The E-Cat's Meow: Exploring Activity in Translingual Mobile Gaming

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In this article, Jacques sets out to explore the activity systems surrounding a mobile gaming experience, especially those with a transcultural bent. To do so, he considers a variety of his antecedent knowledges and his understanding of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). With some reflection on transcultural language, he discovers that his activities, although largely confined to his smartphone, are part of a system that stretches to the other side of the world and throughout a history that may be more complex than he expected. Luckily, CHAT was there to help.

I'm not a cat person. I don't get the appeal at all. Actually, I may be mildly allergic. And sometimes when otherwise good, decent people start speaking about their feline friends—how rewarding they find the semi-hostile relationships they've developed with these small, furry sociopaths—I die a little bit inside. Not a lot, but ever so slightly. So it came as a bit of a surprise to find myself frequently playing a game on my smartphone that involves cat collecting and tending to their every digitally-represented need. The activity behind discovering, playing, and becoming addicted to a game has intrigued me for some time, eventually leading to some research and some earnest considerations of the cultures and histories affecting that activity, which I aim to explore here. The game's name is *Neko Atsume* (ねこあつめ), and perhaps one of its most interesting aspects and its apparent popularity in the US, at least to me, is how it's a completely Japanese language, cross-cultural gaming experience—no English at all—which, for me, is vital to this exploration.

Regrettably, I don't speak or understand Japanese, but for the sake of honesty and in the hopes of being as thorough as possible in this exploration of my activity, here's an attempt at a comprehensive list of all my Japanese

language **antecedent knowledge**, that is knowledge I've acquired and held before this particular gaming experience:

a. "Dōmo arigatō"—The song "Mr. Roboto" by the 1980s Chicago-based band Styx has to be one of the catchiest usages of the Japanese language to top US music charts. Personally, I was probably exposed to the song in the late 1990s when it was featured prominently in several Volkswagen commercials.

b. "Konichiwa"—After some thought, the precise moment I became familiar with this phrase is unclear. If I were to hazard a guess, I imagine it was some Hollywood caricature of Japanese businessmen greeting a Western foreigner or vice versa. I do, however, remember my relationship to the term being solidified to some degree by a skit in the first season of Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show*, sometime in 2003.

c. "Sushi," "sashimi," "wasabi," and the like—There have always been dietary shifts that introduce Americans to a lot of new words from the languages of the cultures where the cuisines originate. The Japanese have certainly contributed significantly in this regard.

d. "Anime," "manga," and "otaku"—The first two words represent my history of consuming various media originating in Japan. The last is a term that refers to a cultural identification that is distinct to Japanese culture but has been borrowed or adapted in English to refer to a similar phenomenon anywhere.

For now, I haven't translated these phrases from Japanese into English for you simply to reinforce two important points: First, these are all phrases and words borrowed from Japanese but used in English often without contextual consideration to their usage in Japan. Second, their meanings in English are often distinct, inexact representations of their meanings in Japanese. This tendency is closely related to the concept of a "loan-word."

Simply put, a loan-word is a word adopted or borrowed from another language. According to language researcher Schun Doi in *Japanese Loanwords Found in the Oxford English Dictionary* and Kæmpfer's *The History of Japan*, "It can be said that Japan, because of her own distinctive social and administrative systems and cultures, has contributed many loan-words to the English language" (2). Doi goes on to explore in detail the processes involved with Japanese words becoming adopted or borrowed by English language speakers. This line of research and investigation reveals that I am in no way unique in having noticeable exposure to Japanese words and phrases without being familiar with the language itself. We, like our respective languages

and cultures, are often similar to sponges in that way. This is admittedly an oversimplification of complicated trends in language but the concept of loan-words and my own sponginess surely act as guides for my analysis of the activity surrounding this "loan-game."

The question that arises then is: If not the Japanese language itself, what else have I absorbed? What additional antecedent knowledges may have helped me in learning to play *Neko Atsume*? In a way, to thoroughly answer this, I must draw our attention back to section (d) of my Japanese language antecedent knowledge list. As mentioned before, anime and manga are genres of Japanese media that I've consumed throughout much of my life. The two correspond in many ways to Western cartoons and comic books, respectively. Likewise, otaku, a slang term and loan-word defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a person extremely knowledgeable about the minute details of a particular hobby," usually refers to the (arguably obsessive) culture surrounding these particular media. As a cultural identification, similar but not exactly like a nerd or "fanboy," otaku are not uncommon in the West and are usually considered die-hard fans of those media imported from Japan, notably including, for the purposes of this article, video games.

With a lot owed to the Japanese, video games are a broad, ever-developing multimedia genre that I have some significant personal experience with—from the Nintendos of my youth to the mobile and PC gaming of my . . . umm, *latter* youth. I play video games all the time. *Neko Atsume* is the latest in a series of games I download on my phone and become hooked on for some time, partially because it was free, but partially because of the growing familiarity and comfort that comes with continued investment in this particular form of media. Each new game has the excitement of something wholly new to explore but the appeal of something I can likely succeed at in a way similar to how I've succeeded in the past—by mastering words with my friends or moving numbered tiles or launching angry birds or wildly running through temples. I consider every game I've played part of the antecedent knowledge—including but not limited to menu button layouts and operating system tendencies—I needed to succeed in every subsequent game, including *Neko Atsume*.

Still, *Neko Atsume* is its own game, dissimilar from most other games I've actually enjoyed in the past. The game is sort of frustratingly cyclical in nature. The goals of the game are to accumulate fake currency, which look like gold or silver fish, by feeding and providing for various cats and then using that currency to feed and provide for various cats. Over and over again. Buying increasingly expensive accessories and foods for more increasingly unique cats. This is a fairly common concept in gaming, mobile or otherwise.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a scene of cats from *Neko Atsume*.

Gamers today can tend to singular digital pets, large farm plots, diner patrons, and more using the same sort of cyclical game logic and gradual progression towards . . . I'm actually unsure. My own antecedent knowledge of this gaming genre, however, is rooted in ye olde 1997 with the American release of the Tamagotchi, little palm-sized key ring accessories featuring virtual animals. Another import from Japan, the Tamagotchi was much of the world's first exposure to digital pet care-taking and a short-lived frenzy when I was a kid. Everyone had a Tamagotchi or something similar, like a Giga Pet. Although, there are certainly differences between my Tamagotchi (which was a dog and I'm pretty sure I named him "Penis" in 1997), and *Neko Atsume* (see Figure 1), the mobile game I play in 2015, there does seem to be a presence of antecedent knowledges from the late-1990s that have stuck with me and helped me feed my cats on a schedule.

Along with antecedent knowledge though, I feel that *Neko Atsume*'s **ecology**, the background factors that influence activity, are crucial to my experience with the game and worth noting. I've already discussed one ecological aspect: the low, low price of $0.00 needed to "purchase" the game from the App Store. There was an undeniable appeal to this, despite the fuller ecological cost being something like:

> *Neko Atsume* ecological cost = smartphone cost + (monthly data service x contractually obligated length of time) + $0.00 + potential in-app purchases I may not have understood I was making.

Still, the apparent freeness is definitely something that influenced my initial interest and acquisition of the game. Other aspects of ecology I'd have to consider are related to the concept of otaku, as outlined briefly above. As

mentioned, I like comics and cartoons and video games, so I also surround myself with people that share those interests and frequent websites and blogs that discuss those interests. I think whether I would qualify as otaku is irrelevant, but a similar consideration to how I represent myself is definitely at play when I'm looking for new things to download (again, *for free*.) In the case of this particular game, I was prompted to try it out by a friend who shares a lot of my interests. Whether through social media or her own social circles, she was exposed to the game and she excitedly admitted to me that its perceived trendiness, among other things, appealed to her. And I was sold immediately.

Additionally, my friend had to guide me through the App Store search because there were no words to search for in English that would pull up a non-English language game. This is something I honestly never considered about the ecology of the App Store, that results were limited by language in such a way that they might as well be hidden from non-users of that language; that no matter how many times I typed "Japanese cat game" and my friend laughed at me, I would not get the desired result. I remember realizing that there were so many random (again, *free*) apps I might have been missing out on exploring. It was disheartening for a moment. Still, my interest in this particular game only increased then, even before I got my first virtual kitty visitor.

And just as my friend had introduced the game to me, I started introducing it to my friends. Not many though. I remember being very selective about who I considered worthy of the privilege to play with pretend pets on their phone. Each friend had to exhibit at least some marginally otaku behaviors first. I considered what anime they've binge-watched recently or what humorous cartoon-referencing shirts I've seen them wear. But eventually, socialization in regards to this game became as common as the cat with the baseball cap visiting my screen to eat and play with the little baseball that had cost me 200 silver fish, which is to say not too often but often enough. But what I would eventually learn, and perhaps the most surprising and intriguing aspect of all my activity surrounding this game, was that **socialization** had become much larger and intricate than I would have ever imagined.

After months of playing *Neko Atsume* and enjoying some relative success— e.g., rare kitties, more monies, landscape enhancements (I was living the life!)—I think the community developed around the game on Reddit, the link aggregator-social media hybrid website. This was perhaps my first exposure to the socialization systems happening outside of my dozen or so friends that played. The intensity of discussion, the fan artwork, and the attention to gameplay details were a bit overwhelming. It was here that I discovered that the cats I considered special were considered special by others. I used this collected knowledge to learn that different combinations of play toys and foods attracted different cats and yielded different results. There were even

Figure 2: Screenshot of *Neko Atsume* menu buttons.

links and resources available to make it easier. Personally, I decided this was basically cheating and significantly took away from the fun, so I chose to avoid it all. Still, along those lines, it was on Reddit, reading the threads of conversation from fellow fans, that I learned of a unique daily bonus feature that took my consideration of activity in another direction.

Apparently every day a secret password is generated for the game that yields extra fish monies when entered into a specific area of the menu. Up until the point I discovered the online community for this game, which included Reddit but also the blogs and websites linked there, my understanding of it relied wholly on my aforementioned antecedent knowledges as well as trial and error. A yellow button with a camera image in the menu (see Figure 2 below) allowed me to take and share pictures of the cats. A green button with a tote bag brought me to a menu where I could buy food and accessories. A cog image has meant "settings" in as many games and apps as I can remember. This was still the case. Every other button I was uncertain of evoked for me the tendency I have with most unfamiliar technologies, "touch it and find out." Honestly, if touching the button a few times didn't clarify its function, eventually that button stopped being something I considered important to my activity.

When I discovered the daily password bonus and how to retrieve it, that particular series of actions brought a lot of the language issues I'd been ignoring to the forefront very quickly. Firstly, the large number of tutorials available for the game in English revealed to me that the online communities I'd discovered were similarly non-Japanese language users. There were a few users able to translate for the rest of us, but in creating the tutorials they

tended to do an excellent job providing screenshots and sometimes directed readers through the menus without translating at all. Secondly, after retrieving the password from posts on Reddit or Twitter, for it to be successfully entered required either of two things:

1. A Japanese language keyboard installed on your smartphone or

2. The Google Translate app

I chose to use the Google Translate app on my phone and use a feature that allows users to trace the Japanese characters of a word; then I would copy and paste the text version into the text field in the game. For some reason, I've thought a lot about this moment of my activity. Until this point, I hadn't been treating the text of the game as text at all. The Japanese writing was undeniably part of the ecology of the game, but somewhere along the way, I stopped considering it writing in the same way I would think of writing in my native language. I didn't feel good about this. Was I entitled to play a game despite not making the effort to learn its language simply because my antecedent knowledges and privileged socialization we've discussed? Why hadn't I even tried to translate anything before? It was here that I came to a guilty realization: I didn't even know what *"Neko Atsume"* meant.

"Collect Cats" is the title of the game translated into English and nearly a year or so after I downloaded the game, I occasionally see a few mainstream media reviews discussing activity in their own ways. In a recent CNN review, for example, the authors try to link the popularity of this "addicting new app where you feed stray cats" to "Japan's feline love affair," using Hello Kitty, another of Japan's famed exports, as an example to support the shallow claim. In a way, once CNN gets their hands on something cool, it's clear the trend is over. I rarely play the game nowadays. The fun has definitely died down, but admittedly a sense of unease persists. In exploring my activity surrounding this game, I've learned that there may be more cultural and ethical impacts to consider. I've discovered that the visibility of a language, of a culture that has contributed so much to me personally can be easily taken for granted. This was a reminder that there exist complexities to writing research that are global and activity systems that appear small at first but can expand across languages. I don't have all of the answers or even most of the questions regarding the ethics of taking or "loaning" from other cultures, but I know that I don't ever want to ignore writing simply because it's unfamiliar or take from a culture in a way that's thoughtless. Apparently a lot of cultural-historical activity theory still applies, so at least thinking about what's going on doesn't have to be that hard. *Dōmo arigatō* for exploring this all with me. By the way, that means "thank you" in Japanese.

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