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Ludic mutation: the player's power to change the game

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Chapter One: Lightness of Digital Doll Play

In this chapter I will present my first example of transformative play, or what I refer to throughout this writing as *ludic mutation*. What follows the presentation of this chapter's object, a 1990's erotic digital doll game known as "KiSS," is an attempt to describe the conditions that facilitate creative and liberatory play. An international community of adult players remixed these digital doll games with variable results each time the game was played, experimenting with projecting fantasies of becoming other genders, creatures and imaginary beings onto doll-like, player-created characters. KiSS games break from the domestic setting and the roles commonly associated with women's and girls' dolls, the private domain of household "necessity" that philosopher Hannah Arendt describes as "the oikia" (24). I will borrow Arendt's constructive divide between this household, economic sphere of vital necessities vs. a freer, aesthetic, public arena, hazarding a stretch of Arendt's public "Space of Appearance" to encompass artistic *unfolding games* of identity and gender play (199).

1. THE CHANGING CLOTHES DOLL

A curious computer game form known in Japanese as Kisegeau Ningueu, or "changing clothes dolls," surfaced during the early stages of the Internet, fading from use around the turn of the millennium. In the mid-1990's, anonymous programmers digitized the paper dolls printed in the back page of Japanese comic books, commonly referred to in Japan as "manga." The freely downloadable game software was taken up as an adult erotic play practice among an international cadre of digital doll makers. A changing clothes doll (hereafter referred to as a KiSS doll), could be created by a single author or collaboratively drawn by multiple artists in a "KiSS Jam Session." The author(s) of the doll set first drew the

doll's clothes and accessories over ten sequential picture screens, when finished uploading the doll to the Internet. Secondly, players—who quite often were also the authors of other dolls—downloaded the digital doll, reconfiguring the ten screens of doll figure and accessories.

In each picture frame, the player rearranges the doll's clothes on the screen, even moving and removing appendages and organs from the doll. Interactive KiSS dolls contain hot spot areas on the screen that play a sound file, a moan, or a pithy comment from the doll, in response to the computer mouse curser rolling over sensitive body parts. No longer merely a dress-up doll for little girls, a KiSS doll was as frequently undressed as dressed. Dolls switched genders and cross-dressed, wielded fetish instruments, and grew fox ears and a feline tail. A miniature doll body might be revealed beneath draggable robotic appendages, or the doll might be inspired by a popular figure from Japanese Anime, the Hollywood film industry, or from art history, such as a doll version of Michelangelo's David sculpture. Fantasies both naive and queer, asexual, violent, and pornographic, were mapped onto the surface of the doll body.



Fig. 1. Leena Felinsky, a “furry” animal fetish doll by Canadian college student Kim Galvas. The background behind the KiSS doll consists of the icons from the graphics applications she used to draw the doll; 1999; Game Screenshot.

2. UNFOLDING GAMES

The digital age did not bring about the first appearance of these mutable games, available for download from websites like Otaku World.¹ We find antecedents for similar recombinatory games in women’s and children’s paper dolls, coinciding with the ready availability of paper since the 18th century. The modern fashion paper doll was dressed in changeable outfits designed to wrap seamlessly around the doll’s figure. A paper doll and its fashion accessories were drawn by the player herself or the doll’s clothes might be repurposed from other sources like a newspaper or a catalogue. In remote Western-American frontier towns, children cut out attire from the mail-order Sears Robuck catalogue to dress the dolls of their collaged paper “scrapbook dollhouses” (Flanagan 28). Other paper dolls, as in the Japanese comic

book dolls directly prefiguring digital KiSS dolls, were purchased with all their components and forms ready to cut out.

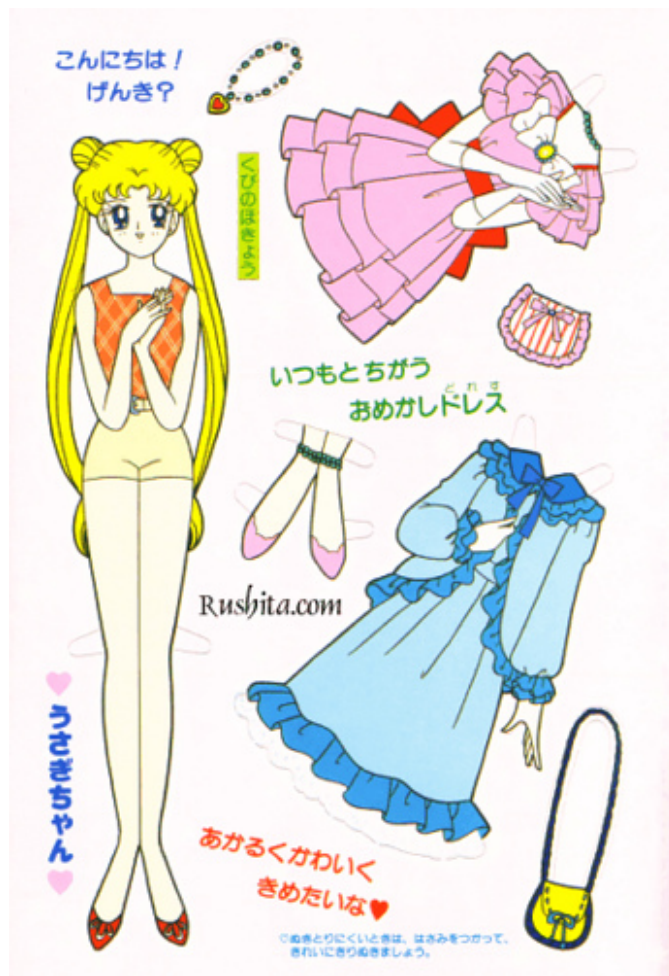


Fig. 2. Japanese Sailor Moon Anime Character Paper Doll; Web; 1 August 2011.

In Surrealism, as practiced in artist gatherings in Parisian cafes, we find another pre-digital age precursor to what I am referring to as an *unfolding game*, a game of mixable components that add up to a unique combination each time the game is played. Motivated by an interest in the irrational, chance associations of the unconscious, Surrealist artists designed a game of drawing and collaging body parts alternately known as the “Exquisite Corpse,” “Rotating Cadaver,” or “Sequential Drawing.” Seated around a cafe table, each player drew one segment of the body on a fold of paper and passed the paper on to the next player, who would then add head, body, torso or leg on a separate, hidden fold. The chain-like, sequential

iterative protocol of an Exquisite Corpse game prefigures the collaborative KiSS doll. Each author of a collaborative doll set draws one doll frame and then passes the doll to the next author, at the final moment of “unfolding” revealing a surprise outcome for all creators.

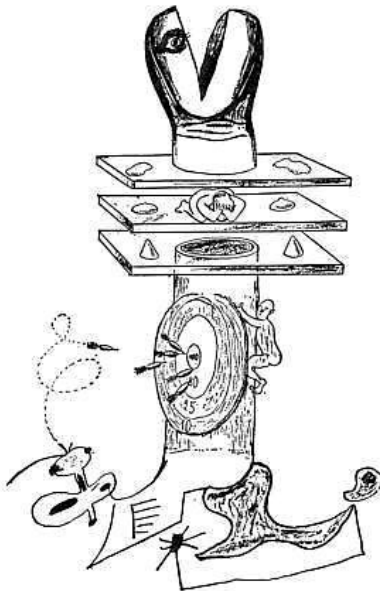


Fig. 3. Exquisite Corpse Drawing by Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, Joan Miró; 1926; Web; 1 March 2012; <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurrealismLecture.htm>

An unimagined outcome emerges from a nevertheless structured, chain-like play protocol in an unfolding game. The final result of the drawing of the Surrealist “cadaver,” or for that matter the final appearance of the KiSS doll, cannot be precisely predicted, and the more surprising the outcome, the greater delight invoked among other players. This contingency of outcome contrasts to games that culminate in a pre-determined end-game state, such as the final checkmate of a round of chess. Although subject to fixed rules and parameters (in each of a chain of ten sequential visual frames there will be a doll body with interactive parts), the unfolding game may also be understood as a generative toy. At the interstices of play and art-making, players of an unfolding game participate in a generative process that is in itself artistically performative and also culminates in an art object, a unique drawing or record of a particular game.

3. DOLL AVATARS

The playful transformation of the dolls' images, and of their genders, roles, equipment and characteristics, invites comparisons to other computer games wherein the player manipulates and customizes fictional virtual characters. For a KiSS game author, the doll becomes a projection of a player's self on the computer screen, similar to an "avatar," a protagonist character controlled by the player of a computer game. Like an adult computer game avatar controlled by a child-player, the paper doll is a manifestation of the little girl's (and of the fashion industry or of the comic book maker's), fantasies of adulthood and femininity. The girl imagines herself becoming the fashion cut-out doll even as she eroticizes the fetishized body image of the doll as a woman other than herself, dressing her doll up for imaginary private and public (non-domestic) adult functions, for work, college, parties, or vacations. Thus similar to a game avatar, the paper doll is already imagined to be an actor in the adult world. But KiSS digital dolls enter into even more adult territory than paper dolls.

A doll as a fantastic projection of an adult self, or as an eroticized other of various genders, diverges from a prevalent notion of doll as infant that prepares a girl for the properly domestic, reproductive labour of mothering. Yet as Mary Flanagan argues with convincing historical examples, even domestic dolls can be played subversively. In her media archaeology of "critical play" forms, Flanagan invokes doll house scenes of labour strikes and funerals as evidence of doll play that is resistant to proper notions of Victorian domesticity (32). Troubled children reenact violent traumas with dolls, and the therapist suspecting abuse observes children playing with dolls. And for modern young girls, infant dolls asking for maternal nurture are not the only toy figures populating their imaginaries—other toys; a teddy bear, a robot or a green, one-eyed monster represent imaginary playmates and play parts in childish fantasies. As Flanagan notes, toys and "games of women and girls"

such as dolls are an under-appreciated play form in game studies, their relatively unconsidered and subordinate stature in comparison to other games and sports likely stemming from their connection to the “non-public,” feminine, domestic sphere (31).

Yet unlike the subversive scenes described in Flanagan’s chapter dedicated to dolls entitled “Playing House,” KiSS dolls are seldom contextualized within the everyday, domestic stage of family and home. Like modern paper dolls, KiSS doll figures are divorced from any background scene whatsoever. Drawn against blank white or framed within a sparsely defined backdrop, KiSS dolls float in a liminal, other-worldly void, an empty digital page that invites adult, multi-gender doll play.

4. THEORIZING LIBERATING PLAY

My analysis of unfolding games of remixable doll identities, of not only playing with dolls of variable genders but also role playing as other animals, monsters, robots, and quasi-human beings, will require a detour into philosophical and political territory. I hope the reader will bear with the scope of the first chapter analysis of light, mutable doll play, as I launch this exploration of ludic mutation and ludic power from a wide satellite view of this chapter’s games, introducing concepts from the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt that will provide both a constructive framework and a critical contrast to transformative play in later chapters. Retracing Arendt’s steps, I hope to illuminate a separated play sphere of free unfolding actions, and to describe the conditions that give rise to such pockets of online free play. In so doing, I will stretch Arendt’s notion of freeing aesthetic political actions to encompass games, taking my own liberties with her categorical distinctions, including disregarding Arendt’s dismissal of play and “hobbies” like art as trivialized, leisure pursuits of the Industrial Age (128). Viewed through a more muted lense, the digital doll game

phenomenon can certainly be dismissed as an escapist hobby, as superficial, anonymous experimentation in a safe, virtual “closet.” Yet no matter how passing, ephemeral and limited the occurrence of such games, and no matter how frivolous (and possibly very gay), even in contrast to other computer games, I will argue that unfolding games are evocative registers of liberating, transformative play.

At the end of her foundational treatise on politics and philosophy, *the Human Condition*, Arendt empties politics of material economic “necessity” and social pressures, clearing the way for her aesthetic and agonistic “Space of Appearance,” a liberating public space of collaborative, aesthetic “words and deeds,” suggestively drawn from ancient Greek politics and culture (199). Although the Space of Appearance is not defined with detailed action examples in the *Human Condition*, Arendt suggests it is space not only for political discussions but also for poetry, tales, drama, and agon—for contests and competitions—if so then why not also a space for unfolding games? I propose that a public online platform, an unfolding game available on the Internet, approximates a liberating Space of Appearance. Games can be performative, public “agoras,” public plazas for open-ended identity play and disclosive tales of self, or in Arendt’s more philosophical terms, a space for the unfurling of “the who” (179). Such an analysis of libratory play is distinct in methodology from socio-demographic studies where games are approached as communal containers of “the what,” fixed common qualities of player belonging, for instance a study of twenty-five year old, male North American Military First Person Shooter games, or of forty-year old Korean housewives’ shopping games.

5. LUDIC MUTATION VS. LUDIC STASIS

A liberating divide shields between virtual and non-virtual; an “alternate universe” is available to the anonymous user on the computer screen where theoretically his or her “real world” identity and behavioral routines can be left behind. Likewise, a gap divides between game and not-game, the border at the periphery of the game and the rest of the world, the fence dividing the playground from the school and the city, the play-time separated from work or study time. Dutch ludologist Johan Huizinga referred to this separated play sphere as the “magic circle of play” (10). Within the magic circle of play, as in the liminal celebration of the carnival, players are free to experiment with becoming others (Turner 24). Alternate rules are in effect, contrasting to the routine norms of everyday life.

Yet such free transformative play is not readily performed in all games. Player turfs have coalesced into genres, such as military shooter games, Tolkienesque role playing games, and real-time battle strategy games. In many games, play follows a rigid script, and ludic stasis is as likely to occur as ludic mutation. With ludic stasis, the emphasis of the ludic is on rule-bound rather than open-ended play.² Contrasting to the open-ended, atelic variability and lightness of KiSS doll play, is the much more restricted role playing of fantasy game characters in the “Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Game” (hereafter referred to as a MMORPG). I invoke the MMORPG genre, an escapist fantasy genre that is often assumed to be liberating, so as to draw a more vivid distinction between what I argue is ultimately a fairly constricted form gameplay in comparison to the mutable, unfolding play of KiSS.

In a game like Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* (2004), a player accumulates virtual “loot” (gold and treasures) through exploration and contests, and uses this currency to improve upon and augment his or her game character’s magical powers and weaponry. Economist Edward Castronova distills the upward-bound, competitive economic formula of such role playing games into a few sentences: “Define a series of *roles* (such as “scout”) for players to assume and use game mechanics (a set of options and consequences) and AI to get

people into them. Establish an *advancement system* to reward certain behaviours (treasures in the cave that allow you to buy better armour). Generate *status inequality* so that rewards matter (most villagers don't have treasure)" (107).

MMORPG games are fiercely hierarchical and players advance through levels. Players occupy tiered positions within their "guilds" (teams), and the guilds are also ranked in comparison to other guilds in the overall game world. Players meet with other guild members at pre-scheduled playing hours, much as an employee is expected to appear at work for certain hours. And like at a real life job, MMORPG players can be "fired" from a guild if their teamwork and player kills against opposing factions and creatures are insufficient. Albeit occurring in Elvin and other fantasy settings, the rewards and punishments of such games mirror the specialized activities and set advancement channels of a modern career. Even more so, they offer the seductive security of a more ordered, play-by-rules progression lacking in an outside of the game career.

In the MMORPG game form, in contrast to KiSS, reputation becomes so important over the years invested in leveling up one game character, that the player loses the liberating opportunity for anonymous identity experimentation with their avatar. For instance, although a male office worker still escapes the supervision of his parent, wife, or boss in "real life" while role playing as a powerful female elven mage, ultimately there is little escape from the worldly pressures replicated in the virtual society of the game world, the pressure from other players on the elven mage character to conform to in-game behavioural norms and from demands to contribute to the game world's extensive in-game economy. As Castronova writes, advocating the "social benefits" of the genre, "MMORPG advancement systems are especially suited to restoring meaning to our activities, because they place our struggles in a context marked by the presence of other people" (112). Yet over time, this intensified, artificially engineered social and economic significance becomes a weight to bear for players,

even sometimes negatively impacting outside the game relationships and work. In contrast to the open-endedness of KiSS play, the economic and social pressures replicated in these massively populated game worlds diminish the available space for unfolding, weightless, anonymous play.

6. THE CONTAGION OF THE DOMESTIC

What is fenced outside the space of free play from a game like KiSS but still infuses the MMORPG type games just described? Arendt's liberating barrier surrounding her Space of Appearance blocks out the "actions of necessity," the economically motivated actions of labour and work which are in her analysis closely bound to the demands and hierarchical roles of the private domestic sphere, at least historically. Arendt's critical approach to the domestic sphere of necessity, and her identification of a transferral of family functions from the household to the modern state and to the national economy, has been more recently taken up in biopolitical critique. One could—perhaps erroneously—imagine that the *Human Condition* was written with a female philosopher's sensitivity to the toils and the vital economic relevance of the domestic—even as Arendt's appropriation of an Aristotelean liberating partition between public and private continues to garner both feminist and Marxist criticism for excluding material and domestic concerns from politics.

The uniqueness of Arendt's analytical trajectory comes to light if we indulge in a brief contrast of Arendt's liberating divide to Jean Baudrillard's oft-cited, dissolved border between public and private. In the *Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard's critique of post-modern information saturation laments a breach of the private sphere. The advertising slogans and communication media of "InfoCapital" enter the home through the glare of the television screen, and an invasive communications apparatus illuminates what was previously

hidden behind “the scene and the mirror,” revealing the private, charmed and “secret” (25). Although the inhabitants of Baudrillard’s once private domesticity of a bygone era remain shadowy (are they mother, father, brother, servants, masters, mistresses?), Baudrillard’s writing is imbued with a nostalgia for a domestic privacy, a longing for comforting repose from the blinding “obscene” light of communication (21).

Writing thirty years earlier, Arendt likewise sketched a broken periphery between the public and the private, yet in contrast to Baudrillard, Arendt’s vector of infection originates from within the private, not from without via modern communications technology (34). Arendt approaches the private domestic scene with a decided lack of romanticism. In her chapter on the private and the public spheres she identifies a specifically “French” enchantment with the private sphere that could apply to Baudrillard’s mood of domestic nostalgia: “Since the decay of their once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the art of being happy among “small things,” within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot” (52).

For Arendt, the household is not what has been invaded but is the original site of contagion, the “oikia” of Pater Familis, of women and of slaves in classic Greek antiquity (33). Over time, the household’s repetitive domestic “natural” rhythms of upkeep, cleaning, eating, reproduction, human survival, and the household economy’s attendant controlled subdivisions of labour, infiltrate what was once a freer, political arena. Over the course of Western history, household business becomes a public managed matter (from feudal household oikia to national economy), and mercantilism pervades the political demos (28). In modernity, states begin to concern themselves with “housekeeping,” nations attempt to act as families, and household managerial logic evolves into an alienating teleocratic “mass society,” as invasive of both the public and private spheres as the blinding glare of Baudrillard's Infocapital. In other words, in contrast to Baudrillard’s longing for a lost

domestic tranquillity, in Arendt analysis, the household of antiquity itself is the origin of a pervasive social control.

7. BACKWARDS TO THE AESTHETIC SPACE OF APPEARANCE

Arendt's account of the public/private border transgression moves hopefully backwards, so that ultimately she vacates politics of "necessity," clearing the way for her agonistic aesthetic political action sphere. The negative critical phase of her project is her Heideggerian deconstruction (Abbau) of "the *vita activa*," the life of action, travelling back through Marx, Nietzsche, Kant, St. Augustine, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others (Villa 114). She underscores an inordinate bias for the still "contemplative life," both in classical philosophy and later in Christianity, over action (14). The tradition of Western philosophy relegates all that is necessary to an inferior realm of action; the mercantile, cycles of tedious labour and upkeep, and the work of *Homo Faber*, man the maker of "artificial worlds" (136). Having abandoned the life of action, including politics, to makers and workers, Arendt proposes that philosophy is powerless to defend against the rampant instrumentalism of the social; against modernity, bureaucracy and the state's incursions. Yet the life of collective *action* could be otherwise, and thus the suggestive contours of Arendt's aesthetic space of appearance, a space of action—not philosophical contemplation, intended for actions that are neither work actions, nor labouring domestic actions.

Thus after Arendt's negative deconstruction of politics and philosophy, the very lack of positive specificity to her emptied Space of Appearance can be read as an invitation. What is aesthetic open-ended political aesthetic action that is neither work nor labour? These "disclosive tales of the who" could be the unfolding actions of a game (182). Digital dolls and their creators loosen their moorings to identifiable subjects and bodies, to predetermined

barristers of value, and to fixed endings. Released from gravity, players and digital doll makers do not know whom ultimately they will reveal through their unfolding actions and ephemeral, collage-like remakings.

The doll game is shielded from the older offline world of roles and domestic duties—parents, spouses, children and co-workers are generally not whom one engages in anonymous erotic play with on the Internet. The doll games are also insulated from colonizations by online and offline capital and governance—unlike commercial games, KiSS games are not managed by a computer game company—the doll software is costless and designed by players. Unbound from the earthly weight of flesh, digital doll bodies transition between sexual and cultural stereotypes, furry, pawed and antennaed, girlish and manlike, exercising a greater range of transformational freedom than their non-virtual creators are free to exhibit in the workplace, the home, the school, and related social settings.

8. GENDER, IDENTITY PLAY, AND THE ACTIVE DISCLOSURE OF THE WHO

A theorization of transformative, unfolding play also owes a debt to Judith Butler's groundbreaking work on performative gender and identity formation. Butler famously recast gender as a verb, as an active process, rather than a noun or an attribute (33). Gendering is continuously performed through iterative role play, in negotiation with and against the "binary matrices" of gender norms (23). Butler's notion of gender is not predetermined by culture, religion, biology or society at birth. Gendering requires persistent regulation and relearning, repeated lessons, re-enactments, subversions and negotiations between many forces. She writes "*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing, that cannot rightfully said to originate or end" (43). Gender norms have a tendency to impose "regulatory fictions" that naturalize gender as an originary substance of being (44). When subjects act

outside of these naturalized gender norms, (unless they manage to overturn them), their failure to conform to categorical distinctions is construed as monstrous and queer. In *Gender Trouble*, identity takes shape through early acts of gendering.

What is the link between Butler and Arendt? What does gender and identity construction, Butler's theory that evolved from Michel Foucault's juridical investigation of subjection and subjectivity, have to do with Arendt's "disclosure of the who" (Butler 4)? Both Butler and Arendt stress action over normative markers and substances, (the what). For instance, Butler invokes Nietzsche's contention that there is no being behind doing, that the doer is a fiction added to the deed (Butler 33). The who in Arendt's Space of Appearance is also revealed (disclosed) through his actions, his deeds—he does not have an "identity" prior to action (Arendt 179). While both Arendt and Butler argue that identity emerges through an active process rather than existing as a prior essence, Butler's work more directly addresses the back and forth workings between actions and in Arendt's terms, society's pre-existing "rules" for identity and behaviour, what Butler refers to as "regulatory fictions" (Arendt 40; Butler 44).

Butler questions, "What kind of practice of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?" implying that repetition, a tool used in the repeated, performative re-enactment of identity, might also be applied subversively to undo gender-identity regulation (42). We can propose the unfolding game as one possible answer to Butler's question—a repetitious yet at the same time, subversive unravelling of identity unleashed through play. Proceeding in a modular, chain-like, additive fashion, a copy of a KiSS doll body is replicated to each frame of a doll set, and yet this body also mutates in syncopation along with accessories and clothes over the ten standard frames of the viewer.

Prolific dollmaker Glyndon's cross-dressing, gothic, trans-sexual "X" doll is a clear example of such transformative *ludic mutation*, of unfolding gender play. X starts off as a woman in frame set zero but acquires a phallus in frame set one and loses his breasts in frame set two. X's gracefully drawn leather lace and leather garb retrofits to whatever body the doll happens to be wearing. The repetition of doll bodies in conjunction with variations, transform the doll's identity over the frames of the doll set. Some KiSS dolls address other axes, like that of human to animal, in addition to Butler's gendering. Blurring the distinction between human and animal, Kim Galvas' "Furry doll" cycles through outfits, growing or losing a tail, whiskers, and other parts. Normative distinctions and regulatory fictions are unfolded in such games, and the who is unveiled through play.



Fig. 4. X Doll by Glyndon; 1999. KiSS Game Screenshot.

In the ludic Space of Appearance, mutable characters are constructed and remixed with an interstitial subtlety developed over hours of play. In an ethnography of play based on the early online, text-based, role playing game *LamdaMoo* (1990), self-labelled heterosexual Julian Dibbell confesses to a delightful "gauzy" sensation induced by online cross-gender

play, describing a cultivation of a taste for “nothing quite so much as for that of thoroughgoing entanglement itself” (121). In a chapter titled “Samantha Among Others”, Dibbell documents his own learning curve in what we might call ludic mutation, beginning with the construction (in words) of his first cross-gender character, an exaggeratedly feminine, cartoon-like, uncomplicated “Samantha” character, whom he eventually tires of playing. His chapter culminates in the disassembly and remixing of increasingly sophisticated, interstitial game characters, who evolve in relation to other players’ characters and inspire further ongoing, erotic role play interactions. He writes, “They were playing harder now, inventing new characters and trying out old ones on each other. Niacin was no longer Lisbet only, but sometimes also Giustina, or the virile, bay-rum-scented Ishmael, or the lean old traveller Wattson; exu might be Emory or Xango or the sea-goddess Iemanja or even, on occasion, exu herself, whatever that was” (Dibbell 141).

Like a masked ball, a ludic online Space of Appearance is a liminal, threshold realm of role play that at its most refined, remixes the stereotypical into unexpected and unique recombinations. Reflecting on recombinant play, Turner writes: “it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free or “ludic” recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality, of liminality *par excellence*” (28). Experienced ludic mutators stretch, remix and mutate identity oppositions and categorical distinctions into new poles for further interstitiality.

9. COLLABORATION AND PLURATITY IN AN ONLINE SPACE OF APPEARANCE

In a *collaborative* unfolding game, each piece created by a different player adds up to a dissonant whole. Like the sequential chain of creative play moves of the Surrealists’ Exquisite Corpse game played around a cafe table (yet with more of time lapse between each move), in a KiSS doll Jam set like the “David Project,” each artist takes a turn to draw a

frame of the set, upon completion emailing the doll to the next artist. The “King in Yellow” (allegedly a woman) orchestrated the David Project, inviting seven female-identifying artists to each contribute a different outfit for a doll figure of Michelangelo’s David sculpture. In the resulting doll, David at turns wears a computer-geek Tee-shirt, fishnet stockings, disco bellbottoms, and green lederhosen, resulting in a teasing “dollification” of a renowned, art historical figure.

Obsessions, hobbies and predilections that have induced players to participate in the arena of KiSS include an interest in drawing, in fashion, in Japanese Anime style artwork and characters, in eroticized “Furry” human-animal hybrids, in gender exploration, in drag and trans-gendering, and the desire to strip fetishized doll bodies. A player’s gender, age, occupation, and origins map to profiles such as Canadian female college student of Asian immigrant origin, New York cyberartist, middle-aged German male information technology worker, adamantly heterosexual Italian male programmer, and gothic Spanish drag queen.

Yet my project is not to systematically profile KiSS doll players, their desires and proclivities and their humorous and/or erotic virtual doll creations or avatars. I would prefer for these players to remain in the shadows behind their dolls, their unfixed anonymity a source for further experiments in doll ontology. I list these brief profiles in order to underscore the diversity of the KiSS “community.” The open, free to make, play and share protocol of the game itself is the primary commonality that binds KiSS players together, evident in the “free to play” logo pasted onto the frames of many dolls. The players of these games are potential players of each other’s dolls and potential collaborators, sharing access to Internet protocols that facilitate exchange and interaction, such as passing a game by email to volunteering participants of a collaborative doll set.

Such a collaborative, communal platform that is theoretically open to erotic diversity can veer into a dystopia, when players are luridly misogynist or create disturbingly childlike, pornographic dolls. Both shielding and dangerous, an anonymous virtual space of encounter is an invitation to the shy and the sexually curious to enter performative online agoras. Insulated from the more weighty consequences of flesh to flesh encounters, digital play is immune to physical rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and the normative pressure of biologically-based gender roles and cultural scripts invoked during live encounters. KiSS players often invented email addresses to obfuscate any trails leading back to their official identities, operating under the liberating anonymity of the pseudonym. This virtual freedom, within which the spectre of the child molester lurks, is also the terrain where women can more safely engage in erotic playfulness.

10. THE SENSUAL PLEASURE OF THE DIVIDE

A player loses track of nature's movement of the sun and moon, mesmerized before the screen, her metabolism slowed in a trance, and she only leaves the computer at routine intervals to take a so-called "biobreak" to attend to bodily needs. A divide, the wall consisting of keyboard and screen, separates the player's multiple doll avatars from her static, solitary seated biology. Isolated in the flesh, alone in the bedroom or cubicle, she finds other player's avatars and digital dolls online. Transgender media theorist and one time gamemaker Sandy Stone triangulates the both binding and freeing effects of the virtual in relation to bodies and selves, suggesting that both liberties and new constrictions are afforded with different technologies: "One way to read the history of technology is as a series of complexifications, knots and loosening of the bonds and tensions between bodies and selves" (Stone 86).

Serial transcendentalists, ludic mutators acquire a taste for queer, digital polymorphous sensuality while cycling through multiple characters in an online unfolding game. Pixelated rain explodes orgasmically on the screen as the player's cursor strokes fetishized digital doll limbs, overlaid with onscreen hot spots that trigger moaning "oohs" in Marco's Italian "Godella" KiSS doll. Dibbel's *Lamdadoo* players indulge in virtual "TinySex," adeptly communicating one-handedly through textual chat. The player inhabits the screen world, his organic bioware hard-wired to the channels of sight, sound, and the touch of keyboard and mouse. Even if the computer game player can be said to be suffering from a state of digitally narrowed, sensual poverty, the divide between virtual and non-virtual affords its own alien, erotic pleasures.

The transcendent divide between a virtual imaginary screen world and a fleshy corporal substrate does have its side-effects. Continental philosophy pathologizes the metaphysical traditions of the West, the doublings and abstractions from Plato, through Christianity, the Enlightenment and onwards to the ethereal planes of the Information Age. Philosophers from Husserl to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty to Agamben, call for a return to unalienated, existential presence, for immanence in the here and now of the embodied world. Arendt inhabits this tradition, yet here we have transposed her Space of Appearance to a digital arena of virtual screen bodies, albeit following her emphasis on fluid language and action, as well as remaining true to her endorsement of the liberatory effect of a temporary escape from the "world of necessity."

11. BEYOND THE DOLLHOUSE

Although retaining the dressing-up action of paper dolls associated with feminine interests like fashion, digital doll play breaks free from the behaviors and roles of the domestic setting of necessity, from the economic behaviors and the social strictures of the *oikia*. Similar to the

freedom afforded by the pseudonym or the carnival mask, players are liberated by the partitions between both screen and world and between game and not-game. This emptiness, these gaps at the perimeters of the unfolding game, prevent the intrusion of normative linkages between worlds, opening a space for experimentation with “the who.” The light-weight actions of identity and gender play follow the chain-like, additive protocols of the unfolding game, each implementation of the mutable doll game arriving at a different ending.

Despite their departure from the “femininity” of domestic doll play, a visible contingent of KiSS doll makers are women, (or identified as such), and were active on a public platform facilitating a rare blossoming of female-fabricated erotic art and pornography. They shared a “Space of Appearance” with a diverse plurality of varied genders and orientations. “Free to play” was the only truly common protocol shared among these players, who converged in short-lived, constellations of collaborative play, later returning to their behind-the-screen lives.

Not all computer role play games are as hospitable to unfolding gender and identity play as KiSS. Recent game metrics discourage the rapid construction and shifting between characters Dibbell described in his ethnography of the early role playing game of *LamdaMOO*. The danger of artificially reengineering the vital economic structures and social pressures of the oikia in a virtual game world is the loss of a public forum for unfolding tales of the who. As Castronova writes: “it would be a shame if something were to happen at this early stage—say a regulation that no one can use an avatar with a gender different from that of their Earth body” (171). Such binding identificatory regulations are already occasionally enforced for profile photographs on the social software website Facebook, an online social diary forecast as the next frontier of computer gaming (Wagner).

Are unfolding games destined to surface only as a short-lived, avant-garde, generative toy of the Surrealists, and later as a queer, edgy digital folk-art experiment of the early 1990’s

Internet, (rough and amateurish, crude and frivolous KiSS dolls)? Or are unfolding games early instances of an evolving play culture of “the Creative Commons,” a ready template for other player-made, remixable toys to come?³ Attempts at forecasting media trends and judgements of artistic quality aside, the KiSS practice remains as evocative evidence of free and weightless ludic mutation.

Notes

¹ And although designed and played just over a decade earlier than the time of this writing, KiSS dolls have already become a relic of media archaeology, viewable only on outdated computer operating systems.

² Although generally I will employ “ludic” throughout this writing to encompass both chaotic (paidiaic) and rule-bound play (Callois 28).

³ The Creative Commons is an online archive of free digital images, sounds, text, software and other items.