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Entering Another World

A Cultural Genre Discourse of Japanese *Isekai* Texts and Their Origin in Online Participatory Culture

Isekai, a whole new world?

In recent decades, anime and manga have increased their international recognizability, as a part of Japanese visual culture, among fan communities and in academia. As media that "emerged, and [are] still emerging, into the global market in conjunction with the new economies of globalization and informatization" (LaMarre 2002, 337) both are critically important as fields of observation within media studies. For Japan, anime and manga are important cultural exports that have established fan communities beyond domestic borders and continue to expand into different platforms, mainly online. Today, these media are reaching more audiences than ever, and their current trends deserve closer observation.

Since the early 2010s, the medial landscape of Japan has been confronted with a growing influx of stories about protagonists getting transferred to another, fantastical world, vastly different from ours, where they begin a new and adventurous life. As an example, the story *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* continues to be successful both as a light novel (Tables 2–6), anime adaption, and in many other media instalments. These so-called *isekai* stories, originating from writings posted online by amateur authors, often with subsequent adaptations into manga and anime, have gained remarkable attention and market share not only in Japan, but also overseas through online publishing, streaming services, and fan communities.[1]

Currently, isekai works are regularly discussed as stories with implied social and cultural concerns, possibly problematic qualities, and, above all, as a

1 How the medium of anime is thriving internationally can be observed in the recent trend of streaming services investing in it and producing original anime instalments (Reuters 2021).

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storytelling staple within different media (Margolis 2020). Among the anecdotal evidence for that observation is, for example, the genre's pre-emptive exclusion from a writing contest organized by *Bungaku Free Market* and *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*[2] with a view to achieving more variety among the submissions; or the pledge by the media publishing giant Kadokawa in a segment of its annual report from 2019 (Kadokawa, 32) to produce and broadcast at least one isekai anime every season.[3] The reasoning behind this decision was the extraordinary success of two isekai series *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* and *Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* Within the ever shifting "brand" of anime, these texts appear to be the most contemporary cluster among trending patterns that create areas of prominent discourse (Suan 2017, 65). Isekai, I would argue, is one such cluster that has been increasingly discussed among online fan communities and media publishers since the early 2010s and due to its growing number of adaptations into anime.

This article proposes the idea that isekai stories and their worlds are indications of a larger media trend within and driven by fan culture. They excel at fulfilling certain functions for their target audience, which results in their increasing occurrence among fictional works. In this chapter, I will first introduce the theoretical framework of genre analysis based on social as well as cultural dimensions of genre theory. Outlining an almost "mythical" nature of many contemporary genres, I will then focus on the cultural practices of creation, circulation, and reception as the main driving forces behind texts within the isekai genre, thus justifying a closer look at the sites of production, taking as an example the platform *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and its audience, which I locate in the otaku subculture.[4] For my concluding analysis, I examine two popular isekai texts: *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("That Time I got Reincarnated as a Slime") and *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* ("Re:ZERO – Starting Life in Another World") to identify the cultural and social implications therein and examine how their narrative elements meet the expectations and desires of their audience. Moreover, I aim to show how these elements mirror certain social practices that constitute them as a genre linked to otaku culture. Isekai

2 https://buntanpen.hinaproject.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

3 The serialization format of Japanese anime productions follows the rhythm of three-month-long "cours."

4 In this article, subcultures should be understood based on Itō Gō's concept of "mainstream subcultures" (2008, 138) indicating that Japanese manga, anime, or computer game fandoms have long lost their subversive or niche connotations and partly subsumed popular cultures. Mentions of pop and subculture should be understood with this idea in mind.

might be the most contemporary "anime world" or "anime culture" brought into existence by the very nature of anime, which, as Thomas LaMarre has described, "tend to unfurl anime worlds or anime cultures that blur the boundary between production and reception, with fans participating enthusiastically in the dissemination of products and in the transformation of media and narrative worlds" (LaMarre 2009, xiv).

Cultural Genre Theory

Isekai translates as "another" or "different world." While, according to the *Kōjien*, *sekai*[5] means "world" in the strictest sense of the word, as a spatial dimension for sentient beings to exist in, *i*[6] denotes something "different," "unusual," "strange," and "non-conforming" in contrast to something generally accepted. As a genre, isekai describes a primarily Japanese phenomenon within the domestic popular cultural landscape, manifested in written forms, manga, or anime. The majority of isekai stories originate in so-called light novels (*raito noberu*). Without an exact definition, the marketing term describes today's isekai as partly illustrated novels, in an easy-to-read format, whose main target audience is teens and young adults (Enomoto 2008).

Today, an abundance of texts, both light novels and anime adaptations, with striking similarities, seem omnipresent in the current popular cultural media landscape of Japan and beyond. Critics debate about "too many isekai" or even "isekai posing danger to the light novel market" (Margolis 2020). The situation suggested is similar to Schweinitz's (1994) impression of "dense reoccurrence" and "schematic narration" within classical Hollywood cinema, tempting us to perceive genres, and isekai specifically, as "intertextual structures of invariance," only ever containing iterations of the same "conflicts, themes, and narrational patterns" (Ibid., 107). While there is some truth to this statement, this view on genre in general is widely considered outdated (Müller 1995; Schweinitz 1994; Stam 2000). In the context of anime, the term *sekai* (world), from traditional kabuki and bunraku, seems more applicable, as has been elaborated by Stevie Suan (2013). *Sekai* are, in contrast to the conventional concept of genre, particular repetitive formulas "in which the setting, the characters, and plot lines were previously decided upon" (Ibid., 94). These formulas would be familiar to the audience before experiencing a play and could be given a

5 世界 (Shinmura 2018, 1623).

6 異 (Shinmura 2018, 124).

"certain twist" (*shukō*) to become new iterations that were enjoyed within a specific *sekai*.

The adequate definition of genre, and the theory that is accompanied by it, depends on practice, purpose, academic tradition, and discursive context (Chandler 1997). Jason Mittell (2005, 39) provides a summary of different theoretical perspectives on genre, categorized by the three guiding questions of "definition," "interpretation," and "history." "Questions of definition" aim at identifying the central elements that constitute a given genre by "examining texts to delimit the formal mechanisms constituting the essence of a given genre" (Ibid.). This process of attempting to provide elaborate definitions of genres has been repeatedly deemed difficult, if not impossible (Chandler 1997; Stam 2000; Neale 2012), as it runs into certain difficulties like "extension," "normativism," "monolithic definitions," or "biologism."[7] However, as instances of repetition and difference, genres have narrative *formulas* that repeat narrative elements to fulfil the expectations of the viewers, but also include variations that keeps the viewers interested (Neale 2012; Suan 2017). These formulas, including their ability to shift within different iterations, can be identified as the general narrative structures of texts, without determining what, for example, isekai must be in any given instance. "Questions of interpretation" look at the textual meanings of genres and situate them within larger social contexts. Utilizing cultural studies, these are questions I will extrapolate in this chapter, with a focus on the mythical character of genre and its social function, following the studies of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Finally, "questions of history" focus on genre flexibility over time through specific cultural conditions. In the present chapter, I am not searching for a (possibly far-reaching) isekai lineage, instead I focus on isekai as a phenomenon bound to contemporary media developments and the means of creation and circulation they are emerging from. As emphasized by Mittell (2005), media analysis should focus on looking beyond the text as the locus for genre, and instead "locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (Ibid., 43), thus justifying an exact observation of these fields. Even if genres are categories of texts, they are not constituted by, or intrinsic to them since they are unable to interact on their own. Mittell states that "genres exist only through the creation, circulation and reception of texts within cultural contexts" (Ibid.).

For this observation, I will introduce the concept of "genre as myth," which has generally gained importance in the popular arts (Grindon 2012;

7 These problems are described in more detail in Daniel Chandler's *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (1997, 2).

Schatz 2012). Based on the social studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Altman 2012), this perspective parallels the repetition characterizing genres to the retelling of myths in oral traditions, addressing them as modern "folktales" that portray social problems as dramatic conflicts. In this sense, each individual text is a retelling of the myth, each offering a new opportunity for an imaginative resolution of these problems. However, while the myth model of genre is prominent in genre research,[8] scholars are making different observations as to its function, particularly in relation to the audience. Thus, it has bifurcated into two perspectives of *ritual* and *ideological* approaches.

The ritual approach is mostly concerned with the audience's experience of specific social conflicts and their resolution that is offered within texts. It attempts to explain the popularity of genres through the satisfaction or catharsis it can provide to the audience, which has the desire to mitigate the social concerns underlying the texts of a genre (Altman 2012; Grindon 2012). It addresses the usefulness of genres, which Müller (1995, 116) exemplifies with the term "social utility value," which describes a genre's ability to fulfil certain social functions better than other genres so it can "develop, assert itself and spread." This approach also attributes agency to the audience, arguing that it can influence the media landscape, at least over time. By choosing the films or series it favours, the audience reveals its preferences to the institutions, thus causing them to produce media that mirror their desires and provide social value (Altman 2012). As the counterpart, the ideological approach addresses the economic or political interests of media-producing institutions for social control, as an attempt to distract from the real nature and causes of prevalent social concerns. At worst, it implies "deceiving or seducing the audience into believing in a simplistic and ineffective resolution" (Grindon 2012, 48). While both approaches appear to be contrary to each other, Altman (2012) argues that these approaches can work in conjunction, as it can lead to "extraordinary energy generated by the play of contradictory forces" (Ibid., 31). Taking both approaches into consideration like this, genres enjoy greater popularity when they are able to carry out both functions simultaneously: fulfilling the ritual satisfaction for the audience and social control as part of an institutional agenda.

Since the origin of isekai can be located in fan-based media production, I will focus on the conception of ritualistic reception while, to a certain degree, both ideas can be at work here. The subsequent analysis will be an in-depth examination of the following three aspects that, by interacting with one anoth-

8 Most discussions in this context refer to traditional Hollywood cinema as their subject (Altman 2012; Neale 2012).

er, constitute the genre of isekai: First, the audience, located in otaku culture, and its particular mode of reading fictional works, as has been established through the literary studies by Azuma Hiroki; second, the production, in order to answer the question of origin and distribution. I intend to indicate how isekai stories are results of democratized production within participatory culture, and how they become part of larger media enterprises. Considering the findings of the first two steps I will, thirdly, analyse two isekai texts; specifically, their plots, characters, and settings. Focusing on storytelling elements, I will show how shared characteristics in these aspects amount to a narrative formula, while also pointing out key differences in how they provide a solution to the narrated conflicts.

Audience: Otaku and database consumption

According to cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2009, 4) "any attempt to consider seriously the contemporary conditions of Japanese culture must include an investigation of otaku culture." Azuma perceives otaku to be one manifestation of a larger trend towards the postmodernization of culture in Japan. Based on this assessment – the fact that many discourses mention otaku as important actors within Japanese popular culture, specifically anime (LaMarre 2009, 2018) – and because isekai texts link to them in different ways, I identify otaku as one of the main audiences for isekai texts.

The cultural activities of otaku are especially visible in Akihabara (Morikawa 2003; LaMarre 2018), one of Tokyo's major shopping districts for anime, manga, and videogames. Kaichiro Morikawa links the architectural trends within this district, with its opaque, windowless buildings, to the "the personalities of the people who go there, rather than function in the classic sense of the term" (Morikawa 2008, 124). As otaku, these people, "confine themselves in their hobbies and icons" (Ibid.).

This "personalized city" is "inhabited both by otaku and anime characters" (LaMarre 2018, 201). In such an environment, otaku and the transmedia characters from the manga, anime, and games that they can encounter there, are on an "equal footing" (Ibid). The exact term Morikawa uses for these closed-off social spaces is *isekai*, which is crucial for observing the genre of the same name and its function in a social context. It enables us to read this social practice of going to Akihabara, entering comic shops and arcades, engaging with icons from popular cultural texts, as "visiting another world." Morikawa (2008, 125) confirms this idea by stating that the case of Akihabara could signal a phenomenon where a "city is simulating cyberspace."

This idea establishes a discussion about the relations between reality and fiction, or, in other words: "the real world" and "another, fictional world." This idea is supported by Shinji Miyadai (2011, 236), who associates the social practices of otaku with the "realization of fiction" or "transformation into another world," which becomes evident and essential regarding the isekai genre.

The importance of otaku as the audience also becomes clear through their "database consumption," which Azuma (2009) established as their distinct way of perceiving texts based on their "excessively detailed knowledge about nonexistent fantasy or media worlds" (LaMarre 2018, 196). This mode of reception is built upon the "narrative consumption" of Ōtsuka Eiji (1989) and implies the consumption of the database of otaku culture as a whole. The recipients are aware that works of fiction are simulacra with a complex layered database of characters and settings behind them. Each of those layers is open for reception to them, including a single work (a small narrative), a worldview behind it (a grand narrative), or consuming characters and settings (a grand non-narrative). This idea, as a practice of fan consumers, becomes observable on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, a web platform where many contemporary isekai texts originate. Here, every layer of the database is accessible through search engines and key words.

Understanding where the website came from and how it functions creates historical context and possible causes for the success of the isekai genre.

Production: The participatory culture of *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*

The beginnings of light novels can be situated in the self-published works of fan consumers creating both fan fiction and original works on personal blogs and websites. This so-called *dōjin* culture and the works emerging from it, often derivative in nature, are identified as an important aspect within otaku culture (Azuma 2009). It includes rereading and reproduction of original manga, anime, and games sold in the form of fanzines, fan games, and fan figures. This situates the movement in the larger concept of *participatory culture*, as conceptualized by Henry Jenkins (2006), as three, intersecting trends leading to more active consumption: First, the emergence of "new tools and technologies" that help fan consumers to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content." Second, the existence of subcultures promoting "Do-It-Yourself" media production and publication. Third, economic trends of horizontally integrated media conglomerates encouraging the circulation of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media types (Ibid., 135–136). In Japan, the third trend is known as *media mix* (*media mikkusu*), which describes the development of media franchises across multiple media types over long periods of time. Specified as the *anime media mix* by Marc Steinberg (2012), it denotes transmedia

storytelling between anime television, manga, and merchandise items within Japanese popular culture. Within this trend, the web platform *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* ("Let's Become a Novelist") has gained importance since the 2010s as a platform of participatory culture. Today, it plays a crucial role in the origin of many franchises within the Japanese media mix, including isekai stories.

Shōsetsuka ni Narō began as a personal project by the university student Umezaki Yusuke, in 2004, as a centralized platform for light novel creators to post their works and better access for readers. In 2010, he founded the company Hina Project to corporatize the platform (Okada 2014). Around April 2019, the site had two billion page views each month,[9] with 14 million unique users. Today, there are close to 800,000 works posted and over two million registered users.[10] The source material of most anime reviewed within this chapter originated as light novels on this platform. The concept of the website is simple and free: anyone who registers can write any kind of fiction and upload it for other users to read, review, and rate, which leads to statistical insight available to the creators. This results in a community mainly consisting of amateur authors, whose fictional works gain or lose popularity based on trends set by the community's reading habits. Through participation by voting, reviewing, reconstructing, and congregating as fan communities around certain stories, they determine their success. With enough popularity, these stories can gain the attention of large media publishers, which, in turn, adapt these into manga and anime to commercialize them in the media mix.

For readers, the site gives an immediate overview of the available genres, their subgenres, and a monthly ranking in each of them, with isekai being an established category alongside other familiar categories: General (*sōgō*); romance (*renai*); fantasy (*fantajii*); literature (*bungei*); science fiction (*SF*); miscellaneous (*sonota*); and other world reincarnation/transference (*isekai tensei/teni*).[11] The site also provides an elaborate search engine[12] to assist users in finding stories by including or excluding the aforementioned genres, subgenres, and a plethora of keywords that can describe a story's tendency (*keikō*), characters (*tōjō kyarakuta*), setting (*butai*), epoch (*jidai settei*), or various elements (*yōso*).[13] This multitude of detailed search options signifies two things: first, it addresses questions of definition, the dilemma of categorizing texts that can

9 Based on an interview with Hirai Miyuki (2019a), current director of Hina Project.

10 https://syosetu.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

11 https://syosetu.com; accessed 12 March 2021.

12 http://yomou.syosetu.com/search.php; accessed 12 March 2021.

13 These elements include very specific, situational tropes such as game (*gēmu*), military (*miritarii*), or even harem (*hāremu*).

actually belong to multiple genres whose different themes and elements overlap. Second, it acknowledges the users' demand for certain types of information, including those unique to their fan culture, which are deemed helpful or desirable when they browse fictional works. Based on this detailed information, users can perfectly know what to expect from each work and find their own niche among all these stories. The usage of these systems mirrors the practices described by Azuma (2009) and LaMarre (2002), where consumers' narrative experience begins to resemble the "experience of informatization itself" (Ibid., 337).

While *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* represents a viable venue for today's amateur authors to publish works outside of the top-down corporate media distribution, its specific role for the emergence of the isekai genre needs to be explained. Some attribute the general rise of the light novel industry, which Saito Satomi describes as a "curious return in content-delivery media from audio-visual media to older text media" (Saito 2015, 144), to the success of *Sword Art Online*. Kawahara Reki started serializing the series on his own homepage in 2002, before it was republished by Dengeki Bunko in 2009. Its successful anime adaption in 2012 caused a rise of web novel publications and their adaptations into the larger media mix, making it one of the pioneering works for the commercialized production and circulation process of light novels we see today. It has also been voted the most popular light novel of the 2010s (see Table 1) by the guidebook *Kono raito noberu ga sugoi!* ("This light novel is amazing!"). *Sword Art Online* emerged from a lineage of survival type stories (*sabaibukei*) and while, strictly speaking, not an isekai story, it still thematizes the relation between the "real world" and an "imaginary world" that is rooted in popular culture and operates under different rules. The characters, some of whom could be described as "game otaku," must navigate and survive in a virtual game world. The text addresses their "awareness of belonging to multiple worlds – but not belonging to any one world" (Saito 2015, 144). From the nature of such stories, isekai emerged as the most popular category, determined by popular opinion of fan communities, to tell stories about a Japanese youth and their social concerns, trying to find their identity within different worlds. In popular cultural discourse, isekai, and other stories with a similar narrative formula, are contemporarily referred to as *narō-kei*, based on their origin on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. However, it is an ambivalent term, sometimes used derogatorily for the overwhelming trend of these texts. The web platform does not officially use it and even wants to avoid it in order to promote its variety of different fictions (Hirai 2019b). Still, the top ten most popular stories on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* are, in fact, isekai stories (see Table 2).

Participatory culture, media mix, database consumption; all these terms denote a shift that caused the boundaries between production and reception

to blur, where "producers are, above all, fans; and fans are budding producers" (Lamarre 2006, 367). A fan-based light novel can be adapted into manga, anime, a game, or vice versa since there is no conventional order anymore. *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* represents a crucial step in this shift, as a dynamic web platform where readers, writers, and publishers are provided with efficient tools and statistics to set these intricate circuits of multi-layered media production into motion. Here, the creation and circulation of media is even further democratized with audiences being able to determine more directly which texts of fiction will thrive within the media mix. These texts, as the analysis will show, often feature fan characters or otaku as their protagonists, which suggests that *isekai* stories could be understood as works made by fan consumers for fan consumers. However, the acquisition of fan-based source materials through big publishing corporations marks a shift from subcultural media creation merging into pop cultural media distribution. I argue that these observations of audiences gaining agency confirms the idea of the isekai genre fulfilling a ritualistic function.

Texts: Profiling the isekai genre

In order to choose a group of texts for the analysis, a bottom-up approach, according to Hickethier (2002) was used. Isekai stories are told across many different formats within the larger media mix, with anime adaptations often being the instalment that proves their success. Additionally, anime make it possible to examine the aesthetic choices for a story's world and characters at large, within the bounds of conventional film analysis. For that reason, the goal was to find available anime adaptations with their source material being light novels on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. Several rankings from guidebooks, community websites, and market data (see Tables 1–6) have been evaluated to identify several noteworthy texts, based on their popularity among viewers and their economic success. Most of these isekai anime have been reviewed for a general understanding of the genre, with the awareness that it is impossible to determine a text corpus with clear objectivity. Ultimately, the two anime series *Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("That Time I got Reincarnated as a Slime) and *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* ("Re:ZERO – Starting Life in Another World") were chosen. They will be simply referred to as *TenSura* and *Re:Zero* in the following, which are the established abbreviations in fan discourse.[14] Both

14 There is an infamous tendency of light novels towards having conspicuously long titles. Like the blurb of printed texts, they directly give content information about the

stories are performing well in terms of light novel sales, placing second and third in the *Oricon News* statistics for 2020 (see Table 4). On *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, *TenSura* is the most popular story among all web novels, with *Re:Zero* following in fifth place. In the following, I will provide short synopses of both texts to introduce their general narrative structure.

Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken

TenSura started in 2013 as a light novel by author Fuse on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and was licenced by Micro Magazine to be published since 2014. In 2018, it received its first anime adaptation with 24 episodes, under the direction of Kikuchi Yasuhito.

The story follows Mikami Satoru, a 37-year-old general contractor from Tokyo, who gets stabbed on the street by an assailant while protecting one of his friends and work colleagues. With his dying breath, he reminisces about the missed opportunities of his life, one being that he never had a girlfriend, and he asks his friend to destroy his computer's hard drive. After his death, he awakens in a dark cave, realizing that he has been reincarnated into a slime in another world. As Satoru died, his pain and regrets were interpreted into many powerful, "game-like" skills that keep evolving and give him a leg-up in this new environment, despite his appearance as a harmless slime. After adopting the new name "Rimuru," he leaves the cave and is increasingly recognized as a powerful entity by different ancestries of monsters inhabiting this other world. The story progresses with Rimuru founding his own nation and inviting more and more monsters, developing a progressive town with him as the leader figure.

Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu

Author Nagatsuki Tappei began writing the story on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* in 2012 before it was licenced, in 2014, by Media Factory, a brand company of Kadokawa, with illustrations by Ōtsuka Shin'ichirō. The anime adaption's first season, directed by Watanabe Masaharu, started airing in 2016. The story fol-

light novel to users and, within their web-based platforms, provide important information for tagging and search engines.

lows Subaru Natsuki, a high-school student and shut-in (*hikikomori*),[15] who, on leaving a convenience store in the middle of the night, is suddenly summoned to another world. Finding himself in a medieval marketplace, he struggles to orientate himself in this new environment and receives support from a silver-haired half-elf girl, who later introduces herself as Emilia. After learning that Emilia is searching for an important artefact, Subaru decides to help her investigate. Both get attacked and killed in the process, but in the next moment Subaru finds himself alive again some hours in the past. While trying to help Emilia again and figuring out the events around him, he dies several more times, realizing he has gained the power to return to a certain point in time with his memories intact. After successfully aiding Emilia to retrieve her insignia, he learns that she is a candidate for the next ruler of Lugunica, the kingdom he has been summoned to, and is received into the mansion of Emilia's supporter, the margrave Roswaal L. Mathers. Living there, Subaru meets the other residents and, for the first time, finds friends and allies he never had before. He decides to use his newfound ability to protect the ones closest to him and help Emilia in her ambition to become the next queen, but suffering the pain inflicted on him every time he dies and being the only one to remember everything from his former lives.

Transfer to another world: The narrative formula

The central plot element that appears to be a given in all contemporary isekai stories and that comprises the core of their narrative formula, is the transfer to another world that exists in parallel (and is similar) to ours. The transfer can occur through different means: a magical portal; reincarnation; or the power of a godly entity. These setups already offer clues about the narrative logic of an isekai text and raise questions about greater cultural concerns. In general, isekai stories can be categorized by three ways in which the character moves to the other world: transfer (*tenii*); summoning (*shōkan*); or reincarnation (*tensei*). *Tenii*, which simply describes a movement from one place to another and *tensei*, the reincarnation, are the two main categories in isekai, according to *Shōsetsu-ka ni Narō*. A prerequisite for reincarnation is evidently the protagonist getting killed, either by accident or on purpose. The reasons for their death, including that of Satoru, tend to be the consequences of a malfunctioning society, and

15 "Acute social withdrawal" has been recognized as a social problem among youth since the 1990s (Saitō 2013).

include variants of murder, death from overwork (*karōshi*),[16] or the recurring trope of a truck hitting the main character.[17] *Shōkan*, strictly speaking, is a form of *tenii,* but implies a more specific plot device: the interaction between the protagonist and their summoners. This can often include a *call to action* from the protagonist's summoners, as they might need their help to defeat a greater evil threatening the world. In *Re:Zero*, Subaru suddenly appears in the other world, and who has summoned him and for what reason becomes an underlying question.

Regarding the main characters, both analysed anime omit an initial exposition of their protagonists' backgrounds and only provide a few clues to the viewer about their characteristics. In the case of Satoru and Subaru, these are reminiscent of otaku stereotypes. Satoru laments about "dying as a virgin"[18] as he was approaching his forties and asks his friend to destroy his hard drive, implying it contains media or a browser history he does not want other people to see, even after his death. Subaru is first shown in a convenience store, browsing through a manga magazine, sighing at the sight of two high schoolers passing by outside. In both cases, the protagonists are depicted as social rejects, struggling with the society they live in and with a hint towards a connection to anime and manga. As for their appearances, they join the ranks of young male protagonists with short, black hair appearing in most of these texts. The light novel even describes Subaru, whose signature attire is a track suit, as "so ordinary that he could be lost instantly in a crowd of people."[19] These characteristics make the protagonists replaceable in a way and, as a consequence, more available for character identification.[20] Both protagonists, through whose perspective the audience explores the story world, are part of the subcultural group of otaku, which is affirmed as both stories progress.

As the transfer to the other world occurs, the protagonist usually undergoes a transformation that places them in a position of enormous power within

16 Death from overwork is a phenomenon observed in Japanese work culture with reasons being long work hours and heavy workloads (Kanai 2009).

17 These scenes are oftentimes said to be references to incidents like the 2008 Akihabara massacre, where a man drove a truck into a crowd and went on to stab bystanders on the street (Kyodo News 2008).

18 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:05:05).

19 *Gunshū ni magirereba isshun de miushinaisō na hodo bonyōna mitame da* (Fuse 2013–2016).

20 Identification with a media character can be thought of as a feeling of psychological connection to the character while maintaining a sense of distinction. It may include temporarily becoming the character, experienced as a sort of perspective-taking activity (Reysen et al. 2020).

the other world and affirms their nature of a player/reader/consumer. There are generally two ways of this happening in the plot: the first is the protagonist gaining a skill or power that is outstanding according to the rules of the other world. The second is a set of skills, bits of knowledge, or sometimes a piece of technology that they bring over to the new world that will become immensely useful. In the latter case, it is not the transformation of the character, but the change of circumstances that makes them powerful. In *TenSura*, Satoru gains two unique skills as a slime that repeatedly act as dei ex machina to solve any problem or conflict the protagonist is faced with. The first, "great sage" (*dai kenja*), is an internal advisor that provides explanations to each of the world's phenomena and aspects. The second, "predator" (*hoshokusha*), comprises several skills allowing Rimuru to absorb any kind of material that he can store indefinitely, analyse, and craft items with. He can also absorb and analyse living beings, which lets him take over their skills or mimic them. In addition, he can live without food or sleep and does not experience pain. Altogether, this results in a ludicrous plot device that constantly evolves and inhibits serious conflicts or challenges for the protagonist, which stands in contrast to the power Subaru gains in *Re:Zero*. "Return by death" is no equivalent of immortality but only gives him the opportunity to try again from a certain point in time with the knowledge of everything that has happened before each of his deaths. Subaru has to utilize his average abilities, which stay unchanged after he is summoned again and are often emphasized for humorous purposes. When the events are unfolding once more, he has to find a way to succeed and to keep the ones closest to him alive. In comparison to Rimuru, he certainly has to struggle more through trial and error, which for him means to die over and over again and to suffer both physically and mentally in the process.

TenSura and *Re:Zero* both show different approaches to the ritualistic function of generic repetitions. First, they thematize the protagonists as otaku characters and the social problems they have to struggle with in modern Japanese society. They are either missing a partner or social bonds. Second, they provide a resolution to these struggles throughout the story. *TenSura* provides more of a "wishful identification"[21] through a protagonist who can effortlessly solve any of the world's problems with his disproportionate abilities (not to mention him being a shapeshifting slime that, in terms of character identification, is adaptable to the audience's ideas). When it comes to power structures, *Re:Zero* utilizes more balanced plot devices and also portrays Subaru's ambivalent emotions

21 "Wishful identification" describes the longing of being or acting like a fictional character. It is associated with parasocial interactions and other fan behaviour (Reysen et al. 2020, 75).

and struggles: these traits did not suddenly disappear with his transfer to the other world. He still has to overcome his social problems after being summoned to the other world. Together, both texts offer a flexible range of modes for exploring the underlying social problems that sustain them, explaining one of the genre's appeals for the target audience (Grindon 2012).

Supporting characters and the sociality in isekai

Based on the observations of Azuma (2009), the cast of characters within a story, their aesthetics and how their dialogues are written, play an important role when it comes to the fascination of manga and anime. The same should be true for isekai texts. Examining characters in both texts with regard to their designs, which, as Azuma (2009) argues, are simulacra consisting of many different appealing elements from the database, I will also illustrate how they are portrayed from the audience's point of view and identify their role within the character constellation.

Azuma (Ibid., 47) states that the "importance of the narrative has declined" in favour of characters becoming more important to the point of "character supremacy" in the context of otaku culture, in which fans are even engaged in parasocial relationships with characters of the texts they perceive.[22] As a result, a database of *moe*-elements[23] comprising these character representations has been established, entailing recurring aesthetics like costumes, hairstyles, or accessories, but also personality traits or patterns of speech. These elements, which are inestimable and each with its own history, have been created to "stimulate the interest of the consumers" (Ibid., 42), its function lying in the visual pleasure it provides, which is observable in many different kinds of media. Both analysed texts contain a multitude of character elements fitting these patterns.

TenSura, in general, features a colourful arrangement of different character designs and costumes, including occasional anachronisms. The childish, overly cute demon lord Milim provides an example visualizing how character designs

22 In contrast to parasocial interactions that are more temporary in nature, parasocial relationships are considered more continuous and have been observed to include sentiments such as "companionship, perceived similarity, empathy, identification, and attraction" (Giles 2002; Tsay and Bodine 2012, as cited in Reysen et al., 73).

23 *Moe* is a slang term coming from the verb *moeru* (萌える), meaning "to sprout" (Shinmura 2018, 2900). It describes attachment, or "budding" emotions of affection that people can feel towards fictional characters, resulting in a parasocial relationship.

seem to be paramount in these texts. Despite being introduced as one of the most powerful beings in this world, her appearance and personality stand in humorous contrast to this: she acts in both a passionate and simple-minded way and is constantly distracted by small things like food or sweets. Rimuru utilizes this, gaining her friendship in the process. Her standard attire consists of ludicrously revealing clothing that alternate in subsequent episodes: in one episode she receives a sailor uniform, reminiscent of Japanese high-school attire, in another she is seen in a cute dress.[24] Here, the "*moe*-aesthetics" of an individual character take priority over any consideration of consistency. This also applies to the two, demon-like characters, Shion and Shuna, who demonstrate unwavering loyalty towards Rimuru throughout the series. Shion is portrayed as a modern iteration of the "beautiful fighting girl."[25] While being a fierce combatant with a short temper, she also works as Rimuru's secretary, receiving a business suit with a revealing, low-cut neckline later in the series. In contrast to this stands the quieter and more caring Shuna. Her attire represents the traditional robes of Japanese shrine maidens. As different as all these characters are, they serve the same purpose: they provide a wide range of different character archetypes that add to the visual pleasure of the recipient and validate the viewer through the protagonist. In general, male characters revere Rimuru with utmost loyalty, whereas female characters express their affection and try winning his favour.[26]

Overall, the plot of *TenSura* progresses around Rimuru establishing his own nation and expanding his social circle of supporters who endorse him. They adore and respect him, always addressing him with hierarchical titles like "great" (*sama*) and "master" (*aruji*) and follow his every command. On the other hand, Rimuru is portrayed as a humble, benevolent, and charismatic regent. While being an idealized leader figure, he is also written as the only one who can provide a home to his allies and friends and enable them to achieve greater deeds. This is mainly accomplished through the concept of giving names to other monsters and thus causing them to evolve. As Rimuru's capital city develops, it soon becomes one of the most progressive places in the other world with many elements of Japanese convenience and tradition, introduced by Rimuru, but without the social problems of contemporary Japan. Different groups of monsters, skills, technology, and knowledge converge in this peaceful

24 (*TenSura*, S01E16, 00:07:55; S01E17, 00:06:22; S01E18, 0014:59).

25 The archetype's lineage of the "beautiful fighting girl" is discussed at length in the book of the same name by Tamaki Saitō (2011).

26 At one point, Shion and Shuna fight over who should assist and take care of Rimuru (*TenSura*, S1E11, 00:01:57).

city, which becomes a sort of "fantastical Akihabara" where an idealized form of living is made possible. It reflects what Azuma denotes as "alternative values and standards" that are preferred over the "social reality" (2009, 27). Altogether, these observations constitute *TenSura* as a series of wish fulfilment, where the protagonist is granted immense power, validation, and a place with a found family to belong to.

In *Re:Zero*, most of the cast are female characters comprised of *moe*-elements. Emilia, the first character Subaru directly falls for based on her appearance, is a silver-haired half-elf girl wearing a delicate short dress that reveals only certain parts and does not consider practicality. The depiction of the twin maids running the household of the margrave's mansion, Rem and Ram, clearly refer to staff of maid cafés in Akihabara.[27] They wear the same black-and-white uniforms and humbly address Subaru with the honorific "guest" (*okyakusama*),[28] as is common in such spaces. These character aesthetics are frequently highlighted throughout the series. For example, the opening sequence of *Re:Zero*'s first season[29] puts a clear emphasis on the female cast, which is presented before Subaru in a bright light, contrasting his dark and painful experience in the other world, and functions as his main motivation in the plot. There are also instances of both anime taking their time with slow-paced tracking shots to highlight designs or costumes of supporting characters, often as a form of introduction.[30] As a result, like *TenSura*, *Re:Zero* emphasizes individual characters, specifically their aesthetics. But where Rimuru gains friends and allies as a matter of course, the social relations in *Re:Zero* play out more mutually, with Subaru developing affection for other characters and actively trying to befriend them. While doing so, he often exhibits stereotypical otaku behaviour, like feeling "*moe*" towards fictional characters (Azuma 2009, 53). He comments on their appearances and gives most of them nicknames while identifying them as familiar character tropes from the database.[31] However, unlike Rimuru, Subaru has to work hard to overcome his profound loneliness and gaining the trust and loyalty from the supporting characters around him. In most instances, he is initially met with distrust and suspicion and must convince others of his good intentions, especially because he often seems out

27 The phenomenon and appeal of this trope is explored in Patrick W. Galbraith's *Maid Cafés: The Affect of Fictional Characters in Akihabara, Japan* (2013).

28 (*Re:Zero*, S01E06, 00:00:28).

29 (*Re:Zero*, S01E03, 00:01:15–00:02:45).

30 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:04:37; 00:05:29; *TenSura*, S01E16, 00:07:55).

31 At one point, he starts adding the cute, affectionate suffix *-tan* to Emilia's name; a habit that remains foreign to her throughout the series.

of place in the other world. This also gets complicated by Subaru's ability to be able to remember every single interaction with others after his death, but other characters cannot recall them.[32]

The supporting characters in both texts provide part of the solution to both protagonists in the form of a social circle that validates them. They are highly fictional characters from the database and their attractiveness is often emphasized before other elements within the individual works, in order to appeal to the viewer. Within isekai texts, they become more reachable through the audience's perspective-taking, which is provided by protagonists who transferred from a contemporary Japan. This point of view also contains voyeuristic potential (Mulvey 1988) with examples of erotically charged scenes that can be denoted as *fan service*, which exemplifies the attractiveness of individual characters as objects of desire and rarely serves the plot in a meaningful way.

Story world: Game-like realism and self-reference

A predominant number ofisekai texts, including the ones examined, shy away from settings like science fiction and tend to play out in a world with a "Western fantasy style" (*seiyō fantajii fuku*)[33] with architecture, clothing, and social order reminiscent of mediaeval Europe. This is also reflected in the naming conventions, with characters having English, French, German, or Italian names. The fantastical elements are the existence of magic, ancestries like elves, dwarves, orcs, and a variety of different human-animal hybrids, which provide means to frequently create exotic *moe*-characters.

In general, these texts follow the world-building of Japanese role-playing games like *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*. This results in a template that is used by many authors for their stories and reappears, only slightly adjusted, in the most successful instalments (Ōhashi 2019). In pop cultural discourse, it has been coined as "*naroppa*,"[34] a portmanteau of the words *narō-kei* and *yōroppa*

32 As an otaku character in relation to the supporting cast, Subaru is depicted as a flawed individual who is given the opportunity, much like in novel games, to "replay" interactions with other characters. Without going into detail, I argue that this is a deconstruction of otaku, with Subaru experiencing a sort of redemption as the story progresses.

33 As described by literary critic Ōhashi Takayuki (2019).

34 The word has an ambivalent nature similar to *narō-kei* and can be used derogatorily (Ōhashi 2019, 3).

(Europe). But these worlds not only take over the surface-level aesthetics of games, but also some of the mechanics intrinsic to many of them. Some stories, like *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*, go as far as employing actual graphical user interfaces that the characters can see and interact with, a system of gaining experience in levelling up and skill trees with specific abilities that can be acquired. These elements, which are also part of the database and familiar to recipients engaged in the media mix, illustrate the story worlds of isekai texts as being highly metafictional in nature.

In *TenSura*, this is observable in the system of available skills that is explained by the "great sage"[35] and the "game-like" dialogue graphics. As a background, this is occasionally provided with music reminiscent of retro games. On the surface, such game elements are not so present in *Re:Zero* but, upon closer inspection, there is one integral gaming element. Subaru's "return to death" ability is a direct implementation of the common game mechanic of "save points." When players reach a save point, usually between different levels, their progress is saved to that point and lets them "respawn" there in the case of failure. Similar to games, the anime utilizes a signature sound every time this happens to Subaru. The protagonists of these texts often seem to be aware of the story world's conditions, as described above. The way isekai-textsintegrate these fan characters as protagonists, as well as other narrative strategies, connects to Azuma's idea of "game-like realism" (2007) or even represents its contemporary continuation. Azuma developed the term alongside an observation of Japanese light novels that gained popularity during the nineties (Ibid., 27). In *Gēmuteki riarizmu no tanjō*, Azuma specifically analysed light novels and games that blur the medial boundaries as "game-like novels" and "novel-like games." Once more referring to the "character database" (Ibid., 45), he identifies their peculiarity in the interrelations of those fictional works instead of production, circulation, or the texts themselves. This can not only be applied to light novels, but all media consumed and produced by otaku, which are "meta-narratives" (*meta monogatari*) without single starting or end points (Ibid., 142) and whose characters can be transposed across works, displaying a game-like existence. For Azuma, these narratives do not focus on representing reality, but the fictional worlds of anime and manga (Ibid., 56) and can display self-awareness of their structure and form, namely, the database behind them. I find these ideas especially true for many isekai texts, that provide a deconstruction of the boundaries between reality and fiction or even aim at the "realization of fiction."

35 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:09:23).

When it comes to the audience's experience of reading those texts, which are metafictional in nature, it invokes the image of a player operating a character, a duality that moves the recipient's engagement from story to metafiction, and from character to player, respectively. Isekai texts, through game-like realism, specifically represent and address the non-fictional "I" as a character. Through their protagonists, they implement the player/reader/consumer within the fictional narrative or meta-narrative. The transfer of fan protagonists from a contemporary Japan to a game-like fantasy world, which is built from the database, allows the non-fictional "I" to become a character and the non-fictional life a story. This quality can be seen as a possible appeal of isekai texts, but also stories like *Sword Art Online*, which utilize an even more explicit, but simulated game world. In the case of the analysed texts, this metafictionality is paired with moments of self-awareness, which are oftentimes humorous in nature.

In *Re:Zero* for example, the moment Subaru realizes that he is no longer in modern-day Japan, he is expressively excited and accepts the fact that he has just "been summoned into a different world" Rather well.[36] He then monologues about it being a "fantasy world complete with the typical medieval culture,"[37] setting the stage with its conventional nature for the viewer. Going forward, the audience learns that Subaru has knowledge about common isekai tropes, which he expects to be also true within this world: When a townsperson is about to get run over by a carriage, Subaru strikes a pose and extends his hand, thinking he will become the cliché magic-casting hero of this world.[38] Nothing happens and it becomes evident that he has no supernatural powers whatsoever; at least "yet," is what he thinks. Subaru keeps running into struggles within this new world that make him wonder about where his "protagonist status" or "the cute girl"[39] who summoned him are. He also continuously uses vocabulary derived from pop culture and treats the other world like a game, calling other characters "NPCs"[40] or identifying them as anime character tropes with their database *moe*-elements, like "maid" (*meido*)[41] or "loli."[42]

36 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:02:01–00:02:23).

37 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:03:00).

38 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:03:13).

39 (*Re:Zero*, S01E01, 00:04:36).

40 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:01:17).

41 (*Re:Zero*, S01E05, 00:04:51).

42 In this case, Beatrice even responds, assuming the word probably "means nothing good." (*Re:Zero*, E05, 00:08:43).

Similar notions can also be found in *TenSura*: after Veldora introduces himself as one of the legendary "four true dragons of the world," he suddenly acts in contrast to his menacing nature. Identifying this behaviour as conforming to the trope of *tsundere* (a character who initially appears hostile, but is later revealed to be friendly), Rimuru states that he would have expected this more from a "cute girl," rather than a dragon.[43]

In other scenes, Rimuru makes a direct game reference to *Dragon Quest*. His catchphrase "I'm not a bad slime!" (*Boku wa warui suraimu janai yo!*) is recognized by Shizue as a pop-cultural reference, which makes both of them realize the other person's Japanese origin.[44] He later uses the same phrase to calm down Kagurazaka after a little misunderstanding.[45] While the two converse about recent trends in Japanese popular culture, establishing both of them as otaku characters, Rimuru states that he had "finished about all the manga and anime" Kagurazaka knows.[46] He then uses his memories and skills to create an actual manga volume from a stack of paper, thus introducing a pop cultural artefact from Japan to the other world. The volume's name, "Sirius" (*shiriusu*), refers to Kodansha's *Monthly Shōnen Sirius* (*Gekkan Shōnen Shiriusu*), the magazine featuring the manga adaption of *TenSura*, which visualizes the anime media mix going full circle within this text.

While these self-referential moments are utilized by both texts for humorous purposes, they make clear how interconnected the narratives, characters, and worlds are within these texts when considering both the anime media mix and the database. This also implies that an audience that is more active, more involved in the database, i.e. otaku, can take more pleasure in these texts. All these elements taken from other media forms as well as their continuous narrative references from the media mix result in explicit depictions of the database, which is readable by the otaku audience, participating in this cross-media pop culture. Isekai worlds unite countless elements from it and draw from manga, games, and other anime on each narrative level. They give medial form to the database and make it accessible to the viewer through protagonists the audience can relate to. The experience in these texts can be described with "game-like realism" and the plot, in case of the analysed examples, revolves around surviving, improving, and winning in the other world.

43 (*TenSura*, S01E01, 00:18:12, 00:20:33; E02, 00:01:42).

44 (*TenSura*, S01E06, 00:13:54).

45 (*TenSura*, S01E20, 00:12:09).

46 (*TenSura*, S01E20, 00:12:41).

Conclusion: New, yet familiar worlds

The analysed texts depict worlds that, in a very immanent way, provide different solutions for social concerns through relatable protagonists. In *TenSura*, the audience is provided with fantastical escapism and wish fulfilment in the form of validation, power, success, and companionship that might be unavailable to them otherwise. *Re:Zero* takes a more nuanced approach and explores the protagonist's emotional struggle and search for identity in more detail. It shows how effort can be rewarded and, ultimately, can lead to strong social bonds. Both solutions are realized within another world featuring themes, characters, and rules more familiar to the protagonist and, through perspective-taking, to the target audience.

Admittedly, many of the elements observed in the analysis can be found in anime of other genres as well and represent a general trend within the media mix: archetypal character designs created from *moe*-elements, fantastical themes, references across different works. These certainly indicate the underlying database in many texts. However, isekai stories display an accumulation of these elements and, first and foremost, provide direct access to them through a relatable protagonist who comes from a contemporary Japanese society, depicted with its explicit problems. With the perspective of a player/reader playing a character as part of a "game-like realism," these texts provide the experience of a transition from the "real" world to the other, fictional world. This is one integral element to their ritualistic function as a genre. Even if both portrayed worlds are fictional in the story, isekai fulfils the "realization of fiction" by mediating a disappearance of the boundary between "reality" and "fiction." Here, fiction means Japanese popular culture in the form of the database, which contains characters, worlds, themes, tropes, and more. This fiction, well-known and appealing to otaku, becomes attainable by entering the other world. By extension, isekai can be understood metaphorically for the social practices of otaku employed to "enter" other, fictional worlds, as is observable in spaces like Akihabara. The act of viewing isekai stories becomes a parallel to other modes of engagement with Japanese popular culture, which are all observable within a larger media trend described by different theories. Therefore, it is the familiarity of isekai worlds that constitutes one of their main appeals. Similar to the experience of *sekai* in the context of kabuki, the isekai audience knows, for the most part, what to expect from any given text. Isekai could therefore be understood not as "another" world (an unexplored realm), but "the" other world (a familiar imaginationscape), which appears in many iterations and is built from the entirety of otaku media, presupposing and validating the extensive knowledge thereof. As a genre, it mediates the "realization of fiction" and a space of comfort as an alternative to "social reality." It functions as a direct

entry to the character database, oftentimes deconstructing otaku activity in the process.

This familiarity, in turn, can be attributed to an audience that is actively involved in its formulation. Through fan culture, represented by communities like those on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, the audience can reveal its preferences and beliefs, deciding what their favoured mode of storytelling is. In a simplified way, isekai stories can be understood as fictional works within different types of media about otaku that are created by otaku to be consumed by otaku. While reality is evidently more complex than this, the audience continues to consider isekai stories best in fulfilling the ritualistic function of alleviating their problems. Possible motivations can be escapism into wish fulfilling fiction, a validation of otaku tastes and hobbies, exploring and providing alternatives to a malfunctioning society, or something entirely different. After the analysis of two texts these options can only be discerned as possibilities and empirical data is needed to give definite answers to these observations. The analysis showed clearly, however, that these two texts utilized very similar elements, drawn from the pop cultural database, to appeal to their audiences. However, they also represent notable variations of the isekai genre's narrative formula and provide different approaches to character development, dramatization, and the story's overall mood. As an instance of repetition and difference, the isekai genre evidently found a successful formula to keep its audience interested in its texts. The isekai genre has no conclusion yet, which is why I consider this article a means of introduction to its texts. Their sheer multitude, as well as the complex media systems surrounding them, warrant further research in the future.

Appendix

Table 1. Kono light novel ga sugoi! 2020 top ten light novels of the 2010s.

Rank	Title	Points
1	*Sword Art Online*	1728.95
2	*Toaru Majutsu no Index* [A Certain Magical Index]	1503.41
3	*Ryūō no Oshigoto!* [The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!]	1452.75
4	*Dungeon ni Deai wo Motomeru no wa Machigatteiru Darō ka* [Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?]	816.67
5	*Nejimaki Seirei Senki: Tenkyō no Alderamin* [Alderamin on the Sky]	718.67
6	*No Game No Life*	702.90
7	*Honzuki no Gekokujō: Shisho ni Naru Tame ni wa Shudan wo Erandeiraremasen* [Ascendance of a Bookworm]	690.14
8	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	682.83
9	*Jaku-Chara Tomozaki-kun* [Bottom-tier Character Tomozaki]	674.01
10	*Monogatari Series*	660.69

Note: The method used for calculating points varies in each issue, but the rankings take into account "web" poll results (conducted in September every year) and votes from "collaborators" including "reviewers, writers, bookstore employees, librarians, event coordinators, university club members, internet bloggers, internet news reporters, etc." Adapted from *Kono light novel ga sugoi!* 2020, Takarajimasha.

Table 2. Shōsetsuka ni narō! top ten light novels.

Rank	Title	Points
1	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	697,638
2	*Mushoku Tensei: Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu* [Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation]	674,309
3	*Tondemo Skill de Isekai Hōrō Meshi* [Regarding the Display of an Outrageous Skill Which Has Incredible Powers]	649,292
4	*Arifureta Shokugyou de Sekai Saikyou* [Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest]	603,547
5	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	553,373
6	*Death March kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyōsōkyoku* [Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody]	532,764
7	*Hellmode ~Yarikomi Suki no Gamer wa Haisettei no Isekai de Musō Suru~* [Hellmode ~Gamer Who Likes to Speedrun Becomes Peerless in a Parallel World with Obsolete Setting~]	531,390
8	*Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* [So I'm a Spider, So What?]	529,038
9	*Kage no Jitsuryokusha ni Naritakute!* [The Eminence in Shadow]	503,798
10	*Hachi-nan tte, Sore wa Nai deshō!* [The 8th son? Are you kidding me?]	483,768

Note: This statistic includes all works of all categories since the foundation of the webpage. Still, each entry of the top ten is an isekaistory.
Adapted 14 March 2021, from https://yomou.syosetu.com/rank/list/type/total_total

Table 3. Akiba Sōken 2019 top ten isekai anime poll.

Rank	Title	Votes
1	*Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* [Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!]	1473
2	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	1447
3	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	990
4	*Isekai wa Smartphone to Tomo ni* [In Another World With My Smartphone]	913
5	*Tate no Yūsha no Nariagari* [The Rising of the Shield Hero]	507
6	*No Game No Life*	456
7	*Isekai Shokudō* [Restaurant to Another World]	440
8	*Death March kara Hajimaru Isekai Kyōsōkyoku* [Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody]	425
9	*Overlord*	342
10	*Yōjo Senki* [The Saga of Tanya the Evil]	259

Note: Top ten of 37 total ranks. Users of the fan community Akiba Sōken could distribute seven votes among 37 preselected isekai anime. 9356 votes were cast in total between 1 March 2019 and 30 March 2019. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://akiba-souken.com/vote/v_2377/

Table 4. Oricon News 2020 light novel sales top five.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Kimetsu no Yaiba* [Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba]	2,752,593
2	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	732,314
3	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	606,700
4	*Sword Art Online*	564,235
5	*Kusuriya no Hitorigoto* [The Pharmacist's Monologue]	527,950

Note: Study period: 2 December 2019 to 30 November 2020. Actual tally period: 18 November 2019 to 22 November 2020. 3975 bookstores participated in the survey. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/special/55505/9/

Table 5. Oricon News 2019 light novel sales top ten.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	879,734
2	*Tenki no Ko* [Weathering With You]	634,151
3	*Sword Art Online*	615,363
4	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	550,202
5	*Seishun Buta Yarō Series* [Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai]	536,494
6	*Kusuriya no Hitorigoto* [The Pharmacist's Monologue]	461,024
7	*Dungeon ni Deai wo Motomeru no wa Machigatteiru Darō ka* [Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?]	434,034
8	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	429,217
9	*Yōkoso Jitsuryoku Shijō Shugi no Kyōshitsu e* [Classroom of the Elite]	420,573
10	*Kimetsu no Yaiba* [Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba]	407,640

Note: Study period: 3 December 2018 to 25 November 2019. Actual tally period: 19 November 2018 to 17 November 2019. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/confidence/special/53961/12/

Table 6. Oricon News 2018 light novel sales top ten.

Rank	Title	Copies sold
1	*Overlord*	807,693
2	*Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* [Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!]	630,889
3	*Mahōka Kōkō no Rettōsei* [The Irregular at Magic High School]	626,952
4	*Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* [Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-]	619,031
5	*Tensei shitara Slime Datta Ken* [That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime]	539,277
6	*Ryūō no Oshigoto!* [The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!]	478,242
7	*Sword Art Online: Progressive*	426,794
8	*Yōkoso Jitsuryoku Shijō Shugi no Kyōshitsu e* [Classroom of the Elite]	393,949
9	*Sword Art Online*	371,626
10	*No Game No Life*	350,960

Note: Study period: 4 December 2017 to 26 November 2018. Actual tally period: 20 November 2017 to 18 November 2018. Underlined titles are isekai stories. Adapted 14 March 2021 from https://www.oricon.co.jp/confidence/special/52166/12/

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Comment by Masako Hashimoto

Tani Levy points out that *isekai* in light novels reflects our real world and that *isekai* has its own authenticity, attracting readers and authors. Traditionally, fantasy stories have served a cathartic and unifying function for people everywhere; however, in the context of otaku, the *isekai* discourse circulates self-sufficiently as an approach to a common desire to transform into someone else in a new world. In Japan today, it is clear that many people are experiencing problems that are trivial but non-negligible. *isekai* stories could provide healing in their intolerable daily lives filled with small doses of creation and consumption. *Shosetsuka ni Naro* seems to function to repeatedly produce *moe* (萌え) representations based on what Azuma calls the database of character elements. At same time, it proliferates its own contents infinitely, creating a much stronger database. Interestingly, however, growing databases does not mean producing diverse outcomes; rather, both creation and consumption tend to be limited and homogeneous. One of this reason is that cliché and fanon are more important for entertainment in light novels. The similitude results in a low evaluation that light novels are inferior literature for kids. Considering

its huge markets and successful expansion into *media mix*, we must reimagine the "creativity" that humans are now instinctively drawn towards. Indeed, can novelty, originality, or uniqueness alone fulfill our reading pleasure?

Comment by Yasuo Kawasaki

This study is an analysis of the *isekai* genre of novels that have become popular in Japan since the 2010s and are now being exported worldwide. In light of the rise of this genre, which even the Japanese consider a special fad, Tani Levy analyses the textual and social characteristics of *isekai* novels, after sorting out the social background of readers and authors. This survey provides new insights into the unique aspects of *isekai* novels brought about by Japan's unique participatory *dōjin* culture.

In Japan, *isekai* novels are often treated with ridicule because of their narrative form and the peculiarity of their fashion. However, this analysis brings new and interesting insights into view. This chapter will almost certainly lead to more in-depth research on *isekai* novels in the future. In particular, I am looking forward to more in-depth analysis of the concept of reincarnation, which is a common feature of *isekai* genre, as well as comparative analysis with similar genres from other countries.