The transition to third-generation cellular technology in Japan was largely completed in 2006, and upgrades to the next-stage technology are already taking place. But even before they were completed, the marketing efforts of keitai carriers to mesh mobile internet services into the fabric of Japanese society and economy have become part of the experienced urban culture of Japan. The transition to advanced mobile technologies is mostly associated with the new range and possibilities of multimedia consumption. Entertainment content for keitai, with enhanced visual and sound applications such as 3D video games,¹⁸ music, television, and book and manga reading with special effects are becoming standardized applications of keitai. From its early days, mobile internet in Japan developed by manipulating the special characteristics of keitai and thus it has successfully avoided being stigmatized as *naichatte internet* (close but not quite like PC-accessed internet). Today, mobile carriers and mobile media content providers are looking for new ways to make multimedia consumption through the keitai unique and attractive. Media forms are domesticated to fit the keitai environment, often by converging and restructuring them as interactive and playful, and, increasingly, as multi-user experiences. The development of music consumption through the keitai would be a thought-provoking case study to explore this point.

Music downloading was pioneered in Japan by KDDI-au in 2002 with *EZchakuuta* service, which allowed users to download usually 30 seconds or less of original music that was used as ring tones. In December 2003, DoCoMo/Foma launched its *chaku-motion* service, enabling users to combine video and high-quality music to signal incoming calls. Most commonly, these keitai-customized clips featured Japanese pop singers waving or strumming a guitar and saying something like ‘*Denwa da yo!*’ (‘You’ve got a phone call!’). Others featured short MTV-like videos and short clips of live performances. By late 2004 KDDI-au introduced the music download service *chakuuta full*, enabling the download of full-length original songs to mobile phones. Within six months of the introduction of *chakuuta full*, KDDI-au announced that 10 million

full-length songs were downloaded. Constantly improving the data compression and data storage capacity of keitai by using memory cards, as well as the sound quality that is complemented by high-quality stereo headphones, all keitai carriers currently market cellular phones as portable music players. In January 2006, KDDI-au launched its music portal, Lismo, which allows mobile phones and PCs to share music seamlessly. The new service also enables users with mutually compatible handsets to exchange music playlists through its *uta-tomo* (song friends) service, advertised as a 'music communication service'. Moving to more experimental territories, the Hong Kong-based company Artificial Life was planning in 2005 to launch a new mobile subscription site called V-Disco that will combine chat, music streaming and music downloading to mobile phones with interactive 3D graphics and animated virtual avatars. Users listen to the songs they choose while their avatars dance or chat with other avatars in real time (Nakada, 2005).

In the keitai cultural environment, playfulness has come to be the civilizing matrix of multimedia consumption that develops in play-forms.¹⁹ Mobile multimedia consumption is transformed into an experience not unlike 'games of vertigo', which consists of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception in an effort to achieve a feeling of ecstasy and mental excitement (see Caillois, 1961 [1958]). The carnivalesque imageries, innovative juxtapositions, sensory overload and endless roads by which to explore the unfolding 3D multimedia keitai world fascinate consumers who have by now been educated to see futuristic mobile multimedia technologies as play. Incorporated into the ludic logic of entertainment, technology becomes friendly and inviting (see Yamaguchi, 2002). Beyond the socializing effect of play on consumers of new technologies, the convergence of play with consumption promotes further consumption. Technology consumption ceases to be merely about utilitarian materialistic commodities exchange; it becomes a fantastic, hedonic, experiential and emotive activity.²⁰ In sum, technology consumption becomes an expression of progressive lifestyle.

Conclusion: we shape our tools and our tools shape us

In his seminal work on how different media induce sociocultural change, McLuhan (1994 [1964]: 8) has posited that 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'. McLuhan argues that to fully appreciate the change introduced by new media we should look beyond the content or use of the innovation and into the change in interpersonal dynamics that the innovation brings with it (Federman, 2004). I have suggested that one aspect of the sociocultural impact of the keitai medium on the Japanese culture and society is related to the evolution of keitai as a youth-oriented platform of play in which technology develops in play-forms. Play induces sociocultural change since it

has 'the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures' (McLuhan, 1994 [1964]: 242). I have shown in this article a variety of ways in which the keitai playscape becomes a greenhouse for new communication possibilities. I would like now to argue that the unique duality of keitai as a constant dimension of social life and as a playscape turns it into more than an arsenal of alternative cultural possibilities and strategies. Keitai is a vehicle for promoting the integration of these new possibilities in social reality.

The marketing design of keitai as playscape evolved by manipulating the 'otherness' of the keitai environment. Hanging a Hello Kitty charm on one's keitai, playing a simple cell phone digital game or having an animated character hosting one's keitai mail room are all acts of 'deviation' from reality into a play-dimension. However, as keitai is becoming seamlessly integrated into more and more settings of everyday life, the boundaries of the keitai playscape are fading as well. Keitai blurs the distinctions between the private and public, leisure and work, here and there, and virtual cyberspace and reality. As this happens, the boundaries of play as a framed act separated from real life blur as well. Rather than simply making everyday life more enjoyable, the integration of play into real life has profound implications for the production of social identities and life strategies.

The colonization of everyday life by the keitai playscape promotes a strong and irrepressible 'everyday hedonism' (see Maffesoli, 1990: 13), a cultural ambience that is deeply concerned with interpersonal communication, emotions and notions of selfhood and self-expression. This cultural ambience is expressed in the celebration of sensual pleasures, the pursuit of desires, the idealization of aesthetic experiences and affective sociability. The keitai playscape has made 'communication' one of the hottest consumer trends in Japan. Its imagery is promulgating new kinds of sociality and interpersonal communication in which emotionality rather than reserve and restraint is key. It is empowering users by giving them the tools to make their lives more pleasurable, to express and distinguish themselves by combining knowledge, information, skill and creativity. Last but not least, it also refamiliarizes a long-since alienated urban environment that is now embedded in a fun cyberspace of information and entertainment and is netted with invisible Dionysian networks. Like other favorite types of play, keitai youth-oriented playscapes arguably provide a release from the monopolistic tyranny of the 'social machine' (see McLuhan, 1994 [1964]: 238). In contemporary Japan, this social machine reflects a world order dictated by economic and political institutions identified with the 'adult society'. It is a world order that prioritizes production, high levels of conformity and a rehabilitation of Japan's conservative pre-recession middle-class values and lifestyles.

As the appeal of the keitai playscape 'imaginary'²¹ is spreading, and as youth-oriented keitai accessories, services and applications are adopted by or domesticated to fit other age groups of the Japanese urban population, culturally established

stylistic differentiations between mainstream and subculture, genders and generations are challenged. The cultural meanings of these styles are changing and are now hinting at a changing social environment, where 'the play of forms and the intrusion of the "futile" – the non-utilitarian – into daily life' (Clammer, 1997: 162) have become favorite pursuits. These consumption tendencies are indicators of processes that are breaking up traditional patterns of social regulation. Similar to what has been noticed in other late-consumer cultures, youth styles are migrating up the age scale, and adults are being granted greater license for childlike behavior and vice versa (Featherstone, 1991: 100–1). As we witness youth-popular-culture-driven keitai images and products migrating in various ways and degrees up the age scale, we also witness a very clear instance of how youth popular culture is changing contemporary Japanese culture and society at large. It is thus that the keitai playscape is more than a popular escapist haven; it is a mechanism of sociocultural transformation, indeed of a cultural shift.

Notes

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1. Interview conducted in Tokyo, July 2005.
2. QR codes (Quick Response codes) are an increasingly familiar sight in Japan, where they have replaced the older barcodes. The recent inclusion of QR code-reading software on camera phones has led to a variety of new consumer-oriented applications.
3. In March 2006 Vodafone-Japan was sold to Softbank.
4. As of July 2007, there were in Japan nearly 100 million users of cellular phones, and nearly 75 million subscribers to third-generation technology services (Wireless Watch Japan, 2007).
5. NTT-DoCoMo ad for the FOMA F901iS series, July 2005.
6. On the implications of a cultural idealization of play, see Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1986 [1984]).
7. The Japanese term *mote asobe* is hard to translate since it literally means 'to play'; however, it is often used to suggest seduction and temptations in romantic relationships. This choice of vocabulary produces an image in which the user's relation with the keitai is somewhat decadent and almost sensual.
8. For this reason, after-work drinking in the Japanese corporate environment has long been considered a privileged opportunity for interpersonal communication and social bonding (Allison, 1994: 46; Ben Ari, 2002).
9. Interview conducted in Tokyo, July 2005. Wireless Watch Japan is a website covering Japan's wireless business.
10. In October 2000, Matsunaga was crowned 'Asia's Top Business Woman' by the prestigious *Fortune* magazine, and 'Woman of the Year 2000' by *Nikkei Woman* magazine.

11. Yamazaki Tsutomu is a famous actor known to Western audiences as the leading actor in many of Juzo Itami's movies, such as *The Funeral* (1984), *Tampopo* (1985) and *A Taxing Woman* (1987).
12. Interview conducted in Tokyo, July 2005.
13. Imahima website (consulted May 2006): http://www.imahima.com/ihcorpv2/container/imahima_community.php
14. Interview conducted in Tokyo, July 2005.
15. On play as an outlet for expressing wishful subjective worlds, see Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1986 [1984]: 319).
16. Duogate was established by KDDI and Excite Japan Ltd in 2004 to create an integrated internet portal for PCs and mobile phones.
17. Team Factory website (consulted June 2006): <http://pctm.ezavatar.duogate.jp/>
18. The mobile gaming industry in Japan is characterized by the convergence between the traditional video game industry and the telecommunication industry. Today, with 3D graphics, excellent resolution and stereo sound, more and more familiar RPG, racing games and fighting games, formerly designed for game consoles only, are adapted to keitai with competitive performance. Accordingly, in the Tokyo Game Show of 2005 a massive third-generation mobile gaming display was particularly noticeable.
19. On playfulness as civilizing matrix, see Huizinga (1950 [1938]).
20. On the transformation of consumption into a ludic activity rather than a utilitarian activity, see Clammer (1997: 90).
21. I use the term 'imaginary' as Ito (2005: 1) does in reference to a 'shared imaginative projection of technological futures as grounded in everyday practices and the cultural present'.

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Michal Daliot-Bul is a cultural researcher at the department of East-Asian Studies at Haifa University. Her doctoral thesis explores the deep cultural meanings of play in Japan. Her other research interests include the sociology of consumption, youth popular cultures, the production of intra- and inter-cultural imaginaries and the sociology of emotions. She has published a number of articles and is currently preparing her dissertation for publication. Address: Kfar-Hess, POB 545, 40692, Israel. [email: mikibul@gmail.com]