

Modest Mascots Embraced

Ryu Arakawa investigates the burgeoning popularity of the cheap-and-cheerful mascots associated with hundreds of local governments nationwide.

Namisuke is a fairy who lived on Suginamizaurus Island. He left the island on a ship and reached Suginami Ward, the land of his dreams. The story is about Namisuke living an enjoyable life, meeting fairy friends like Spito and Taneta and making various discoveries in the ward."

That is how the portal site of Tokyo's Suginami Ward describes Namisuke, the cartoon character it developed.

"We wanted ward residents to know more about sightseeing spots in Suginami. Namisuke is a character created under this community-branding plan. Suginami has the highest concentration of animation businesses in Japan. Of the 626 companies nationwide, it houses 75. Popular global characters like Mobile Suit Gundam originated here. We considered this characteristic another attrac-

tive feature of the area, so in 2006 we decided to audition for a character that would symbolize the ward," explains Masami Taguchi, animation officer in the ward's Citizen Life Department.

Many prefectural mascots at the annual national sports games are later promoted to prefectural characters. Yet many are left unused after their promotion period and ultimately disappear.

"With this in mind, Suginami held the 2006 audition under the condition that the design needs creative ideas that would keep the mascot in use in the future. We assumed young designers and art students would apply, and asked for not just one but multiple design plans, as well as a mini-story to go with the character," says Taguchi.

Namisuke was selected from 281 ideas that came from nearly every part of the country. He likes fresh air and apples, and has the special skill of being able to clean the air with the

fins on his back, which highlights the Suginami forests. Recently, he has appeared together with his sister Namy on ward materials such as its parental handbook. Items such as mugs and stuffed toys are sold in the Ward Office and are mostly popular among young women.

"We use Namisuke as a tool for communicating with ward residents, and we are hearing more comments from citizens at ward events that they are using Namisuke (such as for computer screen wallpaper)," says Taguchi.

In terms of regional promotion, the ward now has cakes and snacks that feature Namisuke. Exclusively in Suginami, a nationwide convenience store chain sells the "Namisuke Roll," a white roll with custard cream and topped with bits of apple, his favorite food. This became a hit product, selling 12,000 units within two weeks of its release. National newspapers and television news shows introduced the product, which led to promotion beyond merchandise sales.

In October 2007, the ward signed a partnership contract with Fanworks Inc. and commissioned copyright and commercialization management. It all makes for a good return on the 500,000 yen (5,000 dollars) awarded to the design audition winner.

"I'm hoping for something in the future like a Namisuke picture book, which mothers and children could appreciate," says Taguchi.

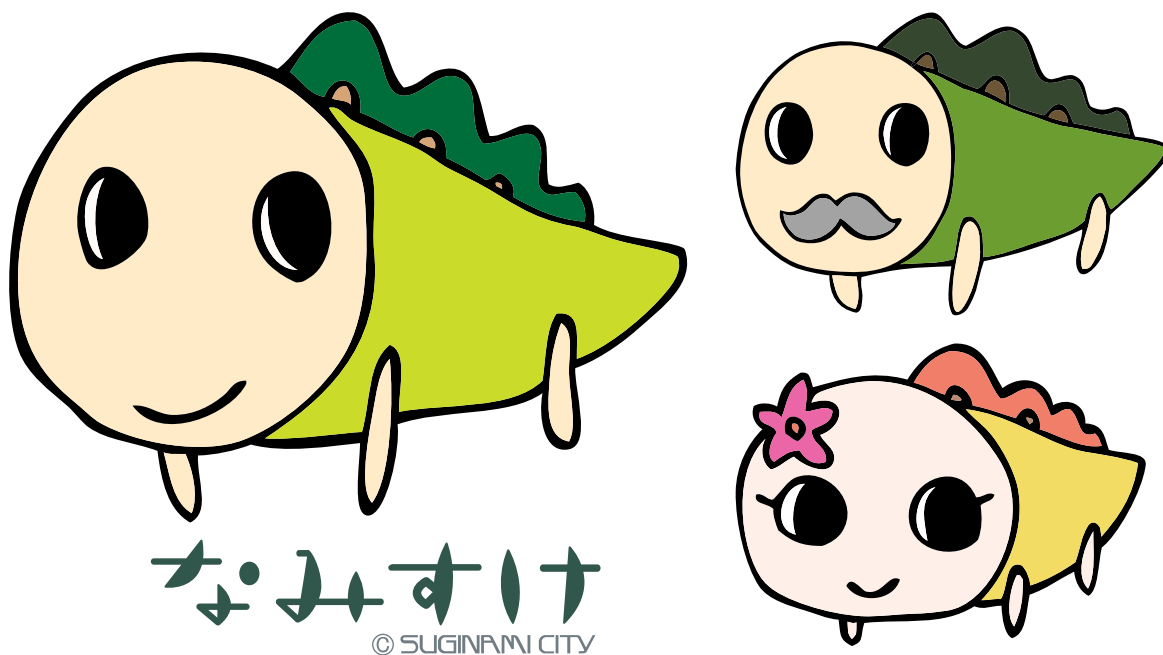
The Yuru-kyara Boom

Noboru Takayama, president of Fanworks, describes his company's work under the partnership contract with Suginami Ward as managing copyright contracts, distributing royalty income to the creator, and supervising and checking relevant products.

"Creators create the character; we come up with its media strategies. Suginami decides how it will sell the character, and we think of how to continue developing it. As a community branding method we started a



Tokyo's Suginami Ward animation officer Masami Taguchi poses with a pair of Namisuke stuffed toys in the Ward Office.



COURTESY OF SUGINAMI CITY, TOKYO

Suginami Ward's adored mascot, Namisuke (left), with family members

Namisuke blog from around last autumn, in which Namisuke goes to various places in the ward to introduce its attractive features.”

Takayama explains that it is a lot cheaper for an administration to create a character than to construct ward halls, as used to be the approach. It also has a greater promotional effect toward citizens when media such as TV and newspapers take it up as a topic.

“Budgets of local governments are not so rich now with the sluggish economy, so I think local government characters are a sign of the times,” says Takayama.

Our search on the Japanese Wikipedia for local government characters turned up approximately 260 of them, far beyond our expectations. This includes the popular Hikonyan, a peculiar samurai-helmeted catlike character of Hikone, Shiga Prefecture, which is said to have produced merchandise and promotional effects from media exposure that convert to a value of 1.7 billion yen (17.2 million dollars).

Community characters such as Namisuke and Hikonyan are collectively

called *yuru-kyara* (“yuru” means “light” or “loose” or “unfinished,” while “kyara” is short for character). Generally, they are somewhat crudely designed local government characters that give viewers a chuckle. Jun Miura, author of a reference book on the characters and a popular illustrator, coined the term. Miura explains, “Give something a set of eyes and a mouth

and it takes on a life. This culture is only possible in a polytheist country.”

Takayama points out that *yuru-kyara* derives from the unusual situation in which every region in the country has eight million gods, and from Japan’s manga culture.

“It’s not a counterpart of, say, Mickey Mouse in the United States. I think the Japanese approve of any-



Akira Takayama surrounded by *yuru-kyara* goods including, right, Yawaraka Sensha.

RYU ARAKAWA

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thing cute and likeable as a character. That is a trait you do not see too often overseas.”

Kazuo Rikukawa, president of Character Databank, also says, “The Japanese people’s love for characters started with Buddha statues.” His company conducts market research in the character business.

“A university professor once said,



and books associated with the character.

A former advertisement agency employee, Takayama founded his current company three years ago after working for, among others, an animation production company. His experience in developing merchandise for popular animation characters at the animation company led him to start his own corporate-driven character business in hopes of developing an environment where individual creators can distinguish themselves beyond just pro and amateur.

“Characters have always been created by professional manga art-

characters created by local creators have appeared on TV programs and children’s magazines. He considers the rise of CGM to come from two social factors.

“One is that people are moving away from TV, as seen in the huge decline in TV advertising income. Internet use is heightening and net ads are growing as a response. The rise of Internet media is slightly leveling what had been the trend of people obtaining information from TV. Another factor is that computer software has become commonplace and enabled anyone to easily design a

“The Siddhartha Gautama statue is very much like Hello Kitty. They both could appear expressionless or smiling archaically depending on how you see them.”

—Kazuo Rikukawa, president of Character Databank.

‘The Buddha statue is Japan’s ultimate character,’ and I agree with him. There are many variations of Buddha statues and each has its own story. Personally, I think the Siddhartha Gautama statue is very much like Hello Kitty. They both could appear expressionless or smiling depending on how you see them.”

Rikukawa refers to the yuru-kyara fad and its local government characters, saying, “It seems to reflect today’s Japanese society facing a sluggish economy and sinister incidents. Their appearance puts people at ease and their incompleteness as characters makes them likeable.”

The “Flattening-out” of Information

Takayama drew word-of-mouth popularity in Yawaraka Sensha, a web-originated character that gained exposure in newspapers and TV, and he already handles merchandise, a DVD

ists or animators, which would gain consumer popularity and then become movies or books or merchandise. But these days there is a new process in play where a character created by an amateur goes on the web, gains popularity and media exposure, and is adapted for books and movies. I want to develop Namisuke in the same way,” says Takayama.

This process is called CGM (consumer-generated media) and signifies a new trend in the character business. Fanworks provides some 100 professional and amateur creators information on various audition exhibits and net media, and assists in their efforts to release new works.


“We are trying to form a character business market that originates with the consumer, so to speak. The environment already exists wherein professional and amateur creators living in local areas can produce national hits,” says Takayama.

Indeed, with Takayama’s support,

character, and the Internet now allows people to release such works on YouTube and present them immediately to the public.”

Rikukawa, taking another perspective, points out the Internet’s “flattening-out” effects on information.

“It was previously inconceivable, but today we are starting to find consumers who see Mickey Mouse and Suginami’s Namisuke on the same level. We will see more dispersion in the future popularity of characters. But reality has yet to turn a CGM-originated character into another Pokémon. Our immediate challenge is in developing human resources that can take a locally born character and affectionately raise it.”

Will community characters and yuru-kyara end as a passing fad, or become another Pokémon? The answer is likely also to affect the future of CGM. 

Ryu Arakawa is a journalist.