

The Politics of Imagination: Virtual Regulation and the Ethics of Affect in Japan

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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of Philosophy in the Department of  
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

In the past decade, responding to the scourge of child pornography, countries around the world have passed legislation that erases the distinction between actual and virtual forms. One result is that comics, cartoons and computer/console games featuring “underage” characters engaged in explicit sex are now against the law. Even as scholars draw attention to a subtle but troubling shift from protecting children to stopping imaginary sexual violence, such laws have passed without much debate in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. A notable exception is Japan, which maintains a legal distinction between actual and virtual and allows for explicit depictions of sex and violence involving “underage” characters in comics, cartoons and computer/console games. If a line has been drawn in the battle against child pornography, then, for many, Japan is on the wrong side. On the other hand, there are people in Japan drawing their own lines: Artists drawing the lines of cartoon images and sex scenes, people lined up to buy their work, lines that are drawn and crossed when producing and consuming such images. Following these lines, this dissertation explores the contours of an emergent politics of imagination in Japan and beyond. Most especially, this dissertation is focused on the line between the virtual and actual, which is drawn and negotiated everyday by Japanese men and women producing and consuming images of sex, violence and crime. These men and women insist on the distinction between actual and virtual, fiction and reality, and in so doing draw a line. This line is not always clear and clean, which is precisely why it is insisted upon and maintained through collective activity and practice. Opposed to virtual regulation by the state, fans of comics, cartoons and computer/console games in Japan speak of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters, and an ethics of *moe*, or proper conduct of fans of fictional characters. What

this means in practice is that they insist on the drawn lines of fictional characters and on drawing a line between fictional characters and real people. In the ethics of *moe*, proper conduct is to keep fictional characters separate and distinct from real people, even as fictional characters are real on their own terms and affect individually and socially. The contrast between these men and women in Japan and much of the world, however inadvertent, is political: It points to other ways of understanding imaginary sex, violence and crimes, and other ways of living with fictional and real others. To get at the lines of this politics of imagination, this dissertation focuses on *bishōjo* games. “*Bishōjo*” means “cute girl,” and it refers to characters that appear in Japanese comics, cartoons and computer/console games. *Bishōjo* games are a genre of adult computer games that allow the player to interact casually, romantically and sexually with cute girl characters. The dissertation draws on 17 months of intensive fieldwork in Akihabara, a neighborhood in Tokyo where *bishōjo* game producers, retailers and players come together and share affective responses to fictional characters.

## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 Imagining Japan and Sex in Crisis .....	5
1.2 The Politics of Imagination.....	16
1.3 The Ethics of Affect and Chapters.....	23
1.4 Toward an Anthropology of Imagination.....	30
2. Imaginary Sex and Crime: A Brief History of Virtual Regulation in Japan.....	42
2.1 A Crisis of Hegemony and Reproduction.....	47
2.2 “The Otaku Panic” .....	52
2.3 Bishōjo Games and “Virtual Reality” .....	57
2.4 Media Effects: Otaku and “the Two-Dimensional” .....	64
2.5 Media Affects: Otaku and “Moe” .....	70
2.6 Imagined Perversion in Japan.....	77
2.7 Conclusion .....	84
3. Akihabara: “The <i>Moe</i> City;” or, Imaginary Sex in Public.....	89
3.1 A Space of Imagination.....	91
3.2 “Japan Only:” On Closed Circulation.....	98
3.3 Coming of Age in Akihabara .....	104
3.4 Dangerously Moving Images.....	113
3.5 Imaginary Sex in Public .....	121
3.6 A Warning from the West .....	132
3.7 Conclusion .....	137
4. Moving Images: “ <i>Moe</i> Characters;” or, Affection by Design.....	139
4.1 Playing Bishōjo Games.....	143

4.2 Characters and Stories Designed to Move .....	146
4.3 The Role of Imagination in Bishōjo Games .....	156
4.4 The Ethical Encounter in Bishōjo Games .....	161
4.5 Conclusion .....	174
5. The Ethics of Affect: Drawing Lines with <i>Bishōjo</i> Game Producers and Players.....	178
5.1 Drawing a Line Between Fiction and Reality .....	183
5.2 Interacting with Fiction and Reality .....	190
5.3 Drawing Lines with Others.....	204
5.4 The Ethics of Moe in Akihabara .....	212
5.5 Conclusion .....	223
6. <i>Hajikon</i> : Bodily Encounters and Dangerous Games.....	225
6.1 Adults' Day at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace.....	230
6.2 From Kawasaki to Akihabara: Fictional and Real Women.....	237
6.3 Pillow Talk: Interactions with Bishōjo in Material Form .....	242
6.4 "Failed Men" Living in Precarious Japan .....	251
6.5 Conclusion .....	264
7. A World that's Ending: Do You Love Me?.....	269
7.1 Take Care of Yourself.....	269
7.2 The End: Death and Rebirth.....	276
7.3 The Beast that Shouted "I/Love" at the Heart of the World.....	285
References.....	287
Biography .....	309

# 1. Introduction

In 2014, the global market for electronic gaming was estimated to be US\$67.2 billion. That year, the bestselling game in the United States, the largest market, was *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (Activision, 2014) (Fiscal Times 2014). Classed as a “AAA game,” which have the biggest budgets and most resources behind them, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* is the equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster. In fact, it features Kevin Spacey as the antagonist, who is a digital recreation of the Hollywood heavyweight that he also voices. Making use of near photo-realistic graphics, real-time rendering and cinematic cutscenes, the game looks and feels like a film. As a game, however, it allows the player to take control of the action and fight through military warzones of the future. Separate from the single-player campaign, multiple players can connect over the Internet to fight with and against one another. *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* is part of a genre called first-person shooters, where players move through virtual spaces and shoot enemies from a first-person perspective. First-person shooters are the most popular genre of game in the United States, which reflects the increasing influence of the “military-entertainment complex” (Lenoir 2000; also Stahl 2010). Sure enough, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* sold 17.59 million units in 2014. That year, the Mizuho Group estimated that first-person shooters made up 21.2 percent of the market in the United States, second only to action games (22.3 percent) (Mizuho 2014: 140). In contrast, in Japan, first-person shooters made up only 1.1 percent of the market (Mizuho 2014: 140), making them the least popular genre. Far more widespread are roleplaying games (23.9 percent), which tend to emphasize story and character, and “fantasy” (*fantajī-sei*) as opposed to “reality” (*riaru-sei*) (Mizuho 2014: 140). In pointing out divergence between Japan and the United States, the Mizuho Group also laments that much of the content in Japan is produced for domestic niches. While electronic gaming is increasingly

mainstream among adults in the United States, “adult game” (*adaruto gēmu*) means something entirely different in Japan. Developing alongside Japanese computers in the 1980s, adult games focus on simulated romance and sex and are “a niche market” (*nicchi shijō*) (Mizuho 2014: 117-118). Globally, Japanese adult games stand out as different, even strange.

In 2014, the top three bestselling adult games in Japan were *A Generation Charging Ahead* (Sakigake jenerēshon, Clochette, 2014),<sup>1</sup> *When Love Blossoms, Cherry Blossom Time* (Koi ga saku koro sakura doki, Palette, 2014)<sup>2</sup> and *La Dea of the Balance: Goddess of War Memori* (Tenbin no La Dea: Ikusa megami Memori, Eushully, 2014)<sup>3</sup> (Haya no Sorane 2015). *Generation* is the story of Shūho, who founded a club at his school that allows him to play games with his younger sister and best friend after class. A mysterious transfer student introduces them to a game called “Wizard Generation,” which turns out to be a virtual reality game. As they become immersed in this world, and others join them, something strange is happening in the real world. *Blossoms* is the story of Yūma, a student who listens to the problems of girls in love and gives them advice. While this has made him very popular, the stories have soured Yūma to the idea of love. One day, a mysterious girl appears. Claiming to be a fairy, she asks Yūma if he would like to fall in love, which she cannot. The story follows this unlikely relationship and its impact. *La Dea* is the story of Celica Sylphil, a man who obtains the body of a goddess of war by slaying her, which results in his being hunted by gods and men alike. After defeating a dragon and losing most of his power, Celica goes on a mission to solve the mystery of a missing princess. *Generation*, *Blossoms* and *Le Dea* are very different games, but they also have much in common. All three are played on personal

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<sup>1</sup> See: <<http://clochette-soft.jp/sakigake/>>.

<sup>2</sup> See: <<http://palette.clearrave.co.jp/product/sakusaku/>>.

<sup>3</sup> See: <<http://www.eukleia.co.jp/eushully/eu015.html>>.

computers. None allow for free movement in open worlds; they are single-player games focused on stories, which advance linearly. All three share a game mechanic whereby the player, from a first-person perspective, interacts with female characters by looking at still images of them, reading text appearing in a box below the image and making choices that impact characters, relationships and the story. All three include sex scenes, which the player may or may not reach, depending on choices. Because of these sex scenes, purchase of these games is restricted to players over age 18. The female characters in all three games share a similar aesthetic: They have round faces, small noses and mouths, massive eyes, colorful hair and striking costumes. All look distinctly like the characters of manga and anime, or Japanese comics and cartoons, respectively. That is, they diverge from realism in an aesthetic known for its “non-photorealism” (Minotti 2016).<sup>4</sup> Female characters are so central to adult games such as these that they are often called *bishōjo* games, or “cute girl” games. What connects *Generation*, *Blossoms* and *La Dea* is a focus on *bishōjo* characters and interactions with them. *Generation*, *Blossoms* and *La Dea* were celebrated as the best of the year because they were effective at moving players interacting with *bishōjo* characters. Indeed, *Generation* won a “Moe Award,” or an award celebrating *moe*, an affective response to fictional characters.

The image is of a Japanese man who appears to be in his twenties or thirties. His hair is thick and black, long and loose. He wears black-framed glasses, an oversized black hooded sweatshirt, black pants and black shoes. A large black bag is slung over his shoulder. The man is gazing intently at shelves of adult games at a store in Akihabara, a neighborhood in eastern Tokyo where stores selling manga, anime and computer/console games cluster together. Everywhere there are images of *bishōjo*, or

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<sup>4</sup> This quote comes from Inafune Keiji, best known as the creator of the character Mega Man. The context is a response to how different his games look beside American offerings: “One of the charms of Japanese game development is pursuing that kind of non-photorealism. A lot of that comes from gaming’s ancestry in anime and manga” (Minotti 2016).

cute girl characters, whose cartoony faces and massive eyes stare back at the man. Some of the characters are in various states of undress; many wear uniforms visually similar to those worn by Japanese in junior and senior high school. Below the image are the words “Japan’s child porn problem” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). Are these images of children? The manga/ anime aesthetic does make cute girl characters appear young, and many in *bishōjo* games are indicated to be below the age of 18 – some, yes, children. This does not stop the depiction of explicit sex involving them. As the article accompanying the image explains, Japan, in contrast to countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, maintains a legal distinction between “virtual” and “actual” child pornography and bans only the latter. A very narrow definition of obscenity, which focuses on genital exposure, means that artists can simply blur or erase genitals and then place characters in all manner of sexual situations and couplings. Insofar as no crime is committed in the production of the image – that is, no minor is involved and no one is coerced – and genitals are not obscenely exposed, adult manga, anime and computer/ console games of the most disturbing kind are sold alongside hit releases such as *Generation*, *Blossoms* and *La Dea*, which often also depict sex with underage characters. Do these images engender perverse, pedophilic and predatory desires? Do they put young women and children at risk? “It has not been scientifically validated that it even indirectly causes damage,” a Japanese politician responds. “Since it hasn’t been validated, punishing people who view it would go too far” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). Confronted with men in Akihabara buying *bishōjo* games, the author of the article still has questions. In 2014, stores like the one in the photograph “stock a profuse amount of video games where the objective is to sexually subjugate underage girls” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). Why is such material not banned? The man browsing through it looks shady at best. Why is he not on a watchlist? It must be a cultural thing. Imagined to be

overflowing with such material and men, Japan is described as “the Empire of Child Pornography” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). The same image of this man buying *bishōjo* games would appear with articles the following year, when the United Nations sent an envoy to Japan to ask that nation to do more to protect its children (Daily Mail 2015). There are increasingly fewer children in Japan (Kuwayama 2016; also Allison 2013), and sex crimes involving them are statistically low (Ishikawa et al 2012: 308; also Diamond and Uchiyama 1999), but what do the numbers not tell us? Certainly something is going on here. One can only imagine.

### ***1.1 Imagining Japan and Sex in Crisis***

This dissertation is about the politics of imagination in Japan, where imaginary sex, violence and crime are part of a robust market of comics, cartoons and computer/console games and are more visible than anywhere else in the world (Schodt 1996: 50-53). (For a more detailed statement on the topic of the dissertation, see the next section.) As manga translator and historian Frederik L. Schodt noted in the early 1980s, Japan seems to have a high “tolerance of fantasy” (Schodt 1983: 137). Writing of that same decade, anthropologist Anne Allison argues that consumption of imaginary sex, violence and crime in Japan played a part in keeping people productive at school and work (Allison [1996] 2000: 32-33). But the heady days of the 1980s, when the economy expanded into an incredible bubble and social institutions seemed integrated and unassailable, are long gone. Since a catastrophic economic crisis in the early 1990s, Japan has limped through recession and recovery. Declining even as China and other Asian neighbors rise, Japan has become an indebted nation with bad credit (Ujikane 2015). Underemployment has made starting a family difficult. Marriage is increasingly less common, and birthrates are lower than ever. The fertility rate is down to 1.43 per woman, well below the required 2.07 to reproduce the population, which is projected to

shrink by a third by 2060; there were only 1.001 million births in 2014, the lowest figure on record (Guardian 2015). Social disintegration and disease seem rampant; stories circulate about people living and dying alone, shut away from the world, depressed and suicidal (Allison 2013). People seem to be turning away from one another, too: Only half the population between the ages of 16 and 49 is reportedly having sex (Baer 2015). And those that are having sex seem to be doing it wrong – for example, having sex with cartoon characters (Rani 2013).

Against this backdrop of crisis, young people are taking on new political significance. Formerly unproblematic, imaginary sex, violence and crime in comics, cartoons and computer / console games is now seen as a threat to the healthy development of youth and the future of Japan. Before leaving office, in December 2010, populist Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shin'tarō revised the Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths. The original proposed revision aimed to protect “nonexistent youth” (*hijitsuzai seishōnen*), but what ultimately passed was a zoning scheme that would push certain forms of comics, cartoons and computer / console games deemed “harmful” (*yūgai*) out of the reach of young people. Although abandoned amid mass criticism, “nonexistent youth” is a provocative turn of phrase. Even as the declining birthrate threatens to make youth a nonexistent population in Japan, the government turns to regulating sex and crime involving nonexistent youth. While seemingly unrelated, these concerns converge in contemporary Japan. Ishihara's revision of the ordinance was to ensure the healthy development of young people, which is based on the assumption that media consumption can lead to unhealthy development and desires (a concern seen beyond Japan and the present moment [Wertham (1954) 2004]). Comics, cartoons and computer / console games, critics worry, will warp youth and spread warped desires for youth. Media can warp the minds of

young people and turn them into perverts; they can also make young people into the targets of perverts with warped minds. Either way, the situation is, according to Ishihara, “abnormal” (*abunōmaru*).<sup>5</sup> Either way, Japan must act to protect youth who are potentially perverted or targeted, which is to say nonexistent youth – youth that do not yet exist, but might exist as future perverts, criminals and victims. And so the government attempts to stamp out what feminist critic and comics scholar Fujimoto Yukari calls “nonexistent sex crimes” (quoted in Kanemitsu 2010), which become real sex crimes under new and revised laws.

While debate about imaginary sex, violence and crime really took off in Japan in the wake of economic and social instability in the 1990s (Kinsella 2000, chapter four; Allison 2006, chapter three; Leheny 2006, chapter two), it has been building in other parts of the world since the late 1970s. It was at this time that concerns about children led to campaigns against sexual abuse and pornography and laws in North America, Europe and beyond (Adler 2001: 211-212, 218, 221; also Ost 2009, chapter four). More important than the specifics of these laws was the direction they broadly pointed. In a public dialogue in France in 1978, philosopher Michel Foucault explained:

[T]he legislator will not justify the measures that he is proposing by saying the universal decency of mankind must be defended. What he will say is there are people for whom others’ sexuality may become a permanent danger. In this category, of course, are children, who may find themselves at the mercy of an adult sexuality that is alien to them and may well be harmful to them. Hence there is a legislation that appeals to this notion of the vulnerable population, a “high-risk population.” (Foucault 1988: 276)

An issue for Foucault is how sexuality becomes a risk to be managed, or what he calls a “roaming danger” or “omnipresent phantom” (Foucault 1988: 281). Managing the risk of

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<sup>5</sup> Ishihara said this at a press conference on December 17, 2010. The transcript has been removed from the Metropolitan Government’s website, but is still available at: <[http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumi-s\\_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280](http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumi-s_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280)>. See also: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2edE4kd0O1w>>.

sexuality has consequences. As philosopher Guy Hocquenghem, one of Foucault's interlocutors in the public dialogue in 1978, puts it:

What we are doing is constructing an entirely new type of criminal, a criminal so inconceivably horrible that his crime goes beyond any explanation, any victim. [...] In the case of *attentat sans violence*, the offense in which the police have been unable to find anything, nothing at all, in that case, the criminal is simply a criminal because he is a criminal, because he has those tastes. [...] In a way the movement feeds upon itself. The crime vanishes, nobody is concerned any longer to know whether in fact a crime was committed or not, whether someone has been hurt or not. No one is even concerned any more whether there was actually a victim. The crime feeds totally upon itself in a manhunt, by the identification, the isolation of the category of individuals regarded as pedophiles. (Foucault 1988: 278)

In North America, writing in the aftermath of what she called "the child porn panic" in the late 1970s, anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin developed a theory of sexual politics (Rubin 2011: 142). Sex "is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others" (Rubin 2011: 180). Put simply, sex is organized into "good" and "bad" forms, with the latter tied in many ways to risk and danger, so it is not surprising that "eroticism [that] transgresses generational boundaries [... is] the lowliest of all" (Rubin 2011: 149). As Rubin points out, "For over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children. The current wave of erotic terror has reached its deepest in those areas bordered in some way, if only symbolically, by the sexuality of the young" (Rubin 2011: 141). Rubin argues that, "some sex acts are considered to be so intrinsically vile that no one should be allowed under any circumstances to perform them" (Rubin 2011: 162), but it also turns out that no one should be allowed to imagine them. Even if no crime is committed in imagining, it might "lead to crimes and should therefore be prevented" (Rubin 2011: 165). If this is "victimless crime," then victims are imagined and created. "They draw on the pre-existing discursive structure which invents victims in order to justify treating 'vices' as crimes," Rubin writes. "Even when

activity is acknowledged to be harmless, it may be banned because it is alleged to 'lead' to something ostensibly worse (another manifestation of the domino theory). Great and mighty edifices have been built on the basis of such phantasms" (Rubin 2011: 168-169). In managing the risk of sexuality, "police, media, and public hysteria have targeted strangers and weirdos [...] real and imagined" (Rubin 2011: 185). Even as victims are imagined and created, so too are criminals, and all are caught up in regimes of policing imaginary sex, violence and crime.

What Foucault, Rubin and others – notably cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who identified in the United Kingdom the dynamics of "preemptive policing" of "potential criminals" in relation to "potential victims" (Hall et al 1978: 20, 42, 46) – drew attention to in the late 1970s has only become more pronounced in recent years. In the United Kingdom, media and sexuality scholars Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith argue that many lawmakers operate with the assumption that "arousal – particularly sexual arousal – is potentially risky," and that such risk should "be managed through legislation" (Attwood and Smith 2010: 187). The identification of risky sexuality, Attwood and Smith continue, "enables accusations or identification of possible 'harm' to translate into calls for more and more legislation against the imagination" (Attwood and Smith 2010: 187). As Foucault suggested, it is potential sexual arousal in relation to children that is considered to be the riskiest and is thus most subject to legislation, even when, as sexuality scholar Mark McLelland points out in the context of contemporary Australia, the sex in question involves "*fantasy alone*" (McLelland 2005a: 75). Even as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia take legal stances against sexual depictions of underage cartoon characters (see overview in McLelland 2013), this is not a case of panicked lawmakers "losing the capacity to understand the distinction between fantasy and reality" (Furedi 2015: 9). Rather, fantasy is being translated into reality by law (Hall

et al 1978: 42). Encounters with certain media, critics worry, will lead to the realization of potential victims and criminals (Attwood and Smith 2010: 185-187; also Mazzarella 2013). Aiming to reduce encounters with certain media, the law translates fantasy into reality. Erasing the distinction between “virtual” and “actual” forms of child pornography (McLelland 2005a: 63-64; Ost 2009: 89; Strikwerda 2012: 135), for example, makes certain comics, cartoons and computer/console games equivalent to photographic records of child abuse.<sup>6</sup> The cartoon character is translated into a child, the consumer into a child abuser and production and consumption into crimes punishable by law.

While arrests and prosecutions for pornographic comics and cartoons featuring underage characters have occurred in an increasing number of countries, including the United States (Anime News Network 2010; also Kipnis 1996, chapter one),<sup>7</sup> Japan has continued to legally allow for such imaginary sex, violence and crime. A national movement against “harmful” manga led to better labeling and zoning in the 1990s, but no concessions on content, which reflects a fierce ethos of free expression. A high-profile obscenity case involving adult manga, which went all the way to the Supreme Court of

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<sup>6</sup> While a distinction used to be made between “actual” and “virtual” child pornography based on whether or not the image was of a real person and thus a record of a crime where a child was harmed (McLelland 2005a: 63-64), the tendency now is to collapse together actual and virtual forms in child pornography laws. Writing in the United Kingdom, legal scholar Suzanne Ost explains: “Contemporary child pornography law is not limiting itself towards the main harm of visual depictions that exploit real children, but is now directed towards exploitation of the non-existent child, possible future harm that could be caused to other children, and non-exploitative relationships involving sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. It would seem that the original legislative purpose of preventing the exploitation of real children has gradually metamorphosed into a more all-encompassing construction of harm. Any behaviour related to child pornography, whether real, potential, remote or virtual, is thought to give rise to a risk of ‘harm’” (Ost 2009: 89). One can certainly see this regulatory move in Japan in the discussion of “harmful publications” and “nonexistent youth.” For some, there need not even be any harm to virtual child pornography, because “it offends at bare thought” (Strikwerda 2012: 135).

<sup>7</sup> As early as the 1990s, cultural critic Laura Kipnis drew attention to a prosecution in the United States where the “victim” was “a fictional, nonexistent child” and where a man was sentenced to 35 years in prison for sexual fantasies about “a crime that never happened” (Kipnis 1996: 4, 12). This case was cause for Kipnis to ask, “What kind of a society sends its citizens to prison for their fantasies?” (Kipnis 1996: 3). While the question was no doubt a rhetorical one, the answer has since become clear: the United States of America does, as do countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia (Anime News Network 2010; Thompson 2012; Lightfoot 2014).

Japan in 2007, found the producers guilty and banned the work, but on the grounds of genital exposure, not its depiction of violent sex involving underage characters (Cather 2012: 232, 257-258).<sup>8</sup> In 2010, Tokyo Governor Ishihara encountered mass resistance for attempting to more strictly zone “harmful” media, although much of the content in question has already been banned in other countries without debate (McLelland 2011: 351; also Johnson 2006: 392). As recently as 2014, when Japan made possession of child pornography illegal, legislators notably did not include even the most extreme comics, cartoons and computer/console games in the definition of child pornography (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). Debates about “harmful” media have been going on for decades in Japan, but recent conclusions are out of synch with a growing global consensus – building since the 1970s – that protection of children as a population is an unquestionable good and anything that even potentially puts them at risk should be banned.

The response to Japan’s supposed backwardness and recalcitrance on the issue of protecting children has been uniform condemnation, up to and including statements by the United Nations envoy in 2015 (Daily Mail 2015). Even as the Internet and the proliferation of channels has accelerated the flow of media and increased the ease of access globally, concerns about youth being perverted by images they encounter or targeted by perverts have intensified in North America, Europe and beyond (McLelland 2005a: 61; see also boyd 2014, chapter four). Clearly resonating with Foucault’s roaming danger and omnipresent phantom of sexuality, child abuse has become “an omnipresent threat that preys on our imagination” (Furedi 2015: 8). Seemingly everywhere and impossible to locate, it has achieved “a phantasmic status” (Lumby 1998: 47-48). In the

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<sup>8</sup> While judges did cite global norms against child pornography on the Internet (Cather 2012: 268-271), this was not particularly germane to the trial, which was about a print publication circulated in Japan. At stake in the trial was the healthy development of youth and youth as potential victims and criminals in Japan.

present moment, sociologist Frank Furedi writes, it is imagined that “all adults pose a potential risk to children” (Furedi 2015: 10), but the fear is displaced on dangerous and phantasmic others – perverts, pedophiles, predators. Even as manga and anime circulate globally – through official channels, but also rogue flows underpinned by mass digital piracy online (Leonard 2005; also Condry 2013, chapter six) – the world has become more familiar with adult comics, cartoons and computer/console games from Japan, including sexual depictions of underage characters. In the process, Japan has come to be an imagined source of perverse and perverting images (Schodt 1996: 54-55, 336-340; Eiland 2009: 400-401; Hinton 2014: 56, 65), which locates the deviant other outside and over there, even as he sneaks inside and over here to outraged response.<sup>9</sup>

Hyperbolic descriptions of Japan as “the Empire of Child Pornography” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014) suggest the nation’s imagined transgression. Fictional or real, in allowing images of “eroticism [that] transgresses generational boundaries” (Rubin 2011: 149), Japan has violated a taboo. Imagined as somehow too powerful to be looked upon, images take on a life of their own and seem capable of violating bodies and minds. The taboo image must be banned, and the people protected from it, which is achieved by law. “Far from being defanged in the modern era,” art historian W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “images are one of the last bastions of magical thinking and therefore one of the most difficult things to regulate with laws and rationally constructed policies

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<sup>9</sup> In the United Kingdom, researcher Perry R. Hinton notes the prevalence of media suggesting “Japan as a source of danger, with certain Japanese harbouring the ‘Lolita complex virus’ – which presumably makes them ‘ill’ – and that Westerners need to be protected from this ‘virus’ if it is not going to infect them too. By implication, censorship is simply a ‘medical’ protection to maintain Western ‘good health’” (Hinton 2014: 56). Sure enough, laws in the United Kingdom erasing the distinction between virtual and actual forms are at least in part a response to concerns about Japanese comics, cartoons and computer/console games (Eiland 2009: 400). The idea that manga/anime and Japan contain a “Lolita virus” that is spreading is not unique to the United Kingdom (for example, in the United States, see Schodt 1996: 54-55, 336-340). The treatment of regulating comics and cartoons as a matter of public health also has a deep history (for example, in the United States, see Wertham [1954] 2004: 334-336), but Hinton helpfully shows how this becomes nationalized, Orientalistic discourse in the current moment. Currently, Japan has become “a dangerous (potentially pedophilic) ‘other’ to be censored and avoided” (Hinton 2014: 65).

– so difficult, in fact, that the law seems to become infected by magical thinking as well, and behaves more like an irrational set of taboos than a set of well-reasoned regulations” (Mitchell 2005: 128). The situation is one of what Mitchell calls “iconophobia,” or fear of images, and “iconoclasm,” or destruction of images (Mitchell 2005: 93, 126). However innocuous they may at first appear, images must be read for their potential to attract and affect sex criminals (Adler 2001: 256-264). Critics then rally against these images. So it is that we return to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and find in its “*imaginative pedophilia*” (Wells 2015) the hints to an American sickness, or a Japanese sickness, when *Lolita* is translated into “the Japanese Lolita complex” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 6). So it is that activists suggest refusing to translate media from Japan that might contribute to the spread of harmful images (Norma 2015: 85-86). So it is that images of manga/anime characters – especially cute girl characters – come to suggest for Japanese activists a form of “subliminal child porn” (Kumi 2016), a position that is translated into English as proof that some in Japan are reasonable enough to stand against these images.<sup>10</sup> And so it is that laws against offending and taboo images are passed, even without evidence of harm. Global flows of images, or what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls “mediascapes” (Appadurai 1996: 35-36), are increasingly in conflict with “juridiscapes” (Coombe 1998: 39, 43), or laws meant to control global flows.<sup>11</sup>

The effect of all this on Japan has been complex. International pressure has emboldened activists and conservative politicians, who seek to regulate imaginary sex, violence and crime for their own reasons. The concerns of many Japanese activists are aligned with those of critics from abroad, who agree that consumption of comics,

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<sup>10</sup> Certainly there is a “blurring of lines around childhood sexuality” (Wells 2015), and not least of which the line between actual and virtual, person and character, fiction and flesh.

<sup>11</sup> As anthropologist Rosemary J. Coombe puts it, “Cultural flows are regulated, imagined, managed, and contested” (Coombe 1998: 39). It is precisely this imagining and contesting of cultural flows that I want to bring attention to here.

cartoons and computer/console games potentially leads to sexual abuse and crime and so should be more strictly regulated (for example, Nakasatomi [2009] 2013). For Japanese politicians such as Tokyo Governor Ishihara, who in most cases opposes capitulating to foreign pressure, the growing international consensus about virtual child pornography bolsters his own position that something needs to be done to ensure the healthy development of youth and the future of Japan, which is being undermined by the perverting influence of “harmful” media (for example, McLelland 2011). Both of these strands of criticism come together in appealing to the norm, whether a global norm or an end to the “abnormal” situation in Japan. Both agree that certain forms of comics, cartoons and computer/console games in Japan are harmful and should be more strictly regulated, if not banned outright. This insistence that certain images are harmful and should be legally restricted is an example of what anthropologist Rosemary J. Coombe calls “juridical resolutions of meaning,” or “the role of law in limiting or denying ambiguity” and “consolidating power by stabilizing meaning” (Coombe 1998: 45; also 64). Once the cartoon image is defined as “virtual child pornography,” meaning is resolved. It is harmful and criminal, which is the growing international consensus.

There are many in Japan, however, who refuse the norm and appeals to it (Allison 2013; Nakamura 2013), including cartoon fans who refuse the juridical resolution that there is no difference between virtual and actual forms and live with the ambiguity of imaginary sex, violence and crime.<sup>12</sup> These cartoon fans are seen by many in Japan as failing to live normal lives, but rather than lamenting the loss of the norm or

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<sup>12</sup> For example, while many struggle to suggest ways to increase marriage and birth rates, lure immigrants and investment and grow the economy and military, feminist academic and activist Ueno Chizuko took the occasion of Foundation Day in 2017 to make a radical statement about accepting decline (*Chūnichi Shimbun* 2017). This was also a radical refusal of a normative sexuality that would return men and women to “normal” relations with one another. While Ueno does not have the kindest things to say about cartoon fans oriented toward cute girl characters, who may as well “peacefully go extinct while jerking off to adult computer games and not committing sex crimes” (Editors 2006: 434), one can see in them a similar refusal. To be fair, Ueno noted this about cartoon fans in Japan decades ago, even as she suggested that criticism of them as abnormal was a problematic assertion of the norm (Ueno 1989: 136).

demanding a return to it, they move and live on. What cartoon fans in Japan are doing is part of the phenomenon of refusal, which has been noted in other parts of the world. Anthropologist Carole McGranahan, for example, writes that, “Refusal marks the point of a limit having been reached: *we refuse to continue on this way*” (McGranahan 2016: 320). Such refusals, McGranahan argues, are generative and political, because refusing one world is also the willful choosing of another, which generates “both political alternatives and ethical critiques” (McGranahan 2016: 323). And one can see this in cartoon fans in Japan, who anthropologist Ian Condry’s suggests are refusing normative sexuality, which contributes to “the emergence of alternative social worlds” (Condry 2013: 203). This refusal generates political alternatives and ethical critiques, not least of which alternatives to, and critiques of, making the imaginary sex of these cartoon fans illegal.

If, as McGranahan suggests, “Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities” (McGranahan 2016: 319), then this is also true of the refusal of cartoon fans in contemporary Japan. In his work on virtual intimacies, anthropologist Shaka McGlotten draws attention to criticism of forms of intimacy perceived to be “less real than others” or somehow “dangerous,” but also argues that discourse about the imagined failures of such intimacy obscures “the labors, perverse and otherwise, that animatedly rework categories of intimacy” (McGlotten 2013: 12). “Failure is not an extinction of the possible, not a dead end,” McGlotten writes. “Instead, failure frames the possible in negative terms without actually erasing all possibilities. [...] In this way, the commonsensical antipathy toward public sex, sexual hypocrisy, or virtual sex works to foreclose the possibilities for queer and other alternative intimacies to take form” (McGlotten 2013: 37, 38). Examples discussed by McGlotten include sex between players as characters in games and meetups between players offline (McGlotten 2013: 56-60), but we might also

consider virtual intimacies with characters in games. Norms are perverted here – for example, “marrying” cute girl characters (Condry 2013, chapter seven; for comparison, see Freeman 2002) – even as alternative norms of queer life are developed (Warner 2000: 35). The most notable of these is drawing a line between fiction and reality and orienting oneself toward the drawn lines of the fictional character. This is a refusal of collapsing the two together, even as it is a norm of relations with fiction as such. What are the limits and possibilities? What are the political alternatives and ethical critiques? Beyond a discourse of normal or abnormal, legal or illegal, right or wrong is a messy reality of cartoon fans in contemporary Japan, which challenges us to think about the politics of imagination.

## **1.2 The Politics of Imagination**

This dissertation approaches the politics of imagination as a phenomenon of drawing lines. It builds on the groundwork laid by Rubin in her work on the politics of sex, which are extended to the politics of imagination. The connection is already there in Rubin, who draws attention to the “imaginary line between good and bad sex” (Rubin 2011: 151). If the line is imaginary, then it makes sense that it be drawn in the imaginary.<sup>13</sup> The drawing of this line is part of imagining sexual others, deviants and criminals, which is a matter of politics.<sup>14</sup> Historians have noted the phenomenon of

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<sup>13</sup> Another source is Michel Foucault, who suggests that deviant sexuality has since the mode of confession involved the imagination. He writes: “One has to be completely taken in by this internal ruse of confession in order to attribute a fundamental role to censorship, to taboos regarding speaking and thinking. [...] It is not longer a question simply of saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 60, 63). Indeed, the act itself is no longer necessary, as religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock understands: “whoever looks at a woman with lust in his heart is guilty of adultery in his heart. [...] Thus] a fantasy of adultery is just as sinful as the real thing” (Laycock 2015: 217; see also Kagami 2010: 265-267). Not only are there “moral consequences to what we imagine,” but also legal ones. Hence it is not only Christians, but also governments that call on us “to destroy imaginations” (Laycock 2015: 217).

<sup>14</sup> For her part, Rubin speculates that anitporn politics “will create new problems, new forms of legal and social abuse, and new modes of persecution. A responsible and progressive political movement has no business pursuing strategies that will result in witch hunts” (Rubin 2011: 273). On this point, looking at sex

“policing the imagination” (Laqueur 2003: 19; also Kam 2013a; Laycock 2015), but this is taking on a much more literal, and legal, sense.<sup>15</sup> The present moment is marked by “juridification of the imagination” (McLelland 2012: 473), or expansion and densification of law surrounding the imagination, especially as it relates to imaginary sex, violence and crime.<sup>16</sup> States pass legislation and draw lines that make certain forms of imagination illegal, which is meant to keep bodies and populations in line. Lines are drawn to protect populations of potential victims from potential criminals, and concern is greatest where power relations are most unequal, so the line is drawn between not only adults and children, not only between men and women, but especially between male adults and female children (Foucault 1988). The concern grows when the adult male is associated with bad sex and perversion, the other to good sex and the norm (Rubin 2011). And the line is drawn between countries such as Japan associated with bad sex and perversion and countries such as the United States associated with good sex and the norm (Said 1979). To protect at-risk populations, it becomes easy to draw a line against the threatening other, and to pass laws that translate potential victims and criminals from “fantasy into reality” (Hall et al 1978: 42). Journalists, activists and academics are also involved in drawing lines as part of the politics of imagination.

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laws, psychologist Miodrag Popovic wonders if “an oppressive approach to managing people’s sexual fantasies [...] will do more harm than good,” because, “More adults are likely to be harmed by oppressive agencies than by free sexual fantasies” (Popovic 2007: 255, 262). Chief among Popovic’s concerns is the creation of sex offenders, which is part of a politics of social control.

<sup>15</sup> Historian Thomas W. Laqueur uses this turn of phrase when writing about the cultural history of masturbation, which intersects with concerns about the dangers of imagination (Laqueur 2003: 245, 248-249). While religion plays a major role in Laqueur’s analysis of policing the imagination, it is clearly not the only concern about the “dangers of the imagination” and a “deranged mobilization of the imagination” (Laqueur 2003: 210, 217; see also Laycock 2015: 27, 215-233, 240; Kam 2013a: 52-59). Laqueur ends his book on a hopeful note that the days of outrage over masturbation and unmastered imagination are over (Laqueur 2003: 419), but my research suggests that his conclusion might be a bit premature.

<sup>16</sup> Following the late Jock Young, originator of the notion of moral panic, I suggest that we need to pay more attention to the imaginative dimensions of crime (Young 2011).

On the other hand, there are people in Japan drawing their own lines: Artists drawing the lines of cartoon characters and sex scenes, people lined up to buy their work, lines that are drawn and crossed when producing and consuming such images. Of the many lines that it considers, this dissertation is especially interested in the line between the fictional and real, or “cute girl characters” and “real girls and women,” which is drawn in action and everyday practice by Japanese men and women producing and consuming imaginary sex, violence and crime.<sup>17</sup> In everyday practice, manga/anime fans in Japan draw a line between fiction and reality, even as the law in some parts of the world would not recognize that line. When it comes to imaginary sex, violence and crime involving underage characters, lawmakers around the world increasingly seem to agree that there is no difference between fiction and reality, but manga/anime fans in Japan refuse that conflation. This is a challenge to juridical resolution of meaning, as well as critical resolution of meaning. Hence while Christine R. Yano, an anthropologist focusing on media and material culture in Japan, argues that, “The real or fictive nature of the sex-child image matters less than her public circulation as symbolic dream girl,” which reflects “heteronormative pedophilia” (Yano 2013: 49), the distinction between the real and the fictive matters a great deal to many manga/anime fans in Japan. They insist on it, and in so doing draw a line between fiction and reality and orient themselves toward the drawn lines of fictional characters. (More on this in the next section.) For the most part, manga/anime fans do not see imaginary sex with fictional characters, even when they are cute girl characters indicated to be children, to be reflections of

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<sup>17</sup> In his work on fans of Japanese comics and animation in North America, science and technology studies scholar Lawrence Eng points out how crossing lines in consumption and play can lead to “nuanced and alternative positions on social issues” (Eng 2012: 100). More specifically, “American anime [Japanese animation] fans have engaged in numerous debates regarding the ethical and legal implications of anime and manga [Japanese comic books] depicting minors in sexual situations. Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, the viewpoints expressed by otaku [anime and manga fans] in some of these debates have been surprisingly diverse, well stated, and cognizant of the complexities surrounding the issue” (Eng 2012: 103). This dissertation expands on Eng’s discussion by examining the complexity of positions on precisely the “ethical and legal implications” of “depicting minors in sexual situations.”

pedophilia; they do not call for increased regulation of these images, which are part of their everyday lives. The contrast between manga/ anime fans in Japan and concerned lawmakers and citizens in much of the world, what anthropologist Gabriella Coleman might call an “inadvertent politics of contrast” (Coleman 2004: 513), is stark. The contrast, however inadvertent, is political. It points to other ways of understanding imaginary sex, violence and crimes, and other ways of living with fictional and real others.

In exploring the politics of imagination in contemporary Japan, this dissertation focuses on *bishōjo* games. “*Bishōjo*” means “cute girl,” and it refers to characters that appear in comics, cartoons and computer/ console games in Japan. *Bishōjo* games are a genre of adult games that allow the player to interact casually, romantically and sexually with cute girl characters. These games tend to be low-tech: A series of still images appear onscreen with scrolling text below them; the text contains periodic prompted choices for the player, and these choices impact relationships with the characters and the overall story. *Bishōjo* games are a medium of imagination: On the one hand, they focus on interactions with fictional characters, who in their cartoony cuteness are clearly distinct from reality; on the other hand, staring at still images of these characters, the player imagines movement based on onscreen text and accompanying sounds, most importantly voices. *Bishōjo* games “require the player to use his (or her) imagination” (Taylor 2007: 194). Imaginative participation moves the image, which in turn moves the player. This affective response to fictional characters is called *moe*, which is part of the broader culture of manga and anime and carries over into *bishōjo* games featuring manga/ anime-style characters. *Bishōjo* games are subdivided into two major categories: romance games (*ren'ai gēmu*), sometimes called “dating simulators” outside Japan, and erotic games (*ero gēmu*), sometimes called “hentai games” outside of Japan. The most

popular *bishōjo* games tend to be romance games, which usually also contain sex scenes, and games that focus entirely on eroticism can feature extreme sex scenes. *Bishōjo* games are labeled “R-18,” or restricted to players over the age of 18, and part of niche market that is separate from mainstream Japanese offerings such as *Super Mario Bros*, *Final Fantasy* and *Pokemon*. The majority of *bishōjo* games sell only 1,000 to 2,000 copies (Kagami 2010: 136). Outmoded mechanics and marketing have alienated younger players; much like the population of Japan, the population of *bishōjo* game players is graying and shrinking. The overall market is in decline (Yano 2014: 2), with some estimating a decrease in value from over 50 billion yen in the early 2000s to 19.1 billion yen in 2014 (Sakakibara 2016).

*Bishōjo* games are described online as “a uniquely Japanese phenomenon” with “virtually no equivalent in the Western video game industries” (Wikipedia 2015). Bracketing for a moment the fantasy of “a uniquely Japanese phenomenon” in contrast to “the West,” *bishōjo* games have been a stubbornly local phenomenon: In 2014, software was still primarily sold on disks in material packages on display in brick-and-mortar stores that cluster together, most famously in Tokyo’s Akihabara neighborhood. *Bishōjo* games have developed quite differently from the three-dimensional graphics, realism, cinematic cutscenes, open worlds and multiplayer and networked online games of North America. While *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997) might come to mind as an example of an adult game that some find problematic in North America (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: 175, 186), in Japan it is *Saori: The House of Bishōjo* (Saori: *Bishōjo-tachi no yakata*, Fairytale, 1991). At the same time, Akihabara looms large in the global imagination, and content circulating in the neighborhood soon circulates around the world. Piracy, namely fan translation and online distribution, have contributed to the spread of *bishōjo* games, and production companies are increasingly working with

fans to tap into new markets amid domestic decline. Outraged discovery of particularly violent *bishōjo* games featuring underage characters has inspired critics to speak about the “perversion” and “social illness that’s embedded in Japanese society” (Alexander 2009), even as activists demand that “the Japanese government ban all games that promote and simulate sexual violence” (Lah 2010).<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, governments around the world respond to *bishōjo* games crossing national and moral lines by imagining “a global regulatory future” (Game Politics 2009). All of this resonates with conservatives in Japan, who want to regulate this content for their own reasons, namely that it represents and contributes to unhealthy, abnormal or bad sex.<sup>19</sup>

In its approach to the politics of imagination, this dissertation adopts philosopher Benedict de Spinoza’s understanding of imagination as a general capacity of representing external bodies as present, whether they are actually present or not (Spinoza 2005: 46), but it departs from his position that imagination is distorted and incomplete.<sup>20</sup> Helpful here is a re-reading of Spinoza by political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:

The imagination for Spinoza does not create illusion but is a real material force. It is an open field of possibility on which we recognize what is common between one body and another, one idea and another, and the resulting common notions are the building blocks of reason and tools for the constant project of increasing our powers to think and act. But the imagination for Spinoza is always excessive, going beyond the bounds of existing knowledge and thought, presenting the possibility for transformation and liberation. (Hardt and Negri 2009: 99)

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<sup>18</sup> These types of games from Japan are entered into the growing forensic database of evidence of a culture of sexism and sexual violence in gaming, which was coming to a head in “Gamergate” while I was in the field. For an overview, see Galbraith, forthcoming.

<sup>19</sup> The sex in *bishōjo* games is “bad” in that it is “nonprocreative,” “commercial,” “alone or in groups,” “cross-generational,” “in public,” “pornographic” and “with manufactured objects” (Warner 2000: 25-26; Rubin 2011: 148-154).

<sup>20</sup> While there are many ways to approach imagination, which is the topic of much academic discussion that takes it in different directions (for example, in psychoanalysis), I use it in Spinoza’s sense, which is reflected in popular definitions. For example, one dictionary defines imagination as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality” (Merriam-Webster 2017). This is related to “creative ability,” the “ability to confront and deal with a problem” and “the thinking or active mind” (Merriam-Webster 2017). Interestingly enough, the connection between imagination and creation carries over into Japanese for imagination (*sōzō*).

From this, I take the following three points about the imagination: One, the imagination is an open field of possibility on which we recognize relations between fictional and real bodies; two, this is part of a project of increasing the power to think and act; and three, the imagination presents the possibility of going beyond existing knowledge and transforming it (also Graeber 2004). As work on gaming shows, play in imaginative worlds can lead to changes in ways of seeing and being in the world (Laycock 2015). Play in imaginative worlds, which involves interacting with fictional and real others, can lead to changes in ways of seeing and being with fictional and real others. For those concerned about imaginary sex, violence and crime, this shift in ways of seeing and being puts others at risk, because players might lose their “ability to discern fantasy from reality” (Laycock 2015: 5). On the contrary, however, players might come to better understand the difference between fiction and reality and their relations with them. They might imagine relations between bodies that are transformative and allow for increasing the power to think and act with fictional and real others. Controlling the open field of possibility is one side of the politics of imagination, and the other is cultivating “the power of the imagination” (Hardt and Negri 2009: 99).

Among *bishōjo* game producers and players, imagination is tied to creation. The Japanese term for imagination, *sōzō*, is also a homonym for creation, so to say “I imagine relations between bodies” in Japanese can also mean “I create relations between bodies;” “I imagine a world” can also mean “I create a world.” From imagining and creating relations between bodies in *bishōjo* game worlds and between fictional and real others in worlds beyond these games, producers and players are transforming ways of seeing and being.<sup>21</sup> If games are a “mental laboratory” (Laycock 2015: 203), then *bishōjo* games run

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<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, producers of *bishōjo* games are engaged in imagining and creating worlds. Unlike film, which captures impressions of objects in the world in front of a camera, *bishōjo* games are worlds created on computers out of nothing. Because the technological and monetary threshold for production is low in

experiments with imaginary sex, violence and crimes. If these fictional characters are at the center of “alternative social worlds” (Condry 2013: 203), then experiments with interacting with them in everyday lived reality are also being conducted. Contemporary Japan, where relationships with fictional characters are increasingly part of everyday life (Allison 2006: 14, 91, 201), might be considered a laboratory of the future (Pettman 2009: 189-191). It is a place where experiments with imagining and creating relations with fictional and real others are playing out.

### **1.3 The Ethics of Affect and Chapters**

As part of its approach to the politics of imagination as a phenomenon of drawing lines, this dissertation explores the ethics of affect. Ethics is often taken to mean rules of proper conduct, principles that govern a person’s or group’s conduct and/or a philosophy that recommends concepts of right and wrong conduct (Deigh 2010: 7). However, work in the anthropology of ethics (for more on “the ethical turn” [Fassin 2014: 430], see Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2013; Lambek et al 2015),<sup>22</sup> specifically that of Michael Lambek and Veena Das, suggests that ethics is not an abstract set of rules, but rather is embedded in action and everyday practice (Lambek 2010a: 2-3; Lambek 2010b: 39-40; Das 2010: 376-378).<sup>23</sup> Lambek especially has drawn attention to the ethics of action,

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comparison to mainstream games, marginalized creators find voice (Galbraith 2014: 81, 100-101, 111). In this way, as game scholar Ito Kenji suggests, minor forms of computer gaming can challenge dominant social ideology (Ito 2007: 138; also Kijima 2012: 159). In these imagined and created worlds, things can diverge from the “real world,” which can be another form of a “politics of contrast” (Coleman 2004: 513; also Shigematsu 1999: 128). Imaginary sex raises questions about what sex is and could and should be. On the other hand, players of *bishōjo* games are also engaged in “world-building” (Laycock 2015: 15), which occurs during imaginative play.

<sup>22</sup> Also reflected in the massive presence of ethics in the March 2017 issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. See: <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jrai.2017.23.issue-1/issuetoc>>.

<sup>23</sup> In an orienting statement, Lambek writes: “Where is the ethical located? I shall argue that it is intrinsic to action. I look at action in two related ways – as specific acts (performance) and ongoing judgment (practice) – and show that ethics is a function of each. Criteria for practical judgment are established and acknowledged in performative acts, while acts emerge from a stream of practice. [...] If practice is rendered possible and meaningful through performative acts, practice also inevitably reveals the inadequacy of such

which is judged in interaction. “It is precisely because practice is not mechanical, automatic, or fully determined that we have ethics. We must continuously exercise our judgment with respect to what we do or say. The criteria by which we do so are made relevant, brought into play, by means of performative acts” (Lambek 2015b: 129). Das adds to this an emphasis on “striving that in its uncertainty and its attention to the concrete specificity of the other is simply a dimension of everyday life” (Das 2010: 377). In its insistence on fieldwork and engagement with practice and everyday life, anthropology is ideally suited to get at these “ordinary ethics” (see also Day 2010; Dave 2010; Pigg 2012). This dissertation considers the ethics of the action and everyday practice of drawing lines, which comes from paying attention to the concrete specificity of the other, among *bishōjo* game producers and players in contemporary Japan.

Following Spinoza, affect, the second half of the ethics of affect, refers to a modification or variation produced in a body (including the mind) by an interaction with another body that increases or decreases the body’s power of activity (Spinoza 2005: 70). The body that affects can be an image or imaginary body (Hardt 1999: 96). As shorthand, this dissertation translates affect as moving, as in moving image, or an image that moves the one interacting with it to bodily response. At one level, then, the ethics of affect means living with what moves us. Again, moving images offer an example. As opposed to “an iconophobic imperative to regulate our desire for images” (Pizzino 2016: 48), Mitchell suggests that we “put our relation to the work into question, to make the

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acts and the limits of criteria and descriptions, especially their vulnerability to skepticism, and hence the need to start anew. Ethics, then, is not only about executing acts, establishing criteria, and practicing judgment, but also about confronting their limits, and ours” (Lambek 2010b: 39). Later, he elaborates: “It is not simply a matter of playing by rules, but, as Bourdieu puts it so well, of having a feel for the game, of simply doing the right or best thing under the circumstances” (Lambek 2010b: 55). This approach to ethics in some ways resonates that the work of feminist existentialist thinker Simone de Beauvoir, who writes that there is no transcendental right and wrong and humans must make choices, act and take responsibility (de Beauvoir 2015: 15, also 146-149).

*relationality* of image and beholder the field of investigation” (Mitchell 2005: 49). This “opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations” (Mitchell 2005: 34). An investigation of our relations with images – moving images, images that move us – might lead to insights into power and desire and contribute to the ethics of affect. The relationality of image and beholder, of fictional and real bodies, becomes the field of investigation. Along these lines, this dissertation examines the ethics of affect among *bishōjo* game producers and players in contemporary Japan. Like manga/ anime fans more generally, *bishōjo* game producers and players speak of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. Put somewhat differently, *moe* refers to a variation produced in a body by an interaction with the bodies of fictional characters. *Moe* is a well-discussed concept in Japan (for an introduction, see Galbraith 2009; Galbraith 2014), and it intersects with discussions of ethics among *bishōjo* game producers and players.

*Bishōjo* game producers and players, like manga/ anime fans in Japan, have developed an “ethics of *moe*” (*moe no rinri*), which might be thought of as rules of proper conduct of fictional and real bodies in relation to one another, but is better understood as the action and everyday practice of drawing a line between fictional characters and real people, orienting oneself toward the former and insisting on the drawn lines of fictional characters. The line between fiction and reality is not always clear and clean, which is precisely why it is insisted on in action and everyday practice. At stake here is how the line between fiction and reality, even as the two are brought together and the line blurs, matters in the ordinary ethics of *bishōjo* game producers and players. In action and everyday practice, the ethics of *moe* is to keep fictional characters separate and distinct from real people, even as fictional characters are real on their own terms and move those interacting with them to bodily response. In the face of affect, which is inherently unsettling – interaction changes the body – *bishōjo* game producers and players engage

in the ethical action and everyday practice of drawing and insisting on lines. In shared affective response to fictional characters, *moe* becomes social, as do the ethics of *moe*.

In this way, *bishōjo* game producers and players, like manga / anime fans in Japan, imagine and create alternatives to expanded state power over imaginary sex, violence and crime. Both *bishōjo*-oriented men and their critics recognize the powerful affect of moving images, and by taking them seriously, as anthropologist William Mazzarella does in his work with film censors in India (Mazzarella 2013: 2), we can observe the politics of imagination in both virtual regulation and the ethics of affect. This dissertation focuses on men not only because they are the majority of *bishōjo* game players – *otome* games, which center on interactions with male characters, specifically target women and are projected to soon be a larger market than *bishōjo* games (Yaraon 2013), deserve a separate research project – but also because the relation between men and cute girl characters is where sexual risk is most often imagined, calls for virtual regulation are most persistent and the ethics of affect are most defined.<sup>24</sup> This is where lines are most clearly and consistently drawn, which opens into questions about the politics of imagination in contemporary Japan and beyond.

Following from this introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 sketches the history of virtual regulation in Japan, which, despite a reputation for being sexually liberal, has long been concerned with “harmful” comics, cartoons and computer / console games and their impact on young people and society. This was especially the case in the 1990s, when Japan was experiencing a crisis of hegemony and reproduction, which led to increased scrutiny of youth, sexuality and media. At the same time as debates about the

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<sup>24</sup> Following from the work of anthropologist Paul Amar, I consider “*otaku*,” or manga and anime fans and gamers, a type of “hypervisible subject,” or “fetishized figures that preoccupy public discourse and representations but are not actually recognizable or legible as social formations and cannot speak on their own terms as autonomous subjects rather than as problems to solve” (Amar 2011: 40). These hypervisible subjects appear at times of crisis, and often intersect with discourses about a crisis of masculinity.

danger of confusing fiction and reality and harming others, fans of *bishōjo* characters were deliberately separating fiction and reality and orienting themselves toward the former. The clearest expression of this is *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters, and the emergence of this discourse in the 1990s reveals a growing awareness of the affect of media, an orientation toward fiction and shared affection and orientation. I argue that the discourse about *moe* among fans of manga, anime and computer / console games reflects emergent forms of media literacy and ethics. Akihabara, the center of the *bishōjo* gaming world and “the *Moe* City,” is the topic of Chapter 3. A space of imagination and dizzying blur of fictional and real worlds, *bishōjo* game producers and players gather in Akihabara and openly share their affection for cute girl characters. While many journalists, activists and politicians imagine *bishōjo* game producers and players to be dangerously open to the moving image and overwhelmed by media affect, my fieldwork in Akihabara suggests that producers and players recognize the powerful affect of *bishōjo* games and respond with an ethics of action and everyday practice. Approaching Akihabara as a public sex culture and space of informal peer learning, I follow others in launching a “principled defense of pornography, sex businesses, and sex outside the home” (Warner 2000: vii).

Going inside of production companies and drawing on interactions with the men and women who create *bishōjo* games, Chapter 4 discusses aspects of design. *Bishōjo* games pursue a cartoony aesthetic of unreality, but nevertheless affect players. This is in part possible because these games require, even demand, imaginary participation. The moving image involves not only the character – itself an assemblage of drawn image, voice and story – but also the input of the player interacting with it. The chapter demonstrates how the design of *bishōjo* games triggers complex and seemingly contradictory responses in players, and in so doing moves players to understanding

their capacity for violence. This in turn underpins an ethical position of facing ugly feelings and desires, working through them and acting with care. Drawing on fieldwork with *bishōjo* game producers and players, Chapter 5 focuses on what I came to know as the ethics of *moe*. Examples from the field demonstrate the ethics in the action and everyday practice of drawing a line between fiction and reality, orienting oneself toward the former and insisting on the drawn lines of fictional characters. Chapter 6 offers an in-depth account of *bishōjo* game raves where actual and virtual bodies, material and image, men and women come together in an affectively charged space. The primary focus is group performances of sex and violence involving material representations of *bishōjo* characters. Women are present at these raves, but *bishōjo* game players draw a line between them and cute girl characters, which they are oriented toward and insist on in action and practice. These networks of men and women support alternatives to the normative model of success in Japan, which has become toxic. If, as Condry states, *moe* leads to “the emergence of alternative social worlds” (Condry 2013: 203), then these worlds support the lives of *bishōjo* game players. For some, social interactions with fictional and real others are what keep them moving and living on. At stake here is what anthropologist Anna Tsing describes as pushing against the limits of life in ruins to find possibilities of “collaborative survival” (Tsing 2015: 20, 25), which are being imagined and created by *bishōjo* game producers and players in contemporary Japan. Concluding remarks appear in Chapter 7.

As a whole, the dissertation circles around three major points about ethics: one, there is an ethics to drawing lines between the fictional and real and orienting oneself toward the drawn lines of characters, which are moving images; two, there is an ethics to facing the violence of desire and one’s own capacity for violence, rather than denying it or projecting onto others; and three, there is an ethics to sharing desire, in all its

violence, because it is through interactions with fictional and real others that one learns to draw lines. While this dissertation comes out of a focused anthropological project in contemporary Japan, the ethics of *moe* raises questions of broader significance. Consider for example anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli's critique of "economies of abandonment" (Povinelli 2011), which begins and ends with Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). A thought experiment coming out of the United States in the 1970s, Le Guin's short story tells of Omelas, a shimmering city of happiness that is almost beyond imagination. This happiness, Le Guin writes, depends on a sacrifice: In Omelas, a filthy and miserable child is locked away in a broom closet. When they are old enough, all the people of Omelas are made aware of the existence of the child. They are shocked, but most come to terms with it and a few silently walk away from Omelas, although where they go is even further beyond imagination. In her read of Le Guin's story, Povinelli argues that, "the ethical imperative is to know that your own good life is already in her [= the child's] broom closet" (Povinelli 2011: 4). The ones who walk away from Omelas are refusing the city of happiness, which suggests political alternatives and ethical critique (Povinelli 2011: 188, 191; recall McGranahan 2016).

While it is all too easy to suggest that the ones who stay in Omelas are simply offering "facile excuses" (Povinelli 2011: 2), one might also imagine that they are living with the suffering child and struggling to act ethically. Indeed, Le Guin writes that knowing of the suffering child makes the people of Omelas far more caring toward children. The child is also part of social relations that "must, as of necessity, loop through her" (Povinelli 2011: 4). Existing in the same space and time, and the one that makes the present possible, she is never far away. What if instead of focusing on the "alternative social worlds" (Povinelli 2011: 5) of the ones who walk away we focused on

the ones who stay? What if the “alternative social worlds” (Condry 2013: 203) in question were not centered on a suffering child that is abandoned, but rather cartoon characters and affective relations with them? Relations of not just sympathy, but also care and cruelty, love and lust? What if these characters were not confined to the broom closet and relations with them spilled out into the streets? If relations with these characters were part of everyday life? Perhaps such a world is beyond imagination, but, as Le Guin coaches us, we can try. In refusing to accept the suffering of the child, but also refusing to walk away – as if Omelas could be left behind, could be someone else’s problem – alternative social worlds centered on cartoon characters can suggest political alternatives and ethical critique. Considering the concrete specificity of the other – child or cartoon character – and the striving in uncertainty of the ones who stay is considering the ordinary ethics of Omelas. To ask about the concrete specificity of the fictional and real other is also to refuse the parameters of Le Guin’s thought experiment, which is an imagining and creating of others.<sup>25</sup> This, too, is part of the politics of imagination, which opens up a space for considering the ethics of action and everyday practice.

#### **1.4 Toward an Anthropology of Imagination**

This dissertation is based on 17 months (April 2014 to August 2015) of fieldwork with *bishōjo* game producers and players in the Akihabara neighborhood of Tokyo, Japan.<sup>26</sup> In my fieldwork, I was involved in the politics of imagining and creating worlds with others, and I am involved again in writing this dissertation. Like most anthropologists, I am committed to thinking through experiences with others, which

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<sup>25</sup> Stated most starkly: “If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one.” See: <<http://engl210-deykute.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/omelas.pdf>>.

<sup>26</sup> This research was conducted with approval of the Institutional Review Board of Duke University (Protocol C0044).

leads to a kind of empiricism that anthropologist Danilyn Rutherford calls “kinky” (Rutherford 2012). This is an “empiricism that admits that one never gets to the bottom of things, yet also accepts and even celebrates the disavowals required of us given a world that forces us to act” (Rutherford 2012: 465). Such an empiricism is ethical, Rutherford argues, because its methods put anthropologists into relation with others and create obligations, which compel researchers to “put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe” (Rutherford 2012: 465). Although the kinky empiricist may never get to the bottom of things (see also Carr 2015: 274), Rutherford rightly points out that anthropologists are increasingly entering into “politically fraught arenas,” which “require us to write and speak authoritatively” (Rutherford 2012: 465). In matters of law, for example, anthropologists have trouble translating data gathered in fieldwork into authoritative statements, which can undermine informants’ claims and abandon them to the juridical fixing of meaning that wants simple answers to make decisions (Clifford 1988: 317-318, 321-322, 337). While anthropologists want to leave room for ambiguity, the law does not (Clifford 1988: 332), and the ethics that Rutherford is suggesting recognizes both demands. Translating from long-term and ongoing engagements with “open systems” (Fortun 2009: 169; also Marcus 2012)<sup>27</sup> to clear and concise statements is challenging, but, in politically fraught arenas, it has the potential to deeply impact the lives of the people anthropologists describe (also Fassin 2013: 635-639, 642-644; Clifford 1988: 289, 337-343).

In this dissertation, I try to convey the complexity that I encountered in the field, even as I am clear and concise in the presentation of the ethics of affect as I came to

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<sup>27</sup> While anthropologists once produced written ethnographies that seem to posit cultures and peoples as static and fixed, the tendency now is toward ongoing engagement with complex and dynamic “open systems,” which are “continually being reconstituted through the interaction of many scales, variables, and forces” (Fortun 2009: 169).

understand it. Relatively marginalized *bishōjo* games aside (Jones 2005; Taylor 2007; Azuma 2009; Galbraith 2011; Greenwood 2014), in the robust literature on manga and anime, there is a striking lack of voices from male fans in Japan. The lived realities of these men, or so-called “otaku,” are just assumed or taken for granted. For all the dwelling on underage sexuality in manga and anime in academic and activist circles and popular media, has anyone bothered to dwell with the men most associated with it in contemporary Japan? In the absence of such engagement, the field is open for ungrounded and undisciplined claims, which are repeated widely, loudly and often enough to be taken as fact, and go on to inform the decisions of lawmakers. When it comes to Japanese *bishōjo* game producers and players, who are being positioned as perverts, pedophiles and potential predators, the ethics of writing and speaking about others is all too obvious. Ways of seeing are in question, and at times it makes sense to refuse to present others in certain ways (McGranahan 2016: 319-320).<sup>28</sup> Speaking to laws that would fix meaning (Coombe 1998: 45, 64) and make *bishōjo* game producers and players into criminals, it is necessary to put oneself on the line and translate fieldwork into clear and concise statements (Rutherford 2012: 465; also Clifford 1988; Fassin 2013).

This is a partial account, which is in part to say that it is incomplete and dedicated to certain ends (Clifford 1986), but also something else. The kinky empiricism

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<sup>28</sup> In the field, researching imaginary sex, violence and crime can lead to refusals by those who think the researcher is on one “side” or another. While it has long been noted that there are differences of opinion among those anthropologists encounter in the field (Sapir 1938), this is perhaps even more salient in politically fraught arenas such as contemporary Japan, where choosing to engage with some might lead to being refused by others. I was told by a particular NGO, for example, that they “basically do not respond to interview requests from people with an opposing position” (*kihon-teki ni hantai no tachiba no kata no intabyū ni wa ōjiteinai*) (December 12, 2014). On another occasion, a free speech advocate got upset with me for talking to a representative of an NGO who came to hear me speak on virtual violence, because this advocate considered me to be his friend and the representative of the NGO to be an enemy (October 27, 2014). The representative curtly told me that her group was seeing a “different reality” (*chigau genjitsu*) than me. Finally, an advocate for making *bishōjo* games illegal responded to my written request for an interview by saying, “It is certainly necessary for cultural anthropologists to control their Western-centrism and not judge if something is good or bad. However, *bishōjo* games are not ‘culture’ (*bunka*), but an issue of ‘domination and subordination’ (*shihai jūzoku*), ‘human rights’ (*jinken*) and ‘politics’ (*seiji*). The discussion cannot even begin unless you judge whether they are good or bad” (March 17, 2015).

that Rutherford advocates for anthropology “takes seriously the situated nature of what all thinkers do” (Rutherford 2012: 466), which resonates with feminist theorist Donna Haraway and her discussion of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988). Haraway argues that there is an objectivity that comes with “limited location and situated knowledge,” which “allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway 1988: 583). This objectivity is opposed to what is often understood as “objectivity,” which is detached and uninvolved, resulting in “unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway 1988: 583).<sup>29</sup> Like anthropologists, Haraway is interested in “specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life” (Haraway 1988: 583). Like anthropologists, she draws attention to the “care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view” (Haraway 1988: 583; compare to Malinowski [1922] 2014: 24). Through such careful learning in interactions with others, one develops “the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths” (Haraway 1988: 583). The peripheries and depths are preferred not because they are innocent, but because they are less likely to allow for denial of “the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge” (Haraway 1988: 584; compare to Geertz 1973: 10). Further, Haraway argues, “We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake, but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible” (Haraway 1988: 590). An objectivity coming from the partial “privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (Haraway 1988: 585). This, too, is a politics, and a politics of imagination, as the partial position encourages a “split

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<sup>29</sup> Resonating with Haraway on this point, Rutherford argues that the situated or partial knowledge of anthropology allows it to be more, not less, empirical. “Because we don’t set the parameters of admissible data from the get-go, anthropologists are arguably able to be more empirical than social scientists constrained by survey instruments and the need for large samples. We sacrifice what statisticians call statistical validity, but we gain construct validity: a higher level of confidence that we are doing justice to a messy reality” (Rutherford 2012: 468).

and contradictory self,” which is able to “interrogate positionings and be accountable [... and] construct and join rationale conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history” (Haraway 1988: 586). Is there a better figure of the split and contradictory self than the anthropologist in the field as a “participant observer,” who remains self-reflexive even while trying to see and experience the world as other? Joining in conversations and imaginings with others in the world opens the possibility of transforming systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. Is this not the goal of anthropologists going to the field?<sup>30</sup>

When imagination is taken into account as part of everyday life, kinky empiricism must go even further. Beyond proximity leading to feeling “what one imagines the other feels” (Rutherford 2012: 472), sharing imagination and movement was part of fieldwork among *bishōjo* game producers and players. Although I moved around Tokyo and even took trips to other parts of Japan, my primary site was Akihabara, where I frequented stores, participated in events and bought *bishōjo* games. Having no experience with *bishōjo* games, it was absolutely necessary for me to play them to have something concrete to discuss with producers and players. To my surprise, I found it unavoidable to reflect on my experiences as a player, because *bishōjo* games make the player into both a participant who makes choices with consequences and an observer of the “player character” interacting with cute girl characters. (Again the “split and contradictory self.”) This sense of observing self and other while participating in an

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<sup>30</sup> As theorist Robyn Wiegman argues, in critical practice one seeks an object hoping that it will fulfill the political commitments that inspired the critique (Wiegman 2012: 3). One aspect of this is a supposed “failure of partial perspective” (Wiegman 2012: 241), which must be overcome for the object to fulfill political commitments. While the “case study” – and anthropology in particular (Wiegman 2012: 265) – seems to suggest solutions, Wiegman highlights how contingency “overwhelms my critical ability to situate the case as a paradigmatic entity,” which makes it impossible to assert authority and provide order (Wiegman 2012: 296-297). However, what if instead of the “paradigmatic read” the critic embraced the partial perspective? This would mean embracing that constructive attempts will always fail against checks of empirical reality, which is not a problem. Leaning into and learning from contingency means not positing the case as paradigmatic, but instead embracing partial perspectives, which are valuable in their own right.

imagined and created world became all the more acute when interacting with *bishōjo* game producers and players, who had also been that same player character, interacted with those same cute girl characters and been invested and involved in that same world that moved them, as it moved me. This shared imagination and movement is what made it possible for us to have the sorts of interactions that we did. On the other hand, whether or not imagination and movement was shared, and what parts of it and how much of it, was always a question, and a political one. As Rutherford suggests of her empiricism, there are “analytic and ethical twists and turns born of a research method that forces [... one] to get close enough to imagine how it might feel to walk in another’s shoes” (Rutherford 2012: 476), but my fieldwork made these twists and turns kinky indeed.

While Rutherford suggests that the anthropologist as kinky empiricist is “not afraid of dangerous liaisons” (Rutherford 2012: 476), I cannot say that I was always so brave, because my fieldwork called for sharing imaginary sex, violence and crime that was often perverse and personally challenging. This kinky empiricism, or perhaps we might call it “perverse methodology,” often began with a question from *bishōjo* game producers and players: “Hentai desu ka?” “Are you a pervert?” To answer yes was to open up the possibility of certain interactions, while to answer no was to close it down. I almost always answered yes, which did not seem insincere. After all, I have been an avid fan of anime since I was a child, experienced significant sexual arousal and desire for cute girl characters as I went through adolescence and young adulthood had been hanging out in Akihabara since 2004, which exposed me to many things. Having felt somewhat isolated and odd growing up as an anime fan in the rural United States, Akihabara drew me in. I was attracted to these characters, these men and their imagined and created worlds. There can be little doubt that my long-term interest in and exposure

to anime made me seem less like an outsider to *bishōjo* game producers and players, which made certain interactions possible (for comparison, see Kulick 1998: 14-16). Hanging out with these men, I felt a certain sense of solidarity; sharing imagination and movement, the lines between subject and object, inside and outside, self and other began to blur (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 20, 31). At times I thought that I was indeed a pervert, but then a *bishōjo* game producer or player would introduce me to something involving imaginary sex, violence and crime that crossed lines I did not even know I had drawn. Negotiating those lines while interacting with cute girl characters and *bishōjo* game producers and players was part of fieldwork. This often took place in private and public events, where *bishōjo* game producers and players came together.<sup>31</sup> Part “ethnotextual reading” (Schein 2004: 436) and part “analytical play” to understand “different game cultures” (Mäyrä 2008: 165-167), playing *bishōjo* games with others and drawing and crossing lines was a perverse methodology of sharing imagination and movement.<sup>32</sup>

Given all this, I do not want to draw a line between *bishōjo* game producers and players and myself, which would serve to keep imagined perversion safely located in the other, as if I did not share their imagination and movement. Part of fieldwork is what theorist Tim Ingold calls “wayfaring,” or following the lines of the movement of others (Ingold 2011: 149, 162, 179), which was for me following others as they were

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<sup>31</sup> Issues of access and privacy aside, I found that rather than going into people’s homes to observe them, I could explore the action and everyday practice of drawing lines by participating in regular private and public events, hanging out with *bishōjo* game producers and players and imagining and moving together in response to cute girl characters. This resembles in some ways anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s work on the independent film scene in North America, which she accessed through “interface events” (Ortner 2013: 25-26; my gloss of her, not a quote). While Ortner seems to have improvised this method due to issues of access, I do so because interface events are where *bishōjo* game producers and players interact with one another in ways that make the ethics of affect clear in drawing and insisting on lines.

<sup>32</sup> “Ethnotextual reading” is defined as a close reading from the perspective of the context in which a production takes place and to which it speaks in a particular voice (Schein 2004: 436). I take this to mean something like reading texts with others in their context.

moved by games.<sup>33</sup> I was affected by interactions with fictional and real others, and needed to be ethical in action and everyday practice. Fieldwork, which renders us vulnerable in interaction with one another, “requires ethical reflections and solidary engagement” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 14; see also Haraway 1988: 587, 590; Rutherford 2012: 475).<sup>34</sup> For me, this means not erasing myself from the field and accounting for my own imagination and movement, especially when it would be easy to hide behind *bishōjo* game producers and players as perverts and reduce any risk of personal association or criticism. Such hiding is more problematic still when those exposed might be taken as criminals. For this reason, in this dissertation, I do not share in too much detail the gaming experiences of others (except when published) and instead expose myself as part of my perverse methodology. I spent a good deal of time in the private rooms where others played, but instead expose my own.

If talking about others always risks unselfconsciously playing out desires “through the disguise of projecting them onto someone else” (Allison 2012: 318), then perverse methodology turns this inside out (for comparison, see Treat 1999: x, 47). It encourages an unsettling of self and other, subject and object, and the dynamics of power involved in desiring and knowing the other or object of interest. Considering the “erotics of epistemology (or epistemological erotics)” (Allison 2012: 319) raises questions about how we imagine and create others and objects and relate to them. There is a politics to this imagination, too. Knowledge claims are “claims on people’s lives” (Haraway 1988: 589), and, in my case, on their imaginary lives, on the life of the imagination. My fieldwork led me to situated knowledge, which I apply to an

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<sup>33</sup> Ingold proposes anthropology “centered on the drawn line” (Ingold 2011: 179). For Ingold, “*as soon as a person moves [s]he becomes a line*” (Ingold 2011: 149). Producing and playing *bishōjo* games, people are moved, and following their lines was part of fieldwork.

<sup>34</sup> Here again *bishōjo* games offer a lesson, in that the player makes choices that impact relationships and change the story, which encourages what some describe as “ethical encounters” (Sasakibara 2003: 113). Others can be hurt by what we say and do, which matters.

intervention into imagining “Japan” and “the Japanese” as dangerous and perverse others to be shamed and criticized by those who would make some forms of imagination illegal.

The anthropology of Japan, even more than other islands in the Pacific (Mead [1928] 2001a; Mead [1935] 2001b), is intimately wrapped up in the politics of imagination as it relates to imagined difference and deviance. In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, anthropologist Ruth Benedict refers many times to the imagined difference and deviance of Japan: “deep-rooted cultural differences between the United States and Japan,” “the most alien enemy,” “phenomenally strange” (Benedict [1946] 2006: 1-2, 10). Above all else, Japan appears as a series of contradictions: peaceful and violent, beautiful and ugly, disciplined and excessive, normal and abnormal, kind and cruel. It helps to know that Benedict wrote this foundational text of cultural anthropology from the United States while it was at war with Japan, which made fieldwork impossible and relegated her to interviewing Japanese-Americans in interment camps and gleaning hints from Japanese media and popular culture. A focus on sexuality in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* both reflects and contributes to the long history of imagining Japan as the erotic and exotic other to the United States. One cannot help but see parallels to the dynamics of Orientalism, which itself was always about imagined difference and deviance, even as theorist Edward Said drew attention to the desires and power relations involved in imagining and creating others (Said 1978: 12, 43-45; also Treat 1999; Allison 2012).<sup>35</sup> After the Second World War, this politicized imagining of Japan as the chrysanthemum and the sword – attractive and dangerous, ally and enemy, female and male – continued in the form of area studies, where the nation of Japan became an “area” of study due to its strategic importance to the United States during the Cold War (Cumings 2002: 16-19; see

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<sup>35</sup> “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different;’ thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 1978: 40).

also Harootunian and Sakai 1999). For decades, Japan was a preferred other to fear and learn from, to love and hate, to be drawn to and repulsed by.

The imaginary bifurcation of Japan continues in contemporary discourse about “Cool Japan” and “Weird Japan,” which is often still understood at a distance through media and popular culture. In addition to the cottage industry of journalists writing about imagined Japanese difference and deviance, many scholars are also invested in a position of speaking as an expert on “Japan.” Following cultural theorist Koichi Iwabuchi’s insight about the role of imagination in “inter-national” discourse, or the “reworking and strengthening of the national in tandem with the intensification of cross-border media flows” (Iwabuchi 2010: 89, 94), researchers should be critically aware of their role in the dynamic struggle to imagine nations. In this vein, Iwabuchi raises the issue of “methodological nationalism,” or “unambiguously and uncritically regard[ing] the nation as the unit of analysis” (Iwabuchi 2010: 93). To talk about “Japan” is to be guilty of this methodological nationalism, just as to talk about the flow of “Japanese” media across borders is to be guilty of inter-national discourse. Appadurai, who has long struggled with “problematic heuristic devices for the study of global geographic and cultural processes” (Appadurai 2000: 7), might refer to the nation as not only imagined, but also contested. This dissertation recognizes that it is “an intervention in the battleground of ideas” (Hall et al 1978: x).<sup>36</sup> This is not about “speaking for or against Japan, of locating oneself inside or outside Japan,” because this positioning is, as historian Naoki Sakai has long argued, “nonsensical and irrelevant” (Harootunian and Sakai 1999: 638). Rather, this dissertation is a political imagining of “Japan,” or rather parts of it. It is a partial view coming from the peripheries and depths of “Japan,” from *bishōjo* games, shared imagination and movement in response to cute girl characters.

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<sup>36</sup> As cultural theorist Stuart Hall noted long ago, “national-popular culture” is “a battlefield” (Hall 1998: 451).

In its intended intervention, this dissertation participates in what anthropologist David Graeber calls “liberation in the imaginary” (Graeber 2004: 101-102). Graeber points out that the world seems to offer many problems that are without solution, but this perception is often based on a commonsense understanding of reality that is shuttered. Hence the struggle for imagination and its liberation. In his own struggle, Graeber turns to the ethnographic archive to find examples of social organization that are different from what has become taken-for-granted reality (also Coleman 2004; Povinelli 2011; Kasuga 2011).<sup>37</sup> Another turn of the screw would be to recognize that the ethnographic archive is a collection of fictions imagined and created by anthropologists (Geertz 1973: 15).<sup>38</sup> And another would be to go not to the archive, but rather to the field, where we cultivate ways of seeing and being in the world with others in the present.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I am thinking “anthropological critique” and “*cultural critique through contrast*” (Coleman 2004: 513, 515), “anthropology of the otherwise” (Povinelli 2011: 10) and what Kasuga Naoki, writing in Japan, has called “anthropology as critique of reality” (*genjitsu hihan no jinruigaku*) (Kasuga 2011). (It should be noted that Kasuga is interested in the ontological turn in anthropology, but I find the title of his edited volume provocative for other reasons.) More broadly, I am thinking of what Andrea Muehlebach describes as anthropology’s “ethical imagination,” which sustains arguments against rational choice and self-interest, racism, a hierarchy of cultures and capitalism as the only possible future (Muehlebach 2013: 298-299). Insofar as anthropology’s ethical imagination, and indeed the individual anthropologist’s ethical imagination, can be at odds with others (Muehlebach 2013: 305), both in and out of the field, this contestation and conflict is another facet of the politics of imagination. Even as some books are used for “regulating the imagination,” the anthropologists that Graeber discusses contribute to an archive capable of “enlivening the passions – and expanding the imaginations – of anyone who opens its pages” (Rutherford 2012: 471, 474).

<sup>38</sup> Fieldwork, as described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is an interpretative exercise of constructing a reading (Geertz 1973: 10). Such interpretations are “fiction,” Geertz argues, not in the sense that they are false, but “in the sense that they are ‘something made’” (Geertz 1973: 15). To use the terminology of this dissertation, they are something imagined and created.

<sup>39</sup> One can see the politics of imagination when Margaret Mead, that giant of anthropology, went to an island in the Pacific to imagine alternatives to anxiety and taboo surrounding youth and sexuality that created social disease in the United States (Mead [1928] 2001a, chapter 13). Although it is hard to support her findings, it has always been inspiring to me to think that somewhere in the world – or in some other world – gender roles could be completely different from the United States (Mead [1935] 2001b, chapter 18). That “feminine men,” “masculine women,” “neutral couples” and more could not only be possible, but even preferred in some places; that deviance is created by the social and cultural order that defines and enforces norms. I like Mead the same way I like the fantasy writer Le Guin, daughter of anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, which is to say as a creator of worlds where gender and sexuality function quite differently than they do in this one. One can also see the politics of imagination in Mead’s friend and colleague, Ruth Benedict, who imagined Japan as something other than a cartoonish villain threatening the national security of the United States (Benedict [1946] 2006). I personally find it fascinating to imagine a place where there is no “confession” (Benedict [1946] 2006: 223), which seriously troubles sexual subjectivity as discursively constructed (Foucault 1976] 1990). Rather than defer judgment to a transcendent moral code of right and wrong, one follows situated standards of behavior in relations with others in the world (Benedict [1946]

This, too, is part of the politics of imagination, which struggles to imagine other possible worlds and other possibilities in the world. If, as Appadurai suggests, “imagination [...] is a space of contestation” (Appadurai 1996: 4), then the anthropology of imagination is part of that contestation. In my case, at a time of anxiety about youth and sexuality that is leading to a discourse of risk and the expansion of surveillance and state power over the imagination, I imagine “Japan” not as a source of danger and perversion, but instead as a source of other ways of seeing and being in the world and interacting with fictional and real others. This has the potential to transform systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. In my politics of imagination, I call for liberation not only in the imaginary, but also of the imaginary. And so it begins, as it so often does for anthropologists, with an invitation: “Imagine” (Malinowski [1922] 2014: 3).<sup>40</sup> Imagine a world of cartoon sex and violence. Imagine that you are in that world. Just imagine...

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2006: 184, 188). More recently, one recognizes the anthropology of imagination in Katherine Frank, whose ethnography of strip clubs has her often empathizing with, and even imaginatively inhabiting the position of, male patrons (Frank 2002). The book includes fictional “interludes” to allow even more room for imagination. Another example is Lisa Stevenson’s *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, which is not only about imagining other forms of life and care, but also proposes a methodology of working through images, which “has the potential to turn our everyday world upside down” (Stevenson 2014: 14-15).

<sup>40</sup> Although fixated on “being there,” anthropology has from its beginnings been closely connected with imagination, as indicated by Bronisław Malinowski inviting readers to imagine an island in the Pacific (Malinowski [1922] 2014: 3). Malinowski developed methods that are foundational to anthropology, including participant observation, which calls for researchers to join in the activities of others and experience things together (Malinowski [1922] 2014: 21, 24). “Again, in this type of work, it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives’ games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations” (Malinowski [1922] 2014: 21). The goal is no less than “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him” (Malinowski [1922] 2014: 24). Malinowski realizes that it is an impossibility to inhabit world and see exactly as “the native” does, which means that part of fieldwork is imagining how others see the world through shared experience and life. Recent work suggests that Malinowski was often imaginatively journeying with others while “sailing through color” (Taussig 2009: 95, 100-101).

## **2. Imaginary Sex and Crime: A Brief History of Virtual Regulation in Japan**

There are more people here, and more cartoon characters having sex, than is reasonable to assume would ever be in any one place. This is the Comic Market, which has grown from humble origins in the 1970s into an event of massive proportions. Twice a year, over 550,000 people gather to buy and sell media produced independently of commercial publishers. Independently, but also completely dependently. Most of the media here is printed material featuring manga/anime-style drawings of characters from existing manga, anime and computer/console games. These publications are, in a word, fanzines, and the Comic Market is the world's largest gathering to buy and sell them. While these publications are technically against the law, copyright is not strictly enforced, which allows fans to produce works featuring their favorite characters. The most common theme is imagined relationships with and between favorite characters – sex, typically. Explicit, sometimes extreme, sex. Everywhere one looks are images of cartoon characters in some state of undress, covered in obscene amounts of semen and begging for more. Some look very young. All of this is out in the open; the Comic Market is anything but discreet. Held in Tokyo Big Sight, a colossal convention center, the Comic Market draws attention from major media outlets around the world. Over seven million fanzines are purchased during the event (Tamagawa 2012: 122), which continues to grow, even as sales of manga, anime and computer/console games decline (Yano 2012: 79). Commercial publishers, broadcasters and retailers rent space in Tokyo Big Sight during the Comic Market to appeal to participants, who are their most devoted and passionate fans. Everyone seems to know about the Comic Market, and what is bought and sold here, but legal and police intervention has been minimal over its over 40 years of existence. If the Comic Market is an example of what legal scholar Lawrence

Lessig calls “free culture” (Lessig 2004), then it is also a culture of free imagination and creation.

During my fieldwork in August 2015, I found myself at the Comic Market assisting Nagayama Kaoru, a well-known activist against increased regulation of manga, anime and computer/console games. Over the course of the three days of the event, people – men and women, young and old, Japanese and not, gay and straight, alone and in groups – came to Nagayama’s booth to purchase his books and discuss recent legal actions in Japan and abroad that could potentially impact manga, anime and computer/console games. Surprisingly, several groups of politicians came to visit Nagayama and pose with him for photographs. They came on a tour organized by Ogino Minoru, a junior member of the Tokyo Assembly and founding member of the Institute of Contents Culture, which has its roots in the *bishōjo* gaming industry.<sup>1</sup> Most were clearly not fans of manga, anime and computer/console games, and certainly not the fanzines on display, but they nevertheless posed for photographs in what critics describe as a den of imaginary sex crime. On the whole, these politicians did not appear to be particularly concerned. One pointed out the thousands of women at the event – women are, in fact, the statistical majority of participants, and have been since the founding of the Comic Market (Shimotsuki 2008: 18) – as well as visitors from overseas and families with children. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, which brought a smile to this politician’s face. Others, however, were much less in the mood. Addressing an assembly of Comic Market participants on August 15th, Yamada Tarō, a member of the House of Councilors, warned of a conservative backlash building in the halls of the Japanese government:

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute of Contents Culture (*Kontentsu bunka kenkyūkai*) is an activist group centered on freedom of creation (*tsukuru jiyū*, sometimes *sozō no jiyū*, or freedom of creation/imagination) founded by adult computer game designers and scenario writers in 2008 (Sugino Nao, personal interview, March 16, 2015). See: <<http://icc-japan.blogspot.com/>>.

What the government really wants to focus on is the erotic and grotesque stuff. I strongly feel that their true intension is to rein in erotic and grotesque expression, no matter what. They also want to do something about the perceived deficiency of current child pornography legislation, which does not extend to games, cartoons and comics. I think that the government is also really starting to feel that it needs to do something about the violence of games.

But why? I ask Yamada after his address. Why push for more regulation now? “This content is considered creepy,” Yamada explains matter-of-factly. “For critics, it expresses perversity and potentially perverts minds. It does not matter if there is no evidence, because enough people share this perception and it is something that politicians can come out strongly against. Who is going to defend this content in public? It’s a losing position.” Looking around the Comic Market, one wonders how the market for imaginary sex, violence and crime ever got to be so robust and open in the first place, why the government cares now and what it will do to rein in the culture of free imagination and creation. With the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo on the horizon, and Tokyo Big Sight likely to play some part in hosting the anticipated flood of tourists, what will become of the Comic Market and the culture it represents? One can imagine legislation to clean up the virtual sex industry, just as the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo saw legislation to clean up the sex industry and push it out of sight (Leheny 2006: 65).

This chapter offers a brief history of virtual regulation in Japan as background to the contemporary moment of concern about imaginary sex, violence and crime in *bishōjo* games. Although there is a much longer history of regulation to be told (Allison [1996] 2000; Nagaoka 2010; Cather 2012), this chapter begins with the 1990s and with manga, which broke sales records, was hugely influential and became an issue of social and political concern in that decade. Japan is home to the most vibrant comics culture in the world, and, in the 1990s, it was estimated that manga accounted for 40 percent of print

publications (Schodt 1996: 19). Weekly manga magazines hundreds of pages long were circulating millions of copies (Schodt 1996: 19) and available at train station kiosks, in convenience stores and on the street. Anime also reached new heights in the 1990s, when at least 90 series aired a week (Condry 2013: 86, 106) and series such as *Dragon Ball Z* (Doragon bōru zetto, 1989-), *Sailor Moon* (Bishōjo senshi Sērā Mūn, 1992-) and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shin seiki Evangerion, 1995-) were popular enough to be dubbed “social phenomena.” Manga, which provides the primary source material for anime, enjoyed synergy with it, which extended into adaptations into live-action television series and films, games, toys and merchandise, music and advertising. Quite simply, manga was a powerful engine of Japanese popular culture. Given this high profile, it is not surprising that in Japan in the 1990s, as in the United States in the 1950s, comics were accused of “seducing children into becoming juvenile delinquents” and “encouraging young people to get absorbed in fantasy worlds and to commit acts of violence” (boyd 2014: 14, 105; as a key text in this influential American debate about comics, see Wertham [1954] 2004; for the broader sociopolitical context of it, see Hajdu 2008).<sup>2</sup> As manga translator and historian Frederik L. Schodt argues, it is precisely because manga was so ubiquitous and influential in Japan that it got caught up in discourses about media effects (Schodt 1996: 48). Manga appeals to young and old, men and women; there are sexualized depictions in manga for the young and old, adult manga featuring explicit sex for both men and women and crossover readership

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<sup>2</sup> While there is not space here to develop a comparative analysis, it is worth noting that Fredric Wertham, an opinion leader in the American debate about comic books, was far ahead of his time in drawing attention to “harmful potentialities” (Wertham [1954] 2004: 118), which resonates with the contemporary discourse of potential victims and criminals and risk management. For Wertham, one of the greatest harmful potentialities of comics was undermining what he called “the ethical image,” which “makes possible a stable and yet not rigid ethical equilibrium” (Wertham [1954] 2004: 92). This is something that my fieldwork among *bishōjo* game producers and players in contemporary Japan has urged me to reconsider. If, as Wertham suggests, “Many if not all sexual conflicts are fundamentally ethical difficulties” (Wertham [1954] 2004: 92), then we would do well to focus on emerging ethics – the ethics of affect, for example – rather than assuming that existing ones have been undermined.

(Kinsella 2000: 136). In this vast market, it was manga for boys and men featuring sexualized depictions of cute girl characters that were problematized in the 1990s. More specifically, the 1990s saw the emergence of concern about “otaku,” who were understood to be male fans of manga. First discussed as perverts in niche media in the 1980s and reimagined as potential pedophiles and predators in the 1990s, not only were otaku considered to be a danger to the youth of Japan, but also the youth of Japan were in danger of becoming otaku due to the impact of “harmful” (*yūgai*) manga. Much of this history is shared with *bishōjo* games, which rose to prominence in the 1990s and feature manga/anime-style characters engaged in explicit, often perverse and sometimes violent sex. *Bishōjo* games throw into relief growing concern about “virtual reality” and how the virtual can threaten reality.

Reviewing the history of the so-called “otaku panic” (Kinsella 2000, chapter four), this chapter positions it in the context of a crisis of hegemony and reproduction in Japan in the 1990s. It also shows how fans of manga, anime and computer/console games, responding to media and the otaku panic, discussed their affection for fictional characters. In manga-driven popular culture, what spreads across media and material forms are characters, who are “a technology of attraction and diffusion” and “expand outward through the media and social environment” (Steinberg 2012: 44, 45). In relation to these characters, in the 1990s, fans began discussing *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. The discussion of *moe* began among men gathering online to share their affection for *bishōjo* characters, which were an increasingly notable part of the media landscape at the time (Akagi 1993: 231). In informal peer networks, men shared their experience of being moved by cute girl characters, or their experience of *moe*, and learned that this was not as strange as they might have thought, which contributed to an increasingly open culture of expressing affection for fiction as such. In this way,

relations with, and an orientation of desire toward, fiction, which was associated with otaku in the 1980s (Editors 1989; Ōtsuka 2004; Galbraith 2015a), became prominent enough to be noted by academics in the 1990s (Saitō [2000] 2011). This indicates the existence of competing discourses about “otaku” as, on the one hand, perverts attracted to *bishōjo* and, on the other hand, as potential pedophiles and predators. Both discourses are part of how manga, anime and computer/console games, and “otaku” as fans of them, are imagined to be harmful. Both appear in contemporary discourse, and are key to understanding recent calls for increased regulation. The chapter concludes by highlighting a convergence of domestic and international concern about harmful media, specifically how Japanese activists and politicians responding to the imagined perversion of youth, sexuality and society draw support from activists and politicians in North America and Europe, which suggests an ongoing process of consensus building toward virtual regulation.

## ***2.1 A Crisis of Hegemony and Reproduction***

The end of the Shōwa Period in Japan has become “a hard crease in time” (Kernaghan 2009: 1). Time flows forward and backward from 1989, which seems like a threshold. That year, Emperor Shōwa – also known as Hirohito, who oversaw the rise of the Japanese colonial empire, its complete destruction in 1945 and Japan’s reconstruction during the postwar period – died in a protracted media spectacle that brought the nation together in mourning (Sakai 1997: 72-75). That same year, Tezuka Osamu, the “god of manga” (Schodt 2007: vii-viii, 16), Misora Hibari, the legendary singer associated with Japanese soul music (Bourdagh 2012: 72-73), and Matsushita Konosuke, founder of the largest Japanese consumer electronics company and a symbol of the power and innovation of Japanese industry (Kotter 1997: 1-2), all died. As if this was not enough, the Berlin Wall came down, signaling the end of the Cold War and a world order

dominated by ideological and military conflict between the United States and Soviet Union and alliance with one against the other. When Japan was built up after 1945 as an ally of the United States against the Communist threat, it did not have to face its history as a military aggressor in East Asia. Historian Carol Gluck notes that the arrangement with the United States resulted in a stable political, economic and social system in Japan that froze memory into a narrative of victimization and reform (quoted in Manabe 2013). The narrative of Japan's long "postwar" (*sengo*) – a term used nowhere else in the world by 1989, but still in wide circulation in Japan at the time – was coming undone, exacerbated by rising East Asian neighbors, US interest shifting to the Middle East and criticism of Japan for not participating on the world stage as a "normal" nation (i.e., having a military and assisting with global peacekeeping efforts).

In the early 1990s, the Japanese economy, which had gone through a postwar recovery described as a "miracle" – made possible by not maintaining a military, focusing on strategic industries and preferential trade deals with the United States – to become the second largest in the world, tanked. The Nikkei stock market index fell more than 60 percent from a high of 40,000 at the end of 1989 to under 15,000 by 1992 (Powell 2002). Fortunes were lost. An entire generation of young people graduated from universities only to find that there were no longer good company jobs waiting for them (Brinton 2011). Reforms in labor law to make Japanese companies more globally competitive led to a massive increase in flexible, part-time and temporary employment. Unable to secure the stability thought necessary to start a family, birth and marriage rates plummeted (Allison 2013: 33-34). Despite the changing times, gender ideals, which had ossified under the relative stability of integrated institutions during the postwar period, persisted to make men and women who did not achieve reproductive maturity feel like losers and failures. Where East Asian historian Ezra Vogel had once argued for

*Japan as Number One* (1979), Suzanne Hall Vogel now argued that the Japanese family was coming undone and young people were alone and adrift (Vogel 2013: 149-169). New diseases such as “acute social withdrawal,” which indicated not only the sickness of youth but also the compound illness of family and society, were discovered and said to afflict people in the millions (Saitō [1998] 2013: 3, 83-89); social abandonment and mediated, technological and commodity replacements for human intimacy seemed epidemic (Turkle 2011: 106-108, 146-147); the suicide rate was up (Leheny 2006: 34). The 1990s were traumatic enough to be remembered as the “lost decade” (*ushinawareta jūnen*) in Japan, which has stretched out in a sluggish recovery to become “the lost decades” (Kelts 2015).

Japan in the 1990s seemed to be suffering from what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls “a crisis of hegemony” (Hall et al 1978: viii, 218). For Hall, hegemony is an interlocking system of ideas that produces norms and persuades people of their rightness. This expands politics and power beyond electoral or party politics and state power to include various institutions and interests that can align to create hegemony, which becomes “common sense.” One might argue that myths of “the mass middleclass” (*ichioku nin sō chūryū*), “homogeneous people” (*tan’itsu minzoku*) and “mainstream consciousness” (*chūryū ishiki*) speak to the hegemony of postwar Japan, which was taken as “common sense” (*jōshiki*). One can also recognize hegemony in gender ideals such as the “salaryman” (*sararīman*), or white-collar worker productively employed at a major corporation, whose tireless efforts support the family (= wife and children) and nation. This gender ideal is an example of “hegemonic masculinity,” which need not be the most common or comfortable form, but is still the common sense of what a man should be and is judged against (Connell 2000: 10-11). Hall argues that crises occur in hegemony not only in political and economic life, but also “in a wide

series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions” (Hall 1987: 5). Certainly we can see this in Japan in the 1990s, which were characterized by debates about the direction of society. Political scientist David Leheny argues that Japan was gripped by a “vague anxiety,” which was reflected in debates about sex and violence in the media, out-of-control youth and terrorism (Leheny 2006: 3-5, 14, 44). Youth, who symbolize the future, are particularly apt to become targets of concern at times of crisis (Allison 2006: 75). Hall argues that the idea that youth are in trouble is hard to defend statistically (Hall et al 1978: 13-16), but this does not matter in terms of the perception of crisis and calls to action. Again, this was the case in Japan in the 1990s (Leheny 2006: 58).

Responding to the gap between statistics and anxiety about youth, crime scholar Kondō Jun’ya suggests that “people’s fears and imaginations become more and more detached from reality” and the “ominous image of youth takes on a life of its own” (quoted in Hack 2015: 238). Kondō is right to emphasize imagination, which is a crucial part of criminology (Young 2011), and Japan is no exception. In the 1990s, there was a general fear for and of youth, which anthropologist Anne Allison captures in the phrase “millennial monsters,” or those associated with “monstrous disruption of the normal” and threats to “national security” (Allison 2006: 76). A similar dynamic has also been observed by social media scholar danah boyd in the United States, where “many adults are simultaneously afraid of teens and afraid for them” (boyd 2014: 17). Writing of escalating concerns about young people in the 1990s, boyd points out, “Moral panics that surround youth typically center on issues of sexuality” (boyd 2014: 105). Again, as Hall and Leheny note in different contexts, there does not need to be statistical evidence of increased danger for fear and anxiety to take hold (boyd 2014: 109-110). And, again as Hall and Leheny note, fear and anxiety invite paternalism and the expansion of

authority (boyd 2014: 28). Since the 1990s, the youth of Japan have been constantly berated for having too much sex, sex with the wrong people at the wrong times in the wrong places, the wrong kinds of sex, or not having enough sex at all (Leheny 2006: 40, 54, 68-69, 73, 80-82). In any case, something is wrong with youth and sexuality, which seems to undermine the social order and future of Japan. Echoing Hall's analysis of Britain in the 1970s, Leheny shows how "political actors used the fears bubbling up during Japan's nervous 1990s to justify enhanced powers of the state" and a return to "normality" (Leheny 2006: 3, 183-184). To rephrase, there is a struggle to reconstitute hegemony as various institutions and interests work to police the crisis (Hall et al 1978: 13-16).

Building on the concept of a crisis in hegemony, I propose a related crisis of reproduction, which is meant to not only capture the increased interest in controlling the bodies of young people to ensure that they are normatively oriented and sexually reproductive, but also social reproduction in taking on roles and responsibilities at home and work. In the 1990s in Japan, youth came to be seen as "a selfish generation that refuses even its most basic responsibility of reproducing the nation" (Leheny 2006: 40). This is yet another reason why youth need to be disciplined in the return to normality, and it sits alongside concern about youth as a population at risk and a dangerous population. On the one hand, youth might be attacked, damaged or perverted, which would destroy the next generation and undermine the future. On the other hand, youth might be doing the attacking and hence become a generation destroying the nation and its normalcy. Similarly, youth might become dangerous adults or be in danger in relation to adults; youth might become perverts or the victims of perverts. So, on the one hand, youth as a *potentially dangerous population*, and, on the other hand, youth as an *endangered population*. This endangered population is particularly important, because the

number of children in Japan – along with birth and marriage rates, and even the number of people having sex (Aoki 2016)<sup>3</sup> – continues to decline (much like an endangered species). In any case, youth need to be protected and disciplined at the same time. As part of this response to crisis, authority expands over not only relations between actual bodies and populations, but also relations between virtual and actual bodies and populations. During its crisis of reproduction, Japan has become concerned not only with youth and sexuality, but also virtual youth and sexuality: Youth in manga, anime and computer/console games, youth who might be harmed or perverted by encounters with such media, youth who might become the victims of perverted adults. So, *a virtual population of youth and adults*. This suggests a regime of “pre-emptive policing,” which deals with “potential victims” and “potential criminals,” and in so doing “translates fantasy into reality” (Hall et al 1978: 42). The dynamics of policing a crisis of hegemony and reproduction undergird much of the debate in Japan in the 1990s.

## **2.2 “The Otaku Panic”**

Manga specifically and virtual worlds more generally appear regularly in the discourse of Japan in crisis in the 1990s (Schodt 1996: 45-47; Kinsella 2000: 126-129; Allison 2006: 80, 85; Leheny 2006: 39). Media consumed by and associated with youth and intersecting with sexuality became a cause of concern, which led to calls for increased regulation. As feminist novelist Angela Carter notes, pornography is only regulated when it is seen as a threat to society (Carter 1979), and it was adult manga that was perceived this way in Japan in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> It can be said to have begun, as is perhaps fitting, in 1989, flowing forward from that hard crease in time. On July 23, 1989,

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<sup>3</sup> A survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. revealed that almost half of Japanese between the ages of 18 and 34 are virgins (Aoki 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Carter, it should be noted, spent two years in Japan in the early 1970s and was intrigued by the “Sadeian excesses” of adult manga, which she wrote about in articles published in *New Society* (Gravett 2004: 8). More recently, Carter has appeared in defenses of seemingly abnormal sex in adult manga (for example Otomo 2015: 143-144).

Miyazaki Tsutomu, a 26-year-old printer's assistant from the Tokyo suburbs, was arrested after attempting to insert a zoom lens into the vagina of a grade-schooler in a public park. During the interrogation, it became apparent that Miyazaki was the man that had over the past year murdered, mutilated and molested four girls between the ages of four and seven. The details of his crimes are horrifying, including keeping one of the corpses in his room, posing it for photographs, having sex with it over the course of days and eventually dismembering it and drinking its blood. This brutality and depravity shocked a nation known for its low rate of sexual and violent crime, especially crime involving children, and Miyazaki had terrorized the nation by mailing pieces of his victims to their families, which was widely reported in the media. In the panicked reporting upon the arrest of this millennial monster, commentators discussed everything that they perceived to be wrong with youth, media, sexuality, society and Japan (Kinsella 2000: 129).

Among the many reasons advanced for Miyazaki's crimes, including a breakdown of the family (Treat 1993: 354-355; Kinsella 2000: 126-127), the one that stuck was media effects and confusion about the line between fiction and reality. The evidence seemed to be in order: A photograph of Miyazaki's room, which was filled with 5,763 videotapes, including a series of horror/slasher/gore films upon which he based some of his crimes and recordings of those crimes. Responding to Miyazaki, cultural theorist Yoshimi Shun'ya argues, "For him, the sense of reality, or the reality of killing, was already virtual" (quoted in Galbraith 2012: 226). There are at least three ways to read this statement: One, Miyazaki had seen so much sex, violence and crime in virtual worlds that it no longer seemed real to him; two, he had rehearsed his crimes virtually and acted them out in reality; and three, even after committing his crimes, they appeared virtual to him. Related are three points about media effects: One, media had reduced

Miyazaki's resistance to committing violent sexual crimes; two, the line between media and reality was blurred for him; and three, he committed crimes based on media and returned them to media through recording and placing them in his videotape collection.<sup>5</sup> While media and material consumption is normal in contemporary Japan, the sheer volume of Miyazaki's collection was enough to convince many of excess and pathology, and the confusion of fiction and reality made him a limit figure and folk devil for a society struggling to negotiate boundaries. A distinction between normal and abnormal media and material consumption was formalized by describing Miyazaki as an "otaku," which means literally "your home" or "you" and had been used as slang in Japanese fan communities since the 1970s and became associated with manga / anime fans in the early 1980s (Galbraith 2015a; more on this below). In this way, fans of a certain stripe, who were already perceived as abnormal and labeled "otaku" in the 1980s, came to be associated with a serial killer who was also a pedophile, cannibal and necrophiliac.

Despite the fact that they were used as models for some of his crimes, it was not exclusively or even necessarily the horror / slasher / gore films in Miyazaki's collection that were mobilized to explain his dangerous break from reality, but rather manga. Photographs of Miyazaki's room show adult manga in the foreground, which by association make one think that the piles of boxes behind them must contain more manga and that the videotapes must be anime, although neither of those assumptions, often repeated as facts (for example, Kinsella 2000: 126-127), are accurate. Based on the testimony of journalists who were in the room at the time of the photograph, the few adult manga that Miyazaki owned were placed in the foreground to make it seem as if his collection was primarily manga and anime (Nagaoka 2010: 151-152). This is made

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<sup>5</sup> Add to this that Miyazaki reportedly owned a copying machine, camera and computer, which is to say that he was technologically savvy at a time before these devices were generally popular, and the image of a man lost in virtual reality was all the more convincing (Treat 1993: 353-355).

more convincing by adding that Miyazaki had attended the Comic Market – that den of imaginary sex crime involving cute girl characters. As “*lolicon*,” or “Lolita complex,” became a keyword in describing the problem of manga, sexuality and youth, the message of the photograph became that Miyazaki was attracted to fictional girls and acted out his perverse desires in reality.<sup>6</sup> The story became not only that Miyazaki was a man who blurred the line between fiction and reality, as would seem to be the case when he watched ultra-realistic violence in horror/slasher/gore films and then enacted horrific violence to record and add to his collection, but also, and more importantly, that his attraction to the unrealistic worlds of manga had warped his sense of reality and sexuality. The cute girl characters of manga were warped objects of desire that turned Miyazaki toward sexual violence and crime. This was the story of not only Miyazaki, but also “otaku,” who were understood to be men harboring “dangerous sexual proclivities and fetishes,” “who might be mentally ill and perhaps even a threat to society” (Schodt 1996: 46).<sup>7</sup> Otaku as male manga/anime fans were described as “a reserve army of criminals” (*hanzaisha yobigun*), which haunts the discourse to this day. As cultural critics such as Ōtsuka Eiji and Nakamori Akio debated whether or not Miyazaki was an otaku<sup>8</sup> and creative types such as Miyazaki Hayao (no relation to the criminal) and Murakami Ryū discussed the need for manga and anime fans to escape their “closed rooms,”<sup>9</sup> a perceived connection – accepted or denied – between manga/anime images, the pedophile predator and otaku was established in the popular imaginary.

Although it began with feminist and new religious groups in Western Japan (Nagaoka 2010: 154-155, 161-164), what came to be known as the “harmful manga

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the accuracy of this is questionable, as the identifiable adult manga in the photograph appears to feature stories and images of horny housewives (Ōtsuka 2004: 74).

<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Sharon Kinsella notes that in Japan during the 1990s, the sense that otaku were “multiplying and threatening to take over the whole of society was strong” (Kinsella 2000: 129), which is in line with anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin’s understanding of the “domino theory of sexual peril” (Rubin 2011: 151).

<sup>8</sup> In the September 1989 issue of *Spa!* magazine.

<sup>9</sup> In the November 1989 issue of *Animage* magazine.

movement" (*yūgai manga undō* or *yūgai komikku sōdō*) found support amid the vague anxiety gripping Japan in the 1990s. Responding to reports coming out of the harmful manga movement, on September 4, 1990, the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper ran an editorial wondering what kind of human beings children exposed to such manga will become. What is at stake, the editors explain, is no less than the "future of our culture" (*bunka no shōrai*). Politicians began to receive letters from citizens, which they forwarded to police, concerning "abnormal," "unhealthy" and "perverse" sex and "grotesque eroticism" in manga, which "surely lead to sexual crimes" (Anime Comic Tone 2009). At its most hyperbolic, the claim was made that, if left unchecked, the effect of harmful manga would be such that "the youth of Japan have no future." This discourse of youth as vulnerable and at risk sits alongside the "millennial monsters" discourse of youth as dangerous; in Japan in the 1990s, after the arrest of Miyazaki, youth were potentially perverse, always already perverse, and the perverse imaginary of manga might be what pushed them over the edge. In the halls of government, the issue of harmful manga was raised on five separate occasions between October 1990 and June 1991 (Kinsella 2000: 146). On one such occasion, in February 1991, Asō Tarō, a future Prime Minister of Japan, led a group of politicians in asking for more responsibility from the manga industry; resolutions were pushed through amid open bullying of opponents for allegedly forcing pornography on children (Nagaoka 2010: 177-179).

Despite not having solid statistical evidence that manga was harmful to society, tougher ordinances were passed and arrests "increased dramatically" (Schodt 1996: 56; also Nagaoka 2010: 248-249). In April 1991, for example, police questioned 74 people, arrested 40 and confiscated 4,040 manga books (Kinsella 2000: 132; also Nagaoka 2010: 173). Ordinances were amended in 1993 and again in 1997 to tighten regulation of adult manga (Kinsella 2000: 142). When publishers of adult manga for men began to regulate

themselves by marking works as for adults, shrink wrapping them and encouraging sellers to place them in dedicated sections, scrutiny shifted to adult manga for women and eventually to general manga for young people considered to be “pornographic” or “harmful” (Nagaoka 2010: 36-37, 142-143, 146-147, 233). There was notable focus on manga featuring *bishōjo* (Nagaoka 2010: 181-182, 196), or cute girl characters, which was perceived to be “anti-social” (Kinsella 2000: 152) in appealing to adult perverts and perverting the minds of youth, who would not become “normal grown-ups” (Cather 2012: 241). Such manga also put youth at risk in relation to adult perverts, imagined in the image of Miyazaki. Global norms were applied in crackdowns, for example using international laws concerning anti-child trafficking, prostitution and pornography against adult manga (Cather 2012: 242, 267-272; for comparison, see Leheny 2006: 4, 24, 90-91, 95, 104-106, 186-187).<sup>10</sup> In the process, as media scholar Kirsten Cather points out, the law expanded from protecting real children to preventing “*potential* harm done to *real* children by readers and viewers who consume [...] sexualized images” (Cather 2012: 270). And so too did crime expand from the actual to the virtual.

### **2.3 Bishōjo Games and “Virtual Reality”**

While the emphasis of the discourse about harmful media effects in the 1990s was clearly on manga, *bishōjo* games are perhaps even more associated with anxiety about “virtual reality” (*kasō genjitsu* or *kyozō riaru*). According to Ōtsuka, “the virtual reality age” began in 1983 (Ōtsuka 2004: 17-20). That year, the Nintendo Family Computer, a home gaming console better known as the Famicom, went on the market. The word “otaku” was also coined in 1983 in response to the perceived perversion of men oriented toward *bishōjo* characters from manga and anime (Galbraith 2015a; more

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<sup>10</sup> Here David Leheny complicates Hall’s notion of hegemony in the case of Japan: “In fact, it is only because conservatives have *not* been hegemonic that they have turned to the legitimacy afforded to them by international norms” (Leheny 2006: 186).

on this below). Adult computer games existed in Japan since at least as early as Kōei's *Night Life* (Naito raifu, 1982), appeared as part of the booming interest in cute girl characters in the form of Enix' *Lolita Syndrome* (Rorīta shindorōmu, 1983) and evolved into more story-based character interactions with Jast's *Angels' Afternoon* (Tenshi-tachi no gogo, 1985). *Angels' Afternoon* is remembered for its manga/anime-style characters and setting in a school, which would become hallmarks of *bishōjo* games. Concerns about adult computer games began soon after. In 1986, *177* (Ichinananana, dB-SOFT, 1986) – which takes its name from Article 177 of the criminal code concerning rape, which players simulate in the game – was taken up in the Diet and severely criticized.<sup>11</sup> This brought the existence of adult computer games to public attention and sparked outrage in Japan.

Virtual reality was clearly a growing concern by the end of the 1980s. For example, Itō Seikō's novel *No Life King* (Nō raifu kingu, 1988), nominated for the Mishima Yukio Award, tells of grade-schoolers who interact with the world as if it were a game. That same year, photographer and writer Fujiwara Shin'ya argued that games lead to confusion of fiction and reality, which has come to be known as the "harmful game discourse" (*gēmu yūgai ron*) (Tsuji 2000; also Ōtsuka 2004: 18).<sup>12</sup> Critics suggested that games also contribute to a lack of empathy, antisocial behavior and even a loss of humanity in youth, which crystallized in the discourse of the "terror of the game brain" (*gēmu nō no kyōfu*) (Mori 2002: 6-7, 25, 28; also Allison 2006: 81; for a comparison in the

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<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, Japan did not invent the so-called "rape game." That honor goes to the United States and Mystique's *Custer's Revenge* (1982). Further back, Atari's *Gotcha!* (1973) featured as controllers pink rubber buldges, which were meant to represent women's breasts. Embroiled in controversy, the game was denounced as pornographic.

<sup>12</sup> This is an old critique that is not unique to Japan. In the moral panic about the roleplaying game in the United States in the 1970s, a discourse emerged about "the delusional gamer," who could not tell the difference between fantasy and reality (Laycock 2015: 25). While the discourse about the most iconic "delusional gamer," James Egbert, turned out to incorrectly connect *Dungeons and Dragons* to his disappearance, the story stuck and was repeated by advoctaes against games and criminals as a defense for their actions.

United States, see Turkle 2011: 293; Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: xviii-xix, 20-23, 107-112, 130-131).<sup>13</sup> In March 1989, *Shūkan Spa!* magazine ran an article with the sensational title, “Spirited Psychiatrist Noda Masa’aki’s Analysis! Murder of a Fourth Grader at Tokyo’s Kōjimachi Elementary School, the Game Generation is on the rise, the ‘Perverved Murderer’ who was After All from the ‘Otaku Tribe’” (Kagami 2010: 157). In other words, there was concern in Japan about games turning a generation of youth into “otaku” and “perverted murderers” even before the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu later that year. Even as otaku are associated with perverted murderers, the discourse about the “otaku generation” (*otaku sedai*) is deeply inflected with concerns about computer users and the “game generation” (*gēmu sedai*), with both converging in the image of the man dangerously absorbed in virtual reality and cut off from society.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Phillip Zimbardo, a psychologist best known for this Stanford Prison Experiment, is particularly concerned about excessive gaming and pornography, which he argues lead to young men being socially and sexually immature and stuck in “virtual reality.” “Even if games were originally designed to inspire players and make a better reality, they are now being used to replace reality, and many young men are losing themselves in increasingly sophisticated virtual worlds that are totally enchanting” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 23; also xviii). Further: “Underdeveloped emotions combined with a lack of engagement with others can stunt future social and romantic relationships [...] The problem worsens when young men’s sexuality develops independently from real-life sexual relationships” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: xxi, 76). In this way, adult comics, cartoons and games are worse than photographs and films, because they encourage this orientation toward the virtual, which may be out of synch with reality (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 111). The problem, then, is with “gamified virtual worlds” where “young men get to have a taste of what it’s like to be a sheikh with their own virtual harem” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 88). Virtual sex is said to be derailing actual sex and these games to not address human “love needs” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 95). Hence the gamer lives a subhuman life. Further, imagination becomes a problem, because interaction with fictional characters is mind altering, “even if those other minds are imagined” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 132). What Zimbardo calls “two-dimensional cyber mates” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 109) reduce the human capacity for sexual intimacy. Predictably, Japan comes to represent a dystopian future of social and sexual problems brought on by excessive gaming and pornography, which have undermined what it means to be a man and perhaps even a human being (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 252; also Turkle 2011: 329).

<sup>14</sup> So central are computers to the discourse that some speculate that the so-called “my computer tribe” (*maikon zoku*) are the ancestors of the “otaku tribe” (*otaku zoku*). What connects them both is *bishōjo*, or cute girl characters. Soon after the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu, the mock documentary *Otaku no Video* (1991) introduces the viewer to a man who appears to be masturbating as he tells the camera crew he is a virgin but is satisfied with the “two-dimensional” (*nijigen*) and another who is addicted to *bishōjo* games, in love with a character named Hiroko and never goes outside. The gamer is playing *Cybernetic Hi-School* (Den’nō gakuen, 1989), a *bishōjo* game produced by Gainax, and appearing in *Otaku no Video*, an anime produced by Gainax. According to rumor, many of these “otaku” are Gainax staff playing up stereotypes. This gamer, for example, is asked if he has any desire to have sex with “a real girl” (*honmono no onna no ko*), to which the answer is, of course, no, because he is fixated on the two-dimensional girl.

Not surprisingly, *bishōjo* games were caught up in calls for increased regulation of harmful media in the early 1990s. In 1991, the same year as a major crackdown on manga, a boy in junior high school shoplifted the game *Saori: The House of Bishōjo* (Saori: Bishōjo-tachi no yakata, Fairytale, 1991). The content of the game was such that once it came to the attention of police during the investigation, it was not the boy who shoplifted, but rather the production company behind *Saori* that was punished for seducing the boy into crime, if not also perverse desires. *Saori* is the story of a young girl haunted by sex. After seeing a couple having sex in the park, the girl goes home to masturbate, falls asleep and dreams that she has been abducted by two masked men and taken to a mansion where she witnesses incest, torture, homosexual coupling, gang rape and more. The girl awakens to find that it was only a dream, but it is clear that her sexual imagination has been awakened – and that her awakened imagination is perverse. *Saori* almost reads like a nightmare of Japan in the 1990s, when the nation was swept with intense concern about the awakening perverse sexuality of (and for) youth. Despite the fact that the game was not meant for people under the age of 18 – hence the boy’s shoplifting – *Saori* ran afoul of police for not blurring out genitals, which had become the standard for obscenity in Japanese courts (Allison [1996] 2000: 149; also Cather 2012). On November 25, 1991, the president of Fairytale, the production company behind *Saori*, was arrested; the four games named in his indictment were *Saori*, *Dragon City Designation X* (Doragon shiti x shitei, 1991), *Angels’ Afternoon 3: Side Story* (Tenshi-tachi no gogo 3 bangai hen, 1990) and *Angels’ Afternoon 4: Yūko* (Tenshi-tachi no gogo 4: Yūko, 1991). The result of the so-called *Saori* Incident was *bishōjo* game producers banding together to establish the Ethics Organization of Computer Software. An industry self-regulatory body founded in 1992, the Ethics Organization insists on genital

blurring, labeling works as adult and zoning content, which is very similar to the manga industry.

Self-imposed and enforced industry regulations have been largely successful in keeping outside authorities from imposing regulations, which critics continue to demand, emboldened by media linking crimes such as the Aum Shinrikyō cult releasing poison gas on the Tokyo subway to the “otaku generation” raised on a steady diet of “virtual reality.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that computer/console gaming was undergoing massive growth and popularization in the 1990s – when Nintendo, Sega and Sony, three Japanese companies, competed for control of the domestic and international market for console games, and Konami, Elf and Leaf were transforming *bishōjo* games and attracting hoards of fans in Japan – only made the concern that much more urgent. Crucial was how “the burgeoning interest of youth in computer games” was imaginatively tied to “the rising incidence of youth violence” (Gardner 2008: 210, 214-215).<sup>16</sup> Like manga, computer games came to be “regarded as potentially dangerous or as emblems of what is wrong with Japan” (Gardner 2008: 200). In this climate, it was all too easy for neurologist Mori Akio to point to the “social problem” of computer/console games, which allegedly confuse youth about reality, disconnect them from others and lead to out-of-control behavior (Mori 2002: 4, 19). For Mori, these games pose a problem for “the future of Japan” (Mori 2002: 5). If mainstream console games were a threat, then

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<sup>15</sup> Religious studies scholar Richard Gardner remains skeptical about these claims: “Though the term ‘virtual reality’ was vaguely if at all defined, it became the key to explaining how manga, anime, and computer games could harm people’s abilities to distinguish reality and fantasy or reality and representations thereof. [...] There seems to be little evidence that manga and anime can cause people to be unable to distinguish between reality and what they read and view. [...] Such perceptions of the other, it might be noted, parallel nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theories of primitive mentality that viewed ‘primitives’ as unable to make distinctions between things such as word and object or symbol and reality” (Gardner 2008: 216-217).

<sup>16</sup> Concern about *bishōjo* games continued apace with the harmful manga movement in the 1990s and led to regulation. For example, in 1992, Miyazaki Prefecture revised its Youth Protection and Nurturing Ordinance (*seishōnen hogo ikusei jōrei*) to allow for computer games to also be named as “harmful publications” (*yūgai tosho*). Among the games labeled as such was *Cybernetic Hi-School* – the same game being played by the mock gamer in *Otaku no Video*. The response to this pressure has been what adult computer game scenario writer Kagami Hiroyuki calls “excessive self-regulation” (*kajō na jishu kisei*), by which he means reactionary stances that are often overreactions (Kagami 2010: 18; see also Fujimoto 2011: 30).

adult computer games were even more so; console games went on to become “normal” entertainment, while adult computer games absorbed concerns about the “abnormal.” Further emboldened by global reactions against *bishōjo* games, which are increasing out of synch with global norms of imaginary sex and violence, critics in Japan continue to call them “harmful to society” (Nakasatomi [2009] 2013: 5) and demand that the government ban them outright.

The issue becomes more complex when we consider that manga, anime and computer/console games were part of increasingly robust franchises that spread characters across media and material forms in the 1990s. If, as media scholar Marc Steinberg suggests, the tendency was to create a “total media environment,” where characters could be encountered “*anytime, anywhere*” (Steinberg 2012: 79, 166), then this also created media worlds centered on characters and subjects in affective relations with them. In his historical research, Steinberg reveals that, since the 1960s, manga/anime franchises have made characters part of the social worlds of children in Japan. This is considered, to a large extent, to be “normal,” but the growing number of adult manga/anime fans, and adult manga/anime, from the 1970s planted the seeds of the “otaku” problem and “abnormal.” Specifically, by the early 1980s, there were concerns about men being lost in virtual reality and sexually attracted to cute girl characters in manga and anime (more on this below). Even as Miyazaki Tsutomu was being held up as a folk devil, manga, anime and computer/console games featuring *bishōjo* characters exploded in successive booms around *Sailor Moon*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and more; indeed, in the 1990s, *bishōjo* characters were an increasingly notable part of the mainstream media landscape in Japan (Akagi 1993: 231). Affection for these cute girl characters was growing alongside concern about *lolicon*. Even as the Comic Market, where fanzines featuring manga/anime characters in explicit sex scenes, was pushed out

of its venue and subject to criticism, attendance skyrocketed in the 1990s (Comic Market Committee 2014: 26). And *bishōjo* games, which center on affective relations with cute girl characters, also exploded in the 1990s (Azuma 2009: 75-79). The very prevalence of *bishōjo* games specifically and *bishōjo*-oriented men or “otaku” generally in the 1990s helps to explain why they came to represent a social problem for critics.

The discourse about “virtual reality,” associated with manga/anime worlds and made overt in criticism of computer/console games, raises some important points about the politics of imagination. First, men drawn to virtual reality are labeled “otaku” and perceived to be on a flight from “reality” (Kam 2013a: 45, 55, 59). Second, “otaku” imagine and create alternative worlds and realities, which often center on *bishōjo* characters, encourage fan affection toward them and veer into sexually suggestive and/or explicit territory. For critics, this is a perversion of the imagination and its productive capacities (Kam 2015: 183-187, 190). Third, as media theorist Thomas Lamarre argues, “otaku” move in relation to manga/anime characters, and this movement “generates a world, a reality” (Lamarre 2006: 383). *Bishōjo* games, for example, center on affective relations with cute girl characters and move players to bodily response and movement beyond the game, which generates new social worlds and realities. In this way, “virtual reality” has the potential to shift perceptions of “reality” and generate competing realities, which threaten what religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock calls “commonsense reality” (Laycock 2015: 10-14). As Laycock emphasizes, games and play in imaginary worlds are perceived to be “dangerous” – or, to borrow from the debate in Japan, harmful – when they threaten commonsense reality. Commonsense, which, following Hall, is related to hegemony (Hall 1987). Part of the maintenance of hegemony is controlling imagination and play, especially in youth, who are crucial to social reproduction (Laycock 2015: 8-9, 27, 240). The struggle over youth,

sex and imagination is thus also a struggle over reality and the future. In sum, *bishōjo* manga, anime and games are problematic because they: first, orient men toward cute girl characters and, even as the content crosses into “adult” territory, it contributes to perceived perversion and failure to achieve reproductive maturity; second, are associated with a rejection of reality or escape from it; and third, pervert the productive capacities of imagination to generate worlds and realities, potentially shift perceptions of reality and threaten commonsense reality.

## **2.4 Media Effects: Otaku and “the Two-Dimensional”**

Affection for manga / anime characters is a longstanding part of the discourse on “otaku,” which both precedes and continues after the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu and the “otaku panic.” Growing up in Japan, where manga is ubiquitous enough to be compared to “air” (Gravett 2004: 17), manga / anime characters are an intimate part of everyday life. As critic and *bishōjo* game player Honda Tōru (more on him in Chapter 3) explained to me:

Today, in Japan, manga and anime are a part of growing up for kids of all backgrounds. You get used to seeing cute characters everywhere. Many people learn to draw them, and with more and more people drawing, character designs get better and better. The attention paid to manga and anime characters in Japan is unique in the world. Nowhere are there cuter characters in greater numbers than in Japan.<sup>17</sup>

And nowhere is there more affection for these cute characters. It is not uncommon to develop deep attachments to them. As adult manga / anime fans emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, clubs, special events and niche magazines reproduced images of characters as shared objects of affection and desire. When fans wanted more from characters than the producers would provide, they produced fanzines. Sharing affection and desire for manga / anime characters, fictional bodies became real objects of human desire

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interview (September 26, 2009).

(Yoshimoto 2009: 168-170; Nagayama 2014: 83-87). Not confused about the difference between fiction and reality, manga/ anime fans in fact insist on it. Following from the manga/ anime aesthetic, which has been described in terms of flatness (Murakami 2000), manga/ anime fans regularly speak of “the two-dimensional” (*nijigen*), which is associated with manga/ anime and opposed to “the three-dimensional” (*sanjigen*), or the world of humans. The manga/ anime aesthetic is sometimes described as “non-photorealism” (Minotti 2016), and it clearly differs from “reality.” Fans of manga/ anime are attracted to this aesthetic, or the two-dimensional, despite it offering things that are unrealistic – *or precisely for that reason*. In the 1980s, those who were oriented toward manga/ anime characters were said to suffer from a “two-dimensional complex” (*nijigen konpurekkusu*), “two-dimensional fetishism” (*nijikon fechi*) and “two-dimensional syndrome” (*nijikon shōkōgun*) (Tsuchimoto 1989: 102; Schodt 1996: 48; Yamanaka 2010: 17). Others referred to this as the “cute girl syndrome” (*bishōjo shōkōgun*), “Lolita complex” (*rorita konpurekkusu* or *lolicon*) or simply “sickness” (*byōki*). Strikingly, in clubs and at special events, in niche magazines and fanzines, manga/ anime fans claimed their complex, syndrome or sickness as a shared orientation of desire.

It is not without significance that the first people labeled “otaku” in Japan in the early 1980s were part of the perceived problem of orientation toward manga/ anime characters, specifically cute girl characters, as opposed to “the real thing.” At the time, during the so-called “Lolita complex boom” (*rorikon būmu*), specialty magazine *Manga Burikko* was publishing realistic drawings of girls beside photographs of young women posing as Lolitas, which suggests a permeable boundary between fiction and reality. However, from 1983, readers of the magazine began to request that the magazine publish only drawings of cute girl characters (Galbraith 2015a: 24-26). Some readers even self-reflexively identified as people with two-dimensional complexes. Ōtsuka, who

was editor of *Manga Burikko* at the time, recalls that his magazine responded to fans by dropping realistic drawings and photographs, which speaks to the broader moment of growing desire for fiction as such (Ōtsuka 2004: 18-19, 126, 128). This orientation toward fiction is indicated in the title of the magazine – *Manga Burikko*, meaning “comic fake girl/child” – and was underscored during its transformation in 1983 with subtitles such as “Two-Dimensional Idol Comic Magazine.” This emergent orientation of desire was perceived by critics to be a rejection of reality, which was abnormal.

So it was that, in 1983, critic Nakamori Akio wrote a column published in *Manga Burikko* denouncing “otaku” as socially and sexually immature men with a “two-dimensional complex” and “Lolita complex” (Galbraith 2015a: 26-28). In this context, the abnormality of the Lolita complex, or *lolicon*, was tied to attraction to and affection for cute girl characters in manga and anime, and not “the real thing,” regardless of age. Unwilling or unable to “get with” real women, “otaku” were described as lame, failed men. In fact, compared to a putatively normal man such as himself, Nakamori found “otaku” to be “strangely faggy” (Galbraith 2015a: 26-28). The “otaku,” then, is somehow queer. After cancelling Nakamori’s column, Ōtsuka responded to it as discrimination against the readers of *Manga Burikko* and the generation of men who grew up with manga and anime and developed an orientation of desire toward manga/anime characters. For Ōtsuka, it is clear that the problem of “otaku,” which was described as a “reality problem” (*genjitsu mondai*) in the last installment of the column that defined the term in the pages of *Manga Burikko* (Galbraith 2015a: 29-30), is an orientation of desire toward fiction as such. Developing his argument in subsequent publications, Ōtsuka argues that manga and anime do not refer back to reality, but rather to manga and anime, which he describes as “manga/anime realism” (*manga/anime-teki riarizumu*) as

opposed to “naturalism realism” (*shizenshugi-teki riarizumu*) (Ōtsuka 2003: 24).<sup>18</sup> So it is that the *bishōjo* is a cute girl character referring to the manga/ anime world and not the natural world, the two- as opposed to the three-dimensional world. She is a construction, a fiction, a comic fake girl/ child, which real in her own way.

Recognition of an orientation toward fiction, or the cute girl characters of manga and anime as distinct from “reality,” was foundational to the discourse of otaku before the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu, and it continued as a substantial counter-narrative after. One can see this in *The Book of Otaku* (*Otaku no hon*, 1989), where the editors claim that, “[W]e have determined that the characteristic preference of ‘otaku’ called *lolicon* is actually a manifestation of the desire of ‘not wanting to become men.’ By acquiring the ‘platform’ of shared fantasy called the fictional *bishōjo*, it was no longer necessary for boys to force themselves to date flesh-and-blood women” (Editors 1989: 3). Again, “otaku” are somehow queer “men” who are not “men.” Note also the distinction between *bishōjo* and women, which is emphasized by modifying them as “fictional” (*kakū no*) and “flesh-and-blood” (*namami no*). In an interview published in *The Book of Otaku*, feminist thinker Ueno Chizuko takes this to a logical but jarring conclusion that “the Lolita complex is completely different from pedophilia” (Ueno 1989: 134). Like many observers of manga/ anime fans in Japan in the 1980s, Ueno understood *lolicon* to be an orientation toward fiction and thus distinct from sexual desire for flesh-and-blood women, regardless of age. A few years later, in an article in *New Feminism Review*, manga editor and critic Akagi Akira argued that the men attracted to manga/ anime characters were called *lolicon* by peers, but this meant “an existence that seeks two-dimensional images (manga, anime) rather than realistic things” (Akagi 1993: 230). Nevertheless,

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<sup>18</sup> At stake here is precisely how virtual images do not point back to “objective reality,” which calls into question sociologist David Oswell’s argument that regulation of “virtual images” of child abuse is necessary because they are only intelligible through a connection to “objective reality” (Oswell 2006: 258).

imagined connections with Miyazaki during the otaku panic (Schodt 1996: 45-46; Kinsella 2000: 126-127; Ōtsuka 2004: 74-75) deeply compromised the term *lolicon* in the 1990s. It was, and is, still used as slang among manga/ anime fans, but some modify it as “two-dimensional *lolicon*” (*nijigen rorikon*).<sup>19</sup> Again a distinction between fiction and reality is insisted on.<sup>20</sup> Coming out of the debates in the 1990s, the first academic book dedicated fully to a discussion of “otaku” approaches them as sexually oriented toward fiction (Saitō [2000] 2011, chapter one).

Although the arrest of Miyazaki fundamentally changed the image of “otaku,” it is important to note that his relation to “virtual reality” and his “reality problem” differ in significant ways from the original debate in the 1980s. In fact, to conflate the cute girl character and object of affection and desire with reality – as Miyazaki is thought to have done in actualizing his virtual sex crimes – is to miss the point of what was originally thought to be abnormal about “otaku,” which was a conscious distinction between fiction and reality and an orientation toward the former (taken as a rejection of the latter). This earlier “reality problem” concerns socially and sexually immature men oriented toward fictional girls and unwilling or unable to “grow up,” “accept reality” and “get a life.” In the 1990s, in the wake of the arrest of Miyazaki and subsequent otaku panic, this reality problem transformed into concern about manga, anime and computer/ console games warping minds and turning men into pedophiles and potential predators. So, with “reality problems” in Japan, we have, on the one hand, “otaku” as perverts, and, on the other hand, “otaku” as potential pedophiles and predators. These reality problems – the problem of being in flight from reality or not

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<sup>19</sup> A male manga/ anime fan introduced himself to me this way at a dinner party that took place in Ikebukuro on November 28, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> This has been noted among manga/ anime fans in other parts of the world, as well. Even as fans orient themselves to fiction and so “deliberately [...] break from reality” (Zanghellini 2009: 173), they at times “militate against any realistic interpretations” (McLelland 2005a: 69), which reflects an explicit and deliberate orientation toward fiction.

recognizing it, youth and adults lost in virtual reality – converge and become intertwined in contemporary discourse about “otaku.” In any case, reality problems become social problems.

While many manga/anime fans understandably invested a great deal of energy in the 1990s denying that Miyazaki was an “otaku” and had anything to do with them by association, some responded in the opposite way. Having spent over a decade cultivating an orientation of desire toward fiction and defending manga/anime fans, Ōtsuka nevertheless did not reject Miyazaki as an outsider and “other” after his arrest. Reportedly, Ōtsuka was shocked to see one of his books focusing on girls and consumption discovered in Miyazaki’s room (Kinsella 2000: 127). Amid the otaku panic, Ōtsuka called Miyazaki a “friend” (Treat 1993: 355). In recent work, Ōtsuka writes that he attended Miyazaki’s trial due to a sense of responsibility and thinks of him whenever he writes the word “otaku” (Ōtsuka 2015: xxii, xxvi). To rephrase, Ōtsuka, who helped define an orientation toward fiction that would be associated with “otaku,” thinks of a serial killer and child molester when writing the word “otaku.” Even though Ōtsuka was well aware of the orientation of desire toward fiction and found the media response to Miyazaki to be so much more discrimination against “otaku” – as is clear from his dialogue with Nakamori in the book *The Generation of M: Miyazaki and Us* (M no sedai: Bokura to Miyazaki-kun, 1989) – he still perceived Miyazaki’s problem to be a shared one. Unlike many commentators,<sup>21</sup> Ōtsuka was unwilling or unable to dismiss Miyazaki as an outsider and other to “otaku.” Instead, Ōtsuka made Miyazaki’s problem as a perceived manga/anime fan a shared one by stating that, “[T]here are over 100,000

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<sup>21</sup> Consider that psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki, in the first academic book dedicated to “otaku,” clears the field by saying that Miyazaki was an outlier among “otaku,” who have an orientation of desire toward fiction and treat fiction itself as a sex object (Saitō [2000] 2011: 16, 29-30). So it is that Miyazaki Tsutomu is “entirely exceptional” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 30). However, Saitō also notably seems to count Miyazaki among “otaku,” even as he is “virtually the only one to cross that line” between “the otaku’s sexual tastes and their actual sexual practices” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 29). It seems to me that it is precisely because of counting Miyazaki among “otaku” that Saitō insists on the line between imagination and sex acts.

people with the same pastimes as Mr. M” (quoted in Kinsella 2000: 129). Knowing his heinous crimes, Ōtsuka still resisted pushing Miyazaki away, which he perceived to be a process of scapegoating that frees us of the ethical responsibility to face the potential Miyazaki among us and in us: the otaku generation; the generation of M; Miyazaki and us. To my eyes, Ōtsuka appears to be a man who is aware of both the orientation toward fiction and the potential for harm, which is real. By not denying the latter, Ōtsuka advocates taking responsibility for “reality problems.”

## **2.5 Media Affects: Otaku and “Moe”**

Significantly, it was in the 1990s that manga / anime fans began to more openly and persistently discuss their affection for *bishōjo* characters. Specifically, at the beginning of the decade, there emerged among manga / anime fans a discourse of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. On rudimentary online message boards, early adopters of the Internet discussed their attraction to cute girl characters such as Sagisawa Moe, typing in something like, “I am hot for Moe!” Due to the limitations of conversion software, the Japanese language input for the verb *moeru*, meaning “to burn” (as in “to be hot”), would sometimes be misconverted into the homonym “to burst into bud” (Morikawa 2003: 30-32). The result was *moe* as in-group slang. Given that Sagisawa Moe is a grade-schooler, comments about being hot for her no doubt strike many as dangerous, especially given the actions of Miyazaki just a few years earlier, and herein lies an important point: The term *moe* makes explicit that one is responding to a *fictional character*. If Miyazaki was confused about the distinction between fiction and reality or conflated the two, these manga / anime fans knew Moe was a fictional character and were attracted to and responding to her as such. It matters that all of the characters tied to the origin of the term come from manga and anime, because *moe* refers to a response to these fictional characters. *Moe* reflects a growing awareness of attraction to and

affection for fictional characters, which had been developing among manga/ anime fans for decades. To use the word *moe* is to say that the object of affection is fiction, and it allowed manga/ anime fans to discuss their relations to fiction as such. The result was a robust discourse that spread throughout manga/ anime fandom in Japan (for an overview, see Galbraith 2014).

*Moe* marks an emergent form of media literacy, which is learned informally in peer networks. The men gathering online to talk about *bishōjo* characters in Japan in the early 1990s were not a hidden network of pedophiles – a terrifying image deeply tied to concerns about child safety around the world (McLelland 2005a: 76-77; see also boyd 2014, chapter four) – but rather fans of manga, anime and computer/ console games. At a time when *bishōjo* were transitioning into the mainstream (Akagi 1993: 231) – in, for example, the many cute girl characters of *Sailor Moon*, who are explicitly referred to as *bishōjo* – producers appealed to fan audiences by foregrounding characters, which encouraged following their movements and consuming across media and material forms. Affective marketing centered on characters (Clements 2013: 201-205; also Steinberg 2012) was matched by manga/ anime fans sharing their affective responses to fictional characters, learning that they were not alone and developing a language to discuss their shared affection. Talking about *moe*, fans were socialized into relations with fictional characters. While *moe* is by no means limited to male fans responding to *bishōjo* (see for example Galbraith 2015b), the slang originated among men responding affectively to cute girl characters. Further, because men interacting with *bishōjo* characters raise the most concern about potential harm and are key to calls for increased regulation, the importance of the distinction between fiction and reality is clearest and most vigorously insisted on, which allows for the exploration of an ethics of *moe*.

The orientation toward fiction reflexively and publically shared among manga/ anime fans in the discourse of *moe* since the 1990s has consequences for how we understand *bishōjo* games. Undergoing a renaissance in the 1990s, *bishōjo* games focus on interactions with cute girl characters, affect players (i.e., move them to response) and are deeply tied to the discourse of *moe*. Interactions with *bishōjo* characters can involve explicit, extreme sex that would be criminal if it involved human actors. These cute girl characters appear young, and are often indicated to be below the age of 18 – even children, sometimes. Much of the content, then, might be associated with *lolicon*, which has been a keyword in global criticism of (virtual) child pornography in Japan (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). However, when I spoke with Kagami Hiroyuki, a scenario writer for *bishōjo* games and legend in the industry, he firmly insisted that, “*Lolicon* games are not child pornography.”<sup>22</sup> While it might be seen as a predictable defensive posture, the statement makes sense in a context where desire for the cute girl characters in *bishōjo* games, even when they are indicated to be children, are made explicitly and deliberately separate from children. More broadly, Ōtsuka suggests that, “The virtual idols in *bishōjo* games” speak to “desire for simulation, where the bodies of women have come to be unnecessary” (Ōtsuka 2004: 129). Coming from someone such as Ōtsuka, who was witness to the emergence of an orientation of desire toward fiction (“virtual idols”) and also to the trial of a man who blurred the line between fiction and reality to deadly effect, it would do well to understand statements about “the bodies of women” as “unnecessary” to be claims to a normative desire for fiction that is explicitly and deliberately separated from reality. In a way, Ōtsuka is educating fans about an

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<sup>22</sup> Personal interview (February 9, 2015).

orientation toward fiction as part of their informal learning, which reduces the potential for confusion and harm.<sup>23</sup>

This leads directly to the position of men such as Sasakibara Gō, an editor and cultural critic who has worked with Ōtsuka on various books and emerged as an expert on cute girl characters, *moe* and *bishōjo* games, which he began playing in the 1990s. Clearly influenced by Ōtsuka, who is slightly his senior, Sasakibara began thinking about media effects and affects in the aftermath of the actions of Miyazaki Tsutomu, Aum Shinrikyō and others. “I started thinking about the role of human imagination,” Sasakibara tells me over coffee in Shinjuku.<sup>24</sup> Why did he start thinking? “There seemed to be idiots who would actually commit acts of great violence.” Soon after we meet, Sasakibara, author of books such as *A Contemporary History of “Bishōjo:” “Moe” and Characters* (“Bishōjo” no gendaishi: “Moe” to kyarakutā, 2004), produces folders of print outs, tables and charts to help explain things to me. Over the course of our conversation, Sasakibara tells me how he grew up with manga and anime, was attracted to cute girl characters from the late 1970s and worked in the manga/anime industry from the 1980s. He is, quite simply, among those who might be called an “otaku.” Sasakibara is also a father, and he worries about how media will affect his children and whether or not they will be safe. Taking the affect of media as a given, Sasakibara takes issue with those who deny it. “We know that manga and anime have an effect on people,” he tells me, shaking his head furiously. “Of course they do. People claim the influence when it is good and deny it when it is bad. I think that’s dishonest.” Such people might, for example, observe that a generation of young men became interested in soccer because of the

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<sup>23</sup> There is reason to believe that Ōtsuka’s statement is prescriptive, because he writes about a possibility of otaku not stopping at fiction and seeking “reality” (*genjitsu*) (Ōtsuka 2004: 224).

<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from a personal interview (August 31, 2014).

manga/ anime *Captain Tsubasa* (Kyaputen Tsubasa, 1981-), but then deny that media has any power to influence or impact reality after the arrest of Miyazaki.

As someone whose life was changed by manga/ anime, Sasakibara advocates recognizing its impact, even when that takes one into uncomfortable territory. If manga/ anime and cute girl characters impacted Sasakibara, then he is in a similar category as Miyazaki. This is not to say that Sasakibara is in any way a criminal, but he nevertheless recognizes a shared “problem of the heart” (*kokoro no mondai*). Stated simply, the problem is that imaginary sex, violence and crime could potentially lead to harming others. There are three important aspects to this recognition: First, media moves people; second, there is potential for blurring the line between fiction and reality; and third, people have the capacity to harm others. It is not regulation that Sasakibara advocates, but rather personal and shared understanding and respect for the affect of media:

Humans are affected by all the things around them, including media. The question is how do humans think about this affect? What do we do about it? [...] We are greatly affected by media, which is part of our environment. The question is how do we live and not commit crimes? We need to look at how so many people are affected by media and do not commit crimes.

This call to think and live with media that affects is also a call to act responsibly without harming others. This is, I argue, a crucial aspect of manga/ anime fandom in contemporary Japan. In it I see emergent forms of media literacy and ethics. Part of this ethics of affect is drawing and insisting on a line between fiction and reality, which is learned in informal, peer networks and maintained through collective practice and activity (Chapters 3 and 5). *Moe* is not only an affective response to fictional characters, but also shared movement, which supports life (Chapters 4 and 6).

The politics of life around *moe* articulates with the crisis of hegemony and reproduction in Japan since the 1990s, when an increasingly large population of young

people was set adrift by economic unrest and disintegrating institutions. Unable to transition into stable positions, they seemed as lost as Japan itself. Even as the times were changing, success was still determined by the achievement of an ideal of reproductive maturity. Hegemonic masculinity remained particularly stubborn (Dasgupta 2005: 168; McLelland 2005b: 97; Taga 2005: 161), even as the putatively “normal” status was increasingly rare. Many men were perceived as lame and failures. The 1990s was a time of winners and losers, with a growing gap between them and those on the wrong side finding prospects for romantic relationships scarce. Facing a so-called “love gap” (*ren'ai kakusa*), people began to imagine and create solutions. Even as Allison observed the creation of virtual worlds, pets and friends as a major trend in Japan in the 1990s (Allison 2006: 14, 91, 201), so too was the creation of virtual lovers. Consider that Sasakibara was at the time planning on producing an elaborate virtual reality and social gaming system, whereby a virtual girlfriend would be loaded on one’s computer and talk with the player while he was at home, stay in contact by cellphone while he was out and wait for him to return. Sasakibara tells me that he anticipated that having a virtual girlfriend would contribute to psychological wellbeing, which comes from caring and being cared for. “It almost worked,” Sasakibara says, wryly. “But the technology wasn’t quite there.”<sup>25</sup> Instead the 1990s saw the explosion of *bishōjo* characters in manga and anime, the rise of *bishōjo* games simulating intimate relationships and the discourse of *moe*, which points toward affectionate relationships with fictional characters that are real and socially recognized.

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<sup>25</sup> On December 15, 2016, years after I heard this story in the field, a former student sent me a link to a company in Japan marketing a virtual partner along the lines that Sasakibara imagined. Watching the promotional video for Gatebox, where a young Japanese man says that someone is waiting for him at home, I could not help but think of Sasakibara’s system of “care.” Technology has caught up, it seems. See: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkcKaNqfykg>>.

In this way, just as virtual idols and girlfriends were imagined and created in *bishōjo* games, a new reality of life and love with fictional characters was imagined and created in Japan in the 1990s. These characters not only addressed the love gap, but also encouraged imagining and creating new forms of life and love. Even as these alternatives become more common, they are imagined as problems. So it is that sociologist Yamada Masahiro, who gained notoriety in the 1990s by identifying problems such as “parasite singles,” came to be concerned about men finding “pseudo partners” in “virtual worlds” (Yamada 2014: 18, 152). In the perceived flight from reality, critics see problems for the nation and its welfare and future. For example, one of the reasons for the declining population is said to be “a new breed of Japanese men, the otaku, who love manga, anime and computers – and sometimes show little interest in sex” (Rani 2013). These “otaku” are interested in sex – maybe not the sex critics consider “real,” but sex nonetheless. It is not that no Japanese are having sex (Aoki 2016), but rather too many Japanese are having perverse sex with imaginary others. In addition to concerns about imaginary sex, violence and crime, which are threats that might be realized, a serious problem for Japan and its future is posed by the explosive growth on manga, anime and computer / console games featuring *bishōjo* characters and dedicated to triggering affective responses in fans, and the seemingly endless expansion of events such as the Comic Market, where fans express and share their affection for such characters. The fact that manga / anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game players specifically are moved by fictional characters to the extent that they claim to be married to them – even as the marriage rate plummets; virtual families on the rise even actual families decline – is taken to be paradigmatic of the perversity of the contemporary moment. In any case, the situation is abnormal and something needs to be done. There is growing tension between those imagining and creating virtual reality and worlds in and

around manga, anime and computer/console games and those seeking to (re)establish and maintain the hegemonic socio-political order in Japan. Along the way, imagined perversity has become a serious problem.

## **2.6 Imagined Perversion in Japan**

Rising during the crisis of hegemony and reproduction, in 1999, Ishihara Shin'tarō, co-author of *The Japan That Can Say No* ("No" to ieru Nihon, 1989) and a political firebrand known for concerns about the abnormal nation, became the Governor of Tokyo. Resonating with national politics, Ishihara campaigned against "harmful environments" (*yūgai kankyō*), which effectively expanded the scope of "harm" (Nagaoka 2010: 223).<sup>26</sup> With characteristic confidence in his populist positions, Ishihara called for revision of the Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths, which targeted certain adult manga as harmful and to be removed from the environment. Receiving significant resistance from advocates of freedom of expression, industry organizations and manga/anime fans, who perceived the revision to be a power grab by authorities who want to dictate morality (McLelland 2011: 355-361), Ishihara found himself in the position of having to answer to critics. At a press conference on December 17, 2010, Ishihara was asked by a reporter to explain the need for increased regulation. Unhappy that he was being questioned, Ishihara responded bluntly:

There are after all perverts in the world. Unfortunate people with messed up DNA. People like that, with thoughts like that... Well, feeling ecstasy from reading and writing this stuff is fine, after all. But I don't think that it would be allowed in Western society. Japan is too open. After all, it's abnormal, right? [...] A man can't marry a 7- or 8-year-old girl or rape an

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, at one point, Japanese politicians debated whether or not *Winnie the Pooh* might be harmful. Ishihara found allies in people such as Matsuzawa Shigefumi, governor of Kanagawa Prefecture, who designated Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) a harmful publication. Responding to his critics, Matsuzawa appealed to the "silent majority" (*sairento majoriti*), who understood, supported and indeed demanded action in the face of social perversion. For more on the "silent majority," see Hall et al 1978: 163-164, 221, 241-242.

innocent child, but somehow this should be allowed if the stories are drawings? Such things serve no purpose. I think that there is harm and not a single benefit from them.<sup>27</sup>

Note five things: First, while the Tokyo Ordinance was meant to ensure the healthy development of youth, who should not see certain kinds of manga, the reason for its revision shifts here to adults who want to produce and consume such manga; second, these adults are perverts and a threat to youth (who might also become such adults); third, the problem is the thoughts that they think, which are perverse enough to suggest that they might be genetically damaged; fourth, such perversion might be tolerable, but it is too open in Japan at present and would not be allowed in “the West,” which becomes a normative and aspirational model (despite Ishihara’s own writing suggesting the need to refuse foreign pressure); and fifth, this manga caters to perverts and is nothing but harmful. On this last point, there is a subtle blurring of various strands of discourse about reality problems, where virtual rape raises the specter of the potential pedophile and predator, while imagining marriage to a child character suggests other perversions. When the reporter pressed the issue of harm, Ishihara snapped that, “It’s obvious that we should regulate this stuff.” Just looking at the images is enough to know that they cross a line. Those who resist this commonsense position are perverts, sympathizers or enablers.

Employing familiar strategies of smearing and silencing opponents as “porn politicians” and “the enemy of children” (Fujimoto 2011: 37; recall the actions of Asō Tarō and comments by Yamada Tarō),<sup>28</sup> Ishihara succeeded in pushing through

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<sup>27</sup> The transcript has been removed from the Metropolitan Government’s website, but is still available at: <[http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumi-s\\_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280](http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumi-s_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280)>. See also: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2edE4kd0O1w>>. For more on Ishihara, see Nagaoka 2010: 13, 21-23.

<sup>28</sup> Feminist thinker and educator Fujimoto Yukari draws attention to how problematic healthy youth ordinances and strategies for passing them can be for free speech, thinking and the democratic process (Fujimoto 2011: 30-31). Manga historian Nagaoka Yoshiyuki also draws attention to the problems of policing thought and paternalist creation of “youth” as a category to be protected and nurtured (Nagaoka 2010: 261; also McLelland 2011: 359-361). At a conference I attended called “Regulation and Freedom of Expression:

revisions to the Tokyo Ordinance in December 2010. The language of the revised ordinance targets manga, anime and games depicting “sexual or pseudo sexual acts that would be illegal in real life” and “sexual or pseudo sexual acts between close relatives whose marriage would be illegal in real life” (see McLelland 2011). Despite the mass resistance it met, the revised ordinance expands the scope of harm to depictions of any sex act that would be illegal in “real life.” Essentially, Ishihara’s position is that it is better to err on the side of protecting children from perversion, and it finds supporters in unexpected places. For example, Maeda Toshio, an artist known for adult manga depicting ultra-violent sex with tentacled monsters, explains the need to regulate certain manga:

But the point is, it looks pedophilic. In some manga, the female, you know, the victim, looks six or seven years old. I hate it. The Tokyo governor tried to propose a strict law against such pedophile manga, and many famous manga artists were so against it because it is against freedom of speech or such crap. But actually, I supported such a law because if you had a baby girl, or girl, as your daughter, and something happened... It would be so bad, right? So before something happens, we should do something about it. My manga, I think, as far as I’m concerned, is just designed for grownups. It’s completely 18+. It’s completely different from *moe* style, with, you know, the little girls as victims. (Quoted in Schley and O’Mara 2015).

Again, it is not the youth, but the perverted adults who might prey on them that are in question. The message could not be any clearer: Perverts are putting our “baby girls” and “daughters” in danger. “So before something happens, we should do something about it” – a perfect summation of pre-emptive policing. This is notably in line with contemporary global concern for “exploitation of the non-existent child, possible future harm that could be caused to other children, and non-exploitative relationships” (Ost

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The Arrest of Rokudenashiko and the Politics of Bodily Expression” (*Hyōgen no kisei to jiyū: Rokudenashiko taihō jiken, soshite, shintai hyōgen no poritikusu*) on September 15, 2014, there was a general sense from the lawyers, educators, artists and critics in attendance that Japan is in the grip of an ongoing and heightened concern for sexual expression, which is leading to state intervention.

2009: 89), for example those between perverted men and cute girl characters in manga, anime and computer/console games. As legal scholar Suzanne Ost puts it, “Any behaviour related to child pornography, whether real, potential, remote or virtual, is thought to give rise to a risk of ‘harm’” (Ost 2009: 89; also Attwood and Smith 2010: 187). In Japan, as elsewhere, so-called “cognitive disorders” are thought to lead to sexual crimes (Kagami 2010: 13; McLelland 2012: 479). This position is increasingly commonsense, and those who argue against it are perverts and the enemy of children.

In recent years, advocates of increased regulation of imaginary sex, violence and crime in Japan are gaining support from international organizations that argue that the nation does not do enough to regulate child pornography, despite legally banning its production, sale and distribution in 1999 (Leheny 2006, chapter four).<sup>29</sup> The current issue is not recordings of sex acts involving children, but rather “virtual child pornography,” which does not include an actual child in its production, but rather is “text and images that are purely imaginary and fictional” (McLelland 2005a: 63). To root out virtual child pornography, countries such as Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom have already expanded the legal definition of “person” to include fictional characters (McLelland 2013). This raises many questions – Neil Gaiman, known for writing for comic books, quips, “I think it’s nonsensical in every way that it could possibly be nonsensical” (Gaiman 2008) – but it is nevertheless expected that Japan will fall in line for the sake of protecting children. In the United States, obscenity law and other regulations limit virtual child pornography while still protecting freedom of expression, but case law in Japan has narrowly defined obscenity in terms of genital exposure (Allison [1996] 2000: 149-150; Cather 2012: 269-271), thus missing the content and context

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<sup>29</sup> Leheny argues that this law was pushed through with international pressure, and used to police problematic youth populations rather than protect children (Leheny 2006: 51).

of sex acts in adult manga, anime and computer / console games, which can involve underage characters.<sup>30</sup>

In Japan, activism for increased regulation has been slowed by robust resistance to any form of censorship and “thought policing,” which reduces the ability to pass broad measures. So it was, in June 2014, that the Japanese government passed new legislation against child pornography, which outlawed so-called “simple possession.” International critics were outraged, however, that Japanese legislators did not take the opportunity to outlaw virtual child pornography as well. In a widely circulated segment for CNN, a reporter enters a store in Tokyo, picks up a manga book and describes its content as “so graphic, so sexually explicit, [that] we turned our undercover cameras off” (Ripley et al 2014). The lurid details are left to the imagination, but the implications are not. The reporter interviews Japanese activists arguing for connections between adult manga and the molestation of children. In the end, one wonders, along with the reporter, if “cartoons might be fueling the darkest desires of criminals” (Ripley et al 2014). Note the emphasis on potentiality: Cartoons *might* be fueling the darkest of desires, which *might* lead to sex crimes; adults *might* be criminals, and children *might* be harmed. The potential of harm is enough to be incredulous about why the Japanese government is not doing more to protect children. Because of its paucity in regulating virtual child pornography, Japan has been shamed by the United Nations, UNICEF, ECPAT and the US Department of State, among others, as an “international hub for the production and trafficking of child pornography” (Hellmann 2014). Notice how virtual has dropped out here, which demonstrates the collapsing together of virtual and actual forms in condemnation of Japan. This in turn emboldens politicians such as Ishihara.

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<sup>30</sup> Historically, a de facto legal ban in Japan on depictions of pubic hair might have encouraged the use of young models, in combination with cultural understandings of artistic value and child models as asexual, which thereby allowed pornographers to avoid scrutiny under obscenity laws.

Responding to reports that paint Japan as “the Empire of Child Pornography” (Adelstein and Kubo 2014), on September 1, 2014, *TV Takkuru*, a popular television show hosted by iconoclastic filmmaker Beat Takeshi, hosted a debate about whether or not the nation should do more to regulate imaginary sex, violence and crime (TV Takkuru 2014). The question, specifically, was, “Is it necessary to regulate violent *lolicon* anime?” The objects under discussion ranged from hardcore adult manga, anime and computer / console games depicting explicit sex with children – which cannot be shown on television, and thus the details are left to the imagination – to suggestive and sexualized images of underage characters. A panel of guests, including both a criminal psychologist and a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, watched as images of cartoon characters flashed before their eyes. This one is in grade school. She is shown in the nude when transforming into a magical girl. Here she is in the bathtub with her friend. How about this one? The protagonist is again in grade school, but she is in love with her teacher. An image of her pulling her panties down. What connects these examples, the panel is told, is that the protagonists are *bishōjo*. Three men are brought on and introduced as otaku who are fans of *bishōjo*. The panel has questions. Do they have a Lolita complex? Are they attracted to normal women? One of them, a 21-year-old university student and gamer, admits to committing crimes in his imagination. Leaving the studio, a camera crew follows another group of *bishōjo* fans onto the street and into the stores where they shop for comics, cartoons and computer / console games. The men – a 22-year-old university student, two company employees, 21 years old and 24 years old – are said to have no experience with the opposite sex and be in love with *bishōjo*. One tells the camera crew that he is married, but then holds up an image of a cartoon character. This is his “wife” (*yome*) – a cartoon character that is 10 years old. Even as the man happily explains his object of affection and desire, the viewer notices a sign behind

him indicating that school children commute through the area. Over images of streets and stores overflowing with cute girl characters in various media and material forms, a voice over tells the panel that the number of *bishōjo* fans is increasing in Japan. “What do you think of this reality?” Back on the panel, the psychologist, who is said to have examined over 10,000 criminals, says that regulation is necessary, because imaginary crimes “will escalate.” The politician agrees, drawing attention to a case in Kumamoto Prefecture where a three-year-old girl was murdered by “a lover of cartoons depicting child rape.”

Note the return of various strands of discourse about reality problems concerning otaku, or *bishōjo*-oriented men. On the one hand, the *bishōjo* fans on *TV Takkuru* are perverts who are oriented toward and involved in intimate relations with cute girl characters. They are abnormal, weird and sexually and socially immature; although more funny than dangerous, one hopes that they can also be attracted to “normal women” like “normal men.” On the other hand, the *bishōjo* fans are potential pedophiles and predators. One commits crimes in his imagination. Another is attracted and attached to cute girl characters that are children – 10 years old! – and is interviewed in front of a sign indicating that children might be nearby. We are told that imaginary crimes will escalate and spill over into reality. Look at the case in Kumamoto, which immediately brings to mind Miyazaki Tsutomu. In the competing and interwoven strands of discourse about otaku are, on the one hand, oriented toward cute girl characters. This speaks to an orientation to the two-dimensional and fiction, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was summarized in *The Book of Otaku* (1989) and made explicit in the discourse of *moe* in the 1990s. However, on the other hand, otaku are potentially harboring dangerous desires that they might act on, which makes them a reserve army of criminals; this is the discourse summarized in the *Generation of M*

(1989), which has spread since the 1990s. In either case, these otaku and their desires are abnormal. They might have a problem with reality, or be a real problem, but there is a problem nonetheless. Hence the question: “What do you think of this reality?” Whatever it is, it is not right. Something should be done, be it a return to reality or stopping imaginary crimes through regulation. It does not matter if these men and their imagined orientation and crimes are not common, because there is an imagined crisis that requires action – some sort of intervention, law and order – to return us to normal reality.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The year is 2113. Japan is a stable, safe and prosperous island nation in a world that has descended into chaos. The secret to Japan’s success is the Sibyl System, a central computer that constantly monitors the populace. More specifically, the Sibyl System conducts scans to gauge the population’s mental states and the probability that anyone will commit a crime. If a person’s “crime coefficient” exceeds a certain level, authorities will be dispatched and the person will be pursued, apprehended or killed. These so-called “latent criminals” are put into specific places and occupations where their freedom is limited. It does not matter they have not committed a crime and have no intention of doing so. Latent criminals are arrested and neutralized so that the crime never happens. This is the world of *Psycho-Pass* (Saiko pasu), a hit media franchise in Japan that began in 2012. *Psycho-Pass* resonates with Philip K. Dick’s “The Minority Report” (1956), which, fittingly for its subject matter, predicted the phenomenon of “preemptive policing” that would come in the 1970s (Hall et al 1978: 42). Similarly, *Psycho-Pass* predicts a future of policing virtual crimes, which is to say crimes that have yet to be actualized. It predicts a future of virtual regulation, which turns virtual criminals into actual targets of the law. The author of *Psycho-Pass* is Urobuchi Gen, who got his start as a scenario writer for *bishōjo* games. Like so many others in the *bishōjo*

gaming industry, Urobuchi might be wondering when he too will be marked as a latent criminal.

Such a future may seem unlikely. After all, Urobuchi has been recognized as a breakout talent after penning the script for *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (Mahō shōjo Madoka magika, 2011), a television anime that won Grand Prize at the Japan Media Arts Awards. Yet Urobuchi's earlier work for *bishōjo* games such as *The Song of Saya* (Saya no uta, Nitroplus, 2003) is certainly enough to get him on many watchlists. *Saya* is the story of a man who sees the world covered in gore and people as hideous monsters, even as he perceives Saya, a Lovecraftian creature from another dimension, as an attractive girl. The two move in together, become lovers and murder humans and consume their flesh. The creature appears to her college-aged roommate as a young girl, who, in addition to having sex with him, is brutally raped by their neighbor and in turn rapes a woman, tortures her and turns her into a sex slave. *Saya* is on the darker and more disturbing side of *bishōjo* games, but it is ultimately a love story about a co-dependent and violent relationship that leads the characters, and the player, into the depths of madness. *Madoka* is less direct in this, but tells the story of magical girls who trade their souls for wishes and are doomed to fight witches until they go mad and become them. It, too, is ultimately a love story between two of these magical girls, and Urobuchi intended it as a commentary about child soldiers and the struggle for survival (Nihon keizai shimbun 2011). Fans fell in love with the cute girl characters – indicated to be about 14 years old – and produced fanzines imagining sex with and between them, even as producers spun out endless media and material to capitalize on fans' affection. Just another day in the manga/anime world. But then why are images of *Madoka* appearing in the *TV Takkuru* debate about the need for increased regulation of imaginary sex, violence and crime (TV Takkuru 2014)? Why are these images being discussed in terms of *lolicon* – in the same

space as questions about marrying *bishōjo* characters and crimes against children? Potential harm that demands preemptive action? Perhaps Urobuchi's imagination of sex and violence involving cute girl characters in *Saya* and *Madoka* is abnormal and dangerous. Perhaps we ought to do something about it. Perhaps the future of *Psycho-Pass* is not so unlikely after all.

The groundwork for all of this was established in the response to “otaku” in Japan in the 1990s. This was a time when a crisis of hegemony and reproduction led to “vague anxiety” (Leheny 2006: 3-5, 14, 44) and concern about media, youth and sexuality (Allison 2006: 75). In Japan, as in other parts of the world, many were fearful for and of youth (boyd 2014: 17), who might become the target of abnormal “otaku” desires or develop them and target others. The massive growth of manga, anime and games, including adult forms, in the 1990s made them a cause of concern as potentially “harmful” (Kinsella 2000: 131-133). At the same time, the fact that manga/anime was a growing market during the recessionary 1990s, and increasingly spreading around the world and winning hearts and minds, caught the attention of politicians. As Cather points out in her analysis of a high-profile obscenity trial against adult manga, it was precisely because manga was considered important economically, socially and politically that regulatory intervention became necessary (Cather 2012: 246).<sup>31</sup> A similar dynamic was at work with computer/console games in the 1990s, when Japan emerged as the global center of console gaming and games were recognized as a creative sector of national importance, which articulated with concern about their impact on youth and sexuality and a desire to police them. The imaginary sex, violence and crime of *bishōjo*

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<sup>31</sup> It is not surprising that this trial brought together concern for the perceived abnormality of “otaku,” the healthy development of youth and the future of Japan. That is, as Cather explains, “the fact that manga (and otaku) were symbols of national importance only fueled that state’s desire to police them” (Cather 2012: 246).

games, along with their perverse and perverting imaginary, made them a target for regulation.

Against the backdrop of increased concern about imaginary sex, violence and crime, this chapter has shown how the 1990s also saw the emergence of discourse about *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. I argue that the use of this word indicates emergent media literacy and ethics, which are learned in informal, peer networks. Manga/ anime fans have learned to separate “fiction” and “reality” and orient themselves toward fiction as such, which is what they respond to affectively. There is a deeper legacy here of manga/ anime fans or “otaku” in the 1980s, who, in their orientation of desire toward fiction, were perceived by critics to have a “reality problem” (Galbraith 2015a: 29-30). Five factors contributed to the emergence of the discourse of *moe* in the 1990s: First, a generation had grown up with manga, anime and computer/ console games and in intimate relation to fictional characters; second, they had the legacy of adult fans, media and desires to build on; third, more manga, anime and computer/ console games than ever before were being produced, and they featured more *bishōjo* characters designed to be more attractive to fans and encourage consumption across media and material forms; fourth, economic and social unrest, combined with persistent hegemonic gender ideals that made people feel like failures, contributed to seeking out alternatives in relationships with fictional characters; and fifth, the Internet helped these fans find one another and events and spaces to gather and share their affection. This led to emergent, alternative social worlds and realities (Condry 2013: 203), which can be as transformative as they are perceived to be threatening (Laycock 2015: 10-14). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, *moe* moved from online discussions to Akihabara, a neighborhood in eastern Tokyo associated with computers and *bishōjo* games. So it was – under the watch of Governor Ishihara

Shin'tarō, no less – that Akihabara transformed into “the Moe City” (*moeru toshi*) (Morikawa 2003), where affection for cute girl characters has come to be more open and visible than anywhere else in Tokyo, Japan and the world. In the next chapter, we turn to Akihabara – where *bishōjo* game production companies, retailers and players gather together – to discuss imaginary sex in public.

### 3. Akihabara: “The *Moe City*,” or, Imaginary Sex in Public

*Bishōjo* characters are everywhere: on signboards in the street, on storefronts and packaging, in the form of figurines; their voices can be heard coming from looped video clips played on television and computer screens; women are costuming as them. Men are lined up on the street and in stores to make reservations and buy newly released adult computer games featuring cartoony cute girl characters, or what they call *bishōjo* games. They move en masse from one store to the next looking for the best price and promotional extras on specific titles. Many have oversized bags emblazoned with images of *bishōjo* characters and stuffed with dozens of *bishōjo* games; rolled up posters featuring *bishōjo* characters as pin-up girls stick out like flag poles. Some wear t-shirts with images of *bishōjo* characters on them; the cute cartoony faces are large and gaze out at the viewer with massive, emotive eyes, drawing attention away from the faces of the men wearing them. Using their smartphones while in line, the men scroll through company websites and fan pages and scan discussion threads to decide where to walk next. A few watch live-streaming broadcasts from local reporters who describe the street, stores and swag to look out for. A car decorated with images of *bishōjo* characters drives by; in the passenger seat next to the driver is a body pillow emblazoned with a full-body image of a *bishōjo* character who is partially nude and blushing; photographs are snapped with smartphones and posted online, which invites comments about how embarrassing the display of affection is, or, in the vernacular of those assembled, how “painful” (*itai*). Clearly this is a pain that is shared and is also pleasurable.

This is “the Day of Erotic Games” (*erogē no hi*), when, once a month, new *bishōjo* games go on sale at stores in the Akihabara neighborhood in eastern Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> It is an event and experience, something to be a part of, says Lonely Fukusuke, who runs a *bishōjo* game promotion called Erogē Sixteen in Akihabara.<sup>2</sup> Despite his nickname, Lonely is anything but today, as he is surrounded by dozens of *bishōjo* game players. With proof of purchase of a *bishōjo* game, Lonely provides these men with a place to sit and a discount on drinks. Lonely also organizes a show hosted by voice actresses working in the *bishōjo* game industry, and invites guests from production companies to stop by and talk to the assembled players about new and upcoming releases. Most of the guests are from production companies located in Akihabara, but others come from Nagoya, Osaka and even Hokkaidō far to the north. There is a great deal of intimate sharing about playing *bishōjo* games, what happens behind the scenes of production and more. There are also promotional giveaways, which start with the guest asking, “Does anyone want this?” Hands immediately shoot into the air and men shout, “Yes! Me! I want it!” A quick group game of rock-paper-scissors decides the winner. Inspired by the lively discussion, the men start to talk to one another about what games they have bought today and why. Laughter fills the air. Looking on, Lonely Fukusuke smiles.

This chapter discusses Akihabara as the center of the *bishōjo* gaming world and as a space for socializing players into it. Akihabara is a space of imagination that excites the imagination. For manga and anime fans generally, it is “the Holy Land of Otaku” (*otaku no sei'chi*), but, as design theorist Morikawa Ka'ichirō points out, it is more specifically “the Moe City” (*moeru toshi*) (Morikawa 2003). Akihabara is dominated by people responding affectively to fictional characters; it is a space where affection for *bishōjo* characters has become more open and visible than anywhere else in Tokyo, Japan

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief introduction, see: <<http://www.kk1up.jp/archives/n40776.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview (January 26, 2015). For more on the event, see: <<http://www.akihabara-sixteen.com/>>.

or the world. It is a space produced by spectacle: affection for cute girl characters, sex, media and material culture. If people, thrilled to join the crowd in spectacular spaces such as Times Square in New York City, used to think, *“Let’s go and be with them and live”* (Berman 2009: xxvi), then of Akihabara they think, *“Let’s go and be with bishōjo characters and bishōjo-oriented men and live.”* Akihabara is also a space of imagined dangers. For critics of desire for *bishōjo* characters – who in their cartoony cuteness appear young, are often explicitly below the age of 18 and are sometimes even indicated to be children – Akihabara is a symbol of the scourge of “virtual child pornography,” which is spreading from Japan like a contagious disease (Lah 2010; Nakasatomi [2009] 2013). Photographs of *bishōjo* game players in Akihabara are used to decry Japan as a nation of perverts, pedophiles and predators (Adelstein and Kubo 2014). This chapter approaches Akihabara as a space of contested imaginings of media and its a/effects. Drawing on the work of literary critics and social theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (Berlant and Warner 1998; Warner 2000; Warner 2002), I look at Akihabara as a public culture where imaginary sex is getting played out, practiced and politicized. In my ethnographic interviews, encounters and participation in the public culture of imaginary sex, I observe an “ethics of queer life” (Warner 2000: 33) getting both practiced and contested.

### **3.1 A Space of Imagination**

Located in eastern Tokyo, “Akihabara” refers to an area comprised of Soto Kanda and Kanda Sakumachō in Chiyoda Ward and Akihabara in Taitō Ward. Put somewhat differently, “Akihabara” is an area imagined out of other areas. Indeed, more than anything, Akihabara is imaginary. In Japan, it is the most famous of the so-called “electric towns,” or areas where stores selling home appliances, electronics and computers cluster together. With the rise of Japanese electronics globally since the 1980s,

Akihabara has been permanently inscribed in the global imaginary as a symbol of Japan, technology and the future.<sup>3</sup> When Japanese comics and cartoons – manga and anime, respectively – reached unprecedented heights of production and distribution in Japan in the 1990s, the dense clustering of stores in Akihabara selling such media and related material and merchandise brought renewed interest to the area. Locally, manga and anime were bright spots in a recessionary economy, and many pointed to Akihabara as a source of emergent creativity (Kikuchi 2008). Globally, Akihabara appeared to be the symbolic center of manga and anime, which drew tourists. The circulation of manga and anime around the world and the buzz surrounding them was a source of pride for Japanese politicians, who rallied to the promotional discourse of “Cool Japan” and to Akihabara (see Galbraith 2010). Through all this, Akihabara has emerged as one of the most photographed, filmed and talked about locations in Japan. Despite being only a neighborhood in Tokyo, it is one of the few Japanese place names known outside the country. It is also infamous in Japan, where everyone has heard of it and has something to say about it.

Looming large in the imagination, Akihabara is surprisingly concentrated and circumscribed geographically. The most common point of access is Japan Railways Akihabara Station, which is a stop for the Yamanote, Chūō-Sōbu and Keihin-Tōhoku Lines. Although it is not indicated on city maps, the generally accepted boundaries of Akihabara are Kanda River to the south, Kuramaebashi Street to the north, Shōwa Street to the east and Shōheibashi Street to the west. Exiting Akihabara Station from the Electric Town Gate, one is immediately in the area associated with manga, anime and computer/console games. Continuing west one arrives at Chūō Street, or main/center street, which is where the majority of shops associated with otaku media and material

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<sup>3</sup> Science fiction author William Gibson did much to popularize the area in this way.

culture are located. Along Chūō Street and streets parallel to it, hundreds of stores selling comic books, cartoons, computer/console games, character figurines and costumes, music, fanzines and other related merchandise are clustered together. These stores not only occupy basements and backstreets, but also massive eight-story buildings. Computer gaming arcades and cafés where staff dress up and perform as characters are also common features of the landscape. Walking down Chūō Street, the visual presence of cartoon characters in various media and material forms is not only apparent, but also overwhelming. Strikingly, this visual presence disappears almost immediately when one crosses Kanda River, Shōheibashi Street, Kuramaebashi Street or Shōwa Street.<sup>4</sup>

Given its concentration, one might imagine that the development of Akihabara was planned and its borders secured by official zoning, but such is not the case. Rather, as Morikawa convincingly argues (Morikawa 2003: 14, 51-62), the contemporary formation of Akihabara was unplanned. By the 1980s, stores in Akihabara were catering to computer specialists and hobbyists (Morikawa 2003: 42-44). Over the years, there was a notable gendering of the urban space, which attracted primarily young men. Reflecting this gender bias, adult computer games produced by and for men were sold alongside computers in Akihabara.<sup>5</sup> These adult computer games featured manga/anime-style characters, and appealed to a generation that had grown up with manga and anime and in intimate relation to cartoon characters designed to be increasingly attractive and appearing in adult media. Even as computers became more popular in the 1990s, adult computer games became compatible with the Windows operating system, which greatly

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<sup>4</sup> The tolerance for these images also drops off rapidly. Design theorist Morikawa Ka'ichirō relayed (public talk on November 22, 2008) the experience of trying to use a *bishōjo* image for an exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Ebisu, a posh part of Tokyo conceptually quite distant from Akihabara, only to be asked to please restrain himself.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Messe Sanoh on Chūō Street began to stock *bishōjo* games from around 1987.

increased their reach. Further, Konami's *Tokimeki Memorial* (Heart Beat Highschool, 1994), a dating simulator game without sex scenes, became a mainstream national phenomenon and brought new players and producers to *bishōjo* games. The boom in *bishōjo* games overlapped with the boom in manga and anime in the 1990s, as well as more openly shared awareness among fans of the attractiveness of fictional characters. The result was an emergent discourse of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. Stores appealing to fans of manga/ anime characters saw an opportunity in Akihabara, which was populated by *bishōjo* gamers, and relocated to or opened branches there. This movement transformed Akihabara into a space of open and shared affection for manga/ anime characters, or what Morikawa calls "the *Moe* City." With stores such as Messe Sanoh, Gamers, Trader, Gecchuya, Sofmap, Toranoana, Medio and Melon Books advertising *bishōjo* games in Akihabara in the early 2000s, it is no wonder that these comprised the majority of the images on the street at the time (Morikawa 2003: 1-2, 4-5, 95; also Kagami 2010: 132). The central role of *bishōjo* games in the contemporary formation of Akihabara accounts for its bias toward men attracted to *bishōjo* characters.

At the time of my fieldwork in Akihabara in 2014 and 2015, despite advances in digital distribution online, the majority of *bishōjo* games were still sold as software on physical disks housed in large paper boxes emblazoned with alluring cover art and placed on shelves inside brick-and-mortar stores. While one could buy them through online retailers such as Amazon.co.jp, shipping was limited to Japan and there was a good deal of concern about certain titles being denied visibility for adult content that somehow or another crossed the line. The more extreme, underground and fan-created stuff could more readily be found offline in limited circulation in Akihabara. Moreover, browsing was easier in dedicated stores that had multiple games on display in the same space, eye-catching advertisements and organized displays. In stores, one was a gamer

among gamers, which was comforting. Further, buying at stores, one could solicit advice from staff, who were knowledgeable about the industry and offered insight and guidance. At stores in Akihabara, players expected that along with their purchase would come premiums such as limited-edition box art, swag and signed original art. For these reasons, a surprisingly large number of *bishōjo* game players still left their homes and physically visited stores, bought software packages and took them home to load on home computers. Some kept the boxes in collections, but, due to small living spaces and the cost of *bishōjo* games – on average, 9,000 yen, or US\$90 – they would often sell used games to second-hand stores. Because new releases were relatively infrequent and rigidly scheduled, players gathered in Akihabara on certain days of the month to buy and sell games. In the second decade of the new millennium, when global gaming was increasingly dominated by digital downloads, *bishōjo* games were still stubbornly material and local.

*Bishōjo* game production companies are also concentrated in Akihabara. Although there are no official numbers on geographic distribution, the vast majority of *bishōjo* game production companies that I visited were located in unassuming office and apartment buildings in and around Akihabara. The concentration of production companies in the area was presented to me as common knowledge and indeed common sense. The president of Front Wing, for example, told me that his production company – one of the largest in the industry – was located just a few minutes from Akihabara Station because it is where everyone and everything is.<sup>6</sup> Being located in Akihabara makes it easier to build relationships with other companies, sellers and dedicated players, as well as to build up promotional discourse. On the other end of the spectrum, I was often told the story of Nitroplus, which, although it still produces adult computer

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<sup>6</sup> Personal interview (July 2, 2013).

games, was perceived to have left the tight-knit collective. Enjoying mainstream success, the company created distance from its past by literally distancing itself from Akihabara and moving to the Skytree, a national landmark in the Oshiage neighborhood of Tokyo and symbol of Japan's creative future.<sup>7</sup> When meeting with staff from production companies in Akihabara, they often suggested we talk in spots away from the station and Chūō Street, which they saw as crawling with *bishōjo* game players who might overhear sensitive conversations. To create distance, we would meet outside of the imagined limits of Akihabara – at restaurants and cafés on the other side of Kuramaebashi or Shōwa Street. The boundary between inside and outside, while imagined, was clearly and consistently drawn.

In Akihabara, through collective activity and practice, a space of imaginary sex is imagined out of the built environment. This is what it means for Akihabara to be the *Moe City*: It is a space where the affective response to fictional characters has transformed the built environment, where otaku movement in relation to *bishōjo* “generates a world, a reality” (Lamarre 2006: 383). While scholars such as Morikawa come to Akihabara to learn about *moe*, others are less celebratory. In a dialogue with Morikawa, who was in charge of an exhibit on Akihabara at the Venice Biennale in 2004, Okada Toshio, one of the founders of anime production studio Gainax and a legend in the industry, snapped: “What you find in Akihabara today is only sexual desire. They all go to Akihabara, which is overflowing with things that offer convenient gratification of sexual desire, made possible by the power of technology and media” (Okada et al 2005: 170-172). Okada goes on to explain the problem of sexual desire to be one of “virtual sexuality” (*bācharu seifūzoku*), which proliferates in Akihabara among men who “reject the physical” (*nikutai-teki na mono wo kyōhi suru*). In this Okada repeats a common

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<sup>7</sup> When I requested an interview with Nitro Plus, they responded by email but declined to speak about their past in *bishōjo* games (mail received on August 6, 2013).

criticism of “otaku” (see Chapter 2), and of Akihabara as overrun with men sharing a “peculiar sexual preference” (*tokuyū na sei-teki shikō*) (Kikuchi 2008: 69). Okada’s words are particularly interesting given that his company, Gainax, profited immensely in the 1990s by producing *bishōjo* games and attractive *bishōjo* characters in anime such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shin seiki evangerion, 1995-1996), whose images they exploited in sexualized spinoff media and merchandise (Clements 2013: 201-202). Indeed, Morikawa identifies the massive interest in the characters of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as crucial to the growing phenomenon of *moe* and the transformation of Akihabara (Morikawa 2003: 56-62). However, now that Akihabara is the *Moe City*, overflowing with imaginary sex and sexual desire for cute girl characters, it disgusts Okada. If he played any part, Okada now denounces it, along with *moe* and the men who gather in Akihabara.

Globally, the “peculiar sexual preference” for *bishōjo* characters is associated with something much more sinister than the imagined perversions of otaku: pedophilia and predatory sexuality. For Kyung Lah, reporting for CNN, the sexual exploitation and abuse of fictional girls and women seems to be part of a culture that is normalizing, if not promoting, sexual violence (Lah 2010). Walking through the streets of Akihabara, she reports the phenomenon of *bishōjo* games being distributed online – through piracy, primarily – and making their way to players around the world. “These sorts of games that normalize extreme sexual violence against women and girls have really no place in our communities,” Taina Bien-Aime, Executive Director of Equality Now, tells Lah. “What we are calling for is that the Japanese government ban all games that promote and simulate sexual violence, sexual torture, stalking and rape against women and girls. And there are plenty of games like that” (Lah 2010). Sexual violence seems to be spreading like an infectious disease, and there is no room for *bishōjo* games in our communities or in Akihabara, which is no longer contained. These games “feature

girlish looking characters,” “some are violent” and are stepping “closer and closer to reality” (Lah 2010). At the same time, the unreality of *bishōjo* characters is a problem. In their cartoony cuteness, they might appear to be, and at times are explicitly indicated to be, children. Sex involving such characters might be normalizing sex desire for, and violence against, children, and is only allowed because of legal loopholes that should be closed (Nakasatomi [2009] 2013). For journalists and activists from around the world, Akihabara is a regular stop to gather evidence of Japan’s problem with underage sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Even as there are fears of the boundaries of Akihabara becoming permeable and content from stores in the area leaking out into the world, *bishōjo* game producers and players are increasingly concerned about the world outside leaking into Akihabara.

### **3.2 “Japan Only:” On Closed Circulation**

One of my first tasks in the field was to play *bishōjo* games and familiarize myself with the content. Many of these games are of dubious legal status outside of Japan, and so I could not play them until I was inside the country. Upon arrival in April 2014, I bought a cheap personal computer from the massive electronics store Yodobashi Camera in Akihabara. While in the area, I also purchased some *bishōjo* games, based on buzz and store recommendations. That evening, after returning to my rented room, I tried to load the game software onto my new computer – only to be met with warnings of compatibility errors. After trying to load every game I now owned multiple times to no avail, I finally gave up and resigned myself to ask for help at Yodobashi Camera the following day. With the computer, one game and a player manual in hand, I arrived at the help desk to find two young men assisting an older woman in setting up her

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<sup>8</sup> In a personal interview (January 9, 2015), one activist from the organization Light House put it, “It [Akihabara] is such a great example of the problems that we just take people there and let them see for themselves.” Indeed, this activist admitted to being somewhat upset to see the stores dealing with the most objectionable content disappearing from the street amid growing criticism, because this made the task of pointing them out more difficult.

computer. Although I was tired and scowling due to my frustrated efforts the night before, the young man who assisted me was clearly amused. With the older woman next to us, we tried to discretely discuss the problem, but he could think of no solution and so called more and more people over. Soon there was a mob of support staff, with me in the middle, and curious shoppers looking on. The minutes turned to an hour, then more, and boredom overtook shame. Suddenly, the diagnosis. “Japan only,” the young man says, in English. “That’s the problem.” But I am in Japan. “No, no, no. Japanese only.” But I am speaking Japanese. He switches to Japanese. “No, no, no. The computer’s operating system must be set in Japanese. Japanese only. Otherwise the game will not load.” After some computer wizardry, the opening screen of the game pops up. Two cartoon women are holding used condoms between smiling lips while semen spills out onto their massive breasts. Shame returns with a vengeance, and I quickly say my thanks and scurry away.

As deep an impression as this experience made on me, I got used to seeing the words “Japan only” on *bishōjo* game packages, in player manuals and during the loading of new software onto my computer (see Kagami 2010: 219-220). The compatibility error had been overcome, but I was still constantly reminded that the content was not for me. The fact that there had been an issue between my computer – and, perhaps, myself – and *bishōjo* games became a joke that I told producers and players for a laugh. Hayase Yayoi, a voice actress working in the *bishōjo* game industry, was among those that found the story funny and liked to spread it around. She told me so over lunch on September 19, 2014 before we made our way to Charara!!, a monthly *bishōjo* game industry event in Akihabara.<sup>9</sup> We arrived early, because Hayase wanted to introduce me to people she worked with; although she was not appearing in the event that day, we went through

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<sup>9</sup> See: <<http://www.excaddy.jp/charara/top.html>>.

the back elevator used by staff and guests and started meeting people before the event started. This seemed to irritate the event organizers, and my introduction as a researcher from the United States did not smooth things over. Hayase and I left soon after, and she explained that the organizers had categorized me as someone “collecting information for foreign countries” (*gaikoku muke shuzai*), which they did not want. Charara!! is a local event for producers to build relationships with dedicated players, who make purchases and spread the word. Because many *bishōjo* games are not legally available overseas, any article that I was imagined to write would not lead to sales, and might instead encourage illegal distribution and generate negative publicity (see Lah 2010; Kagami 2010; Nakasatomi [2009] 2013). When I mailed the organizers to apologize, I was not surprised that they refused me future access to the event as a member of the press and firmly reminded me that *bishōjo* games are “for sale in Japan only” (*Nihon kokunai hanbai nomi*).<sup>10</sup>

While denied access as a member of the press (I had never claimed to be that, but was certainly collecting information for a foreign publication), I returned many times to Charara!! as a player of *bishōjo* games, and was always struck by the small scale of the event. On average, around 20 production companies would gather to speak and sell to 100 dedicated, core gamers in a modest space above an arcade located on Chūō Street in Akihabara. Representatives of production companies told the players about upcoming projects, showed preview clips, brought out scenario writers and voice actresses, held “mini-live” shows of music from the games and joked and laughed with the assembled men (overwhelmingly men in the audience). The intimacy of the event was immediately apparent, although most gamers focused on the speakers rather than one another and were glued to the screens of their smartphones and mobile devices when uninterested.

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<sup>10</sup> The message was received on October 17, 2014.

Those who were interested spoke their thoughts aloud and interacted with the speakers, participated in group games of rock-paper-scissor to win promotional giveaways and lined up at tables to buy products, test versions of upcoming games and make preorders, which usually came with something extra such as a handshake, signing or original artwork. Men lingered at tables to talk with the producers, who were in general tremendously generous with their time and friendly. Charara!! is an event for *bishōjo* game producers to build relationships with an inner circle of fans who buy into their work and support them during the long production process.

In light of negative press from global news outlets such as CNN (which at one point ran a survey on its website asking readers whether or not the Japanese industry should be regulated [Kagami 2010: 22]), the openness of *bishōjo* game events was being renegotiated while I was in the field.<sup>11</sup> I crossed a line by entering Charara!! through the backdoor, and this was made worse by an introduction as an American researching *bishōjo* games. The result was a line drawn and highlighted between inside and outside. Despite being free and open to anyone, Charara!! is in fact a controlled and closed space, which allows for interactions between producers and players to occur. Not private, but also not public, a sort of private publicity or public privacy is key. Keeping the space open requires controlling its boundaries, which resonates with what media anthropologist Chris Kelty calls “recursive publics” that have “a shared sense of concern for the technical and legal possibility of their own association” (Kelty 2005: 192). As Kelty sees it, many groups are now concerned with their own “conditions of possibility – and the modes of manipulating them technically and legally – on and off the Internet” (Kelty 2005: 204), which is precisely what one sees at Charara!! The conditions of possibility for the event are a closed circle with clear boundaries and controlled access.

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<sup>11</sup> The CNN survey, which was titled “Should Japan ban sexually explicit video games?” was posted on the news outlet’s webpage in April 2010. At one point, it was at the top of the page.

The event should be offline, and not contribute to illegal distribution online, which threatens the entire industry with increased regulation. Responding to the threat of regulation from the outside, the industry regulates from the inside and insists on boundaries.

Beyond Charara!!, I was regularly warned by *bishōjo* game producers about opening up the culture, its events or even Akihabara, which was attracting too many tourists, journalists and activists. For example, Watanabe Akio, a renowned character designer with deep ties to the *bishōjo* game industry, told me that, “In truth, I don’t want Americans to express interest. I don’t want these games to be known. That is why I’ve refused all interviews.”<sup>12</sup> Despite being one such American, I was granted an interview because of my association with people in the industry, and because Watanabe had something that he wanted to say to me. “If these games come out into the open, we can’t *moe* (*moerarenai*),” he said, flustered but insistent. “We can’t *moe*. If otaku culture is too open, then the power of imagination/creation (*sōzōryoku*) will decline.” My presence threatened the ability of Watanabe and others like him to freely imagine and create *bishōjo* characters, which in turn compromised their ability to freely experience and share affective responses to them. I was caught off guard by the intensity of the words “We can’t *moe*” – *moe* as a verb, conjugated to mean not possible to *moe* – stated twice to underscore their importance. It almost seemed as if my very presence was an attack on *moe*, which was hurting Watanabe, killing him, taking away his life. This was the case because I – an outsider and an American, like so many tourists, journalists and activists – had slipped inside and would no doubt invite outside criticism. Even as some worry about *bishōjo* games slipping out of Akihabara and into the world (Lah 2010; Nakasatomi [2009] 2013), Watanabe, like the organizers of Charara!!, worried about the world

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<sup>12</sup> All quotes come from a personal interview (May 23, 2014).

slipping into Akihabara. One of the conditions of possibility for freedom of imagination/creation is insisting on boundaries, or drawing lines to separate inside and outside. As with Charara!! and Watanabe, so too with Akihabara, which is a space where *bishōjo* games circulate, but within boundaries that are collectively established and maintained.

Production company Minori is a good example of tensions surrounding the publicness of *bishōjo* games. In 2009, in an attempt to invigorate a *bishōjo* game industry facing declining sales and an aging and shrinking gamer population, Minori organized an event called the Denkigai Matsuri.<sup>13</sup> Held twice a year, *bishōjo* game production companies can participate for free – as compared to Charara!!, where producers pay to participate but players get in for free, or the Comic Market, where renting space for an industry booth is costly and highly competitive – which lowers the barriers to participation. Surprisingly, the Denkigai Matsuri is not held in Akihabara, but rather in the Shinjuku neighborhood across town. The Denkigai Matsuri shares its name with the Denkigai Matsuri in Akihabara, which is held by the powerful chamber of commerce and focuses on stores selling home appliances and electronics, which have a longer history in the area than the “otaku” stores that began to appear in the 1980s. Minori cleverly twists the “gai” in “Denkigai” from a character meaning “town” (街) to a homonym meaning “outside” (外), which suggests that it is not the “Electric Town Festival,” but rather the “Festival Outside the Electric Town” or perhaps the “Electric Town Outsider Festival.” Given the name, one wonders if the *bishōjo* game industry was at some point pushed out of that other and more official Denkigai Matsuri in Akihabara, but it is more likely that it is held in Shinjuku to create a dedicated space, align with

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<sup>13</sup> See: <<http://www.denkigai.net/dg/>>.

other events and avoid conflict with outsiders. (For more on *bishōjo* games at the Denkigai Matsuri, see Chapter 5.)

In 2009, the same year that it first organized the Denkigai Matsuri for the *bishōjo* game industry, Minori also closed its website to international traffic (i.e., anyone with an Internet Protocol address that pointed to a location outside of Japan).<sup>14</sup> The decision was made as a form of protest against unwanted and illegal circulation by overseas fans, which invited outside criticism. As Minori explained in a statement, which was very pointedly in English, the decision was made to “protect our culture” (quoted in Ashcraft 2009). While the position has been relaxed somewhat as platforms for crowd funding and direct downloads open official avenues for the distribution of *bishōjo* games online,<sup>15</sup> for a time Minori insisted on boundaries because it allowed them to maintain what they called their “minority spirit,” which is to say their ability to imagine and create things that appeal to a small number of dedicated players but perhaps offend the majority of people in the world. As Watanabe suggested, Minori feels that their culture and spirit are under attack from outsiders and critics who do not understand *bishōjo* games. The imagination and creation of spaces for *bishōjo* games – spaces with boundaries, insides and outsides – allows for their continued existence. These boundaries are often coterminous with those of the nation of Japan and the neighborhood of Akihabara, which seem under attack as elements from inside slip outside and vice versa. So it is that sociality is negotiated, and renegotiated, at the borders and the limits of circulation.

### **3.3 Coming of Age in Akihabara**

With jet-black hair, thick eyebrows and seemingly permanent dark circles under his eyes, Ataru is handsome in a brooding sort of way. Thin and always dressed in

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<sup>14</sup> See: <[www.minori.ph](http://www.minori.ph)>.

<sup>15</sup> See for example MangaGamer (<https://www.mangagamer.com/>), Sekai Project (<https://sekaiproject.com/>) and JAST USA (<https://www.jastusa.com/>).

-muted colors, he is not the type to stand out in a crowd, but is also certainly not a wallflower. When not working as a software engineer – which, depending on the project, keeps him away many evenings and even some weekends – Ataru practices his English conversation, goes to parties and rubs shoulders with people from the manga, anime and gaming industries. Quick to share an opinion and a laugh, Ataru is relatively popular at these social gatherings. He is in and out of relationships with women, but is currently a bachelor who lives alone in a spacious apartment just a two-minute walk past Kuramaebashi Street outside Akihabara. In the evening, Ataru plays mahjong, hangs out in costume cafés and meets friends in the area. After a chance encounter on the streets of Akihabara in 2007, when Ataru was in his last year studying economics at a university in Tokyo, I have been one of those friends. I stayed with Ataru frequently over the course of my fieldwork, because his apartment was no more than a stone's throw away from dozens of *bishōjo* game production companies, including several where I spent a good deal of time.

Dreaming of producing games when he was in high school, Ataru did not end up in the industry, but is a dedicated player of *bishōjo* games. He tends toward dark and disturbing content – think *The Song of Saya* (discussed in Chapter 2), written by Urobuchi Gen, one of his favorites, *Fate/Stay Night* (Feito/sutei naito, Type-Moon, 2004-) and *When They Cry* (Higurashi no naku koro ni, 07th Expansion, 2003-) – and narratives that loop back on themselves. His favorite game is Flying Shine's *Cross Channel* (Kurosu channeru, 2003), which is the story of Kurosu Taichi, who goes to a government-mandated school for people who look normal but are somehow mentally ill and unlikely to adapt to social life. After summer vacation, Kurosu and the members of his broadcasting club return to school to find that everyone has vanished. Further, the world seems to be repeating the same week over and over again. Stuck in this strange, lonely but somehow comforting

world, Kurosu works to restore his broken self and relationships. The story deeply moved Ataru, which is part of what he consistently calls a “god game” (*kamigē*), slang for a masterpiece as opposed to a “shit game” (*kusogē*). Ataru keeps an eye on any new releases featuring *Cross Channel*’s scenario writer, Tanaka Romeo, who he considers a “god” (*kami*). As is clear from the way he speaks about gods and shit, if Ataru feels strongly about something, he will tell you so – often, and loudly. Living in Akihabara, he finds it easy to keep up with the trends, but also goes online to the anonymous bulletin board “2ch” to check lists of the most popular *bishōjo* games by year.<sup>16</sup> Ataru has played almost everything in the top 10 for every year since 2003. He never seems to tire of creating lists of games that I absolutely must play, which he explains is a rite of passage.

Although I also hung out with other *bishōjo* game players, Ataru was my primary teacher and guide. After playing a recommended game, we would talk about it and share experiences. Things were often heated when discussing what choices I made, why and what routes these took me down. Ataru was animated when explaining what I had missed, especially if my route through the game did not include what he considered to be the “best,” or most “*moe*” and moving, scenarios. These were the times when Ataru shared his own play experiences, and often very intimate details of them. When I was a little better versed in *bishōjo* games, Ataru introduced me to other players, who I came to know and play with as well. All of these men, like Ataru and myself, spent their free time in Akihabara, which was central to our lives as *bishōjo* game players. It was the center of gravity that pulled us together and provided a common place to meet after work for dinner, events and shopping. Like Ataru, a few of these men moved to be

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<sup>16</sup> See: <<http://www49.atwiki.jp/aniwotawiki/sp/pages/2538.html>>.

closer to Akihabara, while others tried to recreate it at home in rooms that overflowed with media and material representations of *bishōjo* characters.

Born in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan in 1983, Ataru seemed to see some of himself in me, born in Alaska, the northernmost of the United States of America, in 1982. Both of us had been drawn to the spectacle of Akihabara, to the density of stores dealing with *bishōjo* games and the density of the population of gamers stopping at those stores. Although younger than me, Ataru describes himself as my spiritual older brother, because he awoke to the world of *bishōjo* games much earlier. Sitting in a café on the backstreets of Akihabara, located below the offices of a *bishōjo* game production company, I ask Ataru about his history with *bishōjo* games. “My otaku career began with games,” he says between bites of curry rice. “The start was really just a simple thing. My friends were playing *Tokimeki Memorial* and so I gave it a shot.”<sup>17</sup> It was 1996, and Ataru, a sixth-grader at the time, was blown away. The combination of attractive manga/anime characters, the mechanic of interacting with them and, most of all, the inclusion of character voices was moving in ways that were new and confusing for him.

As Ataru recalls it, his formative years overlapped with the explosive growth of *bishōjo* games as a “*moe genre*” (*moe janru*). Coming of age in the 1990s amid an increasingly open culture of affection for fictional characters, Ataru recalls that, “I definitely had a sense of *moe*.” Indeed, he was soon almost too moved by images of cute girl characters and interactions with them. When playing Red Entertainment’s *Sakura Wars* (*Sakura taisen*, 1996), where the player inputs his name and the *bishōjo* characters speak it out loud in interactions, Ataru was moved enough to be embarrassed and so retreated from the family room to play in his bedroom. These were still classed as “consumer games,” as opposed to “adult games,” which means that they did not have

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<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes from Ataru below come from a personal interview (January 12, 2015).

explicit sex scenes in them, but hearing these cute girl characters speak his name while looking out of the screen at him was arousing enough that Ataru did not want to be with others while feeling this pleasure. In playing such games, he was pleasuring himself in a broad sense of enjoying bodily responses, but not yet masturbating. Content from the booming adult gaming industry was also filtering into the mainstream in releases for the general public, which cut out explicit sex scenes, but not the inherent mechanics that move players (for more on game design, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation).

So it was that Ataru, still playing on gaming consoles (he thought computers were for adults), encountered the Sony PlayStation release of *To Heart* (Tu hāto, 1999), which he describes as a “visual novel” (*bijuaru noberu*). “Nothing before that had been so emotional for me,” he explains. “It really moved me. I think that was probably the first game that moved me to tears.” *To Heart* is a romance game where the player assumes the role of highschooler Fujita Hiroyuki and interacts with classmates before, during and after school. Depending on the circumstances and player choices, certain events are triggered; the events depend on how much cute girl characters like the player, and, depending on how much the player likes the characters, can be quite moving. (English-language fan sites sometimes call these “affection events.”) There are 10 distinct plotlines in the branching narrative, which can lead to good and bad endings. For Ataru, almost all of the plotlines included moving scenarios and moments. “That emotion really wasn’t part of the other consumer games that I was playing, which were about adventure,” Ataru recalls. “After I played *To Heart*, I became completely enthralled by *bishōjo* games. I would buy anything that had images of *bishōjo* on the cover, anything that caught my attention.” One such game was the Sega Saturn release of *Welcome to Pia Carrot!!* (*Pia kyarotto e yōkoso*, 1998), which is a story about courting – and, in the original, bedding – café waitresses in cute costumes. The game was recommended for

players age 18 and older, but staff at Ataru's local game shop in Aomori Prefecture were older male players, who sold him the game. Purchasing a game recommended for adults and popular among older male gamers, Ataru began to see himself as a young adult, a man and a gamer.

Having finished his meal at the café in Akihabara, Ataru lights a cigarette and recalls his sexual initiation in the area. He was in junior high visiting Tokyo on a school trip, and had slipped away to Akihabara during free time to search for replacement parts for his portable gaming device, which he had heard could be purchased at specialty stores. Browsing through computer and gaming stores, Ataru encountered the familiar character images of *To Heart*, which he had played as a consumer game. The box was different, however, and he went to take a look. Turning it over, in preview art on the back of the package, he saw the characters that he knew and loved naked and involved in explicit sex scenes. This was the original release (from 1997), which is to say that Ataru had in his hands an adult computer game. Unlike the consumer game release, sale was restricted (as opposed to recommended) to players over the age of 18, but Ataru wanted it desperately, and must have shown it in his behavior. Despite his being in a school uniform, staff at the store in Akihabara appreciated Ataru's excitement for *To Heart* – which was a benchmark for them, and many others, too<sup>18</sup> – and sold him the game. This was Ataru's first computer game, and first adult computer game. While he was already attracted to the characters in *To Heart*, the explicit sex scenes affirmed his growing desire for manga/anime-style, cute girl characters. While moved to emotional response and arousal before, Ataru was now moved to masturbation. What connects both is his bodily response to images of and narratives involving *bishōjo* characters,

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<sup>18</sup> The shared appreciation for Leaf generally and *To Heart* specifically should not be underestimated. In a personal interview (September 16, 2014), Nakamura Jin recalled that his enthusiasm for Leaf's games inspired him to organize perhaps the first fan event for *bishōjo* games in 1996. The event was attended by Leaf staff, 96 creative groups and 1,500 visitors.

which moved him to arousal, tears and/or ejaculation. In Akihabara, seeing *bishōjo* characters on signs and talking with men attracted to them sexually, and later playing a *bishōjo* game and masturbating, Ataru realized that he was sexually oriented toward manga/anime-style, cute girl characters. Although still attracted to flesh-and-blood women his own age and older, he was nonetheless also, and at the time primarily, attracted to *bishōjo* characters.

“Akihabara is that kind of place,” Ataru states matter-of-factly, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “There is probably nowhere else in the world where virtual sex is this prevalent. Even if you searched the world, you probably wouldn’t find anything on the scale of Akihabara. Just walking down the street, there is a sign board with a *bishōjo* with her breasts showing, or a figurine of her posed provocatively, just there on the shelf, or mouse pads modeled after *bishōjo* breasts, or body pillows with naked *bishōjo* on them, fanzines and adult games. It’s strange for many people, I guess, but for me, and men like me who grew up in this environment, it is a taken-for-granted city (*atarimae no machi*). Whether that is good or bad, I don’t know, but Akihabara is that kind of place. It’s a city overflowing with sex (*sei-teki na mono ga afureteiru machi*).” Specifically, overflowing with imaginary sex with *bishōjo*. Akihabara is a place overflowing with imaginary sex, sex with images and images in material form. Here one can encounter attractive *bishōjo* characters, which is not uncommon in Japan given its robust market of manga, anime and computer/console games, but there is nowhere else in Tokyo, Japan or the world where sexual desire for them is so visible and viscerally felt. There is nowhere else where it is on the scale of Akihabara, and where it is such a part of everyday reality. There is nowhere else where so many people gather and openly embrace sexual orientation toward cartoon characters. This is why Akihabara appears strange, but it is also why it attracts men such as Ataru. It is a place where the strange is

normal, part of a city that is taken for granted. Ataru loves this place because here he shares sexual orientation toward cute girl characters, shares movement in relation to them, sociality among strange strangers who are “men like me.” Men, but, like me, strange. In Akihabara, the *Moe City*, Ataru and men like him are moved in their encounters with fictional and real others, media and material forms, virtual and actual bodies.

While many commentators are concerned with whether or not the boundaries of Akihabara are leaking – that is, whether or not a “peculiar sexual preference” will spread like a contagious disease from Akihabara and infect the world, and, conversely, whether the world will come to Akihabara and destroy the closed circle of imaginary play – Ataru is more concerned about whether or not the boundary between fiction and reality is leaky and what should be done to maintain it. In moments of reflection, be they playing games or sitting with me in a café, Ataru wonders about the powerful affect of media. He is of course moved by his interactions with *bishōjo* in media and material form, which is, after all, the point, and concedes that manga, anime and computer / console games probably impacted his sexuality. He is, after all, attracted to *bishōjo* characters. Some of his friends are content to say that they are sexually oriented toward the “two-dimensional” (*nijigen*) and leave it at that, but Ataru is for his part not convinced that the two- and three-dimensional worlds are clearly and cleanly separated. Rather, the two- and three-dimensional are constantly interacting with one another. This complex interaction impacts people and their movement in the world. “My life would probably have been very different if I had not played *Tokimeki Memorial*,” Ataru says. “If I hadn’t played it, I might not have become an otaku, and if I weren’t an otaku, I wouldn’t be in Akihabara or have met you, right? Taste determines your life. It determines your environment, friends and actions.” Manga, anime and

computer/console games brought us together, and, consuming them together has impacted our lives, actions and interactions. So to say that the two-dimensional is two-dimensional and has no affect on the three-dimensional is to obfuscate the very really fact that images move us and impact our shared world.

Whatever its powerful affect, however, Ataru is adamant that no media is “harmful” (*yūgai*). People are moved by it, and differentially so, depending on their experiences and environment, and it is that movement that can be harmful. “I understand the concerns of feminists and human rights activists,” Ataru tells me, pensively. “I do. But I can tell you that we are not people moved to harmful actions.” With this collective “we,” Ataru moves to speak for *bishōjo* game players generally and the men gathering in Akihabara specifically, who he recognizes as his people – “men like me who grew up in this environment.” These men are not, to use Ataru’s memorable phrase, “harmful people” (*yūgai na hito*). That is, they are not people moved by media to harmful actions; they are moved, but not to harm others. Ataru’s position depends on how he understands movement to be shared. Brought together by a shared attraction to and affection for *bishōjo* characters, the men gathering in Akihabara have friends and a shared environment. If taste determines friends and environment, it also determines actions. Through shared movement, or collective practice and activity, these men keep fiction and reality separate, even as they coexist and impact one another. A shared orientation toward *bishōjo* determines one’s friends and environment, and also one’s actions: To be moved by *bishōjo* characters, but to keep *bishōjo* and women and children separate and distinct and not allow movement in response to images to lead to actions that harm others.

As the melodic five-o-clock chime rings out on public broadcast speakers, announcing to young people that it is time to go home, I cannot help but recall that there

is a primary school on Shōheibashi Street within the bounds of Akihabara and not far from the café where Ataru and I are now sitting. Sixth-graders, no different from how Ataru and I once were, are walking through the streets of Akihabara to the station to catch a train home. While Ataru locates his spiritual coming of age in Akihabara – from Aomori Prefecture, he still is one of the men “who grew up in this environment” – what must it be like to literally come of age in the *Moe* City? These young people are not choosing the environment as Ataru and I have chosen it. What impact will it have on them and their tastes? Might someone seeing these children walking through the streets of Akihabara – “a city overflowing with sex” – worry about them? Worry about them in relation to *bishōjo* game players such as Ataru? Am I, too, worried about these children? These men? Ataru? Is he – like Kurosu Taichi, the protagonist of his favorite *bishōjo* game – someone who looks normal but is somehow mentally ill, a danger to society and in need of institutionalization? I look at my friend and the street, wondering.

### **3.4 Dangerously Moving Images**

“Japan has an incredible tolerance for the sexual exploitation of young girls” (Ostrovsky 2015). These are the first words in a Vice News video on the problem of underage sex in Japan. They are spoken by Jake Adelstein, a renowned crime reporter in Japan, as a voice over during a montage of images of Akihabara: Chūō Street brightly lit up at night; photographs of female idol singers; a sign with a price and a young woman suspended in the moment just before kissing a prone man’s waiting lips; the legs of a woman on the street; fliers for cafés and entertainment, which feature women striking cute poses; a wall of massive images of *bishōjo* characters in various states of undress, next to an advertisement for a *bishōjo* game. After the title – “Schoolgirls for Sale in Japan” – appears onscreen, award-winning journalist Simon Ostrovsky sets the scene: “This is the Akihabara neighborhood...” He walks through the streets, disoriented, but

taking it all in. Ostrovsky knows that sex is for sale here, and his intuition is that the *bishōjo* characters he sees everywhere are related to the women on the signs and in the street. He knows that there is a connection between sexual fantasy and reality. When faced with these *bishōjo* characters and women, Ostrovsky is not confused about fiction and reality. Although he speaks to none of the men on the streets and in the stores, he imagines that somewhere out there, in the night, are men, Japanese men, who are conflating sexual fantasy and reality, who are actualizing their fantasies of underage sex, who are moved to unspeakable acts. Perhaps Japan tolerates this, but we will not.

Akihabara is a city of affective images, of moving images, images that trigger bodily responses from those interacting with them and move bodies to public displays of affection. The *Moe City* is the worst nightmare of right-minded people such as Adelstein and Ostrovsky, who find there hoards of men aroused by omnipresent images of sexualized cute girls, loose on the streets and in close proximity to at-risk populations such as women and children (Adelstein and Kubo 2014; Ostrovsky 2015). Such critics of Akihabara operate with certain assumptions about media a/effects. They assume that, to begin, while the journalist and activist remains unmoved by images of cute girl characters, or in control in relation to these images, the *bishōjo* fan is dangerously open to the affect of moving images. This dynamic speaks to what media anthropologist William Mazzarella calls “the enunciator’s exception” (Mazzarella 2013: 18-19).<sup>19</sup> Working with film censors in India, Mazzarella noted a pattern whereby advocates of increased regulation, who did not need to be regulated themselves, imagined another population that was dangerous and needed to be regulated. That dangerous class was comprised of

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<sup>19</sup> I am certainly not the first to point this out this “enunciator’s conception” in the context of virtual regulation. Writing on the historic concern about women reading novels, religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock points out that, “It is significant that these opponents of fiction were not afraid that *they* might confuse fantasy and reality. This was always framed as a danger for some other class of people” (Laycock 2015: 227).

men in the front row of the theater reacting bodily to moving images on screen. Such men were conceptually understood in the figure of “the pissing man” (Mazzarella 2013: 14-15), or the man who would piss in the street if told to do so, which captures his lack of public decency, inability to control himself and likelihood to act on any suggestion. What makes the pissing man dangerous is that he is moved by images and out of control, and hence the content of images must be regulated to be less likely to move him. One of Mazzarella’s greatest insights is that the relationship between the pissing man and moving image is a source of anxiety and key to calls for increased regulation.

Another aspect of this fear is that a certain population cannot tell the difference between fiction or fantasy and reality. This is clearest in the activist response to pornography in North America. During the feminist sex wars that came to a head in the 1980s, pornography was treated as the theory of sexual violence and rape as its practice (Williams 1989: 15-29). Responding to this discourse, cultural critic Laura Kipnis points out that the conceptual figure of the masturbating man is imagined to be simple, aroused and violent (Kipnis 1996: 175-177). In retrospect, it is clear that much of the campaign against pornography was premised on the belief that the masturbating man confuses fiction and reality and is inspired to act out the sex(ual violence) he sees onscreen, which he takes to be normal and acceptable. Much like the men in the front row of theaters in India, masturbating men were understood to be a dangerous class of rapists, “the raincoat brigade,” or, to borrow a phrase from Japan, a “reserve army of criminals” (*hanzaisha yobigun*) (see Chapter 2). The imagined danger should come as no surprise, because pornography has since film scholar Linda Williams’ foundational book *Hard Core* been understood in terms of “moving images,” which “appeal to the body,”

“elicit gut reactions” and “move the body” (Williams 1989: 5).<sup>20</sup> The regulatory impulse begins with the recognition that the image in question moves the viewer, which is then quickly projected onto others, who are, or might be, moved. In scholarship that builds on Kipnis and Williams in terms of affect, pornography is theorized as images that are “dangerously effective at moving us” (Paasonen 2011: 13).<sup>21</sup> Or, rather, images that are dangerously effective at moving *someone*, an imagined other, the peeing or masturbating man. The imagined other is grouped together as an imagined class of dangerous others. “This demonizing of particular groups of media users,” porn scholar Feona Attwood explains, “is part of the operational bridge that enables accusations or identification of possible ‘harms’ to translate into calls for more and more legislation against the imagination” (Attwood and Smith 2010: 187). To rephrase, the imagining of dangerous others, whose relation to moving images is imagined to put others in danger, is central to a discourse of possible harm and calls for legislation against the imagination.

Insofar as *bishōjo* games feature characters designed to affect, what are known as “*moe* characters” (*moe kyara*) (see Chapter 4), and explicit depictions of sex with these characters, it is not surprising that they inspire a regulatory discourse similar to film in India and pornography in North America. For their critics, *bishōjo* games are dangerously effective at moving players. *Bishōjo* game players are imagined to be men that dominate imaginary girls and women to feel like real men and may well be confused about the difference between fiction and reality (Taylor 2007: 203-206). These

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<sup>20</sup> For parallels with William Mazzarella, see Williams 1989: 12; Kipnis 1996: viii. Part of the regulatory response to pornography comes from the discourse of obscenity, which begins for Williams not with the axiomatic statement, “I know it when I see it,” but rather with the realization that, “It moves me” (Williams 1989: 5).

<sup>21</sup> Thinkers in Japan are taking this even further. For example, at a symposium held at Tokyo University of the Arts on October 5, 2014, one speaker, Ogura Toshimaru, pointed out that the government was regulating sexual expression with the baseline assumption that what stimulates or overly stimulates is “obscene.” At the same event, Yamada Kumiko, who organizes a feminist reading group that I regularly attended, questioned whether or not it made sense to regulate this way, because we do not know what stimulates people or how to qualify the intensity of response.

men are imagined to play games of sexual violence, have decreased resistance to myths about sexual violence and are thus more likely to be inspired to acts of sexual violence (Nakasatomi [2009] 2013: 6-12). *Bishōjo* game players are moved to bodily response and to the street in Akihabara, where they appear to critics as a mass of potentially violent men and a dangerous movement. *Bishōjo* game scenario writer Kagami Hiroyuki argues that such concerns point to a general understanding that “ideas can prompt mass action and invite social chaos” (Kagami 2010: 251). In this way, the regulatory gaze in Japan is not on “the pissing man” or “the masturbating man,” but rather on “the *moe* man” (*moeru otoko*), who is dangerously open to the affect of moving images of manga/anime characters.<sup>22</sup>

Among the many advocates of increased regulation of adult manga, anime and computer/console games in Japan, one of the most vocal is Tsuchiya Masatada, a senior politician with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, who believes that such media is contributing to social and sexual disorder. When we met at his offices in Mitaka in the western suburbs of Tokyo, Tsuchiya was clearly concerned about media effects, telling me that if American children see 20,000 violent deaths in the media before they even reach the age of maturity, then that is clearly a problem in the American culture of violence. “It’s a problem of imprinting (*surikomi*),” Tsuchiya tells me, gravely. “In Japan, we have a problem of manga, anime and games imprinting unhealthy and violent sexual desire for children.”<sup>23</sup> For Tsuchiya, such media is “extremely socially harmful” (*kiwamete shakai-teki ni yūgai*). He begins with the observation that humans have all kinds

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<sup>22</sup> In a personal interview (February 16, 2015), feminist critic Fujimoto Yukari pointed in a similar direction. From her perspective as an editor, critic and educator with experience in the industry in various roles, Fujimoto argued that many people in Japan perceive manga fans as a class of people who are simple minded, undereducated, easily aroused and so on. As with the “pissing man” in India (Mazzarella 2013: 14-15), the dangerous class of manga readers in Japan tend to be imagined as an underemployed, unmarried underclass. These readers, especially men, are the ones treated as potential criminals. While Fujimoto focused her comments on manga, they are certainly suggestive of how *bishōjo* gamers might be perceived as a dangerous class.

<sup>23</sup> All quotes come from a personal interview (October 11, 2014).

of “potential” (*kanōsei*), and media plays a part in cultivating and realizing potential. It is Tsuchiya’s position that certain media promote and foster dangerous sexual desire; that is, certain media cultivates the potential to become a violent sex offender. Resonating with classic approaches to media effects such as priming and desensitization, Tsuchiya argues that, “Human barriers are lowered by seeing over and over again manga, anime and games depicting the rape and group assault of girl-children, which leads to crime. It leads to the crime of attacking girl-children.” Tsuchiya grants that not everyone who consumes adult manga, anime and computer/console games goes on to commit crimes, but because there is potential for it – the recurrent refrain, “There is the potential for a crime to be committed”<sup>24</sup> – such media must be better regulated. Anticipating the need for evidence, Tsuchiya passes me a photocopy of a news report about a young girl attacked and murdered by a pedophile and predator in Kumamoto Prefecture in 2011. This is part of a packet of material he prepared for an address to the Diet, and he directs my attention to a section highlighted with a pink marker. “Seeing such media repeatedly lowered his psychological barriers to the crime,” Tsuchiya explains. “Such media is training a reserve army of criminals.” The use of that turn of phrase immediately brings to mind Miyazaki Tsutomu and his crimes (see Chapter 2). Based on all this, Tsuchiya ultimately advocates for control over the potential of humans to become anything, because one can become something dangerous and put others at risk.

For Tsuchiya, certain media propagates desire that he characterizes as inhuman, or desire so vile that it rejects what makes us human, and it is clear that what he means is unhealthy and violent sexual desire for children. Propagates is the correct word here,

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<sup>24</sup> To make this case in his June 4, 2014 address to the Diet (and on *TV Takkuru*, and with me), Tsuchiya draws on what he calls a typical example from Kumamoto Prefecture in March 3, 2011, when a man in his twenties who murdered a three-year-old girl was found to have a large amount of “child rape and abuse manga” in his room. Notice how closely this follows the model of Miyazaki Tsutomu, the “otaku murderer,” from 1983 (see Chapter 2).

because Tsuchiya, explaining the need for increased regulation, points me to the power of mass media in the example of Nazi propaganda in World War II. This is certainly a startling association, but, as Mazzarella (2013: 2) shows, we would do well to take seriously the concerns of regulators such as Tsuchiya. He is concerned about media, especially what he calls “extremely hot media” (*hijō ni hotto na media*), because of his recognition of its effectiveness at moving people. He worries that media can brainwash even good, normal men and turn them to violence. Not him, but some people, and enough of them to make this an issue of serious social and political concern. Indeed, much of Tsuchiya’s concern seems to stem from a fear that had men of his generation grown up in contemporary Japan, they, too, might have been imprinted with inhuman desire:

If our generation had child pornography manga, anime and games, what would have happened? Repeatedly viewing such images, exposed to strongly sexually stimulating images over and over again, I think that we might have come to see the children in town as sex objects.

Note five things about this very raw, and very real, expression of concern. First, Tsuchiya recognizes that cartoon images can be strongly sexually stimulating. Second, he posits that regular exposure to such images over time naturalizes perverse and dangerous sexual desire. Third, anyone, even the good, normal men of Tsuchiya’s right-minded generation of Japanese, has the potential for such desire, which is cultivated by a sick media environment. Fourth, perverse and dangerous sexual desire spreads like an infectious disease to make the healthy unhealthy. Fifth and finally, sexually stimulating cartoon images, which propagate perverse and dangerous sexual desire, lead to seeing “children in the town as sex objects.” This last part is crucial, because it suggests that the boundary between fantasy and reality will break down and perverse and dangerous sexual desire will become violent sexual crime and overrun the town, city and nation.

If there is a place that seems to be the best possible representation of Tsuchiya's concern, then it is Akihabara. Home to a dense cluster of stores selling adult manga, anime and computer/console games, fanzines and related merchandise, Akihabara is without a doubt a place where strongly sexually stimulating cartoon images are part of the urban environment. These images are of *bishōjo*, which are cute girl characters that often appear to be, and are sometimes explicitly designated to be, underage and/or children. They are regularly involved in perverse and/or violent sex, which is a taken-for-granted aspect of the media landscape. The fear, then, is that men – even good, normal men – exposed to these images regularly over time will develop perverse and dangerous sexual desire and see “children in town as sex objects.”

It is clear that *bishōjo* game players are moved by images, which is the whole point of playing, and they recognize this fact. Such is the case with Ataru. His preference for dark and disturbing content might seem to reflect perverse and dangerous sexual desire and mark him as one of the “reserve army of criminals.” However, in sharp contrast to Tsuchiya, Ataru argues that no media is harmful in and of itself, but rather actions can be harmful. People moved to such actions are what he calls “harmful people.” This is another imaginary other or population of imaginary others, but rather than arguing for regulation of them, Ataru recognizes the potential for harm *in himself*. People can become harmful, but Ataru is sure that he and men like him are not. Why? Because in his everyday life, which I have been observing as part of a relationship spanning almost a decade, Ataru makes a deliberate and explicit distinction between fiction and reality. In some games, he plays through truly heinous actions, but this is fiction and he approaches it as such. These actions are not something that he would ever do, or has any desire to do, *in reality*. Interacting with fictional characters as fictional characters, Ataru keeps these interactions separate from reality. In this way, he regulates

himself to avoid becoming harmful to others. Men who grew up in an environment of imaginary sex, violence and crime, Ataru argues, do not see “children in town as sex objects,” because the fictional characters they interact with and desire are separate and distinct from humans, regardless of age. *Bishōjo* game players indulge perverse sexual desire that some might find to be inhuman (*The Song of Saya* comes to mind), but they observe and respect, through collective practice and activity, a distinction between fiction and reality. It is precisely because the distinction might be compromised that they insist on and maintain it. Making this distinction comes from relating to moving images of manga/anime characters and others moved by them in spaces such as Akihabara, where one cultivates a sense of *moe* and an ethical relation to moving images and others.

### **3.5 Imaginary Sex in Public**

Akihabara is a public space. Public not in the sense of state owned and provided, but rather a common space produced by a public. According to literary critics and social theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, a public differs from a community or group, “because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558). While Akihabara is a concrete place where people gather, it is also more. The circulation of images of *bishōjo* characters appeals to a public, whose members are such by virtue of attention (Warner 2002: 50).<sup>25</sup> This is not, Berlant and Warner insist, just a neighborhood affair, because a public is “imaginary” and “virtual” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558, 563;

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<sup>25</sup> This chapter follows literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner’s approach to publics, which come into being in relation to texts and their circulation, are self-organizing and include unknown others (Warner 2002: 50), but is not concerned with larger theoretical debates about publics. It is in Warner’s earlier work with literary critic and social theorist Lauren Berlant (Berlant and Warner 1998), and in his book *The Trouble with Normal* (Warner 2000), where the political importance of publics, counterpublics and sex in public is most clear.

Warner 2002: 55).<sup>26</sup> The public “requires our constant imagining” (Warner 2002: 57). The public in Akihabara is a “counterpublic,” or “an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558; also Warner 2002: 80, 86). In this counterpublic, members cultivate “criminal intimacies” and develop “relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558).<sup>27</sup> Those relations and narratives appear in adult manga, anime and computer/console games. They are also relations between men and *bishōjo* characters that one sees on the street in Akihabara (Morikawa 2003: 3, 71-78, 249-255).

In this counterpublic, one learns modes of feeling, not least of which is *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. This affection is for *bishōjo*, and on the streets of Akihabara it brings together bodies fictional and real, virtual and actual, mediated and material. As Berlant and Warner put it:

Affective life slops over onto work and political life; people have key self-constitutive relations with strangers and acquaintances; and they have eroticism, if not sex, outside of the couple form. These border intimacies give people tremendous pleasure. But when that pleasure is called sexuality, the spillage of eroticism into everyday social life seems transgressive in a way that provokes normal aversion, a hygienic recoil even as contemporary consumer and media cultures increasingly trope toiletward, splattering the matter of intimate life at the highest levels of national culture. (Berlant and Warner 1998: 560)

So it is that Ataru becomes a *bishōjo* gamer by sharing a love of *To Heart* with older men at a store in Akihabara. Coming of age in Akihabara to become “me” among “men like me,” we see a self-constitutive relation with strangers. So it is that Lonely Fukusuke and others come together during the Day of Erotic Games in Akihabara, where affective life slops over to stranger sociality. So it is that eroticism outside of “sex” and the “couple

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<sup>26</sup> Warner states this clearly: “Publics [...] are virtual entities, not voluntary associations” (Warner 2002: 61).

<sup>27</sup> While some may bristle at the application of concepts from queer theory to the case of *bishōjo* gamers, who appear to be heterosexual men oriented toward women, Warner helpfully points out that “people of very unremarkable gender identity, object choice, and sexual practice might still passionately identify with and associate with queer people. Subjectively, they feel nothing of the normalcy that might be attributed to them” (Warner 2000: 37). Queerness for Warner, as for political philosopher Judith Butler, is not an identity but an alliance, which is “uneasy and unpredictable” (Butler 2015: 70).

form,” sex with images and “sex” as being moved by images and others in relation with them, is pleasurable. And so it is that *bishōjo* and *moe*, even as they are increasingly normalized and nationalized along with manga, anime and computer/console games as “Japanese popular culture” (see Galbraith 2010), are nonetheless problematic when “border intimacies” intersect with sex and become “criminal intimacies.”

In Akihabara, one encounters sex in public. Critics describe Akihabara as “overflowing with things that offer convenient gratification of sexual desire” (Okada et al 2005: 170-172), even as *bishōjo* gamers who inhabit the space describe it as “a city overflowing with sex.” The sex in question is imaginary, sex with images, and it is public. Warner describes “public sex” as sex that “takes place outside the home” (Warner 2000: 173). In Warner’s example, the porn theaters and sex shops of Times Square in New York City were at the center of a public sex culture from the 1960s to the mid 1990s. “A critical mass develops,” Warner explains. The street “develops a dense, publically accessible sexual culture” (Warner 2000: 187). Surely something similar happened in Akihabara, where the area surrounding Chūō Street between Kanda River and Kuramaebashi Street developed into a dense, publically accessible sexual culture centered on *bishōjo* games. While it is true that no one is masturbating or hooking up in Akihabara, which is different from the culture described by Warner, it is also true that what might be a private act – playing an adult computer game at home in one’s room alone, perhaps masturbating – becomes a public spectacle of shared sexual attraction and excitement, shared movements, shared bodily response to *bishōjo* characters (for more, see Chapters 5 and 6). In Akihabara, one finds “queer zones and other worlds estranged from heterosexual culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 547). Even as the sex represented appears heterosexual, it is somehow strange and abnormal. The regularity with which *bishōjo* game players identify themselves as “abnormal” (*abunōmaru*),

“weird” (*hen*) and “perverse” (*hentai*) speaks to an imaginative association with the queer.

For Warner, public sex culture is an important source of knowledge about sexual variation and possibilities. He argues that “sex draws people together and [...] in doing so it suggests alternative possibilities of life” (Warner 2000: 47-48). These alternative possibilities include “forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 562). In Akihabara, we can observe such forms of living, which are sustained through collective practice and activity and so are accessible and available to memory. Media anthropologist Ian Condry argues that *moe* as shared movement is contributing to the emergence of “alternative social worlds” (Condry 2013: 203). Condry sees in *moe* the suggestion of alternative evaluations of masculinity among those who have failed to achieve or have rejected hegemonic modes of life that demand productivity and reproductive maturity. This resonates with what gender and sexuality scholar Judith Halberstam calls “the queer art of failure,” which “imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Halberstam 2011: 88). Halberstam draws many of her examples from the queer lives of cartoon characters and relationships between them, but what *moe* suggests is that one can also imagine queer ways of life *with* cartoon characters. This would certainly count among what anthropologist Shaka McGlotten, in his partial snapshot of the “virtually intimate present,” describes as “forms of sex” that are perceived to be “less real than others,” but the persistent discourse of failure connected to the virtual obscures “the labors, perverse and otherwise, that animatedly

rework categories of intimacy” (McGlotten 2013: 12).<sup>28</sup> The public sex culture in Akihabara, the *Moe City*, is a source of knowledge about such possibilities.

Wearing sunglasses while indoors and constantly talking to and apologizing for himself, Honda Tōru does not cut an impressive figure. One might be forgiven for not recognizing him as “the *Moe Man*,” who has become a guru for many. When I meet him in Akihabara, Honda tells me that social pressure and anxiety as a young man made him “crazy.”<sup>29</sup> He felt alone and inadequate, especially in relation to the opposite sex, and experienced crippling depression and suicidal thoughts. Honda says that his love of manga and anime and manga / anime characters saved his life when things were going wrong for him personally and professionally. Born in Hyōgo Prefecture in 1969, Honda was 29 years old, single and without direction in life when he played the *bishōjo* game *One: Toward the Shining Season* (One: Kagayaku kisetsu e, 1998), where he met a *bishōjo* character that he loved enough to call his “wife” (*yome*). That others were also talking about manga / anime characters in this way in the late 1990s, a time that Honda recalls as “the *moe boom*” (*moe būmu*), encouraged him to share his ideas about alternative social relations. He started telling people about his wife and their life together, and advocating a “love revolution” (*ren’ai kakumei*). “I am not saying that everyone should give up on others or on reality, just pointing out that having a relationship with characters is an option and accepting it might be a way to feel better and relieve some pressure,” Honda

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<sup>28</sup> “Failure is not an extinction of the possible, not a dead end. Instead, failure frames the possible in negative terms without actually erasing all possibilities. [...] In this way, the commonsensical antipathy toward public sex, sexual hypocrisy, or virtual sex works to foreclose the possibilities for queer and other, alternative intimacies to take form” (McGlotten 2013: 37, 38). As an example of this, McGlotten draws attention to criticism of gamers, or “otaku,” for their supposed social and sexual failures, which are deemed pathological (McGlotten 2013: 54). McGlotten argues that screen interaction “summons us to imagine a more expansive array of potential modes of relating. These virtual intimacies, the constellation of latent capacities and routes that might be actualized, or not, serve as reminders that the generativity of queer socialities has not been exhausted, and that we cannot know in advance or for certain what forms our intimacies with ourselves or others might take” (McGlotten 2013: 136). Where McGlotten discusses sex between players as characters in games, and meetups between players offline (McGlotten 2013: 56-60), I would draw attention to virtual intimacies with game characters.

<sup>29</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes from Honda comes from a personal interview (September 26, 2009).

tells me as we walk down Chūō Street. “You can live freely, not in the patterns that society and media determine for you.”

That Honda chose the pattern of marriage speaks to the persistence of hegemonic ideals, but his is a marriage to a nonhuman other, which precludes reproductive sex, offspring and transference of wealth. Instead we find imaginary sex, sex with images, “unconsummated erotics” (Freeman 2002: xv). Honda’s alternative has him living with an ever-growing “family” (*kazoku*) of *bishōjo* characters, who are stock types in the *bishōjo* games in which they appear: his wife is Kawana Misaki, a 17-year-old schoolgirl; his younger sisters are Honda Yū, Suzumiya Akane and Tōdō Kana; he also has a maid, whose name is Nagisa. All of these characters are Honda’s intimate others, who are both imaginary and real. Following Warner, we might see this as an example of public sex culture supporting “nonnormative intimacies” (Warner 2000: 163), if not also “border intimacies” and “criminal intimacies” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558, 560). This is “intimacy out of place,” which is all the more troubling “when it looks like sexuality” (Warner 2002: 79). Just as Honda used to tell others about his wife, *bishōjo* game players engage in public displays of affection from wearing t-shirts featuring their characters to buying figurines and fanzines to decorating cars and rooms with images to sleeping with body pillows of characters. Some even take these body pillows outside with them, which makes private sex public. One cannot help but notice the character in material form and recognize the player’s relationship with it. How we evaluate that relationship, and to what extent we value it, depends on our attunement to alternative social worlds and possibilities of life. As Berlant and Warner argue, certain forms of intimacy are only recognized as such in queer culture (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558). This also helps to explain why people gravitate to the public sex culture of Akihabara and participate in events such as the Day of Erotic Games. There is “pleasure [in] belonging to a sexual

world, in which one's sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one another, but in a world of others" (Warner 2000: 179).<sup>30</sup> Like the public, this world is imaginary and virtual and must be constantly imagined through collective practice and activity.

As part of his defense of sex in public, Warner underscores an "ethics of queer life" (Warner 2000: 33). For Warner, such an ethics begins with an "acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself," with the indignity and shame of sex, which allows for a "special kind of sociability" (Warner 2000: 35). Tellingly, shared affection for manga / anime characters in public is described by fans as "painful," but, as seen in Akihabara, *bishōjo* game players embrace that pain, share it with others and find such sharing to be pleasurable. There seems to be an acknowledgement of the indignity and shame of imaginary sex, which is understood to be abnormal. That one's sexual desire for imaginary others can be so wrong – Honda's schoolgirl wife, his potentially incestuous and ephebophilic relations with his sisters, the abuse of power over his maid, this and so much more in the *bishōjo* games that these characters come from – reaffirms all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. It is the ethical position of many so-called otaku in Japan that rather than deny, hide or project one's sexual desire onto others it is better to face, work through and share that desire (Sasakibara 2003: 101, 113; Nagayama 2014: 148-152, 226-228; see also Chapter 4 of this dissertation). This allows for a special kind of sociability in Akihabara and beyond (see Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation). *Bishōjo* game players embrace (imaginary) sex in all its indignity and shame, challenge the (imaginary) hierarchies of respectability and refuse to repudiate

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<sup>30</sup> Political thinker J.K. Gibson-Graham advocates a politics around "new forms of community energized by pleasure, fun, eroticism, and connection across all sorts of divides and differences" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 18). The struggle is to produce positive affects in a politics of life.

(imaginary) sex or the undignified people (imagined to be) having it.<sup>31</sup> This is an ethics of queer life, and it is also an ethics of imaginary sex.

In contrast to those who embrace sex in all its indignity and shame, many are concerned about the sex of others in Akihabara and seek to control it. Warner shows how the public sex culture of Times Square in New York City was zoned out of existence to make room for commercial interests (Warner 2000: 153, 161), but Akihabara remains relatively unsanitized, which is troubling for some in the face of increased tourism. At a symposium that I attended in Akihabara on March 5, 2012, held under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, one speaker described the main street of Akihabara as “dotted with stores that you wouldn’t want children to go into.” Another elaborated on this by explaining that pornography in the area risked giving the impression that Japan is a pornographic nation, or what he called “Porno Japan” (*poruno Japan*). Both agreed that the public sex culture of Akihabara made it a “weird city” (*hen na machi*). One of the politicians who organized this event later told me that he personally had led tours of Akihabara for guests from overseas and been embarrassed by encounters with *bishōjo* games.<sup>32</sup> A particular kind of pornography, namely adult computer games featuring sexualized images of cute girl characters, struck his guests as weird, which put the politician in the awkward position of having to explain why it was for sale openly in Akihabara. Whether or not it will be in the future is a question. In one of his last acts as Tokyo Governor, Ishihara Shin’tarō pushed through legislation that allows for increased zoning of adult comics, cartoons and computer/console games

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<sup>31</sup> Warner explicitly states that he is trying to imagine the conditions under which an alternative ethical culture exists (Warner 2000: vii-viii), which is to say that he is involved in a politics of imagination. Indeed, drawing on Gayle S. Rubin, Warner points to the politics of sex and “victimless crimes,” “imaginary threats” and “the imaginary rules of sex” (Warner 2000: 25-27). Further, critiques of public sex cultures such as pornography tend to come in a language of disgust that “make a rival point of view seem unimaginable” (Warner 2000: 181).

<sup>32</sup> Personal conversation (July 12, 2014).

because, “After all, it’s abnormal, right?”<sup>33</sup> Here we see the invocation of an “imagined norm,” against which one measures deviance (Berlant and Warner 1998: 557). The culture of abnormal sex is also imagined to be too open and accessible. The solution is to push sex, especially the abnormal kind, off the street (Warner 2000: 169). Even as politicians warn that violence and underage sex have increasingly made *bishōjo* games a topic of discussion in the Japanese Diet,<sup>34</sup> political activists suggest that Akihabara will be cleaned up in anticipation of tourism surrounding the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.<sup>35</sup>

The issue of zoning is complex in Akihabara, which is an unofficially but strictly bordered zone of imaginary sex in public. Crossing over into adjacent neighborhoods, one immediately notices the complete absence of advertisements for adult manga, anime and computer/console games. In this way, Akihabara already seems to adhere to the recommendations of feminist thinker Drucilla Cornell, who advocates keeping pornography “out of the view of those who seek to inhabit or construct an imaginary domain independent of the one it offers,” but also allows for others to inhabit or construct their own “imaginary domains” (Cornell 1995: 104).<sup>36</sup> In concern over

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<sup>33</sup> Ishihara said this at a press conference held on December 17, 2010. See: <[http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumis\\_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280](http://blog.goo.ne.jp/harumis_2005/e/fd37cd702fd9ab084a215dc38e1ed280)>. Also: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2edE4kd0O1w>>.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Yamada Tarō said this at an address to participants at the Comic Market on August 14, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Yamaguchi Takashi said this in a presentation at “Manga Futures: Institutional and Fan Approaches in Japan and Beyond” at the University of Wollongong (November 1, 2014). This is not without precedent, in that the Japanese government passed laws to regulate the public culture of sex in the lead up to the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo (Leheny 2006: 65).

<sup>36</sup> While I am not in complete agreement with her approach to pornography, particularly that images can assault, I stand with Cornell in her fight to expand spaces of imagination rather than close them down, which is part of “liberating the imagination” (Cornell 1995: 158; also 98-99, 138, 144-152). We differ in our approach to “the protection of the imaginary domain” (Cornell 1995: 4), which for Cornell seems to mean protection of women from being forced to see images that make them into sex objects and limit their potential to transform themselves into individuated beings (Cornell 1995: 10, 103-104, 121). I more broadly see protection of the imaginary domain as a project against juridification of the imagination. So while we are in agreement that, “as feminists, we have nothing to gain, and a lot to lose, by any attempts to sexually purify public space” (Cornell 1995: 10; also 27), Cornell would still like to see sexual images kept out of sight (Cornell 1995: 104, 147-148, 150-151), which might suggest that Akihabara needs to be better zoned. (Then again, “communities which allow the proliferation of sexual imaginaries are ones in which the environment itself, by encouraging tolerance, also helps to discourage violence” [Cornell 1995: 153].) This follows from

Akihabara we see a struggle over these imaginary domains. The openness of circulation and affect contributes to imagining a dangerous public. Meanwhile, *bishōjo* game producers are increasingly concerned with controlling circulation in Akihabara, which calls into question the commitment of publics to the “possible participation of any stranger” (Warner 2002: 81). Rather, members of the public are increasingly unwilling to put “at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility” (Warner 2002: 81; recall Charara!!). The counterpublic, acting recursively, closes down the circulation of its texts and, in so doing, closes down one form of stranger sociality for the continued possibility of being strange with others within limits.<sup>37</sup> The risk of estrangement is registered in the counterpublic’s “ethical-political imagination” (Warner 2002: 88), even as the limits of estrangement are negotiated to mitigate the risk that *bishōjo* games may cause misunderstandings with the dominant public. Indeed, *bishōjo* game producers speak of the “ethical considerations” (*rinri-teki na hairyo*) of circulation (Kagami 2010: 220).

The loss of public sex culture is an issue for Warner because it reduces the visibility of sexual variation and possibility for encounter, participation and learning. Public sex culture is how minorities find one another, construct a sense of a shared world and “cultivate a collective ethos of safer sex” (Warner 2000: 169).<sup>38</sup> Consider the experience of Ataru, who discovered in Akihabara that he was sexually attracted to

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her position that images can assault and harm women in the imaginary domain, which I find questionable, especially when the images in question are cartoons that are made distinct from “real girls and women.” The bottom line, for Cornell and myself, is that one “cannot control the sexuality of others” (Cornell 1995: 11; also 163, 233).

<sup>37</sup> As anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin puts it, “The processes by which erotic minorities form communities and the forces that seek to inhibit them lead to struggles over the nature and boundaries of sexual zones” (Rubin 2011: 166). What we see in Akihabara is the struggle over norms of reading, or sorting members of the public on their affective sense of *moe*. “Strangers,” Warner explains, “are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read” (Warner 2002: 83).

<sup>38</sup> This reference to safe sex comes from the experience of homosexual men and HIV / AIDS in North America, but proves useful in thinking public sex and ethics more generally.

manga/ anime characters and not alone. Consider also Momoi Halko, born in Tokyo in 1977, who, like Ataru, played *Tokimeki Memorial* in her youth, but was hanging out in Akihabara in the 1990s before he or I arrived. “I’ve come to think that spending my youth in Akihabara, surrounded by anime, games and idols, was a special kind of education,” Momoi tells me. “The feeling of *moe* seemed natural in such an environment.”<sup>39</sup> In Akihabara, *moe*, an affective response to fictional characters, seemed natural. Attracted to and moved by *bishōjo* characters, Momoi eventually became an idol and voice actress, who sang for many *bishōjo* games. In the process, Momoi interacted more and more with *bishōjo* game players, who, like her, were attracted to *bishōjo* characters. These characters exist alongside women and children, but are not the same as them. Although a woman – a young one, singing as part of a group called UNDER17 – Momoi was not a *bishōjo*. She was not the object of affection, which was *bishōjo*, and she shared an orientation toward it with others. This was the education that Momoi received growing up in Akihabara, the *Moe City*. This way of seeing and experiencing the world stands in stark relief to those who see in Akihabara, surrounded by anime, games and idols, a dangerous environment where underage sex is for sale, which effectively conflates virtual and actual forms (Ostrovsky 2015). While the separation of fiction and reality is anything but complete or clear, it is a collective ethos of safer sex.<sup>40</sup> Queer life, Warner explains, has “its own norms, its own way of keeping people in line” (Warner 2000: 35), and one such norm observed in Akihabara is deliberately and explicitly separating fiction and reality and orienting oneself toward *bishōjo* characters. It is the

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<sup>39</sup> Personal interview (November 12, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> As psychologist Miodrag Popovic suggest, watching pornography is “the ultimate safe sex method,” which also “faciliates learning” (Popovic 2007: 264). Although “no one has decisively demonstrated the link between fantasy and action” (Popovic 2007: 263-264), Popovic highlights the existence of “fantasists,” or people who are satisfied with fantasy. In this group would certainly be “otaku,” who reject even “real” pornography and orient themselves toward fiction.

norm of drawing and insisting on lines, which is learned through collective practice and activity.

### **3.6 A Warning from the West**

On a cold day in December 2014, I took a train from Tokyo to Osaka to meet Miyamoto Naoki, author of three books introducing genres of *bishōjo* games and of *Introduction to the Cultural Study of Erotic Games* (Erogē bunka kenkyū gairon, 2013). When I addressed Miyamoto as professor in email correspondence, he modestly warned me not to expect too much from him or Osaka. Specifically, Miyamoto told me that the Nippombashi area, which is associated with otaku, “is not Akihabara.” This distinction was contrary to everything that I had heard about similarities between Akihabara and Nippombashi. Akihabara is Tokyo’s Electric Town, and Nippombashi is Osaka’s Electric Town. Just as the rise of manga, anime and computer/console games contributed to the transformation of Chūō Street in Akihabara into the Holy Land of Otaku, a street in Nippombashi had transformed into “the Otaku Road.” Indeed, such are the similarities that Nippombashi is often referred to as “the Akihabara of the West” (*kansai no Akihabara*). I had visited Osaka before to conduct interviews at *bishōjo* game production companies such as Key and Softpal, the latter of which has its offices in Nippombashi right off Otaku Road. Itō Noizi, who works at Softpal, designed Nippombashi’s mascot, who is a *bishōjo* character named Neon-chan. Not even Akihabara is officially represented by a *bishōjo* character designed by someone working in the *bishōjo* game industry, suggesting that Nippombashi has taken things even further. Why was Miyamoto making a distinction between this area and Akihabara?

Meeting in front of a collector’s shop in the Electric Town, Miyamoto eagerly shakes my hand, apologizes for keeping me waiting and says that he is taking care of his aging parents, which can be demanding. As we begin to walk, Miyamoto explains that

he has been coming to Nippombashi for 20 years. Born in rural Kagoshima Prefecture in 1978, he moved to Osaka when he was in junior high school and became interested in *bishōjo* games soon after. “My parents bought me a computer for school,” Miyamoto says. “We bought it here in Nippombashi, because the prices are good and they typically have promotional events and sales. The computer came with a game of my choice. I went with what I thought was a zombie game, but it had some sex scenes in it. That’s when I realized that adult games existed. So I started to search for information about adult computer games in magazines in bookstores. I thought, ‘Oh, wow! It’s an erotic anime image! I’ve gotta have this.’ I bought these magazines without having played the games. I got more and more anxious thinking, ‘Do I have to wait until I turn 18?’”<sup>41</sup>

With these thoughts in mind, Miyamoto came to Nippombashi for what he remembers as an encounter that seemed almost like fate. “It just so happened that in a used game shop I saw the exact game I wanted for the exact amount of money that I had in my pocket. So I bought it! I was 16 or 17 years old, and the staff must have known that I was underage, but they sold it to me anyway. Then I started to come to the area to buy games more often.” Nippombashi became a special place for Miyamoto, whose memories of coming of age are associated with content that he purchased at stores in the area. Not only were games more reasonably priced at used game stores, and these stores less likely to ask for age verification, but the young Miyamoto was able to sell the games he played back to the stores to help fund his next purchase. He describes this as a “cycle of return” (*kurikaeshi*) that kept him close to the area. Checking out *bishōjo* games at stores in Nippombashi became a weekly routine and practice that he shared with others in the area. This was even more so the case because of a boom in *bishōjo* games in the

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<sup>41</sup> All direct quotes in this paragraph are from a personal interview (December 3, 2014). The direct quotes in the remainder of the paragraphs in this section come from personal conversation with Miyamoto as we walked around the area together.

early 2000s. “About 10 or 12 years ago, advertisements for adult computer games were a common sight on the street,” Miyamoto recalls. “That was a time of major hit games.” It was also a time when people were drawn to the area to buy these games.

Things are not, however, as they used to be. About five years ago, advertisements began to disappear from the street as *bishōjo* games returned to the basement, back alley and backroom. Maybe it was zoning. Maybe it was pressure from other storeowners. Maybe the demand for *bishōjo* games just declined and stores responded to market pressure by appealing to “normal people.”<sup>42</sup> Miyamoto does not settle on any one explanation, but sees everywhere the signs of retreat. On the edge of Otaku Road, we walk past a large cellphone shop. “That used to be a *bishōjo* game store,” Miyamoto says. Looking inside, he shakes his head, smiling, at an advertisement for the family plan. “No one here.” Turning down Otaku Road, Miyamoto points out that there are no shops specializing in or advertising *bishōjo* games. He recalls that some of the bigger retailers still sell *bishōjo* games, and so we venture into one called Lashinbang. Searching the multiple floors of the massive store, we find adult comics, cartoons and fanzines for men and women, and a section of adult computer games for women, but no *bishōjo* games. We leave the building and cross the street to a store that once specialized in used *bishōjo* games. Judging from the storefront and visible advertising, it now sells used figurines and toys. Walking through the store to a staircase in the back, Miyamoto leads the way to the second floor, where we find adult computer games pushed into a corner against the back wall. “Yappari,” Miyamoto says, grimacing. The word, which he

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<sup>42</sup> Miyamoto, like many others, associates *bishōjo* games with the “abnormal,” for example desire for nonhuman characters both in the stories (robots, animals, aliens) and games (fictional characters, drawings). He is personally attracted to the genre because “the object of affection is relatively free.” He gave the example of loving a robot shaped like a “drum can.” This he takes as a life lesson that teaches us that love comes in many shapes and expands the horizons of who, and what, can be an object of desire and affection.

repeats often to himself, means “as I thought.” “They are pushed to the back, further and further to the back.”

We leave the building and walk further down the street. It is a long walk, which Miyamoto explains is the way things are now. There are perhaps only six stores in Nippombashi that carry *bishōjo* games now, and they are spread out across the area. We finally arrive at Medio, a name I recognize from Akihabara, but it appears to be selling figurines, toys and anime. “Stores can no longer have the stuff up front,” Miyamoto ventures. He leads the way to a staircase in the back with a curtain noting that no one under the age of 18 is allowed. Crossing that threshold and climbing up, we discover three floors of *bishōjo* games, the sort of density of product familiar from Akihabara, but, in this case, we are the only people here. “The way we purchase games has changed,” Miyamoto suggests. “Our lifestyles have changed.” Pushed off the street and into a corner, associated more and more with objectionable content, players are staying home and buying their games online. Among them is Miyamoto, who admits that he only comes to Nippombashi once a month now. “It is more convenient to buy online,” Miyamoto concedes. “But I still miss the way things used to be.” Purchases are more individualized, private and casual. People do not come together in Nippombashi and in public. That was when people would recognize themselves and others as *bishōjo* gamers. There were unexpected encounters with content and people sharing time and space.<sup>43</sup> Hearing this, I realize that I have not seen Miyamoto greet anyone all day. “No one here.” There are no *bishōjo* game players; alone, he seems to be wandering and adrift. “A balance has probably been struck,” Miyamoto says. “But, in all honesty, being a *bishōjo* game player has become a lonely state of affairs.” This space was once alive with

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<sup>43</sup> Miyamoto also worries about the possibility of filtering and blocking information online making certain content invisible, or at least increasingly marginal. He claims that many *bishōjo* games no longer appear on Amazon.co.jp searches.

stranger sociality, a space of sociality for the strange, and he misses it. The city is dead – bustling with people and activity, but dead. Might as well call it a day and go home.

As I wave goodbye and head for the station, Miyamoto's words ring in my ears. *Bishōjo* games have been pushed into a corner: The industry is in decline and feels cornered;<sup>44</sup> the stores carrying *bishōjo* games have been pushed out of the center and into the corner; inside these stores, the content is pushed into corners behind warning signs and curtains. Once existing in the corner of computer stores, *bishōjo* games broke out into the center with specialty shops and open advertising and dedicated fans, but they were now pushed back into the corner of manga, anime and toy stores. With the normalizing of manga and anime fandom and opening up of Nippombashi to "normal people," there was less and less room for *bishōjo* games. The *bishōjo* game player, subsequently, remains in his room. The image of the *bishōjo* game player buying content online from his home computer and having it delivered to his house to play on his home computer – what Miyamoto calls "computer completion" (*pasokon de kanketsu*) – is a striking example of the privatization of sex and a replacement for the social completion of a circuit that has one leaving home and encountering others. At home alone, the *bishōjo* game player does not "understand from experience" (*hada de kanjiru*), as Miyamoto put it, or, more directly translated, does not "feel it on the skin." On the train back to Tokyo, I recall again Miyamoto's warning that Nippombashi is not Akihabara, the *Moe* City. Having spent the day walking with him, following the line of his movement through the area, I think I know what he was trying to tell me. Contrasted to the painful displays of *bishōjo* gamers during the Day of Erotic Games, with Miyamoto, I sensed only the pain of loss.

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<sup>44</sup> Miyamoto estimates that the industry as a whole is selling perhaps half as much as it was at its height. He attributes this to the outdated sales techniques of selling games in material packages at physical stores and charging a high price for long and involved stories, which is out of synch with the general trend toward cheap downloadable games that are played casually.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock points to research in developmental psychology suggesting “that children with a high ‘fantasy orientation’ – that is, children who are more imaginative – are better at discerning fantasy from reality” (Laycock 2015: 289-290). The culture of manga, anime and computer/console games, which is such a part of growing up and everyday life for children in Japan, is a culture of high fantasy orientation (Schodt 1983: 120-137; Schodt 1996: 43-58; Galbraith 2014: 123-125, 163-164, 180-181). In this culture, manga/anime fans have developed an orientation of desire toward fiction not because they are confused, but rather because they make a distinction between fiction and reality and orient themselves toward the former (Saitō [2000] 2011: 30). The literacy involved in making such a distinction comes, Laycock argues, from walking “between worlds” (Laycock 2015: 290). Better still if one can walk between worlds with others, who assist in the journey. Media studies scholar Henry Jenkins argues that participatory culture leads to informal learning in peer networks and the development of not only literacy, but also ethics (Jenkins et al 2009: 28-30). While Jenkins notes that ethics “become much murkier in game spaces,” participation can still lead gamers to become “more reflective about [...] ethical choices” (Jenkins et al 2009: 24-26; see also Chapter 4). Ethics are perhaps even murkier in “game spaces” such as Akihabara, which bring virtual and actual bodies into proximity, but the solution is not to close down such spaces of encounter, participation and learning.<sup>45</sup> If social play can lead to “an ethics of imaginary violence” (Bastow 2015), then it can also lead to an ethics of imaginary sex. One example of this observed in Akihabara is orienting one’s self toward fiction and keeping the cute girl characters appearing in adult manga, anime and

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<sup>45</sup> In both the United States and Japan, concerns have been raised about limiting access to public places, materials and information to learn about sex (Nagaoka 2010: 253; boyd 2014: 102-105).

computer/console deliberately and explicitly separate from reality. It is an ethics of *moe*, of affective response to fictional characters. In spaces such as Akihabara, the *Moe City*, one learns, through collective practice and activity, the norm of drawing a line between fiction and reality, and an ethics of maintaining that line, which keeps people in line.

## 4. Moving Images: “Moe Characters;” or, Affection by Design

“Making adult computer games is a little different from making normal games,” says Matsumura Kazutoshi, founder of *bishōjo* game production company Circus. “This is going to get a little theoretical, but bear with me. I have a theory, what I call the secretion theory (*bunpitsubutsu riron*). When humans secrete two types of liquid, it is incredibly pleasurable. The liquid can be anything – sweat and tears, for example. That’s why an emotional and physically strenuous ballgame is so pleasurable. What about when you eat delicious ramen noodles? Saliva and sweat. Tears and saliva. Liquids are secreted from different parts of the body at the same time. When that happens, we are incredibly moved (*kandō*). I think that is how humans are. If that is the case, then the best adult computer games will contain expressions that make the player release tears and semen (*namida to seiki*) at the same time. This is actually very easy to do with games. There are many players of adult computer games who say that they cry while playing. They can also get off (*nukeru*). The games make them cum (*shasei*). This is probably why the satisfaction of adult computer games is so much greater than what else is out there. The potential that I feel in adult computer games is this ability to move the player. The body is moved to response and secretes different kinds of fluids.”<sup>1</sup>

The two other men in the room listen intently to Matsumura. They work in the adult computer gaming industry, where Matsumura is a legend. Although his ambition led to financial troubles and turned him into something of a cautionary tale, Matsumura is still a guru. Born in Yamaguchi Prefecture in 1975, his *Da Capo* series (2002-2012), which tells the story of high school romance (between the male protagonist and one or more of seven female characters) and a magical cherry-blossom tree, remains one of the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Matsumura Kazutoshi come from a personal interview (July 23, 2013).

most popular franchises in *bishōjo* gaming history. The young men have joined me for this rare meeting with Matsumura, which takes place in an office in Akihabara that serves as a storage room for a *bishōjo* game production company that is somehow related to Matsumura.<sup>2</sup> The room is filled with promotional goods for his games. It is hot and stuffy on a July afternoon, and the fan only serves to push hot air around the room. I glance over at Izumi Yukari, a 32-year-old married woman who works as an assistant to various companies in the *bishōjo* gaming industry. She is nodding as Matsumura speaks, smiling. She has worked with him in the past and heard him talk this way before.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, she had warned me that Matsumura might get a little philosophical. After starting to play *bishōjo* games at the age of 14, he began to see sex as a gateway into human psychology. Somewhere along the way his studies led him to see them as connected to human physiology as well. Just as pornography has been compared to “body genres” such as musicals, “weepies,” comedies and horror (Williams 1989: 5), *bishōjo* games “appeal to the body.” They move the body with “moving images.” “There are many different approaches, for example making people laugh and cry,” Matsumura agrees. “But the theory of adult computer games is to move the player as much as possible. My theory, the secretion theory, is just one example.”

This chapter explores issues of design in *bishōjo* games. It combines a discussion of the production of *bishōjo* games with accounts of players and critics. Image, sound and story come together in *bishōjo* games. Illustrators design characters that are not only objects of desire, but also that players want to interact with. At least three aspects of design are significant. First, the character is a flat, “two-dimensional” image that shares

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<sup>2</sup> Circus’ offices are located in Saitama Prefecture. How the place we met in Akihabara is related I do not know, and the person who set the meeting up told me not to ask Matsumura questions about his business or finances.

<sup>3</sup> Izumi, who trained to be a voice actress, got her first job in the industry at Circus, where she was paid to dress in character costumes and interact with fans. After about five years of this, she was hired as full-time staff in the company (personal interview, July 2, 2013).

an aesthetic with manga and anime. The insistence on manga/anime-style images is characteristic of *bishōjo* games, and this serves to connect them to distinctly fictional worlds. Second, character designers have come to understand that certain elements are more attractive to players and more effective at moving them. These are called “*moe* elements” (Azuma 2009). A combination of these elements, characters in *bishōjo* games are called “*moe* characters.” Players who have become adept at reading characters in terms of these elements are said to have developed “*moe* image literacy” (Kagami 2010). Third, characters are designed to be cute, which is again characteristic of manga and anime. Cuteness encourages “prosocial behavior,” which has been noted in scientific studies of cuteness globally (Shermann and Haidt 2011), and cuteness also triggers “ugly feelings” to act on and abuse objects (Ngai 2005, 2012). In addition to the visuals, voice actresses produce characters that match the image and move the player. Like illustrators, they describe their jobs in terms of “imaging.” The successful voice actress attunes herself to affective character images, which allows her to produce “*moe* voices.” Finally, writers put the player into scenarios where they interact with characters and are moved. These are called “*moe* situations.” *Bishōjo* games allow players to interact with *moe* characters with *moe* voices in *moe* situations, all of which are designed to move the player.

In this chapter, I argue that imagination is a fundamental part of *bishōjo* games and is crucial to understanding how they move players. The game design is simple: A series of still images with text loading below as the player clicks the mouse, accompanied by sound and spoken lines for select cute girl characters; choices appear and, based on them, the narrative branches into different events moving toward different endings. In a very crude way, production companies have settled on this design because it is comparatively easy and cheap to create such games, but also, as I

was regularly told, it “works” for players. *Bishōjo* games work to move players, and work well, and, because that is the primary objective, there is no need to change the design. It would be easy to dismiss this as rationalization by an industry that has fallen desperately behind the times, but in fact there are dedicated players who actively seek out *bishōjo* games because they do in fact work for them. The most common explanation from players for their persistent choice is that there are no other games that focus on intimate interactions with manga / anime characters and feature sex with them. Further, there are no other games that move them the way *bishōjo* games do. I argue it is because these games demand so much imaginative work from players that they work as well as they do to move players. Looking at the still images on screen, the player use his imagination to move the image according to textual and sound cues, and, intimately engaged with the image, the player is in turn moved. Imagining the action, the player co-creates it (McCloud 1994: 68-69). This dynamic of co-imagining / creating action is precisely why, as Matsumura puts it, it is easy to affect players – to move them to bodily response – with *bishōjo* games.

In addition, the player makes choices that impact the story and characters that the player interacts with. In that the choices made reflect the player, *bishōjo* games almost function as “a personality test” (Clements 2013: 201). Building on accounts from players and critics as well as my own experiences, I argue that *bishōjo* game players are encouraged to reflect on their choices and actions and take responsibility for them. From the simplest choice to say hello to much more complex and difficult ones, the player makes choices that impact relationships and what happens next. Even as the *bishōjo* is an object to be acted on, after intimately interacting with and imagining them, some players cease to treat cute girl characters like objects to be acted on with impunity and instead see them as “someone” that can be hurt (Sasakibara 2003: 105-107). At the same time,

one cannot choose inaction, and so must make choices that can and do hurt characters that the player has come to know and care about. In this way, interacting with cute girl characters, I argue that players face ugly feelings, actions and consequences, which they are intimately involved in. They face the ugliness and violence of desire, and the ugliness and violence in themselves and relationships. They also face their capacity to harm others through action, a capacity for violence. Co-creation and imagining of action and making deliberate choices in slowly developing stories about human relationships contributes to an ethics of imaginary violence among *bishōjo* game players, which is in sharp contrast to the automatic and unscrutinized action of mainstream cinema and games.

#### **4.1 Playing Bishōjo Games**

*Big Brother, Use of Your Right Hand is Forbidden!!* (O-nī-chan, migite no shiyō wo kinshi shimasu!! 2014)<sup>4</sup>

She is lying down in bed beside me. Her face is just inches away from mine. Her massive eyes stare at me, unblinking, framed by loose strands of straight black hair. Her cheeks are flushed. The top button of her pajama shirt is undone. I cannot see the rest of her, which is covered by the blanket that we share. We are alone in my room. I click the mouse to load more text on the screen, and hear her voice. “I’ve been so happy to take care of you this past week...” What? Hesitation in her voice, which quivers with emotion. Is something wrong? “I didn’t know what to do when I saw you staring at me...” So that is why she did not come over yesterday. I must have made her nervous by asking her to come to my room and take care of me. Sure, she had volunteered when I hurt my right hand saving her in a traffic accident, but it was obvious that I had something in mind after days of choosing her, and only her, among the three possible

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<sup>4</sup> See: <<http://glace.me/galette/products/right/>>.

candidates. In truth, after playing the game for hours to get to this point, I was getting frustrated that nothing seemed to be happening. I had seen her in various states of undress, but nothing more. When does this become pornography, I had wondered? Now she is in my bed, so close, eyes on me, sharing her feelings. “I’m so happy just to be with you...” Say no more, please. I was wrong. This is too much. But as I click the mouse the text continues to appear and she continues to speak. Aroused and guilty, I listen, alone in my room with the computer and together with her in my room in the computer. She finally falls asleep, exhausted, but seeming to trust me – which makes it worse. The screen fades to black. Calm, while I am chaos. I should have expected this from a game that won a *Moe Award*.

*Favorable Conditions for Groping* (Chikan yūgū ressha, 2014)<sup>5</sup>

She is not protesting out loud anymore, but I can hear her thoughts, which are spoken by the voice actress. “What is fun about this?” She is standing in a crowded train. A man behind her is groping her through her school uniform. The character is a rich girl, self-possessed and prideful, which must make this all the more mortifying for her. She is blushing, perhaps from embarrassment, perhaps excitement. Tears in her eyes, perhaps from frustrated rage, perhaps sadness at the assaults, which have continued for days. “Why is it always me?” Because I chose this route in the game. I was attracted to the character design – blond hair in ponytails. I am not the groper, whose body I can see on screen, but I chose this game and this girl. It was me. And it is me who is clicking the mouse to continue. “Can’t you see that this is bothering me?” Yes, I can. The game and scenario are designed that way. Click. The image has changed. The groper is becoming more aggressive. He has lifted her skirt to reveal the white panties beneath. Click. More text describing the situation. Click. Her voice again, whimpering.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <<http://catwalk.product.co.jp/nero/products/cn08/>>.

Click. The image has changed. Sweat beads on her thighs, which are exposed and fleshy. Click. The groper has his penis out. "What? You can't be serious..." Click. Click. He has forced her into a handjob. Click. She is humiliated. Click. He is cumming. Click. The image has changed. Her exposed panties and legs are covered with viscous, translucent strands of semen. Click. "You bastard! You will pay for this..." Black screen as we transition to a different scene. Thinking for a moment that I see my reflection, I hurriedly turn the computer off. What in the world am I doing? I get ready to leave for work. There is a long train ride ahead of me to get to the city. What in the world am I doing?

*In Solitude, Where We Are Least Alone* (Yosuga no sora, 2008)<sup>6</sup>

This is not right. I tried to end it, but this is not what I wanted. I just wanted to do what was best for Sora, my twin sister. Our parents died suddenly in a traffic accident. At the invitation of our grandparents, we moved to their old house in a village in the countryside. We only have each other. Sora is so frail. While I am at school making friends, she is home alone. Then I saw her masturbating. She was saying my name. I tried to ignore it. I started a relationship with Nao, a girl from school, but it ended badly. I had tried to force her, my mind on Sora, which hurt Nao. She asked if I love her. No, I love Sora – not that I could say that to her. This is not right, but it is my fault. I kissed Sora when we were kids. Maybe I was just playing, but it does not matter. I love Sora, and she loves me. We had sex after she confessed her feelings. For days after we could not keep our hands off each other. Nao knew something was up, and she caught us. This is a village where everyone knows everyone; they would know about us. I had a fight with Sora. I told her we had to end it. She protested, grabbing me, and I hit her while trying to break free. It was an accident, but it is probably better that she hates me. It was going to end anyway. We were out of money and would be taken in by

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<sup>6</sup> See: <<http://www.cuffs-sphere.jp/products/yosuga/>>.

different relatives and live apart. Then I awoke to find Sora gone. I received a text from her saying goodbye. She had gone to the lake to take her own life. I jumped into the water to stop her, but cannot swim. We are both going to drown. This is not right and not what I wanted. What did I do wrong? Everything. Every damn thing. I will replay the game. Make different choices. There must be a way for me to leave this place with Sora. We could be happy, together, just not here. And not in death. Blinking away the tears welling in my eyes, I restart the game. This time will be different. This time we will live and be happy.

## **4.2 Characters and Stories Designed to Move**

The above excerpts are from notes taken as I played and responded to *bishōjo* games, which was part of “analytical play” to understand “different game cultures” (Mäyrä 2008: 165-167). While I often did not always understand how and why, these games did move me. I still vividly recall images, voices and scenarios from them, and many others I played in the field. One of the first things that one notices while playing *bishōjo* games is the prevalence of *bishōjo* characters. Indeed, they are part of the very definition of *bishōjo* games. A *bishōjo* game is a game that features *bishōjo* characters, and, more specifically, one that focuses on interactions with them. Strictly translated, “*bi*” means “beautiful” and “*shōjo*” means “girl,” but a more accurate translation of *bishōjo* is “cute girl.” The distinction is not arbitrary. In the world of manga and anime, cuteness is associated with round shapes and soft lines, which are characteristic of a style that has come to dominate Japanese comics, cartoons and computer/console games (Shiokawa 1999: 97). The mainstream manga/anime style is cute and cartoony, as opposed to the “realism” of competing styles in Japan and abroad.

In addition to these elements of design, *bishōjo* characters have massive eyes, which are characteristic of *shōjo* manga, or comics for girls. As comics scholar Takahashi

Mizuki puts it, the large eyes of *shōjo* manga are used to portray emotion and to “evoke empathy from the reader” (Takahashi 2008: 124). Stated somewhat differently, the large eyes express an inner life and encourage empathy from the reader. Characters with such eyes have an interior life and can be hurt like us. The depiction of interiority is particularly important in *shōjo* manga, which focuses on relationships and emotions. *Shōjo* manga are said to appeal to the reader and move her on an affective level (Takahashi 2008: 124; see also Prough 2011, chapters three and four). This aspect of *shōjo* characters in comics for girls, so strikingly captured in the design of extremely large eyes, was folded into manga and anime for men in the form of *bishōjo* characters in the late 1970s and 1980s (Galbraith 2015a: 22-26). *Bishōjo* games are a direct successor of this lineage of characters that get those interacting with them affectively involved.<sup>7</sup>

*Bishōjo* games, like computer / console games in Japan more generally (Aoyama and Izushi 2004: 121-125; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: 16; Minotti 2016), share a talent pool, aesthetic and fan base with manga and anime, which is crucial for understanding them. *Bishōjo* games speak to an orientation toward manga / anime reality as opposed to some other “reality” (Ōtsuka 2003: 24), desire for “two-dimensional images (manga, anime) rather than realistic things” (Akagi 1993: 230) and “an orientation of desire” toward “fiction itself” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 16, 30). This is a distinct reality and economy of desire, which has been described to me over the years in terms such as “lines of desire” (*rain no yokubō*), “desire for lines” (*sen ni tai suru yokubō*) and “the pleasure of lines” (*byōsen ni yoru kairaku*). “This is not reality,” explained comics scholar Fujimoto Yukari, turning her computer to me to show an image of a *bishōjo* character. “In fact, the line can only exist because it is not reality.”<sup>8</sup> In this encounter, I

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<sup>7</sup> I am not the only one to note this, of course. One *bishōjo* fan made a similar connection in an interview (Galbraith 2014: 149-150).

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview (February 16, 2015).

was again struck by the large eyes of the character, which are constructed of lines and do not exist in “reality” or point back to it. Indeed, *bishōjo*, with their large eyes and characteristic lines, have evolved into what psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki described to me as “extremely strange figures, or strange compositions.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Saitō sees it, “normal people” do not understand why these characters are “cute.” A distinctive evolution of manga/anime characters has led to many strange figures: hybrid animal-humans, robot maids, transforming magical girls, boy-girls and many more besides. All are said to refer back to manga/anime as opposed to some other “reality.” So it is that *bishōjo* game producers and players, like manga/anime fans more generally, see sex with a magical girl-child and not pedophilia, sex with little sister characters and not incest, same-sex character couplings that they claim have nothing to do with homosexuality, sex with animal characters and not bestiality and so on. The design of characters can incite desire for lines, which was once described to me as “line fetishism” (*byōsen fēchi*), or extreme sensitivity to character lines.<sup>10</sup> These lines do not exist “naturally,” but rather are imagined and created. These lines are drawn and shared by producers and fans of manga/anime characters generally, and *bishōjo* game producers and players specifically.

A great deal of effort is put into designing the characters of *bishōjo* games, which are, as one character designer explained to me, “the first thing that people see and what gets them to pick the package up.”<sup>11</sup> Further, the character is what the player sees most when playing a *bishōjo* game. Requiring around 10 hours on average to play through a branch of the narrative, *bishōjo* game players stare at their computer screens for long periods of time. What they see onscreen is a static and flat background image, a flat character image layered on top of it and a window for text below the character. The

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<sup>9</sup> Personal interview (February 26, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Itō Gō, personal interview (March 19, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview (September 1, 2014).

player reads the text, which can be very flowery and poetic, and clicks the mouse to load more when finished reading. When select cute girl characters speak, their recorded voices are heard. As text is loaded, the character image changes slightly, for example adding a smile, blinking eyes or a symbolic response (in the language of manga/ anime) to the interaction such as a sweat drop indicating nervousness. Changes in setting, major actions or events result in a different character image or image of the character appearing on screen, which then changes slightly as the scene progresses. For the most part, the player is reading text; listening to background music, sounds and voices; and looking at a still image of a character. The character image must, then, be attractive and interesting enough to hold the player's attention for extended periods of time.

According to Azuma Hiroki, a philosopher and cultural critic whose work has drawn attention to *bishōjo* games, manga/ anime-style character images were originally preferred to three-dimensional, computer-generated graphics because technological limitations made a three-dimensional image less detailed and attractive to players.<sup>12</sup> Over time, however, even when technology would allow three-dimensional, computer-generated images of similar quality, players' preference for flat, two-dimensional, manga/ anime-style images militated against change.<sup>13</sup> This was also good for business, because *bishōjo* game production companies could tap into the talent pool of manga/ anime illustrators and not have to develop or pay for new software, training and design skills.

One of the results of having so much focus on still images of characters in *bishōjo* games is that interior layers of the character rise to the surface. Writing on limited

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<sup>12</sup> Personal interview (October 16, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Azuma draws attention to the example of Konami's *Tokimeki Memorial 3* (Highbeat High 3, 2001), which made use of three-dimensional computer generated graphics and, despite being a beloved franchise and a technical advance, failed commercially. As Azuma sees it, this was a result of their rejection of the character images, which did not conform to the preferred two-dimensional style. See: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokimeki\\_Memorial\\_3:\\_Yakusoku\\_no\\_Ano\\_Basho\\_deMo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokimeki_Memorial_3:_Yakusoku_no_Ano_Basho_deMo)>.

animation in Japan, which reduces the number of drawn images to 12 or fewer per second, media theorist Thomas Lamarre points out that there are times when a character image will remain still for several seconds while its mouth is drawn opening and closing and the voice actor or actress speaks the character's lines (Lamarre 2009: 10). This limited animation means that the viewer is listening to the voice of the character and staring at its still image for long periods, which might be broken up with cuts, camera tricks and special effects. On a fundamental level, however, the character image needs to be attractive and interesting enough to capture and hold attention. Lamarre calls the resulting character design a "soulful body," where "spiritual, emotional, or psychological qualities appear inscribed on the surface" (Lamarre 2009: 201). The image not only suggests an interior that the viewer reads on the surface, but also interior movements that the viewer can read in the image. One might refer to this as an affective attunement to the character image and its movements, which are not always or necessarily animated, but rather suggested in elements of design and through interactions with others in the story.<sup>14</sup> If, as anime historian and critic Jonathan Clements has suggested, *bishōjo* games are the "the apotheosis of 'limited' animation" (Clements 2013: 193), then it makes sense that designing character images to be "soulful bodies" is even more crucial.

One result of limited animation and a focus on soulful bodies is coded visual cues embedded in character design. Different colors of hair and hairstyles might suggest character, for example "blond with pigtails" (*kinpatsu tsuin tēru*), which I was consistently told referred to characters with a bad attitude and soft heart. There are hundreds of these combinations. A strand of hair sticking up, which is called "stupid hair" (*ahoge*), suggests a character that is energetic but not too bright. Glasses may

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Lamarre described the phenomenon of affective attunement in a personal interview (April 19, 2010).

convey intelligence or shyness, and a girl with glasses becomes a character type, “glasses girl” (*meganekko*). Having the character eating food suggests energy and vitality, or a “healthy girl” (*genki na ko*). Big breasts suggest mature sexuality, and smaller breasts innocence. Different colors of underwear suggest character, for example white cotton with an animal print as code for “child” and black lace as code for “adult.” One character designer said that he designed his characters to convey a mood or feeling, which led him to code his characters with color.<sup>15</sup> In his designs, eye color, hair highlights and elements of costume are all color-coded. Pink characters were sweet, red characters aggressive, black characters brooding, purple characters mysterious and so on. Another illustrator told me that he designed his characters to contrast with one another, for example having the shortest character be the youngest or most vulnerable.<sup>16</sup> While the variables seem endless and arbitrary, there are in fact recognizable and repeated patterns. Clements claims that there are in fact only six character types in *bishōjo* games, which are presented differently visually and narratively (Clements 2013: 202). While this may be somewhat reductive, Azuma similarly identifies a “database” of character design, which is read intertextually (Azuma 2009: 31-33, 39-54, 79-81). Glasses, pigtails, sister, maid, big-breasted and so on are all examples of what Azuma calls “*moe* elements” (*moe yōso*), or affective elements of character design. *Moe* elements are elements of design that trigger an affective response in those interacting with the character. A character designed in this way to affect is a “*moe* character” (*moe kyara*). Such a character is designed to be a moving image. This, ultimately, is what illustrators produce for *bishōjo* games.

Being able to read these affective elements of design is what *bishōjo* game scenario writer Kagami Hiroyuki calls “*moe* image literacy” (*moe’e riterashī*) (Kagami

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<sup>15</sup> Personal interview (September 12, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview (July 24, 2015).

2010: 131). “None of this makes any sense if you try to read it without understanding the language,” Kagami explains to me, animated by his fifth cup of coffee during a lunch appointment. “Let’s say I write a Lolita granny (*roribaba*) character. That’s a character type, you know, Lolita granny. It makes no sense unless you understand that Lolita means a young girl character with a small chest and granny refers to the fact that she speaks or sounds like an old woman. You know, saying ‘ja’ at the end of a sentence. You have to read the character in terms of design, scenario and sound.”<sup>17</sup> While Kagami focuses on players developing *moe* image literacy, it is also an important asset for producers, who collaboratively create the character image. For example, Hayase Yayoi, a voice actress in the *bishōjo* gaming industry, explains how she produces characters: “I read the script and try to match the image of the character. The character in the script has already been imagined by the scenario writer and the illustrator, so my job is matching the image.”<sup>18</sup> Matching work, or the work of “imaging” (*imēji suru*), is informed by Hayase’s own experience listening to character voices and reproducing them. “I grew up with anime and loving anime characters,” Hayase tells me. “I would always try to mimic them. I can produce a number of voices. The director calls me in when he wants me to voice certain characters.” Like the “*moe* image,” which is comprised of affective elements, Hayase and others speak of “*moe* voices” (*moe goe*), which call up characters and move those hearing them. High or low pitch, fast or slow delivery, clean or sloppy pronunciation all suggests different characters. Grainy and human. Smooth and robotic. Certain keywords such as “big brother” (*o-nī-chan*) call up entire scenarios. Ways of ending sentences can make a character sound young or old. To practice for auditions, Hayase takes one sound, “un,” which is a grunt that would be heard in sex scenes, and repeats it over and over in different voices until she has tuned

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interview (February 9, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview (September 19, 2014).

into the character. That one sound, done correctly, indexes a database of *moe* characters. Kagami, Hayase and others underscore *moe* literacy, which is shared by *bishōjo* game producers and players, who understand and appreciate *moe* as an affective response to fictional characters.

More than anything, I am told, a *bishōjo* character needs to be cute. “I don’t really know what guys respond to as *moe*,” says Itō Noizi, a character designer at *bishōjo* game production company Softpal. “But it seems that a small girl with lots of energy, the kind of girl that is just too cute, is close to the core image.”<sup>19</sup> Over the course of our conversation, the number of times that Itō uses the word “cute” (*kawaii*) is striking. Why the emphasis on youthfulness in *bishōjo* games? “Because that is when girls are the cutest.” Why cat ears as an affective element of design? “Like a kitten is already cute, and if you add that to a cute girl then it doubles the cuteness.” And so on. Make no mistake that Itō, who has designed some of the most popular *bishōjo* characters in Japanese manga, anime and games, knows what she is doing. What she is doing, it turns out, is designing cute girl characters. While Japan is often said to be obsessed with cuteness (Kinsella 1995), and interest in *bishōjo* characters has been understood as a cute sickness (Schodt 1996: 54-55; Kinsella 2006: 81, 85; Galbraith 2015a: 30), it is worth considering cuteness in less loaded terms of character design. Studies have shown that cuteness is “a direct releaser of human sociality” that encourages “social engagement” with cute objects, which are attributed inner life and “humanized” (Sherman and Haidt 2011: 1, 4, 6). Cute objects are “empathy generators” (Steinberg 2016; Yano 2013: 56-57). As researchers Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt rightly point out, getting people to “socially engage with (e.g., befriend, play with) an animated or stuffed character is facilitated by making it physically cute,” which “has been exploited by toy makers,

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview (December 18, 2009).

video game designers and animators to great success” (Sherman and Haidt 2011: 5). By designing characters to be cute, *bishōjo* game producers encourage what Sherman and Haidt call “prosocial behavior” (Sherman and Haidt 2011: 1, 6). Designing characters to be cute encourages players to interact with them, attribute interiority and treat them as human. At the same time, as literary scholar Sianne Ngai argues, cuteness is a minor aesthetic that can trigger “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005; Ngai 2012). Associated with accentuated vulnerability (Ngai 2005: 819), cuteness triggers an “affective response to weakness or powerlessness” (Ngai 2012: 24). For Ngai, cuteness, with its roundness, softness and malleable forms, not only triggers the desire to touch and hold, but also to squeeze and bite. “Violence,” Ngai writes, is “always implicit in our relation to the cute object” (Ngai 2005: 823; also Ngai 2012: 85). The cute object is “the most objectified of objects” (Ngai 2005: 834), the perfect object to be acted on, somehow resilient enough to take any amount of abuse. As girl characters designed to be cute, *bishōjo* encourage “prosocial behavior” and trigger “ugly feelings.” They are imagined to have interiority, which encourages empathy and human interaction, but are also objects to be acted on.

The imagining of interiority is encouraged by elements of design (large eyes, soulful body, cuteness), and this interiority is developed in stories that focus tightly on characters, relationships and emotions. The history of *bishōjo* games that is told and retold is that they used to be all about depictions of sex and getting the player off, but now are more about moving the player with developed stories and characters. Nearly everyone I met – my friend Ataru, a *bishōjo* game player; Honda Tōru, a writer and critic married to a character from a *bishōjo* game; Izumi Yukari, my guide in the *bishōjo* gaming industry – all relayed the same story about sex games in the 1980s and early 1990s giving way to moving games in the late 1990s into the 2000s. The message was that story was now more important, hence terms such as “novel games” and “visual novels,” and these

novelistic games are melodramatic – much like soap operas, focused on relationships and emotional responses, which encourages attunement to slight movements of bodies in images dense with potential meaning (Geraghty 1991: 30; Harrington and Bielby 1995: 45; Blumenthal 1997: 53)<sup>20</sup> – moving players to a bodily response other than cumming. Instead, they began to cry while playing the games, which earned them yet another name: “crying games.” The transformation, usually tied to *bishōjo* games produced by companies such as Elf, Leaf and Key, was seen as epochal. “Cumming games” (*nukigē*) had been replaced by “crying games” (*nakigē*). Stories still contained sex, but it was not the only or main thing, which was proven when the games removed sex scenes for re-releases and grew in popularity, even resulting in adaptation into televised anime series. The history is said to reflect a general “de-pornification” (*hi-poruno-ka*) (Kagami 2010: 137). Adult computer games still contain sex scenes, but at the same time are moving away from being defined simply as “pornography.”

Scenario writer Maeda Jun has become synonymous with the rise of crying games. Although his games still contain sex scenes, he moves players to laugh and cry between these scenes or even at the same time. “The range of emotions in these games is so intense that they really can’t be compared to what other producers have done,” Maeda explains. “Moments in the story build up to the climax, where players are

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<sup>20</sup> As a form of melodramatic imagination, *bishōjo* games are in many ways similar to soap operas, where the goal is to “elicit as many and as complex emotions from viewers as possible” (Blumenthal 1997: 53). This is done by focusing on still images – the body in arrest, reacting to other bodies – dense with potential meaning. In soap operas, “the close-ups on faces, of important objects, the deliberate movement of characters across a room, the lingering of the camera on a face at the end of the scene, the exchange of meaningful glances – work to make every gesture and action seem highly coded and significant” (Geraghty 1991: 30). This overcoding adds far more signifying possibilities than are necessary to move the narrative forward. As pioneering researcher Tania Modleski points out, “characters to get together and have prolonged, involved, intensely emotional discussions with each other” (Modleski 1983: 68). What is happening is less important than what might be happening, or might happen. In this way, “the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end an end in itself” (Modleski 1982: 88). This is an apt description of *bishōjo* games, where fulfillment of desire is made complex and anticipation becomes key. As researchers of soap operas and the melodramatic imagination point out, there is something masochistic about this pleasure.

moved.”<sup>21</sup> Over the course of our conversation, I am surprised to learn that Maeda did not originally want to be in the *bishōjo* game industry, and had only ended up there after applying to mainstream gaming companies without any luck. He at first did not think much of *bishōjo* games, and was somewhat embarrassed by what he did for a living. However, working at Key at a time when it was producing legendary games such as *Kanon* (Kanon, 1999), *Air* (Eā, 2000) and *Clannad* (Kuranado, 2004), Maeda witnessed their power to move players. “At first I was surprised that *bishōjo* games had come to a point where they could have such an impact on players, but then I came to think of the tears as a sign of our ultimate success,” he says. “It is very difficult to create a game that moves people the way ours do.” Maeda recalls a scene in *Air* where the heroine, Misuzu, who is fragile and suffering and doomed to die, breaks into song. As Maeda imagines it, players stopped clicking and just looked at the still image of Misuzu, arms spread wide in a field, and listened. Misuzu’s massive, sparkling eyes – eyes so large that they strike some as bizarre<sup>22</sup> – might have been dry, but players cried for her. Maeda, who also watched with tears in his eyes, considers this to have been a moment when the game was disrupted because the players were too moved to continue. The image of Misuzu is burned into the collective memory of players as a moment when image, sound and scenario combined and the moving images of *bishōjo* games ascended to a new level.

### **4.3 The Role of Imagination in Bishōjo Games**

Given the design of *bishōjo* games, players spend a great deal of time looking at still images, reading text and listening to background music, sound effects and character voices. The still images change slightly as the player clicks to advance the text, and players become attuned to these small changes, which reflect the emotional state of the

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<sup>21</sup> All quotes come from a personal interview (December 18, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> In a personal interview (February 26, 2010), Saitō Tamaki singled out the characters of *Air* as examples of “extremely strange figures, or strange compositions.”

character as the player interacts with her. All of this is before and between making choices that impact the story. These choices are sometimes few and far between, with, for example, only 10 choices in a game and an hour of story and character interaction elapsing between them (Taylor 2007: 197). The majority of the game, then, is interacting with still images, or images that move only slightly, images that are said to be moving given what is happening, which the player gathers from textual and sound cues. In this way, *bishōjo* games require the player to use his imagination. This is in stark contrast to the “realism” of much of modern mainstream entertainment, which critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue “denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in the imagination” and contributes to a “withering of imagination” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 100). Against this backdrop, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to recognize the potential of cartoons, as well as the pathos of *bishōjo* characters such as Betty Boop (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 106, 110). Certain forms seem to unsettle reality, leave room for the imagination and contribute to its flourishing, which, Horkheimer and Adorno would insist, is a matter of politics.<sup>23</sup>

*Bishōjo* games are a series of deliberately juxtaposed images, or sequential art, which is artist and theorist Scott McCloud’s definition of comics (McCloud 1994: 9).<sup>24</sup> At stake here is not whether *bishōjo* games are super limited animation or slightly animated comics, but rather, as described by McCloud, how both comics and *bishōjo* games are media that require participation and imagination. If film captures enough frames per second to create the illusion of continuous motion and objective reality, which McCloud describes as the phenomenon of “automatic electronic closure” (McCloud 1994: 65), then

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, if “entertainment is purging the affects” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 115), this is not what we are seeing in *bishōjo* games, which are all about affect.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that McCloud’s longer definition of comics includes that they are “intended to [...] produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 1994: 9). That “aesthetic response” might refer to comics as images intended to move.

limited animation that captures 12 frames or fewer per second offers closure that is still electronic but less automatic (Clements 2013: 120-121). For McCloud, comics are a medium that takes this to the extreme, in that frames are placed side by side on the page to suggest motion, but the closure between the frames is not electronic or automatic. Instead, the viewer is involved and must imagine that the action depicted in one frame continues into the next, or fill in the blanks, as it were, which requires imagination (McCloud 1994: 68-69). *Bishōjo* games operate in a similar but distinct way in that still frames are not laid out on a page, but rather a still image appears on the screen and motion is suggested in small movements of the image (blinking of the eyes, for example), textual description (flowery, poetic, evocative language) and sound cues (background music, effects and, most importantly, voice). To put it simply, the player looks at the still image and imagines it to be moving in the ways that are described in the text and suggested by the sound. The result is, as gender scholar Emily Taylor writes, that *bishōjo* games “require the player to use his (or her) imagination” (Taylor 2007: 194). In this way, *bishōjo* games and comics are what McCloud calls “minority forms” (McCloud 2000: 19), which offer different ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

I became aware of this aspect of *bishōjo* game design at the Denkigai Matsuri when talking with the producers of *Mana-chan* (2015).<sup>25</sup> When I approached the two men, who were at a table in front of two large posters of a manga/anime-style schoolgirl with the shirt of her uniform undone to reveal massive breasts and her panties pulled down provocatively, they happily introduced their work. What kind of game is this? “It’s just what you imagine it to be,” one of the men says, smiling. “It’s sex with your

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<sup>25</sup> See: <<http://www.moetionworks.com/pink/>>.

little sister.”<sup>26</sup> Looking at the poster, I now see that Mana-chan, the *bishōjo*, is clearly indicated to be a “little sister” (*imōto*) character, whose defining characteristic is an intimate relationship with her brother. Although anthropologists once considered incest to be one of the universal taboos of human culture, it is quite common in *bishōjo* games, especially the combinations of father and daughter, mother and son and brother and sister. Given the prevalence of little sister characters, whose innocence, devotion and familial love can easily be imagined as transgressively and excitingly sexual, the producers of *Mana-chan* thought I was asking a rhetorical question. Upon closer inspection, the game is actually a drama CD, where a voice actress performs the imagined scenario of sex with your little sister in one of two school settings. So you just listen to the voice and masturbate? “Yeah, that’s about it,” the man says, laughing. “You look at the poster, too.” Look at the poster? The single image of Mana-chan? Oh, that is why she is undressing. The image is to suggest the sex act to come, as well as to provide an image for the voice, something to give form to the character in the imagination.<sup>27</sup> And this works? “Yeah, it’s super erotic!” Judging from the number of men who are lining up to buy sets of CDs and posters, I cannot argue. In retrospect, I realize that *Mana-chan* is the core of *bishōjo* games: An image, a voice and a scenario, which together form a character that the player interacts with. Interacting with the character, the player is moved to response. The producers of *Mana-chan* were particularly savvy to this dynamic, which they signaled by calling their product a “moemotion” (*moe*-motion) game. In their promotional material, the producers of *Mana-chan* describe their character, in English, as “soulful” and themselves as “specialists” in *moe*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The interaction occurred on August 13, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> One is reminded here of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who describes ancient religious practices of “walking through” paintings into other worlds (Ingold 2011: 199).

<sup>28</sup> Their slogan, in English, is as follows: “Moemotion Works Pink: It’s Soulful, and We’re the Specialists who Creates MOE and EMOTION.”

The fact that *bishōjo* game players are so involved in imagining the action gives rise to peculiar forms of intimacy. Here again McCloud proves insightful in his approach to comics as a particularly intimate medium, because the author draws what is in his or her imagination and lays it out on the page for the reader, who imagines the action to move the images (McCloud 1994: 68-69, 194-196).<sup>29</sup> This is an intimate sharing of imagination, and it becomes somewhat peculiar in *bishōjo* games given the many producers involved (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation). Important here is that the player shares the imagination and creation of others, and is intimately involved in it as a co-imager and co-creator. As McCloud sees it, because comics as sequential art demand the reader to fill in the blanks to complete the action, “Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader” (McCloud 1994: 68). To demonstrate this, McCloud draws two sequential images, the first of an assailant raising an axe and about to strike a terrified man, and the second a cityscape at night that is pierced by a scream. “I may have drawn the axe being raised in this example,” McCloud writes, “but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style” (McCloud 1994: 68). It is telling that McCloud chooses an act of violence to demonstrate his theory of media that require imaginative participation in order to move. With intimate sharing of imagination and imaginative participation comes a sense of responsibility. One cannot sit back and observe the actions of others, detached and unmoved, because that person is involved in the action. The reader who co-imagines and co-creates action must also take responsibility for his or her “special crime.” *Bishōjo* games similarly involve the

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, so common is this technique of having viewers fill in the blanks in Japanese comics and cartoons that there is even a term for it: “mind completion” (*nōnai hokan*). I have also heard a version of this referring to comics and cartoon fans who develop “the faculty of converting in the mind” (*nōnai de henkan suru kinō*).

player, who co-imagines and co-creates the action, but also combine this with the mechanic of making choices that impact the action. “Strike the victim? Yes or no.” The story builds to such choices, even the player is forced to make them and commit their own special crimes. With this comes a sense of responsibility for the action and its consequences.

#### **4.4 The Ethical Encounter in Bishōjo Games**

*Bishōjo* games raise fundamental questions about moving images. Although I take this phrase, “moving images,” from film scholar Linda Williams (1989) and her writing on pornography, *bishōjo* games do not seem to function in ways familiar from the growing body of literature on that subject. Stated simply, Williams approaches pornography in terms of a science and discourse of the body that makes its movements and pleasure more and more visible, which requires real human bodies in front of the camera. This is not the case in *bishōjo* games, which instead place fictional bodies onscreen. There is no “truth” of the body here, only artifice.

*Bishōjo* games also raise questions about pornography and violence. Feminist thinker Catharine MacKinnon famously argues that pornography is an expression of sexualized hierarchy. “From pornography one learns that forcible violation of women is the essence of sex” (MacKinnon 1997: 168). She boils down the essence of sex under patriarchy as follows: “Man fucks woman; subject verb object” (MacKinnon 1982: 541). Under patriarchy, sex is something men do to women, and it is fundamentally violent. This critique of pornography would seem to work well for *bishōjo* games, which seem to be, as MacKinnon might put it, sex between subjects and objects, people and things, real men and unreal women (MacKinnon 1993: 103). This is even more so given that *bishōjo* are cute girls, and cute objects are “the most objectified of objects” (Ngai 2005: 834), constructed to be weak, vulnerable and acted on. As Ngai puts it, cuteness is at times an

“eroticization of powerlessness” (Ngai 2012: 3). However, in that *bishōjo* games design characters to have interiority and develop this through interactions with players over time, these characters cease to be simple objects. While MacKinnon argues that in pornography “women are reduced to subhuman dimensions to the point where they cannot be perceived as fully human” (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988: 38), *bishōjo* games suggest the humanization of “two-dimensional” characters. Players come to know and care about them and recognize that they can be hurt. If, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests, the tragedy of pornography is that “you can see it all but you are not allowed then to be emotionally, seriously engaged” (quoted in Fiennes 2006), then the tragedy of *bishōjo* games is that they get players emotionally, seriously involved and do not stop short of the act. One is involved with the character, developed out of an object into a “someone” with thoughts and feelings, and then acts on desires for that someone as a sex object. Rather than simply enjoying sex, or the act more broadly, players understand the relationship to be one of violence, which leads to the development of an ethical position.

Similarly, *bishōjo* games do not follow the model of automatic action seen in mainstream North American computer / console games such as first-person shooters. With near photo-realistic graphics that render in real time for smooth, seamless action that appears almost as if filmed by a camera, games such as *Call of Duty* strive for a sense of “reality.” These games are to some extent about interaction, but this often takes the form of the player adopting the position of the gunman, seeing enemy characters through the scope and shooting them. In the vast majority of these interactions, it does not matter who the enemy character is, because they are targets to be eliminated as part of the action. The action becomes almost automatic, even as the weapon upgrades to an

automatic one to point and shoot at nameless others.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to first-person shooters, *bishōjo* games are first-person relationships. The player adopts the position of a man and sees cute girl characters from a first-person perspective, but, learning about them through sustained interaction over long periods of time, comes to know, if not care, about them. These characters have names and faces, thoughts and feelings. Moreover, the action is anything but automatic. It is slow – very, very slow – as the player clicks the mouse, text and images load and choices appear. Choices are made after reading the mountains of text that make up the story, hearing the voices of the characters during interactions and considering potential consequences. The game does not progress unless the player reads the text, clicks the mouse and makes deliberate choices. In the North American context, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian argues that computer/console games where the player acts on objects are part of a culture of violence, where one acts without consideration of others, which is particularly problematic for her when a male player acts on “sex objects” (Sarkeesian 2014). One can see the return of the problematics of antiporn feminism here, as well as the ways in which *bishōjo* games raise questions. By design, characters are objects developed into “someone,” action is not automatic and players reflect on how their choices might hurt others. This is a different game entirely.

*Bishōjo* games are designed to facilitate intimate interaction, but the intensity of feelings that players have for *bishōjo* characters was something that struck me often while in the field. Among all the other games available in Japan, it was these games that moved players to proclaim their love for characters, maintain relationships with them beyond the game in various media and material forms and share these relationships

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<sup>30</sup> It is typically only in rare instances that one reflects on action, for example in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision, 2009), when the player is forced to walk slowly and deliberately through an airport and take part in a terrorist attack against unarmed civilians.

with others at events and in Akihabara. The man who helped me understand why this might be was Sasakibara Gō, who I first met in Tokyo in 2014 (see Chapter 2). Born in Akita Prefecture in 1961, Sasakibara is an editor and cultural critic by trade. He is also a player of *bishōjo* games, which he first encountered in 1998. At the time, the *bishōjo* gaming industry was undergoing a renaissance that saw more involved stories and developed characters. A fan of *shōjo* manga, or comics for girls, since the late 1970s, Sasakibara was surprised to find that *bishōjo* games had aspects in common with them:

When I started playing *bishōjo* games, what surprised me was how poetic and lyrical the text was. They focused a great deal on the feelings of the girls. They feature sweet, gentle expression (*yasashii hyōgen*). But, as the stories progressed, they turned into pornography. That problem of sexuality is what most interested me. These games bring together poetic love stories like comics for girls and sex scenes like pornography for men. Adult computer games are a poetic and lyrical world, a world of emotions, like comics for girls. At the same time, they are pornography.<sup>31</sup>

Sasakibara describes *bishōjo* games as “media that allow for gazing at women as objects for the fulfillment of sexual desire, while at the same time depicting the interiority of women” (Sasakibara 2003: 108). Cute girl characters are both sex objects and subjects with interiority that the player comes to know, if not care about. It is because one knows and cares more about characters that *bishōjo* games function differently than other forms of pornography and computer/console games, and why they move players as they do. And it is because players know and care more about characters that *bishōjo* games challenge our ways of thinking about pornography and computer/console games. *Bishōjo* games open a window onto *moe* and the culture of affection for fictional characters.

After years of play and reflection on *bishōjo* games, Sasakibara wrote an essay titled “Sex that Injures” (Kizu tsukeru sei, 2003), which sounds very much like an

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<sup>31</sup> Personal interview (August 31, 2014).

antiporn position, but in fact argues something quite different. Intriguingly, Sasakibara does this by confronting the problem of violence. Desire is targeted at sex objects, this is a relation of power and subjects acting on objects is fundamentally violent. Sasakibara is particularly concerned with “men,” but more generally with subjects that act, which is the core dynamic of the sex that injures. While Sasakibara recognizes that women are involved in the imagining and creation of *bishōjo* games – as illustrators and voice actresses, especially – and that there are female players, and that these too are subjects that act, his critique draws on his own experiences and desires as a player and as a man. To begin, for Sasakibara, *bishōjo* games are “embarrassing” (*hazukashii*) and “painful” (*itai*). On the one hand, they are embarrassing and painful to play. Hours go by without any pornographic scenes to use for masturbation; when they do come, reading the text, looking at the still image, listening to the voice and clicking the mouse to continue makes it hard to focus enough to climax. If certain types of games are played “masochistically,” in that dedicated players increase the difficulty to make the game more challenging and rewarding (Kijima 2012b: 252), then perhaps *bishōjo* games are an example of “masochistic pornography.” On the other hand, frank depictions of even the most embarrassing of sexual desire are at times painful to see laid bare. For Sasakibara, seeing such desire, recognizing it as one’s own and acting on it, which has consequences, leads to moments of embarrassing and painful reflection, which most men would rather avoid. This is why *bishōjo* games remain a minor form.

In a strange sort of split subjectivity, the *bishōjo* game player is the player who sees the player character onscreen and also inhabits the player character, enters into it and sees from a first-person perspective. The player character’s face is seldom if ever shown, and when it is, the eyes are typically obscured. In contrast to the massive eyes of *bishōjo* and their interiority, the player character has no interiority, because the player

fills it with his own thoughts and feelings. This split subjectivity continues in that the thoughts and words of the player character are written by someone else. These thoughts and words appear in the text – never voiced by an actor, an other, but rather heard in the player’s imagination as his own. So one sees the thoughts and words of the player character and scenario writer even as these thoughts and words imaginatively become one’s own. Playing *bishōjo* games, Sasakibara reports that he becomes immersed in its reality, experiences it as reality and is a person involved in that reality. Using highly politicized language, Sasakibara calls himself “a person involved” (*tōjisha*) (Sasakibara 2003: 104), which is a phrase most often used in Japan by minority groups and activists involved in a given issue. If adult computer games are embarrassing and painful expressions of sexual desire, then Sasakibara argues that they also make the player take responsibility for that desire. In the game, it is the player doing the active imagining to move the image in line with the textual and sound cues. It is the player who sees the world from a first-person perspective and thinks and speaks as the player character. It is the player who makes choices and acts. The player is a person involved, a participant and an observer, acting and interacting in the imaginary world even as he is reflecting on action and interaction. As a person involved, the player cannot claim objective distance and uninterested detachment from the game and what happens in it. The mechanics of *bishōjo* games emphasize this involvement by allowing and, indeed, forcing the player to make choices that impact characters, relationships and the story.

While involvement in the story, world and reality of the game are crucial, the importance of this involvement becomes much clearer with regards to characters. In *bishōjo* games, the player spends the majority of his time looking at *bishōjo* characters and interacting with them; the games are based on and proceed through interactions with *bishōjo* characters, who the player is intimately involved with. Given the player’s

position and perspective, one might adopt the analytic of the “male gaze” and construction of female objects to be looked at (Mulvey 2009), but Sasakibara disrupts this by also drawing attention to the gaze of the *bishōjo* character, who is “looking at me” (*watashi wo mitsumeteiru*) (Sasakibara 2003: 105).<sup>32</sup> Cute girl characters stare at the player character and out of the screen at the player engaging the world from a first-person perspective; they meet and return his gaze and directly address him (see also Greenwood 2014: 243).<sup>33</sup> Making eye contact and directly addressing the player personalizes the interaction and contributes to interactions with the other as a person. In this regard, it is telling that Sasakibara chooses to refer to *bishōjo* characters as “human” (*ningen*) (Sasakibara 2003: 105).<sup>34</sup> In contrast to games where players treat nonplayer characters as objects that do not receive human empathy and can be acted on with impunity (i.e., the enemy combatant in *Call of Duty*), *bishōjo* games develop characters from objects into subjects with interiority. As a player, Sasakibara approaches the character as “someone” (*dareka*), “a unique and irreplaceable ‘someone,’ not a simple two-dimensional image or a ‘thing’” (Sasakibara 2003: 107).<sup>35</sup> The player’s choices impact this “someone” (Sasakibara 2003: 105). The player, a person involved, “may hurt the girl in front of my eyes” (Sasakibara 2003: 105). In *bishōjo* games, the character looks out at the player with large eyes filled with emotion and expressing inner life; she meets and returns the gaze, speaks to the player and demands that he act with concern and care.

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, film scholar Laura Mulvey, who popularized the critic of the male gaze with her original essay in 1975, seems to anticipate this when she writes of films where “the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative film) is broken in favour of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator” (Mulvey 2009: 22).

<sup>33</sup> As media scholar Forrest Greenwood puts it, “In directing the *shōjo*’s gaze out toward the viewer [...] many modern *bishōjo* games disrupt this hierarchy, forcing the viewer to regard the *shōjo* as being something more than a mute, passive object” (Greenwood 2014: 250).

<sup>34</sup> Sasakibara’s interaction with fictional characters as “human” is all the more plausible when we consider social science suggesting that humans tend to treat as human and seek social interaction with what is “cute,” including fictional characters (Shermann and Haidt 2011: 5), and human minds mimic the states of those they interact with, “even if those other minds are imagined” (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015: 132).

<sup>35</sup> Sasakibara is not alone in this experience. At an event (February 11, 2015), one female *bishōjo* gamer said that the most effective marketing for *bishōjo* games is when the image of the cute girl meets her gaze: “When there is a cute girl on the floor of the station and our eyes meet, I don’t want to step on her.”

When the player responds to these demands, Sasakibara argues, the character “comes to life” (*ikihajimeru*) (Sasakibara 2003: 107). As someone, human and alive, the character who looks back at the player, the character who has a face, name and interiority, is able to “make actual demands” (Greenwood 2014: 250).<sup>36</sup> Building on Sasakibara, I argue that chief among these demands is, “Do not hurt me.”<sup>37</sup> Such demands change the way players play.

*Bishōjo* games, however, offer scenarios where the player cannot choose inaction and is positioned instead to act and hurt others, who are human and alive. As an example, Sasakibara shares his experience playing Âge’s *The Eternity You Desire* (Kimi ga nozomu eien, 2001). The story is about a highschool senior – the player character – who cannot decide a future path. His friend, Hayase Mitsuki, is tomboyish and pals around with him, but there is no attraction between them. Mitsuki introduces the player character to her friend Suzumiya Haruka, who is shy, but eventually works up the courage to confess her love to the player character. The player character and Haruka start dating and, although awkward at first, develop strong feelings for one another and spend their days together happily. Hours have passed since the game started and the player is completely focused on this young love, but then the story takes an unexpected turn. Haruka is in a traffic accident and ends up in a coma. The story jumps ahead three years. Haruka is still lying comatose in the hospital and the player character is living

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<sup>36</sup> In her discussions of photography and the politics of the gaze, theorist Ariella Azoulay argues that recognition of the demands of the one being gazed at and gazing back leads to relational and ethical engagement (Azoulay 2008: 18-23, 147-150).

<sup>37</sup> The dynamic of the character facing the player and looking out at him recalls philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ approach to the face of the other, which says, “You shall not commit murder” (Levinas 1969: 199). The face, in its nudity and defenselessness, offers “ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers” (Levinas 1969: 199). Put slightly differently, the face compels me not to act: “Do not kill me.” The face offers “passive resistance to the desire that is my freedom” (Bergo 2011). It is startling how resonant Levinas is with Sasakibara, who argues that the character, in her nudity and defenselessness, says, “Do not harm me,” which limits that player’s freedom to act (Sasakibara 2003: 126; also Kulick and Rydström 2015: 274-276). For Sasakibara, as for Levinas, ethics point us toward nonviolence. For both, it begins with an “interruption,” or affective moment.

with Mitsuki, who supported him through despair and realized her true feelings for him, just as he did for her. The two live together happily, but, one day, Haruka miraculously awakens from her coma. She has no sense that time has passed, and still thinks of herself as a highschool student in love with the player character and away from him only briefly. The player character, feeling terrible and guilty, wants to tell Haruka the truth, but the doctor says that he must not do so for fear of psychological shock. The player character goes to the hospital to visit Haruka, who asks him to intertwine his fingers with hers and say the words of a charm, which they had often done as a sign of their relationship. The interaction proceeds as follows. Remember the design of the game: Haruka is looking at the player, who hears her words spoken by an actress; the player sees her from the first-person perspective of the player character, but his words and thoughts are not spoken and appear as text, which the player reads:

(Haruka): "Um... The charm..."

(Player): "What?"

(Haruka): "Can we?"

The charm... Haruka is silently holding out her hand. The charm... I'd almost forgotten it, but...

(Haruka): "Your hand..."

(Player): "R, right..."

I fall silent and hold my hand out. My hand is on top of hers. ... Is this Haruka's hand...? She's so thin, all the muscle is gone, it's just skin and bone... Even so, it's a nice hand. When I touch it, I feel that again. Her five fingers, stretched out from her palm like the branches of a tree, look absolutely nothing like those of a girl.

(Haruka): "Um... So your hand... Goes like this..."

Although Haruka said to do the charm together, she guides my hand and explains it as if to someone who has never done it before. My hand and Haruka's hand come together. Like this... Our fingers intertwine. Can I do this... Me, with Haruka? If I told anyone about this they would probably laugh. It's just putting your fingers together... They might say.

But... Intertwining your fingers has an important meaning... I think. It's not holding hands. The fingers one by one intertwine... They feel one another's warmth. Before, just for a moment, I thought that at least it wasn't a kiss, but... But this... I get the feeling that this has the same meaning.

(Haruka): "What's wrong...? Don't you know it?"

Haruka asks, with a puzzled face.

(Player): "N, no..."

1. Intertwine your fingers.
2. Do not intertwine your fingers.

The scenario is complex, and the player is conflicted, but a choice must be made.

After playing the game for this long to get to this point, the choice is not an easy one.

The player cannot help but think of the meaning of this action and how it might impact Haruka and Mitsuki and his relationships with them. The buildup – with its drawn out pauses, ellipses, suggestion of what Haruka might or might not know at what point, feelings that cannot be put into words – makes the choice seem all the more significant. All the while an image of Haruka stares out of the screen at the player, and the player stares at her and himself reflected on the screen. In Sasakibara's case, playing through this scenario, he cannot help but be a person involved in human relationships and choices. As a participant and co-creator of this shared imaginary, he feels a sense of "criminal accomplice" (*kyōhansei*) (Sasakibara 2003: 107; recall McCloud 1994: 68). He cannot help but be moved, and to make a move, which is both painful and pleasurable.

The guilt that Sasakibara feels for his "crime" suggests a sense of responsibility. Indeed, Sasakibara, who is involved in the scenario with Haruka and Mitsuki at the level of what he calls "subjective action" (*shutai-teki na kōi*) (Sasakibara 2003: 106), argues that *bishōjo* games demand that players take responsibility. The player, who comes to see a character such as Haruka as someone with an interiority and life, must take

responsibility for his capacity to hurt that someone, which is his capacity to make a choice and act in the world. The one who acts, the player, has the power to impact another life and change the story. For Sasakibara, the player must take responsibility for his action and for himself as the subject that acts, which is the “sex that injures” (*kizu tsukeru sei*) (Sasakibara 2003: 109). The player faces his desires and, as Sasakibara explained it to me, “his own violence” (*jibun no bōryokusei*).<sup>38</sup> The *bishōjo* game stages that confrontation with one’s desire, the self as actor and “self as victimizer” (*kagaisha toshite no boku*) (Sasakibara 2003: 108). In *bishōjo* games, the player confront himself as “an existence that hurts her” (*kanojo wo kizu tsukete shimaau sonzai*) (Sasakibara 2003: 109). While incredibly difficult (=embarrassing and painful) to face and work through, Sasakibara argues that it is individually and socially good to take responsibility for one’s involvement in the world and capacity to act in it and hurt or harm others.<sup>39</sup> Rather than deny that one is capable of violence – to maintain the fantasy of the pure subject, who could not harm a soul – or, worse, project that refused and repressed violence onto others, it is better to face one’s own capacity for violence and take responsibility for it. This begins with the recognition of the fundamental violence of subjects acting on objects, the recognition that the object is “someone” and that acts can hurt or harm that someone.

The example of *The Eternity You Desire* demonstrates this dynamic and the violence of “subjective action,” but the violence can be much more explicit: Acting on desire to take advantage of someone, as in *Big Brother, Use of Your Right Hand is Forbidden!!*; sexually assaulting someone, as in *Favorable Conditions for Groping*; getting involved in an incestuous relationship, hitting your lover and driving her to suicide, as

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<sup>38</sup> Personal interview (August 31, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Editor and critic Nagayama Kaoru has made a similar argument about adult manga serving as a mirror that reflects the desires of the reader, who faces and works through them for the better (Nagayama 2014: 148-152, 226-228).

in *In Solitude, Where We Are Least Alone*. All of this violence, and so much more – for example, *The Song of Saya* (introduced in Chapter 2), where the player makes choices in a relationship with a monster that drives everyone mad, is involved in consuming human flesh, rape, murder, torture and the end of humanity – is part of *bishōjo* games. And it is the player imaginatively participating in the action, making choices and impacting others that is responsible for that violence. Rather than deny violence and allow it to go unscrutinized, the player of adult computer games becomes aware of violence and opens it to scrutiny.

This is the beginning of what Sasakibara refers to as his “ethics” (*rinrikan*, literally ethical view) (Sasakibara 2003: 101). The *bishōjo* games that inspire Sasakibara’s thinking stress “passivity” (*ukemi, judōsei*): The player listens to others and learns about them, which allows for the player to “ethically face” (*rinri-teki ni mukiau*) them (Sasakibara 2003: 113). The player acts ethically with consideration for others, which can mean not acting in ways that hurt or harm others, or perhaps not acting at all, which suggests a cultivated passivity (for comparison, see Kulick and Rydström 2015: 274-276). Acting ethically means recognizing one’s capacity to impact others, hurt or harm and taking responsibility for its actions and their consequences. In his ethics, Sasakibara insists on treating others as human beings and acting with consideration for them, even if they are just “fictional characters” in a “game.” This extends from virtual reality to reality as we know it, which Sasakibara explained to me as follows:

It’s about overturning power, or self-consciousness toward violence (*bōryoku ni tai suru ji’ishiki*). It’s not only about whether one does or doesn’t commit acts of violence, but rather recognizing the violence in one’s self. It’s about throwing away one’s power, rejecting violence and not becoming a person who commits violent acts.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Personal interview (August 31, 2014).

Hearing this statement about not becoming a person who commits violent acts immediately brought to mind Ataru, who similarly strives to not become a “harmful person” (see Chapter 3). Rather than contributing to becoming a harmful person, *bishōjo* games might have the opposite effect. In statements such as the one above, Sasakibara suggests that one reason why sexual violence is not the norm among *bishōjo* game players in Japan – as some feminist critics have argued of porn viewers and gamers in North America (MacKinnon 1993; Sarkeesian 2014; Valenti 2015) – is because of *bishōjo* games, which provide a way to face and work through one’s own violence and cultivate an ethical stance against violence.<sup>41</sup> Facing one’s own capacity for violence and violent desires is acknowledging all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself, which speaks to an ethics of queer life (Warner 2000: 33-35).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in some ways, the norm, which denies the abject or locates it in others, is unethical.

There is an ethics in recognizing that imaginary violence, sexual or otherwise, could become real, which leads to what Sasakibara calls self-consciousness toward violence. Consider the difference of first-person shooters in North America, where the gaming industry has fought a successful campaign to deny any connection between gun violence in games and gun violence in society. Game producers and players can now

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<sup>41</sup> While the lessons of *bishōjo* games as played and presented by Sasakibara are striking, he is not alone. Writing on pornography, feminist thinker Angela Carter argued that, by confronting sexual violence, “an individual viewer can potentially learn a great deal about his/her sexuality, and society’s construction of sex and gender, precisely by having to confront it so directly” (as summarized in Cornell 1995: 155). Similar arguments have been made about groups of gamers playing through violent scenarios and developing an “ethics of imaginary violence” (Bastow 2015). In virtual worlds as in the actual one, players can face violence, take responsibility for it and act with concern for others. This is not only not harmful, but also potentially beneficial. As religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock argues in *Dangerous Games*, studies suggest that people who fantasize are generally more aware of the implications of violence and less likely to act out (Laycock 2015: 193). If violence, sex and sexual violence are taboo even in the context of play, then players will be unable to make sense of them and develop a “code of ethics” (Laycock 2015: 171, 190-195, 218-219; Jenkins et al 2009: 24-26; Brey 2008: 375-379).

<sup>42</sup> One is reminded here of a vignette from philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who recalls meeting BDSM practitioners and thinking that they were the nicest people in the world (Žižek 2015). As Žižek sees it, these practitioners have faced and worked through their own obscenity and shared it with others. This “obscene contact” allows them to be “the nicest people.” Given the case of Sasakibara, and what I have experienced in the field, *bishōjo* gamers seem similar.

dismiss the connection outright (for example, Yamato 2016). The arguments against blaming gun violence on games are reasonable, but at times reactionary. General gun violence in society aside, the dismissal is problematic in the context of clear connections between military games and the actual military, for example (Lenoir 2000; Stahl 2010). To deny that the violence of a game such as *Call of Duty* could become real – not only that it is not real, but also that it has no impact on reality – is unethical in the context of North America’s “military-entertainment complex,” especially when such a denial contributes to automatic action and unselfconscious violence. Recognizing that it could be real, and that the player has the capacity to make it real or not, and responding to that recognition, is the ethical thing to do. This is precisely what Sasakibara argues is happening with *bishōjo* games. His ethics – facing one’s own capacity for violence, which might be realized – leads to self-consciousness toward violence and a position to not act in ways that might harm others. Such an ethics, Sasakibara argues, is why so many people who are affected by *bishōjo* games do not commit violent acts. They are moved, and moved to action, but also take responsibility for that action in relation to fictional and real others. As we shall see, the ethics of *moe* takes this further by drawing a line between fiction and reality and orienting oneself toward the drawn lines of fictional characters. In this way, a space to imagine and create moving images – regardless of the content of the image – is maintained, even as a stance is taken against actions that might harm others.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

Back in Akihabara, Matsumura Kazutoshi tells me about characters, love and relationships. “What do you do to make the player feel good when cumming? You have to get him to love the character. You have to get him to think that the character actually

exists.”<sup>43</sup> So Matsumura designs characters to be lovers, even as they are used for masturbation. These characters appear in love stories that Matsumura explains as follows. “People say that my work is very innocent. They associate it with pure love (*jun'ai*). How should I put this? They think of my games as extremely ‘light.’ This is in contrast to ‘dark’ games with themes such as rape and sadomasochism. But for me this division isn’t quite right. In a light game there will be something harmful or toxic (*doku*), and in a dark one something more, such as purity in sadomasochism. This something more exists even in crimes.” Considering exploration of the many dimensions of human psychology and relationships to be central to his work, Matsumura designs games that are about love, even as they contain hints of something else. This has been true since *Rise* (Raizu, Rise, 1999), his first *bishōjo* game, which is about living with a robot girl named Nanako and helping her gain confidence – all while gazing at and desiring the cute girl character. Later Matsumura tells me about a letter he received from a couple who loved *Rise* and named their daughter Nanako. The letter made Matsumura realize that he is in a relationship with players, who are moved by his games.

Having purchased a rare copy of *Rise*, Matsumura shows me the cover. Against an empty background, a character image is offset to the lower right: A girl is sleeping on her side hugging a stuffed rabbit; her eyes are closed, and her bare legs exposed, bent at the knee and pulled up toward her stomach; in what almost appears like a fetal position, she looks very young and vulnerable. The cover was designed, Matsumura explains, so that the player would see himself reflected on it with Nanako and thus be enticed to take her home. *Bishōjo* game sellers and fans describe Nanako and characters like her as “cute.”<sup>44</sup> If, as anthropologist of media and material culture Christine R. Yano argues, to call an object “cute” is to “establish a relationship of care and intimacy” (Yano 2013: 57),

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<sup>43</sup> All quotes from Matsumura comes from a personal interview (July 23, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> See for example: <<http://www.getchu.com/soft.phtml?id=51>>.

then in *bishōjo* games that relationship is fraught enough to join the “border intimacies” that shade into what are popularly perceived to be “criminal intimacies” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558, 560).<sup>45</sup> As a cute girl character, the *bishōjo* triggers complex responses. On the one hand, she is imagined to have an interior, which triggers empathy and encourages human interaction. This element of design has, as researchers Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt point out, long been exploited by makers of toys, games and animation around the world (Sherman and Haidt 2011: 5). On the other hand, as literary scholar Sianne Ngai argues, cuteness triggers ugly feelings and violence as an “affective response to weakness or powerlessness” (Ngai 2012: 24). This takes on more complex layers when we consider that the Japanese word for “cute” (*kawaii*) combines ideographic characters meaning “possible” (*ka*) and “love” (*ai*). What is cute is lovable, and violence is always implicit in our relationship with the cute object we love. While the intersection of love and violence, and sex and violence, is often denied and associated with deviant others, *bishōjo* games insist on it. They insist on the *bishōjo*, who is cute and lovable, and as a lovable cute object is among “the most objectified of objects” (Ngai 2005: 834).

The accentuated vulnerability of the *bishōjo* designed as a cute object to be acted on allows for, even anticipates, violence, but, at the same time, encourages a relationship of intimacy and care. While one might dismiss this as disturbing at best, media theorist Thomas Lamarre instead argues that, “relationships involving vulnerability and

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<sup>45</sup> As an example of such intimacy, literary critics and social theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner offer the example of erotic feeding, where a man force feeds his retrained partner keeping him at the edge of gagging, which involves “trust and violation” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 565). Another example comes from anthropologist of sex Don Kulick, who introduces a subculture where obese women are desired by men who cannot physically have vaginally penetrative sex with them, but indeed take pleasure in watching them eat (Kulick 2005). Some women as performers desire to be “taken to immobility” by men as “feeders,” which is to say to be fed to the point where they can no longer walk (Kulick 2005: 82). This makes the women completely dependent on the men, which both partners desire. The women are made vulnerable and dependent, but this ideally leads to intimacy and care. As with *bishōjo* games, the power dynamics of such relationships raise questions about ethics and politics.

dependency, care and nurture, are not only those we tend most to prize in our lives, but they are also the very key to how we live ethically and politically” (Lamarre 2015: 103). Vulnerability in *bishōjo* games points, I argue, toward ethical ways of life. By design, *bishōjo* game players are moved to response, action and reflection. They interact with *bishōjo* characters more intimately, and know, if not care, more about them. This is why players such as Sasakibara Gō treat the *bishōjo* character not as an image or object, but as “someone,” “human” and “alive” (Sasakibara 2003: 105). Many of the men playing *bishōjo* games depend on relationships with cute girl characters, which extend beyond gameplay into everyday lives where they feel vulnerable. These relationships of vulnerability and dependency, care and nurture, are prized parts of their lives. They are also the key to how they live ethically and politically: Facing and working through ugly feelings and violence in virtual worlds, they share them in the actual world and take a stance against harmful actions. Human geographer Ben Anderson describes affect as the push of life that “runs through individual bodies, collective populations and more-than-human worlds” (Anderson 2012: 28). An ethics of affect must take account of that push of life in more-than-human worlds. An example of this is what I came to know as the ethics of *moe*, which is the topic of the next chapter.

## 5. The Ethics of Affect: Drawing Lines with *Bishōjo* Game Producers and Players

Walking down Chūō Street in Akihabara on a cold morning in January 2015, my companion is visibly agitated. A university professor and researcher with shared interests, Kōta is also a *bishōjo* game player and an artist specializing in drawing cute girl characters. We are on our way to an event at Gecchuya, but Kōta is not looking at that *bishōjo* game store, which is located on Chūō Street ahead of us on the left. He is looking across the street. I follow his gaze to the building that houses AKB48 Theater, where members of Japan's biggest girl group perform live shows. Now dominating the charts, AKB48 started out in Akihabara in 2005, when the original group of 24 performed in that very theater. Because they had strong supporters in Akihabara, where I have been conducting fieldwork since 2004, I followed AKB48 and their fans for some time. I remember lining up on the street on cold mornings not unlike this one. The theater brings back memories for me, some fond, but Kōta does not share the sentiment. The theater, advertised with massive photographs of the performers, is offensive to him. "Akimoto Yasushi, the producer of AKB48, did something that he never should have done," Kōta explains. "He branded AKB48 as 'idols that you can meet' and sold access to the girls in live shows and handshake events. Do you hear what I'm saying? It sounds like prostitution. Idols used to be fiction, but Akimoto turned them into real girls to be bought and sold."<sup>1</sup> We are on our way to a *bishōjo* game event, where girls are being bought and sold, but Kōta is adamant that this is not the same. "Virtual girls. That's the difference."

As we wait in line for the event at Gecchuya, Kōta elaborates. The members of AKB48 belong to a category of performers called "idols" (*aidoru*), who are beloved by

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes come from a discussion on January 22, 2015.

fans and appeal directly to them for support. Born in 1980 in Tokyo and raised in the dense media environment of the city, Kōta associated idols with images. They did not have to be “real;” Matsuda Seiko, for example, was a “fake girl/child” (*burikko*) and also Japan’s top idol.<sup>2</sup> The 1980s was a time, Kōta tells me, when people were becoming aware of their orientation toward fiction. I have heard all this before (see Chapter 2), but recognize that Kōta is working something out as we talk. He is a manga/anime fan that came of age in a world where being an “otaku” was increasingly common. In junior and senior high school, Kōta was surrounded by young men confessing their love for Tsukino Usagi from *Sailor Moon* (Bishōjo senshi Sērā Mūn, 1992-) and Ayanami Rei from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shin seiki Evangerion, 1995-). In Kōta’s world, the character Fujisaki Shiori from the *bishōjo* game *Tokimeki Memorial* (Heart Beat Highschool, 1994), not the person who voiced her, was an idol. She was also his “first love” (*hatsukoi*). Given that Fujisaki – the character – sang a chart-topping hit in 1996, and that many men speak of her as a past love, Kōta was clearly not alone. In university, manga/anime fans were declaring themselves married to cute girl characters and rejecting “reality,” and, while not one of them, Kōta understood the sentiment. He stands beside these men in Akihabara, which is their shared space. And he is angry at the return of the body and its fleshy reality in AKB48 Theater. There one is oriented toward reality, not fiction. Located right across the street from his favorite *bishōjo* game store, it is “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966: 36).

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, Matsuda Seiko was the top idol in Japan, and her image was so conscientiously produced and performed that people began to call her a “*burikko*,” which means “fake girl/child.” Fans, however, supported Matsuda, because they in fact did not want anything more “real” from her and appreciated her idol image (Kijima 2012a: 151-153). Even as women performed as idols and images, fictional women became idols in the 1980s. One can see this in manga artists producing “photo albums” of drawn “glamour shots” of their cute girl characters, and in magazines such as *Manga Burikko*, which presented drawings of cute girl characters as gravure photography. As is clear from its title, *Manga Burikko* suggests that the cute girl characters in its pages are idols not unlike Matsuda Seiko: they are fake girl/children, but still idols.

In Kōta's response to AKB48 Theater, one can observe the ongoing struggle to draw and maintain lines between virtual and actual, fiction and reality, two- and three-dimensional. If Ōtsuka Eiji, the editor of *Manga Burikko* (Chapter 2), writes about "virtual idols in *bishōjo* games" and "desire for simulation, where the bodies of women have come to be unnecessary" (Ōtsuka 2004: 129), then it is *bishōjo* game players such as Kōta who struggle to maintain that orientation of desire in practice. "The two- and the three-dimensional are intentionally severed (*ito-teki ni kitteiru*) from each another," Kōta tells me. But are there not many places in Akihabara where the two- and three-dimensional exist side by side? "Yes, and that is why we must be conscious of the difference." To put it another way, "we" must be conscious of what "we" are here for – virtual girls, fiction, the two-dimensional – and conscious of how this differs from "reality." Again, Kōta is not alone. Arguing against criticism of otaku as "immature or unable to distinguish the real from the imaginary," psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki writes that, "In my experience, there are few individuals more strict about that distinction" (Saitō 2007: 227). Even as manga/anime fans enjoy working through layers of fiction in reality and reality in fiction, the two are "deliberately separated" (Saitō 2007: 245). Kōta is a manga/anime fan who came to Akihabara for cute girl characters in *bishōjo* games; he draws and is drawn to the lines of these characters, which he insists are separate and distinct from real girls and women and real in their own way. Confident that he knows the difference, Kōta condemns AKB48 producer Akimoto and AKB48 fans for (the unconfirmed possibility that they are) using and abusing girls even as he slips into a building right across the street to buy *bishōjo* games that allow him to use and abuse virtual girls.<sup>3</sup> For

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<sup>3</sup> While I do not share Kōta's position on AKB48 being a simple story of exploitation and abuse (Galbraith, forthcoming [b]), I do appreciate his struggle to draw a line between the virtual and actual, fiction and reality, which I try to unpack in this chapter. When writing it, Ataru, another *bishōjo* game player I came to know in Akihabara (see Chapter 3), posted an article about a female member of the Diet condemning the United Nations' request that Japan do more to ban virtual child pornography (Nascimento-Lajoie 2016).

all his confidence, in his lecturing me, I saw Kōta's ongoing and lived struggle with lines.

This chapter explores the ethics of affect among *bishōjo* game producers and players in contemporary Japan. Ethics is often taken to mean rules of proper conduct (Deigh 2010: 7), but anthropologists have argued that ethics is embedded in action and everyday practice (Lambek 2010a: 2-3; Lambek 2010b: 39-40; Das 2010: 376-378). Interacting with cute girl characters, *bishōjo* game producers and players are moved. The ethics of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters, is embedded in the actions and everyday practice of these *bishōjo* game producers and players and judged in interactions among them. *Moe* is a common term among manga/anime fans in Japan (for an overview, see Galbraith 2014) and manga/anime critics regularly discuss ethics (for example, Sasakibara 2003: 101; Harata 2006: 115; Kagami 2010: 220), but the phrase “the ethics of *moe*” (*moe no rinri*) is not widespread. I did not, however, invent the turn of phrase, which is not a heuristic device or element of etic analysis. In dialogue with those I encountered in the field, I use the ethics of *moe* to describe the action and everyday practice of drawing a line between fiction and reality and insisting on it even if, and especially when, that line begins to blur. In the field, I observed people drawing lines and negotiating them, which is also living with uncertainty and ambiguity. Rather than trying to resolve this or fix meaning as the law would, I instead dwell with *bishōjo* game producers and players to observe and participate in the action and everyday practice of drawing lines, which is where the ethics of *moe* is located.

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Ataru drew attention to another article, this one by an NGO claiming that young women were being abused in the Japanese pornography industry (Japan Times 2016). Tellingly, Ataru agreed with both articles, arguing that more should be done to protect actual girls and women and less focus should be on virtual girls and women in comics, cartoons and games. The complexity of such a position is what I try to unpack.

Exploring the relationship between fiction and reality can reveal ideology and open it to critique (Allison 1994; Allison [1996] 2000; Allison 2006), and there are certainly indicators of broad sexual inequality in Japan to critique (Yan 2016), but my aim in this chapter is to see how relationships between and with fiction and reality are constructed and lived. Rather than a “paranoid reading” to reveal hidden meaning that critics know is there, I follow the example of theorist Eve Sedgwick’s “reparative reading,” which is open to surprise (Sedgwick 2003: 146, 149-151).<sup>4</sup> Like Sedgwick, I worry that the dominance of paranoid reading “may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations” (Sedgwick 2003: 124).<sup>5</sup> I choose to stick with those relations. The choice is “ethically very fraught” (Sedgwick 2003: 124), and I make it as part of my anthropological commitment to ethical engagement in the field (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 14). It can be difficult to relate to others with radically different ideas (Hochschild 2016: 5-16) – especially ideas about sexuality, which spur even progressives to familiar critiques (Rubin 2011: 154) – but there are already

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<sup>4</sup> This is not, to be clear, about choosing to be positive and jettisoning identitarian baggage along with politics, which is a standing critique of “the affective turn” (Hemmings 2005: 549-551). Surely Sedgwick (2003: 124, 138-139) acknowledges all the important work that paranoid reading has done to draw attention to hegemonic class, gender and race relations, but drawing attention to these relations does not necessarily change them. As an example of the issue, Dick Hebdige (1979: 13-14) writes that “there is an ideological dimension to every signification” and “every social formation.” The imperative, then, is to read for what we already know is there, and Sedgwick questions whether that is the only thing to do. Scholars see the problem everywhere and read into everything, which can amount to nothing. Worse, scholars can be satisfied with their ability to read, and read well; in reading and knowing, scholars hope for change. Meanwhile, to those not engaged in “critical” reading practices, scholars appear paranoid – indeed, crazy. Scholars are not open to the possibility of things being different, unknown, and so hunker down; nothing changes, the divide between those who know and do not widens and things devolve into finger pointing and name calling. As highlighted by the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 and the entrenched and knowing positions associated with it, and as Sedgwick (2003: 144) anticipated, “critical” habits – thinking that revealing hidden meaning and violence will change things, and that anyone exposed to such knowledge will be changed by it – may have made scholars unable to “respond to environmental (e.g., political) change.” In this spirit, I acknowledge that media, fictional or otherwise, has an impact on “reality,” but resist familiar critiques, which tend to lead to predictable conclusions. I am concerned with a situation where “anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (Sedgwick 2003: 126), because scholars *already know* that things are “problematic” and must reveal “problems” to be “political.” Like theorist Robyn Wiegman, who is also inspired by Sedgwick, I am not convinced that the right critical discourse or tools applied to the right object will lead to the political results critics so desire (Wiegman 2012: 3). Rather than try to make the object produce these results, and be dissatisfied when it cannot, I pursue a politics of engagement and relation with the “object” and openness to its affects.

<sup>5</sup> See also the related discussion of how “paradigmatic reading,” in order to maintain its authority, must ignore contingency and “the mistake” (Wiegman 2012, chapter five).

examples of anthropologists exploring divergent ethics of sexuality and relation (Das 2010; Dave 2010; Day 2010; Pigg 2012; Kulick and Rydström 2015). Anthropology of Japan draws attention to relations with “imaginary girlfriends” (Allison 2013: 96; also Condry 2013, chapter seven), which can be life-sustaining, but questions of ethics remain. To explore unfamiliar territory, anthropologists walk with others (Ingold 2011: 162). The journey requires keeping one’s eyes and ears, if not mind, open, and being open to encounters that can be surprising. We may not know what is going on, especially when imagination is involved, but we can still work with relationships and learn ways of moving and living on.

### **5.1 Drawing a Line Between Fiction and Reality**

A middle-aged man and slightly younger woman are seated behind a table at the Denkigai Matsuri, an industry event for *bishōjo* games (see Chapter 3), on August 13, 2015. They are supposed to be promoting the new game *Samidare Growing Up!* (Samidare gurōin appu, Samoyed Smile, 2015), but the assembled 100 or so men are not getting much insight from them. It has been a long day, with many of the men at the event since early morning, and the Comic Market (see Chapter 2) starts tomorrow. The man, who is a representative of the game’s production company, is supposed to be leading the discussion, but admits to coming without a plan. Instead, it is the woman, a voice actress named Misono’o Mei, who is doing the heavy lifting. In *Samidare Growing Up!* Misono’o voices Kiryūin Kiriha, who she describes to the audience as a girl who pretends to be rich and acts conceited. Referring to a flier distributed to the assembled men, Misono’o goes through the list of characters, gives her own impressions of them and asks the man to verify. In this way, Misono’o comes to a character described as a little sister and asks, “Is this the player character’s actual sister?” The man is hedging, because depictions of incest in manga/anime are drawing criticism from regulators under the Tokyo

Ordinance for the Healthy Development of Youths, which explicitly targets it as harmful (see Chapter 2). “It’s fine!” Misono’o assures him. “Humans are all related anyway.” Very well, then she is his sister, the man says. Moreover, he has a thing for the little sister as a character type, which entails devotion and looking up to her brother. The audience starts nodding vigorously, as if affirming him and their shared interest in this type of imaginary character, which is common in manga/anime. Noticing this, the man suggests that the little sister character is becoming less common in *bishōjo* games, which saddens him. As if in rebellion, the man asks the audience, “Do you like to be called big brother?” He jabs his finger in the air toward a man in the audience before moving on to the next. “Do you like it? Do you?” The nodding has become more vigorous. “OK, so we like it, then.” Thus affirmed, things quickly start to heat up.

As a special service (and to fill up unplanned time), Misono’o agrees to sign the free posters that have been distributed to the audience, but one man, who has purchased a body pillow cover with Kiryūin Kiriha on it, asks her to sign it instead. The man on stage is impressed by the request. “What are you going to do with it?” he asks. “You dirty boy!” The man is drawing attention to the fact that this young man will go home and sleep with a body pillow with the character that Misono’o voices on it, and the pillow will have a trace of her in the signature. Does he like the character or the voice actress? Why does he need the signature? Does the connection arouse him? The audience bursts into laughter and applause. I wonder if this bothers Misono’o, who does not contribute to the discussion because she is busy signing. The man asks if it is her first time signing a body pillow, which it is. “Oi! This guy just took Misono’o’s first! Way to go!” The jocular affirmation of masculinity is familiar, but it is also an unqualified

masculinity that appears “pathetic” (Lamarre 2006: 371) and becomes a joke.<sup>6</sup> It is silly to talk about Misono’o’s first, given that she is a sexually mature adult woman, and that the first in question is signing a sexy pillow cover makes it all the more so. In on the joke, the men are constantly laughing at themselves and one another. Even as the men shuffle by Misono’o to get her signature on the poster and thank her for her generosity, the man beside her at the table continues to playfully draw attention to how pathetic they are. “Is this your last event of the day? Gonna go home, jerk off and sleep?” Laughter. This is a positive environment for men who spend the night alone with fictional girls. How pathetic are you? Am I? Are we? Again, laughter. Nothing of the anger that sometimes comes with being alone and feeling pathetic. Instead, laughter. Taking a break from signing, Misono’o comments on how well behaved the men are, even going as far as to call them “well-trained” (*yoku chōkyō sareteiru*).<sup>7</sup> When I reach the table, the only person in the audience who is not Japanese, the man on stage cannot help but draw attention to me as a particular kind of man. “Oh, hello,” he says in English. “Are you hentai [a pervert]?” Surprised, I just nod yes, which draws more laughter. At me, and with me, because there are perverts everywhere. We are all perverts. Well-trained perverts.

Over the course of the talk event, I am struck by how imagined perversion is shared and affirmed in specific ways. A good deal of time is spent talking about the little sister character, but, while incest is certainly taboo, it is just one of many perversions

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<sup>6</sup> One of the organizers of the event presented himself to me as a failed man who only now, in his thirties, has finally begun to climb “the stairway to adulthood” (*otona no kaidan*). While I doubt from his appearance and success that this man was single or a virgin, the phrase “stairway to adulthood” is often used to refer to social and sexual immaturity. In other words, this man was presenting himself as a late bloomer. This playful assertion and undermining of masculinity is common at the Denkigai Matsuri. The official hashtag for Twitter, for example, is “denkiguy.”

<sup>7</sup> The word translated here as “trained” is typically used for animals (i.e., training or breaking animals). It is also used in adult manga, anime and games as a genre of “training” someone, or “breaking” them in, sexually. Use of the word here increases the potential insult, because men in the audience are implied to be trained animals, but this also increases the sexual undertone. The men were sexually trained and trained to behave, sexually.

imagined and created by the production company and shared with the audience of male players that day. It is something to laugh at, as are the men, who are well-trained perverts. This becomes clearer when considering another topic that comes up: underage sexuality. The common point of reference is “lolicon,” or “Lolita complex,” which has a long history in manga, anime and computer/console games in Japan (Galbraith 2015a; also Chapter 2). For some, the designation of a Lolita character, or a “loli,” is age. A sexualized child character might be a loli. Others consider it a design issue (Chapter 4), with characters that are small and have a flat chest being designated loli, which is independent of age. For her part, Misono’o assumes that some of the characters in *Samidare Growing Up!* are loli, even though they all are in high school and have large breasts. The designation seems to be coming from the fact that they are cute girl characters.

Importantly, she also assumes that some in the audience are “lolicon,” or men with a Lolita complex who like loli characters. She confirms this by asking if the assembled men are lolicon. Many hands shoot up all at once, accompanied by embarrassed laughter. “It’s fine!” Misono’o says cheerfully. “Lolicon is righteous (*rorikon wa seigi desu kara*).” More laughter, which comes from getting the joke that these men, these lolicon, are perverts and not pedophiles or predators. “Lolicon is righteous” refers to a meme suggesting that “lolicon” as an orientation toward two-dimensional girls is righteous in comparison to an orientation toward three-dimensional girls, which might be described as “pedophilia.”<sup>8</sup> (For a discussion of the history of this distinction in Japan, see Chapter 2.) The men at Denkigai Matsuri who are identifying as lolicon are perverts, and well-trained ones oriented toward cute girl characters in manga/anime and manga/anime media such as *bishōjo* games. They have come to the event not with

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: <[http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question\\_detail/q12105704512](http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q12105704512)>.

an interest in underage girls, but rather manga/ anime characters generally and cute girl characters specifically. This is an event for producers and players of *bishōjo* games, a form of interactive manga/ anime pornography, not pedophiles attracted to children. A particular kind of pervert comes to the Denkigai Matsuri. Here, in the context of shared interest in the cute girl characters of *bishōjo* games, lolicon is affirmed as righteous. Shared as part of public interactions, the perverse interest is affirmed. Interactions of this sort, I argue, play a part in training perverts, who understand their orientation of desire toward the lines of manga/ anime characters, and who draw and respect the line separating fiction and reality.

The following day at the Comic Market, I meet John, an American acquaintance currently living in Osaka and in town for the event. Born in 1970 in Hawai'i, John served in the Navy before arriving in Japan, where he decided to stay. He is a self-professed pervert and fan of manga/ anime characters, and is at the event to buy fanzines featuring manga/ anime characters having sex. In the course of our discussion, I mention to him Misono'o's comment about lolicon being righteous. "Yeah," he enthusiastically agrees. "Loli is justice. Loli is life. It's about the protection of life and giving these girls a chance to grow up." To grow up? The cartoons? What is he on about? As John continues, it becomes clear that he is talking about legalizing child pornography and sex work so that it can be better regulated, which he sees as good of children. Animated by the chance to share his thoughts, John draws on experiences seeing people from the United States come to Thailand to purchase sex with children, who were unprotected, which angers him. The encounter is uncomfortable to say the least. I thought I knew John, who is now conflating and confusing the manga/ anime lolicon that Misono'o and others consider righteous (or at least not wrong) with actual child pornography and sex work.

Later in the day, I relay the uncomfortable encounter to Tarō, an acquaintance born in 1980 in Kumamoto Prefecture and now living in Tokyo and volunteering as a staff member at the Comic Market. “No,” Tarō objects, flatly, but with a distinct edge of anger in his voice. “That’s not right. That’s not what lolicon is righteous means. It means separating fiction and reality.” We walk as we talk, because as a volunteer staff member Tarō needs to make his rounds. We pass by booths selling fanzines depicting all manner of sex acts, including some with animal characters, none of which seems to faze Tarō. In the “original” section, which does not feature characters poached from existing manga/ anime franchises, he stops at a booth and picks up a fanzine. Realistically drawn children, in proper proportion, are stripped naked and sodomized. I am unsure why he picked it up in the first place, but, in any case, without a word, Tarō quickly puts it down and walks on. When we are safely out of earshot of the creator, Tarō explains his hasty retreat. “That was real and dangerous (*riaru de yabai*). Not my thing.” The rejection is forceful and insistent. Tarō is drawing a line at images that are “real and dangerous,” which need to be rejected to maintain his orientation toward the fictional bodies of manga/ anime characters. He not only rejects actual child pornography and sex work by positioning himself against John, but also realistic drawings of sex and violence involving children. Interestingly, when a mutual acquaintance gifts Tarō with a fanzine featuring cartoony cute girl characters from a manga/ anime franchise being sexually assaulted, he does not reject it. Given that this acquaintance prefaced the gifting by making sure that I was “okay with lolicon,” it seems that Tarō, who received the gift, is okay with it. As long as it is fiction, manga/ anime, and nothing more “real.”

A tense moment at the Comic Market comes when it is announced that a 15-year-old woman from Hong Kong is missing. The announcement, which comes over the loud speakers, compels John to come and find me. “Is she okay?” he asks, looking for

confirmation, suggesting that something bad might have happened. It is not just that someone has been separated from their group in a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, which is after all not uncommon, but rather that something sinister may be afoot. "I hope that they find her," John ventures. If they do not, it may confirm suspicions that manga/ anime fans are not only perverts, but also predators. As John leaves, I am approached by a cameraman from the United Kingdom, who cannot understand the announcements in Japanese and asks what is going on. Immediately after I tell him about the missing woman, he quips, "One of these guys has got her under his girl cape." I follow his gaze to a group of men standing in a half circle; they have covers for body pillows, which are emblazoned with *bishōjo* characters, draped over their shoulders like capes; they wear bandannas to keep the sweat off their brows and have sunglasses on, despite being inside. They look suspicious to the cameraman. Dressed as they are, surely one of them, or one of the thousands like them at the event, must have kidnapped the missing woman. Noting that I am not laughing, the cameraman chuckles and moves on. These men were innocent, it turns out; the missing woman was just lost, and, in time, found her way back to her group. She found her way back despite being in an unfamiliar place, speaking a different language and not having her cellular phone. She found her way back with the help of the people at the Comic Market, who rallied to find and help her. In a place overflowing with imaginary sex, violence and crime involving underage characters, an actual teen in trouble was cause for concern and treated with care.

In the same space as *bishōjo* characters and men imagining sex with them, this 15-year-old woman was not, I was told, ever in any danger. The overarching message of the stories that I was told about the woman who was lost and found at the Comic Market is that she may have been surrounded by perverts, but they were well-behaved ones

oriented toward fiction. Simply put, the perverts in question were manga/anime fans sexually interested in manga/anime characters; they were at the Comic Market, as *bishōjo* game players were at the Denkigai Matsuri, for explicit content featuring these characters. They were there for sexy cartoon girls, which are separate and distinct from real girls and women. These characters exist in manga/anime and *bishōjo* games, which have their own reality, but nevertheless separate and distinct from real girls and women and “reality.” Many lines are crossed in manga/anime – the incest taboo, underage eroticism and sexual violence, for a start – but not the line between fiction and reality. Insisting on that line allows for imaginary transgression. It allows the Denkigai Matsuri, Comic Market and other events to be spaces for sharing *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. As I observed it in the field, the ethics of *moe* is the action and everyday practice of manga/anime fans drawing a line between fiction and reality and orienting themselves toward the drawn lines of fictional characters. Others judge the actions of fans in interactions with them. Interacting with fictional and real others, one learns to draw lines.

## **5.2 Interacting with Fiction and Reality**

The image is of a schoolgirl being sexually assaulted while riding a crowded train. She is pressed against the door and visible through its cutout window. Her hands are against the transparent surface, as are her breasts, which are exposed. Someone has pulled up her shirt and bra, likely the man behind her, who is holding her right wrist. The pleated skirt of her school uniform has also been lifted to reveal striped panties. The man’s other hand is poised above her left thigh and covered in vaginal fluid, which drips through the young woman’s panties down her legs. Small tears are forming in the corners of her massive eyes, and she is blushing red. She is breathing heavily, which fogs up the window. Her open mouth is wet with saliva; drool runs down her chin. This

image appears on a promotional flier for REAL's *Mischief Fiend* (Itazura kyōaku, 2015), a *bishōjo* game where the player simulates groping women. What is the status of the real here? Certainly the problem of molestation on the train continues to be widely reported in Japan.<sup>9</sup> It is a real problem, and the game might be encouraging it. On the other hand, the character is drawn in the cartoony style of manga and anime. She does not look at all "real." So, both real and unreal, which raises questions about blurring boundaries.

Precisely for that reason, games such as this one come with warnings such as:

The content of this software is, to the end, a constructed work of fiction and a game. Conducting the acts depicted in the game in reality will result in punishment by law. The content of the game is a bit of theater and fiction. Absolutely do not mimic these acts or be influenced by them. (Kagami 2010: 219-220)

So when the boundaries may be unclear, lines are drawn and insisted on. Thus oriented toward fiction, the player plays through sexual scenarios on the train, a form of transportation that is part of the reality of everyday life in the Japanese city, and sex with manga/anime characters, which are also part of everyday life in Japan but cannot be encountered or engaged this way in reality. So, both real and unreal, produced by REAL and experienced as a peculiar "real" (more on this "strange reality" in later sections).

The blurring of lines is said to be dangerous (Taylor 2007: 203; Thorn 2012: 21; Laycock 2015: 5), but in the case of manga/anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game players specifically, it is more accurate to say that lines are drawn even as they are crossed. A conspicuous example of this is maid cafés, which first appeared in Akihabara in the late 1990s. Deeply tied to *bishōjo* games, the first maid café was a temporary recreation of the café from *Welcome to Pia Carrot!! 2* (Pia kyarotto e yōkoso 2, Cocktail

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<sup>9</sup> A survey conducted by the Gender Equality Bureau in Japan in 2004, for example, found that, of 1,773 women over 20 years of age sampled, 47.8 percent reported experiencing being groped on the train. See: <<http://www.gender.go.jp/e-vaw/chousa/images/pdf/h11.pdf#page=58>>.

Soft, 1997), which opened at an event in 1998. Maid cafés moved to Akihabara with the temporary Pia Carrot Restaurant in 1999 and Gamers Café in 2000, before the first permanent maid café, Cure Maid Café, was founded in 2001. The founders of this and other early maid cafés were players of *bishōjo* games, specifically games such as *Bird in the Cage* (Kara no naka no kotori, STUdIo B-ROOM, 1996) and *Song of the Chick* (Hinadori no saezuri, STUdIo B-ROOM, 1997), and they tried to recreate the two-dimensional world of maids in their establishments.<sup>10</sup> Maid cafés originally targeted *bishōjo* game players, who were in Akihabara to buy games and wanted to enter into a space associated with them and distanced from “reality” (Morikawa 2008: 262-269). Maid cafés allowed for the two-dimensional to come into the three-dimensional, and for the three-dimensional to move closer to the two-dimensional. This is why they attracted *bishōjo* game players such as Honda Tōru, who found in them what he calls a “2.5-dimensional space” (*nitengo jigen kūkan*) (Honda 2005: 18-19). While excited to encounter, bodily, the two-dimensional world, Honda was careful to keep this separate from the three-dimensional world. In a maid café, Honda explains, one interacts with fictional characters, which are deliberately separated from the people who perform them. “This is not a romantic relationship between three-dimensional men and women,” Honda argues, “but a relationship between a maid and master” (Inforest 2005: 93). He is not alone in insisting on the character, as I found when interviewing a *bishōjo* game player who stated that, “The attraction is to the maid character, which exists as part of a fantasy. [...] It is not the person who is dressed up as a maid, but the maid character itself” (Galbraith 2014: 140). These sorts of statements reveal, I argue, an ethics of interacting with and being moved by fictional characters. If interacting with fictional characters in the real world has become common for manga/ anime fans today

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<sup>10</sup> This information comes from a personal interview (August 14, 2010) with Nakamura Jin, who knows the men who founded these maid cafés.

(Greenwood 2013: 1-2), then so too has insisting on the distinction between fiction and reality (Saitō 2007: 226-227).

The result of this is an at times startling disconnection between fictional characters and the real people who perform them. Just as the young women who perform maid characters in maid cafés can be simultaneously university students and “17 years old” – despite celebrating multiple birthdays with customers over the course of years working in cafés (Galbraith 2013: 12), and humorously drawing attention to this by identifying as “eternally 17” (*eien no 17-sai*), which is itself an outgrowth of the artificiality of idols (discussed above) – one can perform a character and be separate from it. Consider, for example, Toromi, who is an idol for many *bishōjo* game players. While her age is a closely guarded secret, Toromi is not a young girl, but still performs as one. After working in the *bishōjo* gaming industry for some time, Toromi debuted as a voice actress with the character of Mii from Petit Ferret’s *Popotan* (2002). With a character image designed by Watanabe Akio (see Chapter 3), Mii is presented as a physically and mentally immature girl, the youngest of three sisters, but nevertheless the character that appears in the most sex scenes in *Popotan*. Toromi, who went on to become an illustrator and singer, continues to draw cute girl characters that resemble Mii and to sing songs that capture her innocence and sexuality. One such song is “Bonus Track” from Toromi’s album *Toromi shitate* (2010). Set to a driving beat and happy sound effects, Toromi sings the following words in an impossibly high-pitched character voice:

Let’s do something fun and play together

It will be a secret from everyone

It will be just our secret

It will be a secret from papa

It will be a secret from mama

It will be a secret from everyone

It will be just our secret

It will be a secret from papa

It will be a secret from mama

Let's go!

The song, stated plainly, is about a young girl making herself available to “do something fun and play” with an adult man. It is heavily implied that the something is sex. If the lyrics are not clear enough, the association with Mii ensures that listeners make the connection to sex. However, there is no young girl in the room when the song is performed. Having debuted professionally in 2002, Toromi is older than many of the men who listen to her music. The young girl exists as an assemblage of shared imagination, informed by the images Toromi draws, the voice she produces and the scenario that she creates in the lyrics. (This is very much how *bishōjo* games work; see Chapter 4.) The young girl is Mii from *Popotan*, a cute girl character and fiction, which operates independently of a “real” girl. Despite my being somewhat uncomfortable seeing dozens of men dancing, clapping and shouting in shared excitement when Toromi performed the above song live,<sup>11</sup> none of the men I talked to that day perceived themselves to be pedophiles or predators seeking a sexual relationship with a young girl. They were here for the imaginary character inspired by *bishōjo* games and performed by Toromi. The character was separate from not only real girls, but also Toromi, who was really in the room. The manga/ anime character, the cute girl character, was the object of desire and affection, which was separate from girls and women generally and her specifically.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The event was Eroge Song Only DJ Event EEE Vol. 4, which was held in Osaka on September 19, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> In a similar way, Momoi Halko, a voice actress who got her start singing music for *bishōjo* games (see Chapter 3), sings a song where she and other women simply repeat the English words “Sex...and violence!”

This dynamic was even more striking at an event called Eroge Sixteen, which is held once a month at a café and event space in Akihabara in conjunction with the Day of Erotic Games (see Chapter 3). On the day in question, January 30, 2015, the event draws around 30 men, who stop by after buying *bishōjo* games, chat with others and watch a live-streaming show where a personable female emcee interviews people from the *bishōjo* gaming industry. The men are only a few feet from the stage and interact with the people on and off it in a very relaxed and intimate atmosphere. Despite the low lights on the audience, everyone can see everyone else in the small space. When Hayase Yayoi, a voice actress working in the *bishōjo* gaming industry, appears on stage at 15:00, the audience responds immediately. They already know that she is a “free” (*furi*) voice actress, meaning that she is not affiliated with an agency and so does not have to be as guarded with her words. With attitude that has earned her a reputation, Hayase introduces herself as a “pure bitch” (*pyua na bicchi*), where bitch is normally a derogatory way to refer to women as sluts in Japanese and pure can be either pure hearted or purely, absolutely. As Hayase uses it, pure bitch is a reference to her character, which is an unrestrained sexual being, and she owns it on stage. She is here to promote a book of collected images from Moonstone’s *Daemon Busters: Sexy, Sexy Daemon Extermination* (Dēmon basutāzu: Ecchi na ecchi na dēmon taiji, 2014). Moonstone is a *bishōjo* game production company known for its frankly pornographic content, which has earned it

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over and over again in different cute girl character voices. In the background, one hears stock lines from adult manga, anime and games, as well as women performing exaggerated male voices responding to them. The song sounds like a celebration of sex and violence, but is also a subtle critique. The song ultimately does not encourage sex and violence in reality, but rather reflection on imaginings of, and responses to, it in virtual worlds.

fans and critics.<sup>13</sup> *Daemon Busters*, which will be adapted into an adult anime, is no exception.

While Hayase presents herself as an unrestrained sexual being, and is an attractive woman, the audience's attention is focused not on her, but rather the images projected on a screen behind her. Drawn from the generous sex scenes in *Daemon Busters*, Hayase is showing some provocative images. They are images of the character that she voices, Konoka Shizu, and three others involved in "sexy, sexy daemon extermination." The prototypical image is a *bishōjo* – round face and large eyes, small nose and mouth, different colored hair in different styles, different heights and breast sizes, but remarkably similar visually – with chest and panties exposed, a penis shape (digitally blurred due to obscenity law) nearby and semen on her. The men are scrutinizing the images, guided by Hayase and the emcee, who explain the characters and why they are erotic. The men nod, sometimes adding an opinion, to which the women respond. Hayase and the emcee, along with the men in the room and the ones watching online and making comments, are together reading the images of cute girl characters. Demonstrating their "moe image literacy" (*moe'e riterashi*) (Kagami 2010: 131), or understanding of the affective elements of the image, they talk about "attributes" (*zokusei*) and "erotic parts" (*eroi bubun*). This one is a "committee chairperson" (*i'inchō*), "teacher" (*sensei*), "Lolita" (*rorita*), "sweet, supporting, underclassmen" (*amai ōen kōhai*), "older sister" (*o-nē-san*), "younger sister" (*imōto*). Hayase and the emcee respond to the images with and as the audience: "thanks for the meal" (*gochisōsama*); "that's good, that's good" (*ii ne, ii ne*); "so cute" (*kawaii naa*). Like the men in the audience, their focus is on the images on screen and the cute girl characters, which are separate and distinct from

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<sup>13</sup> The adult manga adaptation of Moonstone's *Little Sister Paradise 2: More Older Brother and Little Sister Everyday Fuck Fest* (Imōto paradaisu: Onī-chan to go nin no imōto no motto ecchi shimakuri na mainichi, 2013) was the first publication to be deemed harmful under the revised Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths.

them. They are objects to be looked at and commented on; the sexual objects on screen have a value and eroticism all their own, which does not seem to be conflated or confused with the sexual subjects discussing them. The emcee in fact draws attention to how these sex objects are fiction and not a reflection of reality. Responding to an image of a little sister character waking her brother up with fellatio, she asks, "Have you ever been woken up by your sister like that?" One man: "No!" Another: "I don't have a sister!" And another: "No sister would ever do such a thing!" No such sister exists. This is a fictional character, after all. The emcee agrees: "That's reality for you. It's tough." Laughter.

The bawdy talk occurs in a space where the status of the body is quite peculiar. At first glance, it appears that two women on stage are talking dirty to a group of men in a dark room in Akihabara. This is clearly embodied, and they are in close proximity. At the same time, they are discussing fictional characters, which exist as images on screen, images attached to voices such as the one that Hayase can produce and images in the minds of producers and players. The men who played the game were involved bodily with characters as they sat in front of computer screens, looked at characters and imagined them as they interacted. Producers and players interact with one another through the character image and are connected by imagination.<sup>14</sup> The character of Konoka Shizu is associated with Hayase's body to the extent that she produced her voice sitting in front of a microphone in a studio, but the character looks nothing like her. Hayase is clear that she is not the character or the object of desire, which is fiction. Unlike the example of phone sex operators, who perform characters for men demanding reality and authenticity in mediated but still direct interactions (Flowers 1998: 38-44, 84-

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<sup>14</sup> Not only does the player interacting with the image enter into the imaginary space of action, but so too does the voice actress. For an example of the importance of imagination in *bishōjo* game sex, see the depiction of voice actresses in *Koe de oshigoto!* (Voice Work, 2010-2011).

105), Hayase steps away from the character, which is fiction that she and players co-imagine and co-create. For their part, the players do not demand reality and authenticity from her, because Hayase is not the character that she performs and they understand and respect the distinction. The intimacy of shared imagination is paired with a separation of actual bodies – producers and players at first, but at Erogē Sixteen also the fictional character and voice actress, who separate fiction and reality and maintain a distance between them. Even as imaginary participation makes the game play experience “real,” and involves real bodies, the “experience concurrently more and less immediate than a live one” (Ortega-Brena 2009: 25) is still kept separate from “reality.” This separation of fiction and reality, and fictional and real bodies, makes certain interactions possible.

For example, Hayase is frank and open in her discussion of *Daemon Busters*, even as players are extremely frank and open with her, which she does not seem to find to be sexual harassment, because she is not the sex object. Noting that eroticism is the key selling point of the game, Hayase introduces a man named Itō Life, who works as a key image illustrator for Moonstone and acted as the “erotic producer” (*ero purodūsa*) for *Daemon Busters*. “His erotic vision is very important to the game,” Hayase points out. “Playing it, you gain access to his Eros.” This was not the first or last time I saw games and related media and material marketed through a discourse of sharing the imagination of others. Indeed, production companies often advertise upcoming titles by saying that players can look forward to sharing a particular creator’s imagination. Players tend to gravitate to certain creators because they share, or want to share, their imagination and to be moved by it (recall the discussion in Chapter 4). However, because the production involves multiple creators – character designers, voice actresses, scenario writers, players – *bishōjo* games involve multiple relationships of shared

imagination, which are differentially emphasized at different times. So it is that Hayase and the audience share the imagination of Itō Life at Eroge Sixteen. Recalling her interactions with Itō Life, Hayase says that the man hired voice actresses if he “responded” (*han’nō*) to them. “Basically, if he got hard, you got hired,” Hayase says matter-of-factly. “That is quite a raw (*namanamashii*) audition,” the emcee suggests. Perhaps, Hayase explains, but it was not about her or her “flesh-and-blood” (*namami*) body. Rather, the audition, as Hayase understood it, was about her ability to produce a particular character voice that got a response. “I was very pleased! That got you hard? You hired me for that? I thought, ‘Wow, I might be able to make it in this business.’” Having succeeded in producing a character that moved someone to bodily response, Hayase felt that she could make it in the *bishōjo* gaming industry. It was the character, not her body, triggering the response. This, Hayase clarifies, is why it was not in fact a “raw audition” so much as producing the character in person and getting an immediate response.

Open and frank discussion of imaginary sex is part of *bishōjo* game culture generally and events such as Eroge Sixteen specifically. As Hayase explains it, *Demon Busters* was intended to encourage something like social or shared masturbation. Not only is Itō Life sharing his Eros with players, but players are also sharing what works for them. “The intention was that players would Tweet screen shots of the game as they played and comment,” Hayase explains. Comment, that is, on what got a response and worked for them. For Hayase, this “playfulness” (*asobi gokoro*) is an important part of the game, and something that she shares. At Eroge Sixteen, Hayase talks about her character, which is projected on a screen behind her, in what can only be described as a playful way. The audience playfully interacts with her, and the men do not conflate the person speaking on stage and the silent images on screen. With it established that she is not the

character or object, Hayase confidently plays with the audience. For example, she produces Konoka Shizu's voice live, which elicits an excited and audible gasp from the audience. She playfully discusses sex not only in terms of the characters on screen, but also herself (a pure bitch) and the men in the audience (pathetic). When the emcee comments again on how erotic the images collected in the visual book are, Hayase responds, "I think that you can use it (*tsukaeru*), but please don't bring it to me to sign if the pages are stuck together." Laughter from the audience. It is definitely "for practical use" (*jitsuyōbutsu*), one man says. Then buy two, Hayase retorts, and bring me the clean copy. More laughter. After she has finished her on-camera interaction, Hayase comes off stage and sits at a table in the back of the room, where men line up to talk with her. Many tell her about what worked for them in the game and got them to respond. When they mention her performance, she smiles and thanks them, saying that she tried to make it sound as erotic as possible.<sup>15</sup> The game is very erotic, right? The characters are so cute, right? Hayase shares stories about the game, shakes hands and signs books. Excited talk and laughter fill the air. If the character appears as a shared object, then Hayase appears as a player. The separation of Hayase and the character makes certain interactions possible.

Another example of interacting with fictional characters and real people, or the convergence of actual and virtual bodies that requires lines be drawn and maintained, occurred at Charara!!, a *bishōjo* game industry event held every month in a space above an arcade on Chūō Street in Akihabara (see Chapter 3). On the date in question, July 17,

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<sup>15</sup> Hayase is not alone in this sharing with fans. Kagami Hiroyuki, a scenario writer for *bishōjo* games, vividly recalls letters from players telling him what works and what they want more of (Kagami 2010: 26-29). In a personal interview (February 9, 2015), Kagami described this as the most fun and rewarding part of his job. "I want people to come up to me and tell me these things," Kagami said. "That is how I can get to know the players and do my job better." Similarly, at an event (February 11, 2015), character designer Fukumimi said, "Please tweet your reactions to the game! We want to hear from you. It keeps us motivated." He also relayed the story of a fan who approached him at the Comic Market and said simply, "I came" (*nukemashita*). "That is the sort of straight and honest response that we want."

2015, around 50 men gather at 17:00 on a Friday. The men are far less energetic than usual, and spend most of the time looking down at their smartphones, poking at screens and listening in a distracted way. The emcee for the evening, a young woman dressed in a character costume, sits next to a screen that is playing a promotional video for a game called *Rape Club*. The juxtaposition, which does not draw attention or comment from anyone, is somewhat eerie. One of the first presenters is an older woman representing Unicorn-a, the *bishōjo* game production company where she works. While incredibly confident in presenting the upcoming game that she is here to promote, which she has no doubt now done many months in a row, the older woman wastes no time in introducing another woman, who turns out to be a voice actress featured in the upcoming game. The voice actress would not be considered physically attractive in Japan – young and thin being the hegemonic ideal (Aiba 2011: 274) – but she is experienced in the industry and performs cute girl characters. The older woman begins to interview her as a way to introduce the game and its characters to the audience. She asks what kind of character the voice actress is performing. The question seems to take the voice actress by surprise, but she manages a response. “Loli... Loli... A loli!”<sup>16</sup> With the stuttering but dramatic declaration, the audience snaps to attention. Something has been announced. Something is happening. Playing the audience, who she knows she has captured, the older woman asks the voice actress, “Do you like loli characters?” More confidently now: “I love them.” Whether she loves them as characters, or loves performing them, the result is that she has created an overlap with the audience, which is comprised of men assumed to be lolicon. In fact, so certain is she that these men are lolicon that the voice actress offers, as a way to generate interest in the upcoming game,

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<sup>16</sup> The spoken Japanese was “Rori... Rori... Rori desu!” The pauses seemed to have been inserted for dramatic effect, but also because she could not think of a better way to describe the character and was pausing before settling definitively on “loli.”

to recreate a scene from it for the audience right now. Not only will she do it live, but with one of the men in the audience. This does not, however, mean reading lines together. Instead, the voice actress wants one of the men to offer his name so that she can insert it into the scenario, which she has in front of her to read from. The men in the audience are quiet and seem nervous; no one is willing to give a name, which surprises the voice actress. "This is a loli kiss scene!" she says, beseechingly. "Is no one interested?" Perhaps they are embarrassed or do not want to be singled out, but no one speaks; the tension is building. The voice actress then challenges everyone to a game of rock-paper-scissors, with the "winner" giving a name.

As luck would have it, a young man in the front row wins. Sitting cross-legged directly on the gray carpet with everyone else, he is perhaps only four feet from where the voice actress is standing. The woman is not particularly tall, but because the young man is seated on the floor, she towers over him. "Seriously? I won?" he says, obviously flustered. "Are we really going to do this (*jitsugen suru*)?" The phrase the young man uses here, *jitsugen suru*, is a noun (broken down, it is *jitsu* "truth or reality" and *gen* "reality or present") and verb (*suru* "to do") that means more literally "realize," "actualize" or "materialize," which is both exciting and dangerous. After some more prodding from the voice actress, the young man finally gives a name: "Kazuki." It is a generic name, a non-name, and no one in the room believes that it is the young man's real one. Real or not, a name was needed and has been given. And so the performance begins. "Everyone," the voice actress says. "Imagine that you are Kazuki." The room goes silent. No one is poking at screens anymore. A few are fidgeting and shifting their weight, nervously, and one has risen to attention on his knees. "Everyone, imagine that it is you." Imagine that the character is talking to you. The voice actress turns her back to the audience so that we cannot see her face. Taking a deep breath, she produces a voice:

Kazuki...

Think of me as a normal woman...

(Kissing sounds)

Is that really her voice? It sounds completely different. Just like an anime character. I only now realize that my eyes are closed. I had closed them to see the character; a Lolita character that is not a woman. I open my eyes and look around to see that the other men have their eyes to the floor, sealed shut, listening intently. Imagining.

Kazuki...

(Kissing sounds)

(Heavy breathing)

The scenario ends before it can become too arousing, but, judging from the way that the men break their silence in excited clapping and cheering, it was arousing enough.

“Awesome,” the man next to me whispers to himself, but loudly enough to also be whispering to others. “I’m glad I got to hear that in the flesh (*nama de kikete yokatta*).”

Hear it in the flesh: To hear the character in the flesh; the character given a fleshy reality by the voice actress; the character now in the flesh and in the room with us, speaking to and appealing to us directly, whose body affects our bodies. Co-present in the room, we hear the character in the flesh, both hers and ours.

Even “Kazuki,” eyes still on the floor and blushing, is moved. He seems almost unable or unwilling to bring his eyes back up to see the woman standing in front of him, who is not the character, but someone who produced it live. Someone who produced it with us, here, in the flesh. We imagined and created her, together. Imagining that we were “Kazuki” and that the character was speaking to us, just as she does when we input our names and play *bishōjo* games, we were all part of the scene. If “Kazuki” opens his eyes and looks forward and up, the character will disappear, because there is a

person there. And he is not “Kazuki.” None of us are. So keep the eyes closed and let the character linger in the imagination, the room, the flesh. After waiting for the promotional talk for the game to finish, “Kazuki” discretely makes his way to the Unicorn-a table to order the game. A line of “Kazukis” do. The voice actress has already left,<sup>17</sup> but the character that she produced continues to be present in the images on the wall, in the games being ordered and in the shared imagination of the men and women involved. Just as a line is drawn between the character and voice actress, a line is drawn between the room and outside. Just as no one thinks the voice actress is the character, no one seeks the character outside. The character is not there; she only exists here, in the game, in our imagination. Many lines were crossed in the transgressive co-imagination and co-creation of the character – the fictional girl that becomes real, inter-generational eroticism, imaginary sex in public – but not the line between fiction and reality, the manga/ anime world and real world, the two- and three-dimensional. Insisting on this line makes the sexual play possible. Blurring of the line between fiction and reality occurs in a controlled space, much like a maid café, and with the expectation that other lines will not be crossed. This speaks to, I argue, an ethics of *moe*, where manga/ anime fans responding to fictional characters draw and insist on lines. They insist on the drawn lines of manga/ anime characters, and in so doing draw a line between fiction and reality.

### **5.3 Drawing Lines with Others**

Located outside of the Electric Town Gate of JR Akihabara Station, Gamers is a landmark. Covered in images of cute girl characters, and with cute girl character voices

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<sup>17</sup> Before leaving, the voice actress performed a character song about a girl in love with her “big sister.” The song, which touches on the “attributes” of lesbian and little sister, was still brought back around to “Lolita.” When the older woman asked the voice actress again what she thinks about her character, the voice actress responded, “Lolis are so cute.”

pouring out of loud speakers and onto the street, it is a beacon for manga / anime fans and, as the name suggests, gamers. Indeed, Gamers is one of the central locations for buying new *bishōjo* games in Akihabara. So it made sense when the location was chosen to host Eroge Briefing, a gathering for *bishōjo* game producers and players. Much discussed in the weeks leading up to it, the event was held in a small space on the top floor of the seven-story building housing Gamers. Adopting a somewhat unique format, Eroge Briefing was to feature two moderators, one male and one female, interacting with an audience of devoted *bishōjo* game players and speakers from three *bishōjo* game production companies. Two of the three companies were described as “core” (*koi*), meaning they produce dark and disturbing content, and the last as “Lolita” (*rori*). After interacting with speakers from all three companies, the moderators would invite everyone on stage to talk to the audience. Producers would be able to hear from players in real time. In sharp contrast to other events (for example, Eroge Sixteen), in the second half of Eroge Briefing, when all the speakers and members of the audience would engage in open dialogue, the event would not be live streamed online. The cameras, which would run in the first half, would be turned off. At that time, what would be said in the room would be between the people in the room. What would be said could not be predicted, and one had to be there to hear it. This insistence on presence added to the affective charge in the room when the day of Eroge Briefing finally arrived on February 11, 2015.

The moderators, Senaka (middle-aged man who works in a *bishōjo* game production company in Osaka and runs a regular talk show) and Ayumi (middle-aged woman with 10 years of experience as a voice actress), start off the event with the usual playful sexual joking. Ayumi asks if we know the meaning of “brief,” which appears in the title of the event. Having looked it up online, she reports finding that it means a

man's underwear. She originally thought, then, that the event had been named after the underwear of men who play *bishōjo* games. Although she does not say it, the suggestion is that these underwear would reflect players' masturbation, which is to say that they would be cum-stained. Everyone laughs as Ayumi responds with mock disgust and calls the idea gross. The straight man in this comedy duo, Senaka steps up to explain that the meaning of "briefing" is to relay information on a particular topic, in this case the state of the *bishōjo* gaming industry. Looking around the room at the 50 people (mostly men, but also four women) seated in folding chairs, Senaka and Ayumi say that they know practically everyone here. If not friends, these are still known faces and personalities who frequent events of this kind. They are experts on *bishōjo* games coming together to share opinions. When Senaka and Ayumi ask questions, the audience is engaged, shouting out answers, responding with loud sounds of affirmation ("Aaaah!") when they have understood something and laughing boisterously. When Senaka, Ayumi or a speaker prompts them, the audience responds almost immediately with information, ideas and questions. At Erogē Briefing, players are treated as experts and their input as valuable.

The intensity level in the room rises with the third and final speaker of the evening. The man is Fukumimi, a character designer working for IRIS, and he is here to promote the game *I Love, Love, Love You!!* (Shuki shuki daishuki, 2014). The players are clearly excited to see this man, who many were apparently waiting for. Although promotional material for the event identified IRIS with "Lolita," Senaka and Ayumi seem somewhat reluctant to use the word, which is increasingly tied to critiques of manga/anime images around the world. It is beyond obvious, however, that *I Love, Love, Love You!!* is a lolicon game, where players take on the role of a man who becomes the manager of a store frequented by young girls. He gets to know a shy girl that helps

around the shop, a Russian girl living next door and a “little idol” (*puchi aidoru*) that is also a runaway and lives in the park. Relationships grow more intimate as the player advances to establish “a slightly risky lovey-dovey couple.” Even as Senaka and Ayumi ask Fukimimi questions, they seem unsure whether they can or should use the word lolicon. Staff members from Gamers are at the back of the room with the camera, ready to cut things off if necessary. For his part, Fukumimi is disarmingly open and frank about creating games that reflect his desires – and he does not hesitate to use the word lolicon. With that line breeched, Senaka and Ayumi get the audience involved by asking who among them is a lolicon. More than half raise their hands (including one of the women). Somewhat surprised by the number, Ayumi hastens to add that all of the characters in the game are of course over 18 years of age, which triggers laughter from the audience. What we are looking at, Ayumi continues to assure us, are not “young girls” (*osanai ko*), but “small girls” (*chiccha na onna no ko*). She uses words for different sizes – “small” (*shō*), “medium” (*chū*) and “large” (*dai*) – to refer to the different body types (= apparent ages) of the characters. This imaginative interpretation of Fukumimi’s words and work trigger those watching the live stream online to begin typing/chanting, “Small! Small! Small! Small!”<sup>18</sup> Responding, Ayumi asks Fukumimi if he likes “small” women, to which he replies, “Yes, of course.” More fireworks online, which reflect what is going on in the room. “It appears,” Ayumi says, “that we have a lot of loli people here.”

Seeming eager and playful, Fukumimi leans in on the discussion of desire. It is not the case that he is attracted to only “small” women. No, Fukumimi explains, he has very broad interests. Approached “as figures” (*taikei toshite*), he is interested in a wide variety of women. As if to demonstrate this point, Senaka, who apparently knows the

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<sup>18</sup> The Japanese, as relayed by Ayumi as she read the comments for the audience in the room, was, “Shō! Shō! Shō! Shō! Shō!”

character designer well, relays a story to the audience. One day, he was walking down the street in Akihabara with Fukumimi and saw a woman dressed in a maid costume. Heavyset and round, Senaka expected that the woman would not be Fukumimi's type. He does not, after all, draw characters that way. When he mentioned his reasoning to his friend as they walked, Fukumimi reportedly responded that he likes that figure very much. Recalling that time and smiling, Fukumimi nods. "Yes, it is true. My interests are way too broad." Listening, I wonder just how broad they are. Not only is Fukumimi attracted to women of various shapes and sizes (the objectification is palpable), but this encounter with a woman dressed as a maid on the streets of Akihabara suggests that he is also attracted to two- and three-dimensional women. If Fukumimi likes both fictional and real "small" women, then this raises the specter of the pedophile and predator, which always haunts the discussion of lolicon. As if to defuse that concern on camera, Ayumi interjects that whatever Fukumimi's interests might be, no matter how broad, there is no problem, because the small women in *I Love, Love, Love You!!* are all over the age of 18 and are, in any case, fictional characters in a *bishōjo* game.

Responding to this repeated assertion of the status of his characters as legally adults and fictional characters, the playful Fukumimi takes the freewheeling talk in a dangerous direction. Instead of agreeing with Ayumi as was expected, Fukumimi mentions that he sometimes goes to primary schools for location scouting and takes photographs of girls. Before Fukumimi has even finished his sentence, the room erupts in an explosion of movement and sound. "Abunai! Abunai!" shouts Senaka. Whoa! Whoa! Danger! Danger! "NG! NG!" shouts Ayumi, her voice overlapping with Senaka's. No good! No good! "Ikan!" Senaka continues to shout, this time in a blunt male speech pattern. Wrong! No way! Seated on either side of the man, both Ayumi and Senaka have leaned over to position themselves in front of Fukumimi and are frantically waving their

arms and hands in front of him. The gesture seems almost to be deflecting the gaze of the audience in the room and online. Almost as if they are scrubbing what has just been said from the record and mind and washing it away. Making similar gestures of rejection and denial, the audience – every single person in the room – is shouting, “No!” Although much of this is playful and performative, it is clear that Fukumimi has crossed a line, which is being reasserted. As the noise dies down, Ayumi punctuates the response with, “Omawari-san! Kono hito desu!” Mr. Policeman! This is the guy! Throughout it all, Fukumimi sits in silence, arms folded across his chest, enjoying the chaos that he has triggered. He may have been joking, and seems pleased with himself at getting such an animated response, but he also clearly understands that a line has been crossed.

One reason for the intensity of the response is because the line has been crossed in personal and shared ways. Everyone in the room is a *bishōjo* game player, and many have played games featuring Fukumimi’s characters; they have shared his imagination and been involved in relationships with his characters. (For more on these relationships, see Chapter 4.) Do these cute girl characters refer to fiction or reality? Comfortable that the answer is fiction, Fukumimi suddenly referenced reality, which implicated players in something that they were moved to reject in personal and shared ways. Even as the players share movement in response to *bishōjo* games, they now share movement in response to crossing a line when discussing *bishōjo* characters. The response is not as simple as rejection and denial, because they are Fukumimi’s people and he is one them. When Fukumimi talks about an upcoming project creating something he calls “pervert fancy” (*hentai fanshī*), Senaka says that he is going too far, but Ayumi interjects. “Hentai desho?” You’re a pervert, right? You like what he does, right? Protesting comically, Senaka in the end acknowledges it. Yes, I am a pervert like him. We are perverts. A

gesture of solidarity with Fukumimi, the man who makes his games and walks with him down the street in Akihabara. And the people in the room, half admitting to being lolicon and most coming to the event to see Fukumimi, also cannot simply reject and deny him. They have shared, and do share, his imagination.<sup>19</sup> His games are their games. Just as his pleasure is shared, so too is his problem. These *bishōjo* game players are perverts like him. He crossed a line and needed to be reminded of it. That can be done, together.

The camera has been turned off. The connection to the outside severed. “This is our time,” Senaka proclaims. “We are free!” As if to demonstrate and get things started, Ayumi says the word she avoided before, “Lolicon, lolicon,” to which Senaka responds, “Omorashi, omorashi,” referring to the peeing of one’s pants, which is one of the eroticized scenarios in *I Love, Love, Love You!!* Like Senaka and Ayumi, speakers from *bishōjo* game production companies and *bishōjo* game players in the audience can now say anything. Although the audience is already participating, the moderators offer stickers to everyone who speaks from this point on. The stickers, courtesy of IRIS, are of the characters of *I Love, Love, Love You!!* peeing themselves. “These omorashi stickers can be yours,” Senaka says, getting a response of laughter and applause. Speakers from three *bishōjo* game production companies are on stage, but Fukumimi continues to be the most provocative. “I want to make a full-on pedophile (*gachi pedo*) game,” he says. “All the ages would be clearly indicated.” He is challenging the norms of the Ethics Organization of Computer Software, a self-regulatory body for the *bishōjo* gaming

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<sup>19</sup> Returning to Tokyo after fieldwork, I was reminded of Fukumimi’s popularity. Walking down Chūō Street in May 2016, I noticed that hundreds of men were using a particular fan to cool themselves. Given away as a promotion by Sofmap, a major seller of *bishōjo* games located on Chūō Street, the fan featured a character designed by Fukumimi. The cute girl character appeared to be between 10 and 12 years old and was wearing a cheerleader outfit that exposed her bellybutton, which I overheard men describe as erotic. So a sexualized girl-child character on fans used openly throughout Akihabara, where these images did not look at all out of place. Certainly Fukumimi is not an outsider in Akihabara or the *bishōjo* game world, and his popularity suggests that whatever problems he has should be considered shared ones. For an image of the fan, see: <<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/omaketeki/e/cf2666aaf13cfa05fa0dd937e4c85f55>>.

industry, which requests that characters appearing underage to be noted as 18 years of age. Fukumimi is also challenging the norms of players by using the word “pedophile” (*pedo*) as opposed to “lolicon” (*rorikon*), which raises questions about the relationship of the content to reality. “You get out of here!” Senaka says, laughing and waving him away. “I don’t think that the day will come when that sort of game will be tolerated,” Ayumi adds. “This is not a matter of funding or marketing.” It is also not a matter of law. As an example of ethics in action, a line is drawn and insisted on. The sort of game that Fukumimi is suggesting, a pedophile game, will not be allowed or supported. Some in the audience are nodding yes, others no. They are negotiating the line, together. An example is made of IRIS, which is described as a “pervert production company” (*hentai mēkā*), but this is also the company that attracted most of the audience to the event.

Are we not perverts? That is the question asked when Fukumimi challenges the audience to a game of rock-paper-scissors to win promotional material for *I Love, Love, Love You!!* “Does anyone want this?” he says, raising the first of many objects emblazoned with images of the cute girl characters he draws. A loud roar as the audience – every single person in the room – shouts, “Yes!” So if Fukumimi is a pervert, he is not alone. “Raise your hand if you want to be in the competition,” Ayumi says. Many, many hands go up at once. “Everyone with their hand up now is a lolicon!” Ayumi may be right. Here they are, hands in the air, at an event in Akihabara. They see one another and recognize themselves as one of many in the room and beyond. Several rounds of rock-paper-scissors decide who gets signed copies of *I Love, Love, Love You!!*, wall hangings and more. Caught in the moment, I participate and am surprised to be among three people in the running for a set of three cups representing the three main characters of *I Love, Love, Love You!!* Rather than continuing until one of us gets all three cups, we are called to the front of the room to compete for one of the three. “Which do

you want?" Fukumimi asks. To use Ayumi's terms, one character is "large," one is "medium" and one is "small," but they all look very young. "Point to the one you want on the count of three," Senaka says. "One... Two... Three!" All three of us are pointing at the cup with the "small" woman, which triggers riotous laughter from the audience. Nodding and smiling, Fukumimi watches. "Take a good look at these guys," Senaka says. "They need to be marked." These guys? Me? Am I on this side of the line now? I lose both subsequent rounds of rock-paper-scissors and end up with the last untaken cup, which is the one emblazoned with the image of the "large" woman. She is the one that looks the most physically mature, but, given the manga/anime aesthetic, this cute girl character still appears very young. She sits in a puddle of pee, ashamed, eyes meeting my gaze as I look at the cup. What am I to do with this object of mine? Could I drink from it in public? No, that would cross a line. Well, not in Akihabara. I could drink from the cup here. But would I, and should I? Where is the line? Where is mine?

#### **5.4 The Ethics of Moe in Akihabara**

In the field, I observed lines being drawn by *bishōjo* game producers and players such as Kōta, who slips into a store on one side of Chūō Street in Akihabara to buy games filled with imaginary sex, violence and crime, but criticizes sexual exploitation that he imagines is taking place in AKB48 Theater on the other side of the street. While Kōta uses and abuses what he calls "virtual girls," he is angered by the thought that men might be doing the same to real girls and women. Just as fiction and reality are, as Kōta puts it, "intentionally severed" from each other, so too should be cute girl characters and real girls and women. I observed lines being drawn by men such as Ataru, who sits in a café in Akihabara and discusses his sexual desire for cute girl characters, but states that men like him are not "harmful people," because they are oriented toward manga/anime fiction and understand and respect that it is separate and distinct from reality (Chapter

3). So it is that Ataru sits in a café in Akihabara not far from a primary school and talks openly about his sexual desire for underage characters, which are separate and distinct from the schoolchildren on the street outside. The men I encountered in the field were oriented toward the cute girl characters of manga/anime generally and *bishōjo* games specifically, and they insisted on the drawn lines of these characters. In the field, I came to understand that there is an ethics to drawing a line between fiction and reality and insisting on it. The ethical *bishōjo* game player draws a line between fiction and reality, which are intentionally severed and deliberately separated from each other. This is especially important when the fiction, if brought into reality, would harm others. Drawing lines, the *bishōjo* game producers and players that I encountered insisted that one should be allowed to interact with fictional characters and be moved by them, but fictional characters should not be confused or conflated with “real girls and women.”

At Eroge Briefing in Akihabara, Fukumimi crosses the line, and *bishōjo* game producers and players respond by insisting on it. Understood to be a man like Kōta and Ataru and not one of the “harmful people,” Fukumimi suddenly suggests that he goes to primary schools not unlike the one in Akihabara to scout locations and take photographs. To put it bluntly, Fukumimi suggests that he uses real children for reference, and might even desire them. *Bishōjo* game producers and players immediately and insistently reject this use and potential abuse of children. This rejection comes from people who happily identify as lolicon and enjoy *I Love, Love, Love You!!*, which is a game featuring explicit sex between an adult man and “small” women. *Bishōjo* game producers and players recognize that Fukumimi has said something, even if it is a joke, “dangerous” (*abunai*). In an instant, what was playful and fun becomes serious. When Fukumimi suggests that he takes photographs of schoolchildren for reference, the fiction of the game is brought into relation with reality in ways that are ethically “wrong”

(*ikan*). If *moe* is an affective response to fictional characters, then Fukumimi has confused and conflated cute girl characters and real children. The shift is from “lolicon” to “pedophile” (*pedo*), which *bishōjo* game producers and players reject. When Fukumimi suggests creating a pedophile game, he is told that such a game will not be allowed or supported. Nevertheless, *bishōjo* game producers and players do not treat Fukumimi as an outsider, but rather as an insider who has crossed the line. Crossing that line immediately brings to mind Miyazaki Tsutomu, a serial killer and sexual predator – arrested taking photographs of children – who confused and conflated fiction and reality with deadly results (Chapter 2). Since the arrest of this “otaku” folk devil in 1989, manga/ anime fans in Japan have become even more insistent about drawing lines. This ethics developed among fans openly and publically sharing affective responses to fictional characters. Such fans separate fiction and reality and interact with, and respond to, manga/ anime or cute girl characters; *they interact with and respond to fiction as such*. What I have been calling the ethics of *moe* undergirds the reaction to Fukumimi at Erogē Briefing in Akihabara, where *bishōjo* game producers and players together draw a line between fiction and reality and insist on an orientation of desire toward one and not the other.

The phrase “ethics of *moe*” (*moe no rinri*) comes from legal scholar Harata Shin’ichirō, who I met in Akihabara in 2015.<sup>20</sup> After over a year in the field, Harata helped me to make sense of what I was seeing. In his many works on the subject of virtual regulation (Harata 2006; Harata 2008; Harata 2011; Harata 2012), Harata identifies a legal limit. “My interest is in the question of whether or not the law can handle the concept of virtuality,” Harata tells me over coffee in Akihabara. “By

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<sup>20</sup> Harata translates “*rinri*” as “morality,” but there is already a word for that in Japanese, “*dōtoku*.” I prefer ethics because it seems to more accurately capture the philosophical dimensions of what Harata and others are discussing.

virtuality, I don't mean something such as virtual reality or fiction that is separate and distinct from reality, but rather something that functions as reality although it is not reality."<sup>21</sup> The insight is as sharp as the dapper Harata – born in 1979 in Aichi Prefecture and now a professor of media and law at Shizuoka University – in his suit and tie. Can the law, which deals primarily with binaries such as real and fictional, true and false, guilty and not guilty deal with complexity of the kind observed in Akihabara? To get at this problem, Harata draws attention to child pornography law. In his studies of the law, Harata explains that he has found that the reason that child pornography is exempt from free-speech arguments and regulated strictly is because it is a record of child abuse. To make child pornography, one needs to have a child in front of a camera. When the child is involved in sex, a crime has been committed, which is punishable by law. To produce child pornography, one must commit a crime, so the law bans it. What makes child pornography distinct from obscenity law – meant to preserve standards of decency – and ordinances – for example, zoning, which is meant to ensure that young people are not exposed to media that perverts their healthy sexual and social development – is “abuse” (*gyakutaisei*). Put simply, child pornography law is meant to prevent the sexual abuse of children. What then of so-called “virtual child pornography,” which a game such as *I Love, Love, Love You!!* might be categorized as? There is no child in front of a camera, and it is not a record of abuse, but there are still reasons to regulate it. These reasons are: one, it might be used in the seduction of children; two, it might trigger a pedophile or predator to abuse children; and three, it might be realistic enough to pass for child pornography, which then would undermine existing regulations. “I have questions about all three of those arguments, however,” Harata says. “Fundamentally, the questions are about whether or not the virtual form approaches the real and whether

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<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from a personal interview (April 26, 2015).

or not it leads to criminal activity.” The questions are empirical ones, which Harata argues have not been answered.<sup>22</sup>

As we walk around Akihabara, Harata brings the discussion to whether or not manga/anime should be treated as virtual child pornography. “It is clear that some manga, anime and games function like child pornography, but are they the same thing, as laws in some countries suggest?” Harata asks.<sup>23</sup> Manga/anime is characterized by what Harata calls “virtuality” in the sense that it functions as reality although it is not reality, but is this the same as the virtual in “virtual child pornography?” As Harata sees it, much of the concern in Western countries is with what he calls “real virtual child pornography,” which seeks to recreate sex with real children and can be mistaken for the real thing. This is not, however, the case with manga/anime, which is characterized by a distinctly cartoony or two-dimensional aesthetic. “To the extent that real virtual child pornography confuses the border between real and virtual, it is certainly legally problematic,” Harata explains. “However, it is questionable whether or not the anime-style images that developed in Japan pose the same problems.” Manga/anime characters are not meant to “reproduce” (*saigen*) reality or be a “substitute” (*daitaibutsu*) for it, but rather, Harata argues, exist as “characters in a completely separate dimension from realistic human images.”<sup>24</sup> Like many others before him, in Akihabara, Harata demonstrates his point by holding up a *bishōjo* game and asking me if the image on its cover looks “realistic” (*riaru*). No, I reply, as I have been trained to do in the field. Harata

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<sup>22</sup> For his part, Harata draws on the writings of Saitō Tamaki, a practicing psychiatrist who has worked with so-called “otaku,” who he defines as people sexually attracted to fictional characters (Saitō 2007; Saitō [2000] 2011). Based on his personal and professional experience, Saitō argues that otaku are aware of the distinction between fiction and reality, are attracted to fiction as such and, despite their perverse sex lives in fictional worlds, are sexually “normal” in the real world. Harata takes from this the idea of “virtual sexuality” (*vācharu sekushuariti*), for example “lolicon,” who are not pedophiles, but rather attracted to cute girl characters in manga, anime and games.

<sup>23</sup> In his written work, Harata is clear that at least some manga, anime and games are a form of virtual child pornography and it is “difficult” (*kon’nan*) to argue otherwise (Harata 2006: 113).

<sup>24</sup> The Japanese is “*genjitsu no ningenzō towa mattaku betsuji gen no kyarakutā*.” Recall the discussion of dimensions and the two-dimensional in Chapter 2.

nods in agreement. “It isn’t that these companies don’t have the technology and skills to produce realistic images,” he says, putting the game back in a pile of hundreds like it. “They produced it like this on purpose, because people are going out of their way to seek these anime-style images as opposed to something else.” However, as his concept of virtuality suggests, Harata is not naïve about the distinction between fiction and reality. He does not treat the virtual as “simple fiction that is severed from reality.”<sup>25</sup> Rather, manga / anime generally and *bishōjo* game specifically are superficially without “reality” (*riaru-sei*), but at the same time have their own “strange reality” (*kimyō na riariti*).<sup>26</sup> Recognition of this strange reality is what is missing from the law, which it confounds.<sup>27</sup>

As we continue walking around Akihabara, a place so associated with this strange reality, Harata turns his attention to *moe*. This is, after all, the *Moe City* (Chapter 3). As Harata uses the term, *moe* refers to “otaku sexuality,” which he understands as an orientation toward fiction. “If *moe* absolutely doesn’t connect to the reality of child abuse, then many of the legal concerns about ‘virtual child pornography’ do not apply,” Harata argues. “But we cannot say that there is absolutely no connection, which is the tension.” From his studies – and, it should be added, his own experience as a manga / anime fan – Harata has come to the position that, with respect to virtual child

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, Harata calls approaches that call manga, anime and games “two-dimensional,” distinct from reality and “safe” (*anzen*) terribly “simplistic” (*tanraku*) (Harata 2006: 114). For Harata, these positions are themselves political stances against the simplistic approach to otaku as a “reserve army of sex criminals,” who are dangerous and must be monitored. The challenge is to go beyond the simple position against a simple position to the nuanced reality of lived experience.

<sup>26</sup> For Harata, manga, anime and games in Japan are characterized by a “dual nature:” On the one hand, obviously “non-reality” (*hi-genjitsu*), and on the other hand, “nothing other than reality” (*genjitsu sono mono*) (Harata 2012: 3). The unrealistic and deformed body of the character appears in pornography that functions as real in the sense that it really excites bodies.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Harata points out that the more seriously and objectively one attempts to apply the law to the discussion of virtuality, for example whether or not a fictional character is old enough to legally consent, the more that the law itself confuses and conflates reality and fiction (Harata 2011: 133). This is a fundamental problem with regulating the virtual. However, a strong sense of outrage at the immorality of simulated underage sex inspires activism for increased regulation (Harata 2012: 7-8; see also Kagami 2010: 265-267; Laycock 2015: 216-217).

pornography, the focus should not be on whether or not the child exists, but rather on the people who see the image and respond to it.<sup>28</sup> (For a comparative anthropological example of virtual intimacies, children and danger, see McGlotten 2013.<sup>29</sup>) What Harata refers to as the “otaku crucible” (*otaku no jūjika*) is the risk of “the realization of virtual sexuality” (*vācharu sekushuariti no genjitsu-ka*).<sup>30</sup> This is the ambivalence of otaku sexuality, or what Harata calls the “performative ambivalence of *moe*” (*moe no pafōmatibu na anbiwarensu*). Hearing this, I recall my earlier encounters with *bishōjo* game producers and players such as Kōta, who insisted on the difference between the “virtual girls” that he uses and abused and real girls and women that might be used and abused. I recall *bishōjo* game producers and players at Eroge Briefing reacting to Fukumimi crossing the line and confusing and conflating fiction and reality, which endangered children. Such examples seem to speak to what Harata describes as the performative ambivalence of *moe*, an affective response to fictional characters. The ambivalence of the response comes from not knowing if these fictional characters are connected to reality, how and to what effect. However, as Harata sees it, the law should not attempt to resolve this ambivalence by deciding what is real – for example, that *I Love, Love, Love You!!* should be banned as child pornography and that there is no distinction between virtual and actual forms. Not only can the law not deal with the strange reality of manga/anime, but it also cannot deal with human beings living and interacting sexually with that

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<sup>28</sup> Harata suggests scholars observe otaku and see if their ethics (*rinri-sei*) encourage them to sever fiction from reality in action and practice (Harata 2012: 9). As I see it, we must not only observe otaku, but also live and struggle with them to understand and negotiate lines.

<sup>29</sup> While there is much to celebrate in his work, I find somewhat problematic anthropologist Shaka McGlotten’s discussion of the men featured on *To Catch a Predator*, who intend to meet children they have encountered online (McGlotten 2013: 37-38). These are not merely “creepy online fantasists” (McGlotten 2013: 38), but men who wanted to interact with real children, thought that they were doing so and sought to meet them in real life. If *bishōjo* game players are on the side of fiction, then these men are on the side of reality. The distinction is an important one that we must not lose sight of. Although inspired to his approach to virtual intimacies as that which “might be actualized, or not” (McGlotten 2013: 136), missing here are ethics that discourage actualization that can really harm others.

<sup>30</sup> Harata also refers to this as “realization crisis” (*genjitsu-ka kiki*) and “latent risk” (*senzai-teki kiken-sei*) (Harata 2012: 6).

strange reality, which is ambivalent. (For a comparative anthropological example of the limits of law around issues of sex, see Kulick and Rydström 2015.<sup>31</sup>)

If men such as Sasakibara Gō (Chapters 2 and 4) ask how *bishōjo* game players live without becoming criminals, then Harata asks how to live without laws that make us criminals by collapsing virtual and actual forms together and translating fiction into reality. In this context, Harata highlights the ethics of *moe*. “You could also call it the responsibility of otaku,” he explains. “Does otaku sexuality, virtual sexuality, lead to child abuse?” Rather than accepting that otaku are not a danger because they are a “special type of person” (*tokushu na jinshu*) that can always distinguish fiction from reality, Harata recognizes danger, which manga / anime fans ethically must face rather than deny. Responding to fictional characters raises questions about relationships with reality and potential harm. In lolicon, for example, or in an affective response to loli characters, there are questions of whether a child might be the object and whether a child might be harmed. “The ethics of *moe* means not realizing virtual desires and stopping them at the virtual dimension,” Harata argues. “When it is difficult to make hard distinctions between the virtual and real, people struggle to make the distinction. That is the ethics of *moe*.” Making the distinction, or struggling to do so, is the ethical action and everyday practice of manga / anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game producers and players specifically. The ethical manga / anime fan draws and insists on lines so that fiction and reality are separate and distinct and not confused or conflated.

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<sup>31</sup> While the law deals with rights, and right and wrong, it has trouble with an expanded sense of justice as defined by anthropologists Don Kulick and Jens Rydström (2015). For them, “a just society will be one that both protects its citizens from abuse *and* provides possibilities and opportunities for individuals to develop their sexuality together with others” (Kulick and Rydström 2015: 287). Beyond rights in a narrow sense – “Is sex a right?” – this approach considers how protection and provision work to acknowledge and facilitate, rather than just deny and prevent, the capacity for intimacy and sexual satisfaction. Part of this would be, I argue, understanding and supporting emergent forms of media literacy and ethic that decrease the possibility of harm and increase the possibility of developing sexuality with others. To make illegal the imaginary sex in and around *bishōjo* games would be, for Kulick and Rydström, unjust. Indeed, I encountered a *bishōjo* game player who was also a lawyer, who argued for constitutional protection of imaginary sex as part of “the pursuit of happiness” (*kōfuku tsuikyū*).

The ethical manga/anime fan interacts and responds to fiction as such, which is real on its own terms. The distinction between virtual and actual, fictional and real, is not absolute or assured. That is why lines are drawn and insisted on. This is a struggle to live with a strange reality that is ultimately ambivalent. This is a lived struggle of ordinary ethics in action and everyday practice, where outcomes are uncertain (Lambek 2010a,b; Lambek 2015a,b).<sup>32</sup> Interacting with others, anthropologist Michael Lambek argues, contributes to the emergence of ethics in action and everyday practice. (For more on the development of media literacy and ethics, see Chapter 3.<sup>33</sup>)

As a legal scholar, Harata's position is in stark contrast to colleagues calling for increased regulation. In what still stands as one of the strongest calls for increased regulation, feminist and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon argues that pornography is "the sexually explicit subordination of women graphically depicted" (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988: 101; refer to 99-105 for the full language of MacKinnon's proposed ordinance). This definition is capacious enough that comics, cartoons and computer/console games might be included as graphic depictions. In fact, MacKinnon's language suggests this. For MacKinnon, "pornography is a two-dimensional sex act" (Cornell 1995: 101). "The women are in two-dimensions, but the men have sex with them in their own three-dimensional bodies, not in their minds alone. Men come doing this. This, too, is a behavior, not a thought or argument. [...] Sooner or later, in one way or

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<sup>32</sup> Lambek argues that ethics is not an object to be located, but rather "is intrinsic to action and practice" (Lambek 2015b: 128). The question is less what ethics is than the when and how of ethical action. For Lambek, "ethics emerges at multiple scales of performance" (Lambek 2015b: 131). Resonating with the ethics of *moe* as a response and "performative ambivalence," Lambek writes, "It is precisely because practice is not mechanical, automatic, or fully determined that we have ethics. We must continuously exercise our judgement with respect to what we do or say. The criteria by which we do so are made relevant, brought into play, by means of performative acts" (Lambek 2015b: 129). Performative acts are marked by contingency and precariousness, because "the outcome is always at stake" (Lambek 2015b: 130).

<sup>33</sup> Harata builds on Saitō's argument that there is nothing natural about being attracted to fictional characters, which means that one "must be trained" (*kunren ga hitsuyō*) (Harata 2006: 115). I heard similar arguments from Saitō and Honda Tōru in personal interviews (February 26, 2010 and September 26, 2009, respectively).

another, the consumers want to live out the pornography further in three dimensions” (MacKinnon 1993: 17, 19). Here MacKinnon argues for a causal relation between the consumption of pornography as two-dimensional sex and action in the world as three-dimensional sex, which is why it must be regulated.<sup>34</sup> Fundamentally, Harata disagrees, arguing that manga/anime fans in Japan make a distinction between “two-dimensional” and “three-dimensional” and orient themselves toward the former (see Chapter 2). Further, Harata notes that the two-dimensional image has its own reality, a strange reality, which is not accounted for in the position of legal scholars who would collapse the two- and three-dimensional together in ways that manga/anime fans would themselves reject.<sup>35</sup> Among those sharing an affective response to fictional characters, Harata highlights an ethics of *moe*, which is drawing a line between the two- and three-dimensional and keeping them separate and distinct. The line is not always clear and clean, which is precisely why the ethics of *moe* is necessary in the action and everyday practice of insisting on lines.

When the pornography in question is “virtual child pornography,” many of MacKinnon’s arguments return in renewed calls for regulation (for example, Oswell

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<sup>34</sup> As feminist and legal scholar Drucilla Cornell glosses it, MacKinnon makes “an argument of ‘addiction,’ premised on her understanding of the viewing of pornography as two-dimensional sex. The man who has two-dimensional sex will want more. He will want to enact the scene on a real woman. A fantasy object will no longer be enough for him. [...] For MacKinnon, then, there is an inevitable causal connection between the consumption of pornography and the way in which men will be incited to act in the real world” (Cornell 1995: 123-124). Pornography thus is a clear and present danger to girls and women and must be regulated. Whether or not “otaku” will “turn two-dimensional sex into three-dimensional sex” (Cornell 1995: 124) is the question.

<sup>35</sup> Personally, I find MacKinnon to be wildly imaginative and creative, which takes her reader in unexpected directions. For example, MacKinnon writes that, “Pornography is masturbation material. It is used as sex. It therefore is sex” (MacKinnon 1993: 17). In three short, staccato sentences, MacKinnon makes pornography itself into sex, which suggests that sex with images is real sex. This is as perverse as it is provocative, and MacKinnon comes to sound like a manga/anime fan (Lamarre 2006: 375-380). “Two-dimensional sex” is a turn of phrase that MacKinnon and “otaku” share, and both agree that it is real. In this way, MacKinnon unintentionally opens up “different dimensions” of what is commonly thought of as “sex” (Shigematsu 1999: 128). Much as literary theorist Leo Bersani returned to MacKinnon to develop a theory of sex as subject-shattering (Bersani 1987: 213-218), one finds in her writing suggestions of a radical theory of sex with images and its reality.

2006).<sup>36</sup> If the solution for many of his colleagues is to expand the scope of the law to regulate both virtual and actual forms, Harata wonders if law can sufficiently deal with forms of “virtuality” such as manga and anime, which are characterized by a strange reality. Again, Harata does not make a simple distinction between fiction and reality, and he acknowledges the risk that virtual sexuality might be actualized. Looking at *bishōjo* games in Akihabara, Harata does not deny that some of the content has the “character and function” (*seikaku kinō*) of child pornography, but rather than demanding an expansion of the law he draws attention to the ethics of *moe* in action and everyday practice. His is not a simple resistance to virtual regulation, but rather recognition of the limits of the law (compare to Cornell 1995: 27, 99, 235), as well as recognition of already existing ethics among manga / anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game producers and players specifically.<sup>37</sup> If the law lacks nuance, then critics would do well to recognize that nuance exists in action and everyday practice. If the question is, as Harata puts it, whether or not it is possible to legally “draw a line” (*kyōkaisen wo hiku*) between fiction and reality, then my encounters in the field show how people are already drawing lines of their own. Rather than relying on “juridical resolutions of meaning” and “limiting or denying ambiguity” (Coombe 1998: 45), there is an ethics to living with unresolved meaning and ambiguity.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to virtual regulation and the expansion of law, I observed in Akihabara an ethics of affect, where *bishōjo* game producers and players engaged in the action and everyday practice of drawing lines in relation to fictional and real others.

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<sup>36</sup> Legal scholar David Oswell states that, “The ethical intensity of the virtual image lies precisely in its capacity to refer to a scene beyond itself” (Oswell 2006: 258), which has been interpreted as a reference to scene of real crimes against children. See:

<[http://www.ecpat.net/sites/default/files/Thematic\\_Paper\\_ICTPsy\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ecpat.net/sites/default/files/Thematic_Paper_ICTPsy_ENG.pdf)>.

<sup>37</sup> Harata refers to this as “diverse ‘law’” (*tayō na hō*) (Harata 2012: 8).

<sup>38</sup> For more on how laws meant to protect children shut down the complexities and potentials of virtual intimacies, see McGlotten 2013, chapter four.

## 5.5 Conclusion

If at times in this dissertation I have seemed to make a simplistic and naïve distinction between fiction and reality, this chapter has shown how people struggle with that distinction in practice. Even as manga/ anime fans and *bishōjo* game players insist that cute girl characters are fictional, they are also real. Anthropologist Ian Condry argues that fictional characters are “real” when they are part of social interactions and impact social activity (Condry 2013: 71, 200-201).<sup>39</sup> Anthropologist Anne Allison similarly describes how virtual others in media and material form are a real part of contemporary Japanese society (Allison 2006: 180-191). I agree, but am nevertheless faced in the field with men who insist on drawing a line between “fictional characters” and “real girls and women.” The distinction is not without significance. These men grew up with manga/ anime and are drawn to manga/ anime characters, which they interact and respond to as both fictional and real. Oriented toward fiction as such, manga/ anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game players specifically draw and insist on lines that make their objects of affection separate and distinct from what they call “the three-dimensional” and is typically considered “reality.” Despite this, the line between fiction and reality is not always clear, which I argue is precisely why they insist on it, especially when others would be harmed if the fiction were reality. This is the ethics of *moe* for those interacting with and responding to fictional characters. In the field, I observed the ethics of *moe* in everyday social interactions with *bishōjo* game producers and players (for example, Kōta), spaces that bring fiction and reality together and cater to such men (for example, maid cafés) and special events for them (for example, Eroge Briefing). In the next chapter, I offer an ethnographic account of *bishōjo* game raves, which are affectively

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<sup>39</sup> For his part, Condry goes as far as writing, “To say this is somehow separate from the ‘3D world’ makes no sense” (Condry 2013: 201).

charged spaces where bodies – virtual and actual, media and material, male and female – come together and move one another. The events demonstrate not only the ethics of *moe*, but also how sharing an affective response to fictional characters can be life sustaining.

## 6. *Hajikon*: Bodily Encounters and Dangerous Games

On Children's Day, a national holiday in Japan, I am lost in a seedy part of Kawasaki, an industrial suburb of Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> It is almost 11:00 pm on a Monday night, far too cold for May and quiet for a Japanese city. I scan my surroundings. On both sides of the long street are buildings and brightly lit signs featuring coquettish women beckoning. This is one of those not-so-secret areas where men go to buy sex, but it is almost deserted, more than likely because the target clientele did not go to work today and instead stayed home with family. "This can't be right," I say to myself, a little too loudly, while pouring over a map on my smartphone. The display of desperation has drawn the attention of a Japanese man in a suit. "What are you looking for? I think my place has something for you." He gestures toward one of the buildings. "Pretty girls, I promise. Japanese girls." He thinks that I am a sex tourist. Flustered as he moves closer, I raise my phone like a talisman to ward him off and gush, "No, I've already got a place! I'm looking for this club. Have you heard of it? It's a place for *bishōjo* game players, you know, otaku." Trying to be helpful, the man takes the phone that he thinks I offered. The glow of the screen shines on the bemused man's face as he holds the phone close to look at the website, advertised with a cute girl character. "You're one of those, huh? Wait a second." He waves and another man appears from the dark. After consulting the map, the two point me in the direction of a building a few doors down. It houses establishments not so different from the one the man on the street tried to introduce me to, but inside I finally spot the sign for Club Moonlight Dream Terrace and take a worn-out elevator to the fourth floor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The date in question was May 5, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See: <<http://tsukiyume.com/>>.

Joining a line of Japanese men wearing shirts decorated with images of *bishōjo* characters, I am greeted at the door. “Welcome to Adults’ Day (*otona no hi*)! Did you pre-register? Do you have your wife goods?” Yes to the first, no to the second. “OK, 2,000 yen.” Still unsure what “wife goods” (*yome guzzu*) means, I pay the money and stand in front of a heavy padded door. When it opens, I am hit with a wall of sound: high-pitched female voices sing up-tempo songs remixed with a driving beat and thumping bass. Low mood lighting, a disco ball and a large screen at the front next to the DJ booth illuminate the space. The screen plays video clips of the slightly animated opening sequences of *bishōjo* games. In these clips, the characters are often shown in various states of undress and engaged in various sex acts, which are sometimes violent – gang rape on a train, for example – and often perverse – incest seems a common theme. The accompanying music is remixed songs from *bishōjo* games. Hanging on the black painted walls of the club are promotional posters for new and upcoming releases. I recognize some of the characters from the screen and the shirts that men are wearing, as well as the character goods that they produce from their bags and show one another. A group is inflating body pillows, over which they slip covers representing these cute girl characters; on the front side of covers, characters, depicted in full body poses lying on a bed, are dressed, while on the back they are disheveled, breasts and genitals exposed. The characters are flushed, as if aroused and about to have sex, and some appear quite young. Over the course of an all-night rave, about 70 men boisterously dance and sing, drink copious amounts of alcohol and throw themselves on the floor in response to the songs the DJ plays and the images on screen. Hot from the activity, they strip down to their underwear, kiss their body pillows and declare their love for *bishōjo* characters, who they call their “wives” (*ore no yome* or *mai waifu*). The material objects that they bring and share and interact with are their “wife goods.” In the club, there are a few

women, who talk with the men and laugh at their antics. When the event ends at 5:30 in the morning, I make my way to Kawasaki Station to catch the first train home. After hours of being bombarded with imaginary sex and violence, it feels strange to be walking on this street where people come to buy sex. Club Moonlight Dream Terrace seems a world away.

This chapter examines a series of *bishōjo* game raves held at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace in Kawasaki, Japan, between April 2014 and August 2015. The primary focus is *Hajimete no kekkon* (My First Marriage), or *Hajikon* for short.<sup>3</sup> First held on June 29, 2012, *Hajikon* has a relatively long history of bringing together *bishōjo* game players, who perform as both DJs remixing *bishōjo* game music and dancers responding to it. *Hajikon* is not an industry event, but rather one run by and for *bishōjo* game players. Despite remixing official music and video clips, questions of rights and royalties are not raised. For their part, *bishōjo* game production companies are aware of *Hajikon* and other events like it, which they appreciate for generating buzz about games and see as a form of customer care.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, the events draw some of the most dedicated *bishōjo* game players, whose affective attachments are affirmed and shared, which is thought to contribute to *bishōjo* game sales.<sup>5</sup> Rather than focus on its relationship to the industry, however, this chapter examines *Hajikon* from the perspective of participants, who are dedicated *bishōjo* game players and mostly men. The chapter focuses on how these players interact with fictional and real others – *bishōjo* characters and people, both male and female – at *Hajikon* and raves like it. If dangerous games are, as religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock (2015: 212-215) describes them, characterized by the possibility that play in imaginary worlds might impact “reality,” then *bishōjo* game raves

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<sup>3</sup> See: <<http://hajikon.binarypot.info/>>.

<sup>4</sup> This comment was made by an event organizer on the morning of May 6, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The logic here is not unlike that of the Comic Market and the manga industry’s unspoken agreement with fanzine publishers (Pink 2007).

qualify. These raves might seem to put women in danger, in that men are responding bodily to images of sex and violence. Some of these men are drunk, while others behave as if they are, smashed by the affect of moving images and bodies in motion.

During my fieldwork at *Hajikon*, despite observing startling performances of imaginary sex and violence, I found that most participants are not particularly concerned about fictional and real bodies in relation. There is no danger, I was told, because participants know how to draw lines. The participants are *bishōjo* game players, and they come to *Hajikon* because of their affection for *bishōjo* characters, which they share with others at raves. In their orientation toward cute girl characters, I was told that participants keep fiction and reality separate, even as fiction and reality are side by side. The separation is not as clear and commonsense as participants often make it sound. During *Hajikon* and similar raves, Club Moonlight Dream Terrace is affectively charged by the co-presence of bodies (Lamerichs 2014: 270-272), and lines blurs. Interactions with cute girl characters oscillate between care and cruelty, which is familiar from *bishōjo* games (Chapter 4), but these interactions occur with others in the club in what participants call “real time” (*riaru taimu*). Further, cute girl characters take on both media and material forms, which allows for interactions with fictional others as bodies that move in a shared physical space. Finally, the imaginary sex at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace is literally next door to establishments selling sex. Media theorist Thomas Lamarre argues that manga/ anime images of girls and women do “not necessarily present a radical break from received sociosexual formations (the homosocial workplace, normative heterosexuality, and the sex industry, for instance)” (Lamarre 2006: 376). For Lamarre, this raises questions: “Is there any reason to suppose that the interest in mastering images of women does not encourage violence toward real women – or that it does not encourage patronage of a sex industry that truly exploits women? Is there any

reason to suppose that the image does not connect at all to actual social practices?” (Lamarre 2006: 381-382). The image does connect to actual social practices, and this chapter seeks to show how. Rather than accept that fiction and reality are unrelated, *Hajikon* challenges us to think how *bishōjo* game players relate them in practice. This returns us to the ethics of *moe*, or an ethics of affective response to fictional characters, and the performative ambivalence of *moe* (Chapter 5). Even if the games are dangerous, playing and sharing them is part of living ethically with desires and others (Warner 2000: 35; Sasakibara 2003: 101; Chapters 3 and 4). Sharing movement in response to fictional characters, I argue, can also be life sustaining for men struggling with precarity and failure in contemporary Japan.

The methodology of my fieldwork at *bishōjo* game raves differs somewhat from that of the fieldwork reported in previous chapters. Getting people to talk about and reflect on what was happening seemed inadequate to the experience of *Hajikon* and similar events. In attempting to convey the affect of bodily encounters with fictional and real others, I am inspired by the work of media and communication scholars Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, who developed a method to address the limitations of asking viewers to be reflexive about the content they were watching (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 122, 125-127).<sup>6</sup> Instead, Skeggs and Wood watched moving images with people and observed how they affected the body and moved it to response – even grunts and twitches that might be lost to traditional methodology or more broadly deemed “meaningless.” Such a methodology requires placing one’s own body with others in front of moving images to be affected by them. Blurring distinctions between subject and

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<sup>6</sup> In a separate work, Wood describes her method as a way to address “the experiential and phenomenological *act* of watching television” (Wood 2009: 106). For Wood, texts are too often treated as “two-dimensional,” and social interaction with texts adds “a *third* dimension” (Wood 2009: 106). One of my aims for this chapter is to address the missing third dimension of *bishōjo* games, which are rhetorically and emphatically described as “two-dimensional” (*nijigen*).

object, self and other, inside and outside, anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin argues that an interest in affect requires “affective attunement” and “openness” (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 20, 31; also Stewart 2007). This means being open to sharing what Skeggs and Wood call “affective responses” (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 126), which resonates with *moe* as an affective response to fictional characters.<sup>7</sup> In the field, moving with others – responding, bodily, with them in laughter, tears and screams – often means blurring the lines between self and other in shared affective response. This requires being open to the movement of others, open to affect, which is at times unsettling, perhaps even dangerous. But openness to these bodily encounters, participation in these dangerous games of shared movement, is part of an ethics of engagement in the field (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 14; also Biehl and Eskerod 2007; Biehl and Locke 2010; Garcia 2010; Stevenson 2014; Kulick and Rydström 2015).<sup>8</sup> It is to those encounters that I now turn.

### **6.1 Adults’ Day at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace**

Walking through the heavy padded door into Club Moonlight Dream Terrace, it takes a moment to adjust to the low lighting, flashes of images moving onscreen and the waves of sound, which are overwhelming in their intensity. The initial blast is painful, bodily.<sup>9</sup> The sound gets into you. The thumping bass is a punch to the gut from the inside. The impossibly high-pitched female voices drill into the skull and send electric shocks through the brain. Circuits are overloaded and fried. Forget the ears – I cannot hear a thing. I feel it. Stumbling over the bodies of young men seated on the floor and changing into shirts emblazoned with oversized *bishōjo* character faces, I instinctively

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<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, Skeggs and Wood refer to “affective noises” such as tuts, gasps and sighs, which speak to “a powerful nonverbal response” (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 127).

<sup>8</sup> I am inspired by the work of anthropologist Philippe Bourgois and photographer Jeff Schonberg, who, facing everyday violence in the field, argue for “ethical reflections and solidary engagement” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 14). My decision to take and work with photographs in this chapter is in part following their example. However, while photographs taken at the event can be provided to give faces to the men and their fictional and real others, these images are still rather than moving.

<sup>9</sup> The initial experience is not unlike a noise event (Novak 2013, chapter one).

move away from the source of the sound, which is coming from speakers set up next to the DJ booth. In the direction I am heading there is a bar; people are gathering to order drinks, smoke and, in the relative quiet, talk. Ordering a beer, I see DJ Jun and DJ Fujikawa. They are both dedicated *bishōjo* game players who often attend events in Akihabara (for example, Erogē Sixteen; see Chapters 3 and 5), where we run into one another. We nod in mutual acknowledgement, share a few words about what games we are playing and our “wives” and move on. Not so with others grouped together, who are excited to see one another and ready to speak for hours on end. This is a reunion and time to catch up and share experiences playing *bishōjo* games specifically and life more generally. When DJ Jun greets someone, he claps the man heartily on the back and moves in close to be heard.

There are other ways to share experiences playing *bishōjo* games, which are occurring toward the screen, speakers and DJ booth. The DJ announces that he is going “dark,” and images of two *bishōjo* having sex appear on the screen. Men start jumping up and down. “Oi, oi, oi!” A man screams as he rushes by me to the front of the room. Standing before the DJ booth, he continues to shout at the man behind the turntables, who has triggered him with this choice of music. The DJ smiles and nods, knowingly. The confrontation tapers off as the man makes his way to the center of the floor, moving to the beat. Knees bent and bouncing rhythmically, he begins to clap his hands to the left, then the right. Bouncing and clapping, other men join him. The beat picks up during the chorus of the song. The clapping is faster now, percussive, and louder as the number of hands has increased. The first man shouts out a count, “Hai! Hai! Hai, hai, hai, hai!” Then everyone howls. “Ohhhhh! Ohhhhh! Ohhhhh!” With each vocalization, each of the men uses his whole body to point to the roof and then down to the floor. The first man leads them to the next set of moves, which are to shape the hands into paired “pistols”

and “shoot” up into the air twice left, once right, once left, twice right. I recognize these moves as modified “otagei,” or “the otaku art,” which is a form of group cheerleading performed at idol events. The moves are always basically the same and come at predictable moments in songs, which is why these men can perform together spontaneously without practice. But there does not appear to be an idol here. The men are oriented toward the images of *bishōjo* on the screen; they are hearing the songs associated with the games featuring these cute girl characters, and responding bodily in public as if to share how they had responded bodily in private while playing in their rooms. The men move, together, in shared response to *bishōjo* games, which is invigorating.

Announcing a change of mood to “light,” the DJ plays a song called “Candy Girl,” which I recognize from a game promoted at Charara!! in Akihabara a few months earlier (see Chapter 3).<sup>10</sup> While others watch and sing along, I make my way to the front of the room, join the assembled men and move with them. Dozens of shared performances at different events with different men have committed the moves to muscle memory. The heat of the bodies around me is pleasant, and the beer is warming me up from inside. Eyes on the dancing *bishōjo* on screen, I am for a moment lost. When the song ends, I break away and move to the wall, where a man has hung a giant image of a *bishōjo* character that is his wife. Others have similarly claimed small areas of the floor and walls and decorated them with representations of *bishōjo* characters. No sooner have I arrived at the wall and gotten out of the way than a new song begins and inspires a young man wearing a *bishōjo* shirt and drinking a soda to come rushing from the back of the room to the front, screaming. The scream is loud enough to cut through even the blasting music. It is the type of scream that one seldom hears, free and wild, shrill and

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<sup>10</sup> See: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnaZlw1czMs>>.

piercing, the scream of someone who is in ecstasy, pain and pleasure, outside of himself. The intensity of the young man's display draws chuckles and headshaking from others. "Mada hayai," one man says. It's still early. It is only 23:30, and we are going to be here all night.

Waves of bodies move front and center, bodies move in physically demanding ways and waves of bodies move to the sides and back to rest and rehydrate. It is somehow tidal. The smell of sweat, the pungent odor of bodies, begins to hang heavy in the air. More *bishōjo* game players have joined us in the small room, which is now full of fictional and real bodies, mostly men in their 20s and 30s and cute girl characters. Bodies move, seemingly out of control but at the same time completely in control. Around midnight, a man starts screaming at the top of his lungs for a full 20 seconds. Moved by the selection of a particular song and video from a *bishōjo* game that is somehow close to him, the man seems unable to stop. One is reminded that *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters, is sometimes described in terms of overloading the circuit board of the brain and causing the system to blow up.<sup>11</sup> To other men observing the scene, a friend of the screaming man playfully pleads, "Dareka, kono hito wo tomete kure!" Someone, please stop this man! Stop him! Laughs, suggesting that there is no stopping him or need or will to do so. The event is after all meant to encourage this kind of thing. The assembled men know well that scream, which they, too, have let out. The only chiding comes from a man who rushes over to the screamer to say, "Hayai, hayai! Mada hayai!" Wait, wait! It's still early! The night is young and more craziness will ensue. Best

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<sup>11</sup> I am thinking here of Azuma Hiroki, a philosopher who has done much to introduce *bishōjo* games into critical discussions in Japan. In early writing, Azuma describes *moe* as follows: "On exposure to certain characters, designs or character voices, the same picture, or voice, will start to circle around in their skull as if the connectors in their brain had been snapped, as if they were possessed. Not a few *otaku* talk about the experience in those terms" (quoted in Kinsella 2006: 75). This can be observed at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace in *moe* responses to the images and voices of characters as they flash on screen and pour into the space.

pace yourself. We will be ready to scream ourselves and share a scream later in the night.

A man begins to jump into the air. In time with the beat, he jumps again and again, higher and higher, almost touching the ceiling. Looking on, another man encourages him by waving his hand up. Up! Higher! More! The physical display and exertion of energy are a sight to behold. Burning up and covered in sweat, the jumping man stops and takes off his shirt. He is thin, but toned and muscular. The men surrounding him clap and cheer in appreciation of this physical specimen and his virtuoso performance. They appreciate the exposed male body and its powerful movements. More men strip off their shirts and join in. Muscles flex and relax as bodies stretch and contort. Sometimes the movements seem almost like calisthenics, other times as if the men are working, for example miming the action of digging a ditch. Men gravitate toward this center of frenetic activity and share bodily movements in response to not only the moving images of *bishōjo* on the screen and remixed music blasting from speakers, but also other *bishōjo* game players. At certain points in the rave, the men rush together toward the front, alternatively the screen with the *bishōjo* characters on it and the DJ booth. Kneeling down with hands outstretched, they are energized and gesturing as if to pass that energy to fictional and real others. They reach out to touch others, which they cannot or do not, reaching across a distance that is carefully maintained in the performance.

One song ends, blending into another, which draws a man from the wall to the front. He stands before the screen, back to it and facing the assembled men. In his hands, which are now raised above his head, is the large package of a *bishōjo* game, which contains his wife. The game he holds is the one seen in the clip playing on the screen, and images of the cute girl character – his wife – from the screen are also on the cover of

the game and in his hands. As the man's physical body stands before the imaginary body of the *bishōjo* onscreen, the material form is brought in front of the media form. His wife has stepped out of the screen and into the physical space and into his hands. Some of the assembled men watch him do this, while most continue dancing. He looks almost like Moses holding aloft the commandments, which are in this case, "See her! Worship her! See that she is real! See us and know that our relationship is real!" Satisfied, the man moves back to the wall and talks energetically with his friends about the game and character. A similar scene occurs when a man comes to the front to kneel before the screen, which towers over him. Worshipping the cute girl character and overwhelmed by her moving image, the man remains in this position, an island of silent homage and stillness against the raging waves of moving bodies, until the song ends. Others bring their wife goods to the front to not only show them and share them with others, but also to dance with them. This is most often done with body pillows emblazoned with full-body images of *bishōjo*, who are in various states of undress and flushed as if aroused. At one point, as many as six body pillows are dancing at the front alongside the men, which contributes to a surreal scene of fictional and real bodies moving together on the floor in front of the screen.

Men run to the front to interact with the DJ, other bodies on the floor and images on the screen. The DJ moves the bodies on the floor with his choice of music, even as the VJ moves them with his choice of videos. One set of choices triggers a response from one of the shirtless men at the front, who falls down. On his back, hands over his eyes, elbows and knees in the air, he has been bowled over. Another set of choices has a group of men kneeling formally, listening intently and learning from the DJ as a teacher who has taken them somewhere unexpected. Another has everyone shouting together, "Nande da yo?" Why? Why have you selected this song, which moves us so and triggers

so much? Why did these things happen in the game? Why did I do what I did? Why? Another set of choices turns the room into a karaoke bar, as the men sing *bishōjo* game songs together, especially calls and responses and choruses. Entire sections of songs and elaborate sequences of interactive participation have been memorized before coming to the event. The DJ is singing along, performing as if he were the female vocalist. His smile is as big as are the gaps where his missing teeth once were. He is radiant, his affect contagious. It is past 1:00 at night and alcohol is flowing. Some are sticking to beer, while others order shots. The DJ is also sent shots, whether it be for a perceived mistake in the program or a particularly skillful move. A bottle of champagne appears on the floor. It is handed over to the DJ, who takes a drink straight from it, and then back to a man who walks around the room passing the bottle. Even as I take a swig, I am surprised that it is being circulated among relative strangers, given that sharing a bottle – mouths touching the same surface – is perceived by some as intimate. Then again, so is undressing and changing clothes in front of others and sharing imaginary sex and responses to sexual images in public, which has already happened here tonight.

As the night goes on, around 3:00, men begin to burn out and black out. Some relocate to the second-floor lounge space, where there are tables and chairs and another DJ playing a much less powerfully moving set. A tender moment as a sleeping man rests his head on the shoulder of another man sleeping in the seat beside him. The other man opens his eyes, sees what has happened, but then closes them again. Did they know each another before tonight? Does it matter? On the floor below, men move to the walls and crash onto piles of body pillows representing *bishōjo* characters. Whose pillows are they? Whose wives? The intimacy is striking.<sup>12</sup> Friends and strangers alike sleep next to one another on shared pillows and floor space. Shirtless men snuggle together playfully,

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the dynamic of vulnerability and trust in the phenomenon of public sleeping, see anthropologist Lorraine Plourde's account of cat cafés (Plourde 2014: 124-125).

only to be pushed away just as playfully. Despite the continued movement of bodies on the screen and floor, the changing of DJs and the continuous stream of thumping bass and piercing vocals, the men sleep. Some wake and move back to the floor, replaced by other bodies in the sleep piles. This continues until the event ends at 5:30 in the morning and everyone changes clothes, packs up and prepares to go home. Blinding bright lights come on and the DJs and organizers address the assembled, blurry-eyed men. They tell them that the event was a blast and they cannot wait to do it again. The message is personal. The men are addressed as “comrades” (*dōshi*), brothers in arms in some sort of struggle the contours of which are unclear. But the struggle is felt. Exhausted from the physically demanding routines of the night, the men still find the energy to clap and cheer. Smiles and laughter. It was indeed a good time. Walking out the door, I wonder when the next one will be, only to be met by men passing out fliers for upcoming events.

## **6.2 From Kawasaki to Akihabara: Fictional and Real Women**

Five aspects of Adults’ Day at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace stood out to me. First, the co-presence and shared movement of fictional and real bodies. Second, the affective charge in the space that was the result of these bodies in motion and interaction. Third, the physicality of the event, where male bodies moved and worked together, which led to stripping off shirts. Their semi-nudity mirrored that of cute girl characters on screens, posters, shirts and body pillow covers. Fourth, the intimacy of exposing not only one’s body, but also one’s imaginary sex life in public. This intimacy was reinforced by drinking from the same bottle, sleeping together and being referring to as comrades. Fifth, the gendering of the event, which overwhelmingly attracted men performing as men in relation to other men and fictional girls. This is not to say, however, that there were no women in the room. A handful of women in fact did participate in the all-night rave. Some were DJs and friends of DJs, while others

participated as *bishōjo* game players. For the most part, these women stayed close to the walls and back of the room and in the lounge area, where they talked with friends.

Another striking aspect of Adults' Day, perhaps the most striking of all, is that none of the men ever approached any of the women to dance together as one might imagine would happen overnight at a club. To be blunt, none of the men ever approached any of the women as a potential romantic partner. Posted signs on the walls of Club Moonlight Dream Terrace explicitly forbid "nampa," or hitting on and trying to pick up women. While women could and did join groups of dancers, the men were oriented toward cute girl characters – including their "wives," who they accompanied to the rave – and danced with them in media and material form. Women were also oriented toward cute girl characters and moved in response to them. When at the front, where the screen and speakers were closest and the movement most intense, women were oriented toward the screen and DJ booth like the men beside them. The men and women did not face one another, but rather were shoulder-to-shoulder oriented in the same direction. Although some wore costumes of *bishōjo* characters, women participating in Adults' Day were not the objects of affection. Surrounded by *bishōjo* characters, and even dressed as them, women were nevertheless not confused or conflated with cute girl characters, which were the objects of affection and separate and distinct from "real girls and women." When I asked one of the women about this, she explained that she is attracted to events such as Adults' Day precisely because men do not try to hit on or pick women up. A *bishōjo* game player herself, she could participate in the event without worrying about advances from men. For her, this made the event, despite the presence of imaginary sex and violence and performances by men that seemed out of control, feel "comfortable" (*kai-teki*) and "safe" (*anzen*). When participants started to fall asleep together, the women did the same – at tables in the lounge, not in

piles of pillows on the floor. This was not, I was told, risky, because the men were at the rave for their characters and were not creeps.

Months later, I make my way down Chūō Street in Akihabara to Toranoana C, a location of the store that sells *bishōjo* games. It is Sunday, February 15, the day after Valentine's Day, which I spent with a group of *bishōjo* game players. Single but not alone, these men attended an idol concert, ate dinner together and stayed up past midnight singing karaoke. Given these men's affinity for fiction, I was less surprised than I might have been when the idol they went to see performed herself as a character – literally, produced a second personality coded with stereotypical idol attributes and performed as it. In honor of Valentine's Day, the idol also screened a clip that she produced of a virtual date with this other idol character, which followed the *bishōjo* game dynamic of first-person perspective and situated choices. After talking about the idol and *bishōjo* games and singing until our throats were raw, I passed out and slept through Sunday morning. It is past noon when I enter Toranoana C, but there is still some time before *Bishōjo* Game Music Party Vol. 5 begins in an event space above the store.<sup>13</sup> When I find my way up the stairs to the venue at 13:00, I am greeted by a very fat Japanese man wearing the very sexy costume of a cute girl character from a *bishōjo* game. Perhaps this is special service for lonely gamers? The ones interacting with him sure seem to be smiling. When I produce a high-denomination bill to pay the entrance fee, the man does not have the change he needs and produces a high-pitched character voice to plead for help. Wallets come out and money changes hands, but no ledgers are kept, suggesting that they are all somehow related to the event or friends who know and trust one another. Inside what appears to be a converted office space, the layout is simple: a screen for projecting clips from *bishōjo* game, a computer for playing *bishōjo* game music

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<sup>13</sup> See: <<http://twipla.jp/events/123291>>.

and space on the carpeted floor for *bishōjo* game players to dance. Folding chairs are lined up along the walls, and men are selling cans of beer from coolers and grilling meat on a hot plate at a folding table set up against the back wall. The event feels not unlike a lazy Sunday barbeque with friends, or a temporary café set up in a classroom as part of a school festival.

Most everyone here is a friend or a friend of a friend invited through circles and social media, and I am no exception. My invitation came from Anri, a woman I know from Club Moonlight Dream Terrace. I have only ever seen her in plain clothes, but today she is wearing the costume of a cute girl character from a *bishōjo* game. Seeing me come through the door, Anri makes her way over to say hello and thank me for coming. The welcome extends to her introducing me around and helping to strike up conversations with people. The conversations invariably turn to *bishōjo* games, whether it be favorites from the past, new titles on display at Toranoana C below us or the games associated with the music we are hearing and images we are seeing on screen. A player herself, Anri knows a great deal about *bishōjo* games, and she makes the conversations easy and enjoyable. Later in the day, as I drink a can of grossly overpriced beer, Anri finds me and produces a small bag of chocolate, which she gives to me. Right, Valentine's Day. A day late, but still. This is probably something given to everyone who comes to the event, but I appreciate the gesture anyway. I make a note that I need to give Anri something in return a month from now on White Day. That would be a nice thing to do; the reciprocity of the gift; social connections and obligations, entanglements and expectations, in a world that is increasingly lonely. These men and women may be single, but they are not alone this Valentine's Day weekend. The DJ echoes the thought. Because it is Valentine's Day – a day late, but still – he announces that he has selected two songs for us. They are songs about love, songs from *bishōjo* games. As the songs

play, the characters express their love. Listening to the song and talking about the game and characters attached to it, the assembled men and women share the love on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

Rather than dancing, the men, women and men and women dressed as *bishōjo* characters sit on the floor eating, drinking and talking. Watching slightly animated opening sequences for *bishōjo* games, they sing along and laugh. At certain points in the afternoon, staff from Toranoana C come and talk to those assembled about new and upcoming *bishōjo* games. When they arrive, the music stops and everyone takes a seat on the floor and prepares to listen. A few lay all the way down on the floor in repose, contributing to the casual and relaxed vibe. Promotional clips are shown on the screen. One is for what is described as a “cumming game” (*nukigē*), and it is pretty hardcore sexual content. Images of nude *bishōjo* sucking blurred out male genitals, engaged in various sex acts and covered in semen flash by. I look over at Anri, wondering what she, in the statistical minority here, thinks. “Not my thing,” she says. “But who cares? It’s nothing to get upset about. People like it, and it doesn’t hurt me.” The promoter is asking whether or not players get off on *bishōjo* games. Embarrassed laughter, but more than a few shout out, “Yes!” Later in the afternoon, around 15:10, DJ Fujikawa shows up as a general participant. After he makes his way over to Anri and I, the three of us start talking. DJ Fujikawa is surprised that the bestselling game at Toranoana C this month is a title focused on hardcore sex scenes, which is not his thing and not the most popular kind of *bishōjo* game produced these days. Anri agrees, but, looking around the room, says that is part of it. Perhaps sex is not the first thing on everyone’s mind today – the love the DJ was sharing earlier was romantic – but the ranking reminds us that it is not far away. And Anri is not so far away from these *bishōjo* game players and the fictional girls that attract them. Many of them are her friends, and they are harmless, she says.

Sexist, perhaps, silly, sure, but harmless. Given that Anri regularly participates in raves at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace, which are far more aggressively masculine and sexual than *Bishōjo* Game Music Party Vol. 5, I am struck by how confident she seems in her assessment. My own experiences at *Hajikon* and similar raves often leave me confused.

### **6.3 Pillow Talk: Interactions with Bishōjo in Material Form**

On January 17, 2015, *Hajikon* is held during the day instead of overnight. There are significantly fewer people attending, but Anri, DJ Fujikawa and I are among them. Following from the theme of *Hajimete no kekkon* (My First Marriage), a discount is given to any *bishōjo* game player who comes escorting a “wife.” This can be any material representation of the character, but, at *Hajikon*, many wives come as body pillows. When I arrive, the lights are still up and reveal a dozen or so men using foot pumps to inflate body pillows. Once they have achieved this, they slip them into fabric covers, which are emblazoned with full-body images of cute girl characters from *bishōjo* games. The body pillows stand almost as tall as the men; the characters are “life size” (*tōshindai*), but are still drawn in ways that make them look small and vulnerable. Characters are depicted lying on their backs on a bed, which reflects the owner’s bed on top of which the body pillow would normally be placed. On one side, the character is fully dressed, while on the other side her clothes are partially or fully off and her breasts and genitals are exposed. (As exposed as possible, because obscenity law means a small strip of white or black is drawn over the vaginal slit.) Her mouth is open, her face is flushed and she is making bedroom eyes. Looking at the depicted arousal, the owner of the pillow lies in bed and imagines sex with the character. Body pillows are not often, if ever, used for sex – they have no place to insert the penis, and while one could conceivably rub against them, the pillows are soft and generating sufficient friction is difficult; depending on

rarity and desirability, the covers can be quite valuable and so are not used in ways that would damage them – but they are an intimate reminder of imaginary sex with characters. This imaginary sex occurs while playing the game in one's room, is captured in the image on the pillow in bed and comes out of that private space into public during *Hajikon*. Once inflated and covered, the body pillows are stood up together against the wall or placed in a pile. The owners then leave to buy drinks and/or mix and mingle before the event starts.

The event starts off slow, with only one to four men on the floor for the first few songs. Suddenly, triggered by the song selection, a man runs from the bar at the back to the front of the room shouting wildly. He runs back to the wall and grabs his pillow cover – he has not yet put it over a pillow – returns to the front, lies down on the floor and covers himself with it. A circle of men forms around the prone body covered by the *bishōjo* character. The men clap rhythmically and begin their performance. There are now five women in the room, all of whom Anri seems to know, but she is at the bar talking with a male friend who is also one of the DJs. Suddenly, in mid-sentence, he breaks off from Anri as if struck by some invisible object. Like the man before, this DJ suddenly runs to the front screaming like a madman. “Oi! Fuzaken janē zo! Kuso!” Hey! Don’t fuck with me! Shit! Other men are also moved by the music and images on screen, but rather than threats they respond with pleas. “Yamero! Yamete kure!” Stop! Please stop! However the images are moving them, they want it to stop, while of course meaning exactly the opposite, because they came to *Hajikon* to be moved. The running man confronts the DJ for playing this song, which he either loves or hates, but in any case moves him, violently. Behind a transparent, hard plastic barrier meant to shield the turntables from flying liquid, the DJ does not look at all intimidated. He just smiles and nods, knowingly. I look back at Anri, who is shaking her head and raising her hands in

the air as if to say, "There they go again!" Backing away from the DJ booth, the running man begins to move his body, or rather allow his body to move, almost as if some unseen forces are buffeting him. This is not dancing so much as being affected and animated by moving images. Seeming possessed, he jerks and twists around. Others have backed away to give him room. As the man settles, the men move closer and others join them. Together they jump and shout when music and images change and trigger them.

The men egg one another on, pointing to the screen and sharing observations. "Kawaii!" She's so cute! "Eroi!" So sexy! One man playfully pushes another and points at the screen saying, "Lolicon! Lolicon!" The image onscreen is of a Lolita character, and you like those, right? You're a lolicon, right? Pervert! The pushed man, as if activated, begins to jump in the air and scream. The pushing man joins him. Someone goes berserk when the music and images change. A friend implores: "Oi! Yamero! Yamerunda!" Hey! Stop! Stop it now! Despite protests and attempts to hold the man back, the berserker makes his way to the screen, literally dragging others along with him. They move together, violently. The music changes. "Yabai, yabai!" Shit, shit! When the DJ tries to speak, everyone shouts him down. "Sex!" He tries again. "Sex!" And again. "Sex!" As if relenting, he plays a remixed *bishōjo* game song that has the word "chinko," or cock, repeating over and over. A man who has been quiet for much of the afternoon suddenly snaps to attention and prepares to run to the front. His friend holds him back saying, "Yatto han'nō shite kureta!" You finally responded! The conjugation of the verb suggests that the man responding is doing something for his friend. Indeed, holding the responding man back is part of a shared performance of going out of control, which is why they are here. Another man stands up only to be humped from behind by his friend. As if responding to a horny dog, the man turns and asks, "Nani, o-nī-san?" What

can I do for you, mister? The sexual assault is playful, never crossing the line to “real,” even as it involves real bodies that are co-present and interacting in real time.

Body pillows are increasingly brought into social interactions. Men are taking photographs of the collection of body pillows at the back of the room. A man runs to the front with his pillow cover – again, empty – and stands in front of the screen as it plays a video featuring the same cute girl character that is on his cover, which he waves like a flag. He then slips the pillow cover over his head so that he is inside and dances wildly as the character, who seems to have stepped out of the screen and onto the floor.

Another man takes the cover off his pillow and puts it over his head, walking around the room blindly. The men respond to the character, which seems to be moving around the space on its own. Some dance with her, which is also dancing with the man inside of the pillow. Body pillows – covers over actual pillows this time – are brought into the mix. One man stands his pillow up, crouches behind it and puts his arms around it on either side so that the character can use his hands to clap, beckon other men to the floor and shake their hands. The man then turns his pillow around and kisses the character passionately on the lips. When he turns the pillow back around, another man who is already there kisses the character. The two men get into a mock fight over the *bishōjo* character as a shared object. Pillows and men crouching behind them with arms jutting out at their sides dance together; men move pillows and are in turn moved by them.

Play sex and violence continues. Responding to a *bishōjo* game song and images onscreen, a man brings his body pillow to the center of the floor and drops it flat. The character on the pillow is the same as the one on the screen, which means that she is one of the characters that this player interacted with in the game. No doubt his favorite, given that he purchased a body pillow representing her and escorted this character here as his wife. The nude side of the pillow is facing up. The man drops to the floor on top of

the pillow, face-to-face with the character, and starts humping vigorously. A circle of men forms around him, laughing and taking photographs. This is not penetrative sex and no one is getting off, but it is imaginary sex in public nonetheless. The performance is troubling. On the one hand, the scene looks suspiciously like men bonding as they gang up on a woman, dominate her and are sexually satisfied (Allison 1994: 168-169). On the other hand, the men and women in the room do not see this as sexual violence against girls or women or promoting it, because it play involving a fictional character. This is a scene that Anri might describe as sexist and silly, but ultimately harmless. As I observe the imaginary sex in public, I can see Anri at the back of the room talking to men not unlike the one abusing a material representation of a cute girl character not 15 feet away from her. She is laughing. Suddenly, another woman appears, costuming as the very same character that is on the screen and the body pillow cover. The one that is nude and covered in semen onscreen and in a disheveled state and being raped in the form of a body pillow on the floor. Taking part in the performance, the woman calls the man out. "Nani shiten no?" What the hell are you doing? The man jumps off the pillow to his feet, steps back, sees the woman in character costume and drops to his knees. Almost as if facing his conscience in the form of the character, who is now asking him what he is doing to her in this place in front of all these people, the man grovels and apologizes. He prostrates himself in front of the woman in character costume and the assembled men around them. He kowtows, she chides and everyone laughs. The music and images change and the scene breaks up. The woman in the character costume goes to talk to Anri, the man returns the pillow to the pile and the event continues.

This was not the first or last time that fictional and real bodies came together in interactions with body pillows at *Hajikon*. On July 20, 2014, a Sunday afternoon *Hajikon* is host to some of the most striking interactions with body pillow that I have ever seen.

Walking through the door, I am greeted by familiar faces – as well as men wearing gas masks and buckets over their heads to playfully mask identity – including one man who remembers me from Adults’ Day. Within the first hour, two men have already brought a body pillow to the front and are interacting with it. The image on the cover is of a cute girl character in a school uniform, which has been stripped off to reveal her flat chest; her skirt has been lifted and her panties pulled down around her knees. The two men plop the pillow down on the floor, nude side up, and straddle it as if to go for a ride. One man has his crotch on the *bishōjo* character’s face, the other on her hips. Hooting and hollering, the men begin bouncing up and down and moving forward and backward. From my vantage point, it is easy to see what is being simulated here: two men in a three way with a cute girl character. Other men circle around them and begin taking photographs, which are shared on social media and inspire a string of comments about how other men wish that they were at the rave and could join in the fun. As before, men are involved in escalating performances of imaginary sex and violence. As before, women are in the room, and they laugh at the men. Two men begin smacking one another with their body pillows. Men strip off their shirts and trousers and dance in their underwear, only to be whipped with empty pillowcases. Another man lies down on his back with his legs spread wide, and two men pretend to kick him in the groin. A man is embraced and humped from behind. As before, the chaos is controlled.

Body pillows are the primary targets of playful sexual violence at *Hajikon* on July 20, 2014. One has its top stuck into a bucket so that the character’s exposed genitals are in the air. In time with the beat of a song, men make stabbing gestures with their hands at the character’s vagina. A man holds his body pillow and six men circle around it, punching and kicking the soft mass. The character is being beaten, abused, publically. After the beating, the man holding the pillow turns it around and kisses the character –

his wife – on the lips. He then pushes the top of the pillow and the character's face toward his genitals and proceeds to hump her face. Another man, shirtless and sweaty, grabs a body pillow and takes it to the center of the floor to hump the character's face. He continues this, while others watch, for the entirety of a song. Taken to be just play and part of the game, the spectacle of sexual violence does not faze anyone, just as the images of hardcore sex, perversity and sexual violence onscreen fade into the background.

Meanwhile, at the back of the room, another body pillow has been planted in a bucket with her exposed genitals in the air. Someone has placed a whiteboard in front of the bucket, and on it is written "1,000 yen." Judging from prices at stores in Akihabara, I know that the value of the body pillow cover alone is no less than 10 times that amount. No, the body pillow is not for sale – an imaginary sexual encounter with the cute girl character is. One imagined sex act are 1,000 yen. Another man adds to the whiteboard: "You can only put the tip [of your cock] in. Blowjobs possible." Marks are added for the number of times men have imagined having sex with the cute girl character. They add up quickly. A pile of 1,000-yen bills becomes a mountain. Men begin to circle around, laughing and taking photographs, which are posted on social media. The more people join in, the more violent the imagined sex. Eight men and a photographer are gathered around the pillow. They throw money at the character and call her a "benki," which means urinal and is slang for a repository for cum. I recognize the term from hardcore *bishōjo* games, and so do these men, who are playing out this scenario of imaginary sex together in real time with a material representation of a cute girl character. Homosocial bonding of real men occurs around the abuse of a material object, which is also imagined sexual abuse of a fictional girl. It is not real, but at the same time all too real.

In the next moment, the playful sexual violence transforms into tenderness. Arms over one another's shoulders, bodies touching skin to skin, the men sway gently together, and their body pillows are with them. When a pillow "standing" with others against the wall bends under the weight of gravity and slumps to the floor, a passer-by stands the soft mass up and smooths the wrinkles from its cover; he strokes the cover and the cute girl character on it gently, his hands lingering as he stares longingly, even lovingly, into the character's eyes. Another man comes over to gently touch the body pillows before lying down with them on the floor; resting, he hugs the pillows close and snuggles with them. Three pillows are leaning against one another and the wall, the bodies of the characters visible by the light of glowing neon sticks that men have placed in a half circle around them. Bathed in soft hues of pink and blue and green, the characters look almost angelic, and indeed some men stop to kneel in front of them.<sup>14</sup> When a body pillow is left on the floor where men are moving together, the character appears to have collapsed. A man responds by stopping to perform CPR. His hands cover the character's exposed breasts as he pumps her chest and performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. His efforts are rewarded when the owner returns to stand the pillow up and bring the character back to life; the revived character dances with the two men, who gaze at her face looking back at them from both sides of the pillow. Men pose their body pillows and characters together, pose with their body pillows and characters, strip off the covers to get inside them and pose as their body pillows and characters. More photographs are taken, which are shared on social media. *Bishōjo* game players comment on how much they love these characters.

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<sup>14</sup> The religious undertones of this should not be underestimated. Recall that men kneel in front of the screen when overwhelmed by moving images. Even as they call certain games "god games" (*kamigē*), here they kneel before the power of the cute girl character as "god."



of the room – the first time that all of them have been assembled together – and stand them up before the screen facing the men on the floor. The men kneel in front of the body pillows, or rather the material representations of the characters that have moved from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional, and sing to them. They draw the characters as body pillows in close embrace. The men then bring the characters as body pillows to the center of the floor and stand them up against one another. They form a circle and dance around the assembled characters as body pillows. As the song builds to its climax, the men fall to one knee and reach their hands toward the characters as body pillows standing in the center of the circle. They reach out to take imaginary hands and ask the characters to marry them. On bended knee, they reach out to the characters across a distance, which is imposed physically in the ritual interaction with the material object but is also impossible to bridge. Even as body pillows, the characters have no hands to give. Men and women without body pillows watch the spectacle and take photographs. They are laughing and smiling, clapping and cheering. On bended knee, hands outstretched, the men are colored red with embarrassment and pleasure.

#### **6.4 “Failed Men” Living in Precarious Japan**

He has been drinking heavily all afternoon: beer in plastic cups, tequila shots, champagne straight from the bottle. Although he is barely able to stand, let alone speak, the organizers of *Hajikon* still give DJ Fujikawa the microphone to wrap up on July 20, 2014. “Oretachi ga warukutemo, dame demo, erogē wa...” Even if we are bad, even if we are no good, adult computer games are... “Erogē wa...” Adult computer games are... He is trying to say something, something important maybe, but cannot get the words out. His voice is breaking, trembling. Was he always this small and fragile looking? The man must be in his forties. Two others hold him upright. Suddenly a voice from behind me. “Ganbatte! Nakanaide!” Do your best! Don’t cry! Ashamed and

blushing, DJ Fujikawa covers his face with his hands and turns away. One of the men holding him takes the microphone to speak, but he too seems overwhelmed. Looking out at the assembled men, he shouts, “Ai shiteru ze!” I love you! The men clap and cheer. Snapping back to us and taking the microphone, DJ Fujikawa tries again. “Erogē wa saikō! Minna saikō!” Adult computer games are great! You’re all great! The affirmation is met with a thunderous roar and round of applause. Fragmentary and halting in its delivery, one can piece together DJ Fujikawa’s message. Even if we are bad, even if we are no good, *bishōjo* games are great. Even if we have nothing else, we have *bishōjo* games. *Bishōjo* games brought us together. Even if we have nothing else, we have one another. We are all great. We are all alive. Fragmentary and halting, the message was nothing if not moving.

In my fieldwork, I found that such affirmations are not entirely uncommon at *Hajikon* and other *bishōjo* game raves at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace. During Adults’ Day, for example, a young DJ experiences a moment of failure.<sup>16</sup> He starts his set with a macho display of freestyle rapping on the floor before moving into the DJ booth to take over the turntables. His shirt is soon off. In contrast to the usual sound of *bishōjo* game raves, he plays a selection of music with male vocalists and rock guitars. Drinking from a bottle of champagne provided to him, the DJ shouts, “Ai shiteru ze!” I love you! Then the music stops – technical difficulties of some sort. The bodies stop moving. As the organizers attempt to fix the problem, and the assembled men shuffle awkwardly in place, the DJ breaks the silence by taking the microphone to speak. He speaks about his life. In his fifth year of university, the DJ is studying without purpose. There are no jobs on the horizon for him. He is single and lives with his parents. In fact, he had to borrow 30,000 yen from them to get to the rave from his home in the countryside. The DJ

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<sup>16</sup> The date in question was May 5, 2014.

confesses that he does not know what lies ahead for him, and wonders if his life has any purpose. He feels like a failure. The DJ falls silent and lowers his eyes to the floor. His masculine performance has broken down. In contrast to the previous bravado, he stands before us now sharing anxiety about feelings of failure that are familiar to the assembled men, who live in a time of precarious existence and everyday violence. “Ai shiteru ze!” I love you! The DJ looks up, smiling. Who said that? One of the assembled men, echoing his earlier words, masculine emphatic sentence-ending particle and all. Laughter ripples through the room. The computer is back online and the DJ finishes his set to much celebration. Seeming moved by the support, despite technical difficulties, the DJ shouts, “Ai shiteru ze!” I love you! Despite the breakdown, he made it through. We made it through, together.

The spontaneous support of DJ Fujikawa and this other young DJ, both perhaps “failures” in life and certainly in moments of failure, is part of a more general pattern. For example, one man in a group I meet speaks about feeling like a failure, because he is single, without stable employment and lives at home. He adds, however, that he has been successful in organizing *bishōjo* game raves with other men in the spirit of *Hajikon*. He has found friends through *bishōjo* games and attending and organizing events. These events, he tells us, give him a space to feel happy and fulfilled. *Hajikon* and similar raves and events support sociality outside of the institutions of home, school and work and give men without a clear future something to look forward to on the horizon. Indeed, at *Hajikon* on July 20, 2014, following DJ Fujikawa’s “speech” – even if we are bad, even if we are no good, we still have *bishōjo* games and one another – one of the organizers expresses a desire to create a space where everyone can enjoy *bishōjo* games together and be happy. To his mind, sharing affection supports not only the struggling *bishōjo* game industry, but also the lives of struggling men who depend on *bishōjo* games.

Aware of how important *bishōjo* games can be for the lives of players, scenario writer Maeda Jun goes as far as to call *moe* “a reason to live” (*ikigai*):

Many people feel insecure. You go to school, but you might not be able to get a job, and even if you do it might not be a full-time position. Without a stable income, it's hard to start a family. There is a general move toward isolation. People don't have a direction or purpose. That is why I say that *moe* is a reason to live. Once people find something, they pursue it. Manga, anime, games or whatever it may be provides a reason to live and a passion that can be shared with others.<sup>17</sup>

Without this passion for something to pursue and share, Maeda suggests, “many people would no longer be able to survive.” As Maeda sees it, *moe* is not only an affective response to fictional characters, but also an important part of people's lives in contemporary Japan. It has become more important as people struggle with conditions of economic, social and ontological precariousness. For *bishōjo* games, Maeda writes stories about characters struggling for life and love against hardship. Games such as *Kanon* (Kanon, 1999), *Air* (Eā, 2000) and *Clannad* (Kuranado, 2004) are meant to trigger *moe* in players and support their lives. How fitting, then, that music from these games – music that Maeda writes, slow ballads, tender and emotional – are part of *bishōjo* game raves such as *Hajikon*, which move bodies and support life.

Situated in the broader context of contemporary Japan, the importance of *bishōjo* game raves such as *Hajikon* becomes clearer. Unemployment and underemployment are rampant; marriage and birthrates are down; many young people are not confident that they will achieve the same economic and social stability and respectability as their parents; many feel like failures (Allison 2013). Demanding the “normal” lives promised to them, some become angry and violent. One can see this in young Japanese men calling for war, which would give them a path to achieve dignity (Akagi 2007). This gets entangled with nationalism. One can see this in young Japanese men protesting

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interview (December 18, 2009).

dominant gender ideals that make them feel like failures, but then turning their movement against women for not being “available” (Ryall 2015).<sup>18</sup> Issues of violence toward others aside, frustration and depression in Japan contribute to high suicide rates, which spike every year in May, when many young people fail to transition into new institutional identities and lives and/or become disenfranchised. Psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki sees this as a tragedy brought on by stubborn hegemonic norms, not least of which being norms of gender and sexuality (Saitō and Jō 2014: 150-157).<sup>19</sup> What is to be done? A start might be distancing oneself from norms that conspire to make young Japanese into failures and contribute to violence. *Bishōjo* game raves such as *Hajikon* point in this direction. A flier announcing raves scheduled at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace in May 2014 shows a *bishōjo* character behind a turntable. Moving to the music, she is smiling, happy, full of energy and life. She points up to an unseen and imagined elsewhere – up, up and away, in defiance of gravity. The image is accompanied by text reading, “May sickness? What’s that?” Whatever might be happening outside the club, in here there is no “May sickness.” Against the backdrop of a spike in suicides, things to look forward to and participate in function to support life. While the men participating

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<sup>18</sup> These men, sometimes called “*himote*” or “the unpopular,” are sexist in different ways than *bishōjo* game producers and players. In activist literature and social media, self-identified *himote* sometimes seem to blame their failure on the unreasonably high demands of women, which shades into open misogyny. The underlying assumption that women should be “available” to men speaks to a profound sense of entitlement, which, when lost, can lead to violence. To put this into the terms that I have been using in this dissertation, *himote* seem to be confusing their fiction of what women are and should be for reality, and in the process pressuring real women to conform to their fiction. Forcing a human being to be an image is, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it, a mortifying form of violence (Fiennes 2006). While *bishōjo* game producers and players may be sexist, they make a distinction between fiction and reality and struggle to not confuse or conflate them, which psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki suggests is an ethical relationship to objects of desire (Saitō [2000] 2011). The producers and players I came to know did not think that women or society owed them anything, and they had no desire for a return of “normal” relations between men and women. In the politically fraught arena of contemporary Japan, the distinction between *himote* and *bishōjo* game producers and players matters.

<sup>19</sup> Saitō suggests that not only work relations, but also personal relations such as family can be toxic, which he refers to as “the bad side of bonds” (*kizuna no warui men*) (Saitō and Jō 2014: 155). As Saitō sees it, the best thing to keep young people from depression, withdrawal and suicide is for them to develop alternative resources and values, which begins with recognizing that “I have this” (*watashi niwa kore ga aru*) (Saitō and Jō 2014: 157). For many of the men and women I met at *Hajikon* and similar events, *bishōjo* games were something that they had and held on to, which might have kept them from falling into depression. Sharing these resources and values with others was a way to stay positive, social and alive.

in *bishōjo* game raves such as *Hajikon* might be described as abnormal, they do not demand a return to normal. For all the jumping and screaming, they are not angry or violent. For all the crying, they are not depressed. They are living and moving on, happily.

For many in Japan, the men who gather at *Hajikon* and *bishōjo* game raves like it are different and strange. When I ask for directions to Club Moonlight Dream Terrace on a street in Kawasaki, a Japanese man responds by asking if I am “one of those.” The expectation is that any normal man walking down this street at night would be looking for the company of, if not sex with, a real woman, where I am joining an abnormal group of men playing and imagining sex with real and fictional others. On this street of sex for sale, the *bishōjo* game players at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace are perverts. Walking off the street and through the heavy padded door, one enters a space where men embrace being abnormal. Men who may appear single, but in fact are “married” to *bishōjo* characters, walk down the street in Kawasaki in normal clothes; they enter Club Moonlight Dream Terrace and change into shirts emblazoned with images of their wives, which are not worn normally. One changes into these shirts to announce a relationship with the character and alliance with others in similar shirts. Before leaving the club, the men change out of their shirts back into normal clothes or put something normal on over it. While one does not want to draw attention outside the club, inside the opposite is true. Wearing the *bishōjo* shirt, one recognizes the self and other as abnormal, in a good way.

Rather than abnormal, the men at *Hajikon* and *bishōjo* game raves like it are more likely to call themselves “perverts” (*hentai*), which they do with relish. At these raves, one of the first things that men I have not met ask is, “Hentai desu ka?” Are you a pervert? To answer yes is to be met with enthusiasm and join in shared movement. In

his foundational work, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud argues that normal sexuality – normal erotogenic zone, object and aim – is localized in the genitals, oriented towards another human of the opposite sex (and not in the family) and for reproduction (Freud 1905 [1962]). For Freud, outside of normal sexuality is perversion. So imaginary sex, or sex with images, is perverse. Looking at sexy images together and being moved by them to shared bodily response is perverse. It takes imaginary sex and the private act of masturbation in one's own room into imaginary sex and the public act of shared bodily response in the club. At this point, we are no longer talking about the drama of desire structured by family, but rather the factory of social desiring, where machines are assembled in ways that work and are productive (Deleuze and Guattari 1983).<sup>20</sup> In the process of perversion and its movement (Lamarre 2006: 376-384), sexuality and relationships are twisted and transformed. The *bishōjo* character is anything that works. The question, as philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari pose it, is not what does it mean, but rather how does it work, and work together, passing “from one body to another” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 108)?<sup>21</sup> This is the perversity shared bodily movement.

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<sup>20</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari critique psychoanalysis for focusing on representation instead of production, substituting a theater for the factory of the unconscious, limiting “interpretation” to the family and the Oedipal triangle and thereby pinning down and pathologizing the subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). The family-myth displaces the true couple: desiring-production and social-field. Deleuze and Guattari argue that all desire is social investment. For them, Oedipus is a means of “integration into the group” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 103), which reproduces the family in service of capitalism. (There is also a national dimension.) This only works to the extent that desire is “blocked” at prearranged impasses. Oedipus reduces desire to familial determinations that no longer have “anything to do with the social field actually invested by the libido” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 62). This is why Oedipus must be destroyed: “Destroying beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 314). After the destruction, engineers work on machines to support their productive working and undo the blockages upon which repression relies. The work is of “ensuring this functioning in the forms of attraction and production of intensities; thereafter integrating the failures in the attractive functioning, as well as enveloping the zero degree in the intensities produced; and thereby causing the desiring-machines to start up again” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 339). While I am interested in “strange flows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 116), I am less certain than Deleuze and Guattari about the revolutionary potential of desire.

<sup>21</sup> In full: “The question posed by desire is not ‘What does it mean?’ but rather ‘How does it work?’ How do these machines, these desiring-machines, work – yours and mine? With what sort of breakdowns as a part of their functioning? How do they pass from one body to another?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 108).

Consider for a moment Adults' Day, which is also Children's Day, a national holiday typically spent with family. Single men and women come to Club Moonlight Dream Terrace for an all-night *bishōjo* game rave; they are looking for partners for "adult activities," but not men seeking women in a "normal" sense. Instead, men and women, mostly men, seek one another out to share imaginary sex with cute girl characters from *bishōjo* games. Many of the men are not, it turns out, single, and they come to the rave with their wives, who are fictional and real. On Adults' Day, imaginary families are recognized and celebrated with others outside of the home, even as those same families are involved in imaginary sex that is perverse. At one point, I am looking at images on the screen of *bishōjo* characters – nude, covered in semen, underage – and hearing a high-pitched girl voice blasting from the speakers and espousing the joys of "papa love."<sup>22</sup> Men – some wearing *bishōjo* shirts, others stripped down to their underwear – are humping body pillows on the floor, while men and women watch, take photographs and laugh. Perverse is certainly an apt description of the scene: Perverse not only in the sense of relationships with those performing, not only relationships with fictional and real others, but also relationships with cute girl characters that are underage, related to the players, loved and abused by them. Such a relationship is "painful" (*itai*), just as these players and their games are described (Chapters 3 and 4). There is something that hurts, something shameful, even as these relationships are so publically shared and celebrated at *bishōjo* game raves. Beyond Adults' Day there is *Hajikon*, the abbreviated name of *Hajimete no kekkon* (My First Marriage), which sounds like "shame convention" (*haji* meaning shame, *kon* meaning convention). A celebration of marriages as relationships sexual and shameful, pleasurable and painful. At *bishōjo* game raves and beyond, sharing sexual shame, "all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself,"

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<sup>22</sup> See: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_i69yNtjtic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i69yNtjtic)>.

allows for a “special kind of sociability” (Warner 2000: 35). Outside the home and “normal” and “real” family, which is increasingly a fiction itself, new affective alliances are forming among men and women, fictional and real, media and material.

Much of this is already familiar from Akihabara (see Chapter 3), which is another affectively charged space where fictional and real bodies come together. It is another space that supports imaginary sex in public and perversion – an “abnormal” space where *bishōjo* shirts are normally worn. It is also a space where we can observe different responses to “failure.” In June 2008, Katō Tomohiro, a 25-year-old man, killed seven people and wounded 10 more on Chūō Street in Akihabara. The mass killings were one of the worst in recent Japanese history. In investigating his motives, police and pundits speculated that Katō had flamed out in highschool, been rejected by his family and ended up in a dead-end job that was only temporary (Slater and Galbraith 2011). Katō thought himself a failure, and felt that he had, and could have, no friends and no chance with the opposite sex. He was even ignored by people online. Katō tried to find alternatives in Akihabara, visited a maid café and even purchased a CD that had the recorded voice of a little sister character that might have been an imaginary significant other. For Katō, however, this was not a normal or real or livable life. Unable to shake his “normativity hangover” (Berlant 2007: 286) and constantly reminding himself of his “failures,” Katō attempted suicide before finally turning his violence toward others in Akihabara.

In the aftermath, Honda Tōru, a writer and cultural critic who himself struggled with rejection, economic and social instability and suicidal thoughts, identified with Katō to the point of saying that they were the same person until the age of 25 (Honda

and Yanashita 2008: 69).<sup>23</sup> The difference between them, as Honda perceived it, is that he found *bishōjo* games, fell in love with cute girl characters, started an imaginary family and shared his love with other men (Chapter 3). Thus supported by relationships with fictional and real others, Honda did not struggle with a precarious ontology in ways similar to Katō, who at times seemed to wonder if he existed at all and desperately craved a response from others. As Honda sees it, Katō retained a sense of middleclass male propriety and desired the normal life promised to him. He explains the consequences:

When I published *Dempa otoko* [The Radiowave Man, 2005, a popular manifesto about *moe*], people came to me and said, “I’m a similar kind of person, but I can’t respond to fictional characters the way you do (*moerarenai*). What should I do?” I was really at a loss. [...] But, you know, I wish I had said, “Just take it easy for now!” [...] I think he [Katō] was extremely prideful, so he couldn’t put up with it [everyday life]. Probably since he was a kid. That’s also probably why he couldn’t just take it easy. (Honda and Yanashita 2008: 69, 72-73)<sup>24</sup>

“Taking it easy” (*yuruku ikō*) suggests not getting worked up about one’s relation to hegemonic norms and social values; it means not having to succeed, grow, win, rise or achieve.<sup>25</sup> Taking it easy suggests the possibility of alternative norms and values that do not demand or punish so much; it means finding other ways to live, and live on, to live with oneself and with others. Taking it easy is related to taking care, both of oneself and of others, who share positions, pleasures and pains. Taking it easy is precisely what *bishōjo* game players do at *Hajikon* and similar events. They are imagining and creating

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Katō was to Honda what Miyazaki Tsutomu was to Ōtsuka Eiji (see Chapter 2). In a way familiar from Ōtsuka, Honda says of Katō, “Other than the crime, he is really the same as me (*boku to issho*)” (Honda and Yanashita 2008: 69). The recognition of one’s self in the criminal other is striking. If things had been different, Honda might have been Katō, which means that this man’s problem is a shared one. This raises questions of how to live without turning to violence.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that Honda was given top billing on the cover of the book that carried these thoughts on Katō, because he was, and is, a spiritual leader and guru for many young men in Akihabara. To me, it seems as though his comments are meant as a message all those who might turn to violence. To them, Honda says, “Take it easy.” Try to find ways to live and move on.

<sup>25</sup> Others have referred to this as “a life in descent” (*oriteiku ikikata*) (Mukaiyachi 2006: 3-4), which is intended to allow even those with no experience of success to live at ease.

new ways to live and move on (Halberstam 2011: 88; Condry 2013: 194-196, 200-203; McGlotten 2013: 37-38, 59-60, 97-100, 136).<sup>26</sup> Outside of rooms where they live and play alone, men and women are living and playing together (Dave 2010: 370, 373; also Allison 2013, chapters five and six).<sup>27</sup>

Still troubling are shared imaginings and performances of sexual violence at *Hajikon*, for example gang raping cute girl characters and treating them like prostitutes. These imaginings and performances are all the more problematic in that they are taking place inside Club Moonlight Dream Terrace while women work in the sex industry right outside the door (Lamarre 2006: 376, 381-382). Responses to cute girl characters at *Hajikon* bring together fictional and real, men and women, media and material, cruelty and care. Observing them, I cannot help but recall what legal scholar Harata Shin'ichirō calls the "performative ambivalence of *moe*," which raises questions about relations to reality and potential harm (Chapter 5). Affective responses to fictional characters are ambivalent, and this is an ambivalence that is performed. This is where danger lies, and also where the ethics of *moe* lie. The ethics of *moe* is the action and everyday practice of drawing a line between fiction and reality and orienting oneself toward the drawn lines of fictional characters. "It is precisely because practice is not mechanical, automatic, or fully determined that we have ethics," writes anthropologist Michael Lambek. "We must continuously exercise our judgment with respect to what we do or say. The criteria by which we do so are made relevant, brought into play, by means of performative acts" (Lambek 2015b: 129). Ethics are located in action and everyday practice.

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<sup>26</sup> I am thinking here of anthropologist Shaka McGlotten's discussion of pornography as part of "a creative and enlivening practice of life in the twenty-first century" (McGlotten 2013: 14).

<sup>27</sup> As anthropologist Naisargi N. Dave writes, distance from "moral norms" and "institutional power" are "the condition of possibility for the creative practice of new, and multiple, affective relational forms" (Dave 2010: 373). An event such as *Hajikon* allows for "the imaginative labor of inventing formerly unimaginable possibilities" (Dave 2010: 373). This is the politics of imagination as imagining and creating.

During participant observation, I observed that even as things blurred together at *Hajikon*, lines were drawn and insisted on. *Bishōjo* game players were oriented toward the lines of fictional characters, which were understood to be separate and distinct from “real girls and women.” Even as fictional girls were real on their own terms and entered into real social activity, they were not confused or conflated with girls and women inside or outside the club. In the dozens of *bishōjo* game raves that I attended at Club Moonlight Dream Terrace, not once did a man suggest leaving the club and buying sex. Not once did I witness unwanted sexual advances, or even attempts hit on or pick up a woman in the club. (Perhaps some wanted to, which adds to the performative ambivalence. In case anyone needs to be reminded of the line, posted signs explicitly forbade hitting on or trying to pick up women.) Not once were imaginings and performances of sexual violence made real in relation to women such as Anri, who regularly participated in these *bishōjo* game raves. Indeed, Anri called these men her friends, and trusted them to draw the line between fiction and reality, cute girl characters and her. As Anri told me, these men were not a threat; she and other women laughed with them; they lived and moved with them. Faced with the imaginary rape of a character and performative rape of a body pillow representing that character at *Hajikon* on January 17, 2015, a woman costumed as that character was confident enough that the *bishōjo* game player knew where to draw the line that she stepped into the scene *as the character*. A man, woman and cute girl character were playing and performing together. While the scene might have been tense if character and woman were confused and conflated (Thorn 2012: 21-22),<sup>28</sup> the players and performers understood and respected

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<sup>28</sup> In the introduction to her book *Violation: Rape in Gaming*, feminist thinker Clarisse Thorn recounts an example of fiction and reality getting confused in a rape scene. For this “live-action-role-playing” game, the players were locked into a building overnight. One player, male, raped another player, female, but it was unclear whether or not this was the character, person or both. The female player was traumatized and

the line, which allowed for an interaction that was funny to them and drew laughter from the assembled men and women.

While imaginings and performances of sexual violence at *Hajikon* and other *bishōjo* game raves were surprising and disturbing, my experiences in the field do not lead me to conclude that they reflect a desire or intention to do violence to girls and women. To state this somewhat differently, my fieldwork suggests that representations of sexual violence do not always reflect a “rape culture” where sexual violence is normalized (Nakasatomi [2009] 2013), but rather that there exist different cultures and cultural approaches to sexual violence. One such culture is that of manga / anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game producers and players specifically, who draw a line between fiction and reality, two- and three-dimensional, and normalize sexual violence in one even as they struggle to keep it separate and distinct from the other. (For a comparative example of tolerance for imaginary sexual violence in manga, see Schodt 1983, chapter six.) These men I encountered took a stance against sexual violence against “real girls and women” not despite playing *bishōjo* games, but because of it. Facing their violent desires and capacity for violence – among that which is least reputable in oneself (Warner 2000: 35) – they struggled to live ethical lives in practice. They struggled to live with their desires, with themselves and with others both fictional and real. Leaving Club Moonlight Dream Terrace, where *bishōjo* game players share imaginings and performances of sexual violence in controlled ways, men and women walked on the street together as friends. They walked together as comrades in a shared struggle with and against the violence of everyday life in precarious Japan. They were living and moving on, together.

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pressed charges, but it was difficult to prove that it had not been “play,” because the lines of fiction and reality were so blurred (Thorn 2012: 21-22). The result of this dangerous game was real harm.

## 6.5 Conclusion

At *Hajikon* on July 20, 2014, DJ Fujikawa selects a song titled “Kimochi Are You Real?”<sup>29</sup> *Kimochi* means feeling, and in the song a *bishōjo* character asks if it is real. In some ways, the answer is obvious. Seeing men gather in front of the screen in Club Moonlight Dream Terrace and move their bodies in response to images of this cute girl character, hearing them scream, it is obvious that they are really feeling something. They are really attracted to the *bishōjo* character in the game and on the screen. They hear her voice, which is also really the woman that produced it.<sup>30</sup> They feel the waves of sound, the joy of movement, the heat of bodies around them, the intensity of this moment of reality. But at times it seems as if the *bishōjo* character is asking the men if their feelings for her are real. How do you feel about me, really? Do you love me? Standing before the screen facing the assembled *bishōjo* game players, one man holds up a material representation of the cute girl character. This is his character, his wife, and they are here, together. He holds the object high above his head as if demanding recognition of its reality and his relationship. The scene brings to mind anthropologist Anne Allison’s discussion of the reality of fictional characters in everyday life in contemporary Japan (Allison 2006: 180-191). Anthropologist Ian Condry adds that fictional characters are capable of triggering responses and becoming part of social relations (Condry 2013: 71, 200-201). For Condry, characters are “alive” when we interact with, through and around them. Certainly this is happening at *Hajikon*, where *bishōjo* characters are brought to life in shared movement and social interactions. Here, the character is as real as the feelings.

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<sup>29</sup> See: <<http://erogetrailers.com/video/9705>>.

<sup>30</sup> At times they can hear the voice as it cracks, which reveals the limits of human vocalist. They can hear the voice’s “grain,” which indexes the body (Fiske 2011: 230-231). It is telling that Roland Barthes, the theorist who discusses the voice in this way (and is cited in Fiske 2011: 230-231), uses sexual metaphors (i.e., orgasm) to explain its affect.

Fan studies researcher Nicolle Lamerichs refines points made by Allison and Condry in her discussion of “affective spaces,” which are media saturated environments where “fiction is actualized” and “intimacy is shared in relation to fiction” (Lamerichs 2014: 270).<sup>31</sup> Certainly Club Moonlight Dream Terrace is such a space during *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves, as is Akihabara (Chapter 3). Importantly, Lamerichs, who conducted fieldwork at anime conventions in the Netherlands, highlights how affective spaces allow for “expression of one’s romantic and sexual feelings in new ways” (Lamerichs 2014: 270). This again is familiar from *Hajikon* and Akihabara, and, like the anime fans that Lamerichs observed, *bishōjo* game players share movement in response to characters and one another. “The characters and love between them are a medium for fans to share their affect together. Affect becomes an intersubjective phenomenon then that signifies a relation between fans, but also between characters” (Lamerichs 2014: 272). The affective space “glues together social contexts, physical space and bodies” (Lamerichs 2014: 272). Relationships are forged with, through and around characters. Of anime conventions in the Netherlands, Lamerichs argues that an affective space “strongly connects sexual fantasy with reality” (Lamerichs 2014: 271), but my own fieldwork shows that it matters a great deal how that connection is made. Fictional and real bodies, male and female, come together at *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves, but lines are drawn to keep fiction separate and distinct from reality. While Lamerichs is comfortable citing scholars who argue that, “It is not that fans are infatuated with or in love with fictional characters” (quoted in Lamerichs 2014: 271), men and women at *Hajikon* in fact insist that they are in love with fictional characters.

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<sup>31</sup> Although there is insufficient space here to fully explain, I find Lamerichs’ approach to anime conventions useful in multiple ways. Not only does she treat these conventions as affective space, but also “imaginative space,” where fans “reiterate a story again at a site” and are “reliving it again” (Lamerichs 2014: 268). They are also “social space,” where fans “enjoy things together” (Lamerichs 2014: 269). This is clearly applicable to *Hajikon* and *bishōjo* game events like it.

At *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves, players describe cute girl characters as their wives and declare love for them, but also share imaginings and performances of sexual violence against their wives in media and material form. Men imagining and playing sexual violence raise questions about what religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock calls dangerous games, which have the potential to shift perceptions of and impact reality (Laycock 2015: 212-215). Playing games of sexual violence might normalize it and contribute to violent sex acts. However, from what I have seen, this does not appear to be what is happening among *bishōjo* game players. In practice, a line is drawn between fiction and reality. At *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves, players are oriented toward cute girl characters, their objects of affection. Even as characters take on material forms and are interacted with physically, they are treated as separate and distinct from “real girls and women.” Imaginings and performances of sexual violence involve cute girl characters, which are real in their own way. This is important, because imaginings and performances of sexual violence could easily refer and contribute to the reality of sexual violence. Even as one responds affectively to fictional characters, there is ambivalence, which Harata Shin’ichirō calls “the performative ambivalence of *moe*” (Chapter 5). For Harata, this ambivalence is precisely why ethics are necessary. It is significant that I never observed unwanted sexual advances, let alone acts of sexual violence against women, at *Hajikon* or similar *bishōjo* game raves. There is an ethics for players sharing affective responses to fictional characters. They draw lines, which is not mechanical or automatic, but rather ethics in action and everyday practice. The ethics of *moe* comes from sustained engagement with manga, anime and games and the “real world,” two- and three-dimensional worlds. “To avoid the dangers of corrupted play,”

Laycock writes, “we must learn to walk between worlds” (Laycock 2015: 290).<sup>32</sup> We must learn to draw lines. Playing, and playing with others, is part of that learning.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond the ethics of *moe*, *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves demonstrate how shared movement can be life sustaining. At *Hajikon* on July 20, 2014, the same rave where he selects “Kimochi Are You Real?” DJ Fujikawa experiences a moment of failure. He is not in control of his body, propped up by others and ashamed. Nevertheless, he struggles to tell the assembled players that even if they are bad, even if they are no good, *bishōjo* games are still great and so are they. He loves these games and these players. Moved by others in the club, DJ Fujikawa’s feelings are certainly real. His love for *bishōjo* games and characters is real. His breakdown is real. Sharing his love and breakdown, the support he gets from the men and women at the *bishōjo* game rave is real. His love for these men and women is real. It is all real, sometimes too real, and painfully so. Overwhelming in their intensity, DJ Fujikawa’s feelings bring him to tears. One cannot help but be struck by the care that these *bishōjo* game players show for one another, especially in moments of weakness and vulnerability. When the equipment breaks down at Adults’ Day on May 5, 2014, a DJ breaks down and shares with the assembled men and women the feelings of precarious life. In the end, this time, they laugh rather than cry. When his set ends, however, the DJ seems on the verge of tears when he says to the assembled men and women, “I love you!” It all breaks down – equipment, social bonds, people – but reparative work is done in sharing breakdowns.

Like many other affective spaces in contemporary Japan, Club Moonlight Dream Terrace is outside of home, school and work. It is a space outside of institutional

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<sup>32</sup> By corrupted play, Laycock means play where the boundaries that circumscribe and set it apart from other parts of life are crossed (Laycock 2015: 286-290).

<sup>33</sup> For Laycock, it is significant that a roleplaying game “is not a private journey, but a shared one” (Laycock 2015: 4). Shared meaning-making is one of the most potentially “dangerous” aspects of gaming, because it can shift perceptions of “reality.” Laycock hints that shared meaning-making can also contribute to rule-making, the development of literacy about boundaries and ethics. It is in this sense that I say we learn to walk between worlds together.

identities and hegemonic ideals that conspire to make people into failures. It is a space to imagine and create some distance from norms that, in their decline, have become toxic. At Club Moonlight Dream Terrace, I encountered men and women living and moving on, which struck me as a stark contrast to a barely missed encounter with Katō Tomohiro in Akihabara in 2008. We were in the same place at the same time, and we were the same age, 25. Struggling with failure, I recognized much of myself in him. But I had things in my life that gave me joy. Having something, even something like *bishōjo* games, can make a difference.<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of *bishōjo* game players, Katō was living “a nightmare where he couldn’t even participate in games” (Honda and Yanashita 2008: 72).<sup>35</sup> While Katō might have been able to afford games and make time for them, he had no one to play with or help see the value of such play. While others experience and share *moe*, Katō’s sense of failure, brought on by lingering middle-class male propriety and desire for something more normal, turned him away from fictional and real others; alone in his room, frustration and depression turned to anger and violence. *Hajikon* and similar *bishōjo* game raves give players a space to come together and share affective responses to fictional characters. While *bishōjo* game players might be seen as failures by many, including perhaps even themselves at times, at *Hajikon* they are encouraged to embrace themselves and one another as abnormal. This keeps them out of their rooms and moving with others, laughing and living. In some shared room somewhere, I hope that DJ Fujikawa and others are still moving together. Now as then, the feeling is real.

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<sup>34</sup> While this may seem to retread the ground of old arguments about pornography as compensatory and a social good (for a recent iteration, see Kagami 2010: 182, 319), it is more like queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s notion of media and material becoming something to have and hold and thus “a prime resource for survival” (Sedgwick 1993: 3; compare to Saitō and Jō 2014).

<sup>35</sup> The Japanese is “gēmu ni sankā sura dekinai akumu.”

## 7. A World that's Ending: Do You Love Me?

"It may be that only amid the ruins can people gain the courage to stride down a new path." – Karatani Kōjin<sup>2</sup>

"We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours." – Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing<sup>3</sup>

### 7.1 Take Care of Yourself

It's the evening after the third and final day of the Comic Market and school is in session at Akihabara University.<sup>4</sup> Or with Akihabara University. In the basement of the Mansei Building across Kanda River just outside of Akihabara, a group of about 20 middle-aged men are lecturing me about *bishōjo* games. My friend, Higashimura Hikaru (born in 1983 in Ehime Prefecture), is to blame. The men were happily talking about manga, anime, games, fanzines and all the other things that matter to them as members of "Akihabara University" (*Akihabara daigaku*), a loose collective of über-fans, critics and creators.<sup>5</sup> They were animated by the events of the Comic Market, being together in Akihabara and the free-flowing beer from self-serve machines located at the entrance to this dining hall. The place looks old, as if Vikings would be quaffing mead here after a battle, which is no doubt why Hikaru reserved it for a gathering of his rowdy followers. Hikaru is a leader in the sense that he does things, makes things happen and is fun to be

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<sup>1</sup> This title is a homage to Anno Hideaki's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shin seiki Evangerion, 1995-), specifically episode 25 of the original animated television series, which is titled "A World that's Ending" (Owaru sekai) in Japanese and "Do You Love Me?" in English. Section one of this conclusion, "Take Care of Yourself," is the English title of episode 26, and the final section, "The Beast that Shouted 'I/Love' at the Heart of the World" (Sekai no chūshin de "ai" wo sakenda kemono), is the Japanese title of episode 26. I have translated "ai" as "I/Love" because it is written in katakana in the Japanese, which suggest a phonetic pronunciation of "I," but *ai* also can mean "love." This is plausible given that the title is itself homage to Harlan Ellison's short story "The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World" (1968).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Aalgaard 2016: 40.

<sup>3</sup> Tsing 2015: 3.

<sup>4</sup> The date in question is August 17, 2014, Sunday. Day three of the Comic Market was concentrated on fanzines targeting male fans.

<sup>5</sup> See: <<http://upfg.lullsound.com/akiba-u.ac.jp/>>.

around. He does something, and then falls back, which creates an opportunity for others to step in and lead. So it was that Hikaru stood and called everyone's attention.

"Everyone, listen! Mr. Galbraith here wants to know about *bishōjo* games, so let's talk about them. Go!" I stupidly think that this might be an opportunity to ask some questions, but instead they come at me in a flurry and reveal that I know nothing compared to these men. And how could I, the men ask? I follow Hikaru around and think that he is someone important and worth listening to! Loud guffaws. But the prompt has succeeded in getting the men to talk about *bishōjo* games. They all have played them, many still do and a few are very dedicated players. They start talking about particular games, scenes and moments. Moved again by memories and play experiences that come back with the force of an exploding bombshell, the men clap and point at one another and shout. They remember how the games moved them – laughter, tears, anger, arousal. I loved that character. I still do. Wasn't that hot? Hell yeah! Satisfied and smiling, Hikaru sits back down and slaps me on the back. His work is done, and he settles in for a session that continues past midnight.

For all the hazing, I was fortunate to be an honorary member of Akihabara University during my fieldwork from April 2014 to August 2015. Hikaru even made me a namecard to pin on my shirt. According to it, my name is "Galbraith," and I am a "Proffesor" at "The university Akihabara." It's the thought that counts. I learned a great deal from hanging out with these men, who seemed to assemble at any suggestion from Hikaru. He bought a bunch of cheap meat at the supermarket, so come to his place for a hotpot. It's a small apartment, but he lives alone and has a stock of CDs for music and fanzines for reading (almost all related to the Touhou Project games).<sup>6</sup> The Comic Market is coming up, so everyone who is making something to sell should come over for

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<sup>6</sup> See: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touhou\\_Project](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touhou_Project)>.

collaborative work. In fact, everyone should come to help, and we can have a party after. Payday, so let's go get ramen. Or curry. Or a beef bowl. Hey, you know what might be fun? Let's charter a bus and tour Shikoku Island, which is know for its noodles. And we did, all of us. Most of the members of Akihabara University were single and had decent jobs that gave them the money and flexibility to join the tour. Around 50 men on a bus traveling through Shikoku for two days in September 2014.<sup>7</sup> The conversation was almost always about manga/anime, games and characters. The guy next to me on the bus was an artist who produced a group fanzine called *Sou-Men*, which featured *bishōjo* characters bathing under a waterfall. *Sou-Men*, because we are men going to eat "men," or noodles.<sup>8</sup> So, what kind of men? The kind that plays with their noodles, apparently, given that an entire leg of the bus ride was spent talking about what kind of tissue paper was best to use to clean up after masturbation. The conversation was bawdy, and men laughed at themselves and one another. When Hikaru started talking about his love for a particular character, the conversation turned to who is married to which character and everyone was all in. Responding to the quality of the men on the bus, the man next to me shouted, "For the sake of Japan's future, this bus should really crash!" But it did not crash and the talk and laughter continued in a present and co-presence that became the future. And one expected that it would continue further still, whether or not for the sake of Japan, for better or worse. When someone left Akihabara University, he was always told, "Be safe" (*go anzen ni*). It's not a normal way to see one another off in Japanese.<sup>9</sup> But

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<sup>7</sup> The dates were September 27 and 28, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Sōmen* are fine, white noodles, which we went to eat on several occasions during the tour.

<sup>9</sup> When my wife, who was born and raised in Tokyo, heard this story in November 2016, she repeated the words several times, as if thinking them to be mistaken or made-up Japanese, somehow foreign. "*Go anzen ni? Go anzen ni? Go anzen ni?*" When I assured her that it was really what these men said in dozens of recordings, she responded, "*Hen na hitotachi!*" What a bunch of weirdoes! The greeting is not, it turns out, limited to Akihabara University (for example:

<[http://www.kepco.co.jp/energy\\_supply/supply/ichiisenshin/approach/goanzenni.html](http://www.kepco.co.jp/energy_supply/supply/ichiisenshin/approach/goanzenni.html)>), but it nevertheless struck my wife as something strange, thought up and made up – imagined.

when the group broke up at the end of the Shikoku tour, they said it again and again: “Be safe.”

Of all the things that I learned from Akihabara University, one of the most important was the existence of networks of support and care among single, working men in contemporary Japan. Brought together by shared interests, these men regularly gathered and always had future gatherings and events to look forward to. As I became a member of the group, I learned to see others off by saying, “Be safe,” and to know that doing so meant that I could look forward to seeing them again in the future. In lonely times, this was nothing less than a lifeline. Everyone in the group had his quirks, and I was often treated as the strangest of all, but we nevertheless got along. Brought together by a shared interest in *bishōjo* characters from a media franchise called *Love Live!* (Raburaibu, 2013-2014), I came to see many of them as friends. They were wankers and weirdoes to the man, but they assured me that I was too and that was what they liked about me. Everyone was welcome and had a place. They all had fun together. They cared about one another, and wanted everyone to be all right so that they could see them again. There will be more events, more laughs, so, until I see you again, “Be safe.” Take care of yourself. A form of care that is both individual and social. It was a lesson I learned well at *bishōjo* game raves, which are less of a closed group and more of an open event, but nonetheless serve to support life (see Chapter 6 of this dissertation). Even if we are bad, even if we are no good, *bishōjo* games are great. We have them and one another. So be safe. Take care.

As strange as *bishōjo* games might seem to some, the story of the men who play them is familiar. It’s a story of living, together. They might be single, but they are not alone. They might be perverts, but they are fine with that and having fun. Despite the violence of the everyday, they are alive and do not want to be otherwise. Anthropologist

Anne Allison reports new ways of living together emerging in contemporary Japan, including a gathering and performance of the group *Kowaremono*, or “broken people,” who share their pain and cry out: “I won’t die, I won’t kill, I want to live! Don’t die, don’t kill, live!” (Allison 2013: 131-132, 155-156). While translated as “broken people,” *kowaremono* also suggests something “fragile” or “breakable.” So, fragile or breakable people. People that could be broken. They are vulnerable and weak, and recognize this about themselves and others. They share vulnerability. This points to precariousness as a shared condition of existence, and recognizing it is the beginning of an ethics of life (Butler 2010: xvi-xvii, 13-14, 53-54).<sup>10</sup> We are vulnerable, together, and live, together. Vulnerability and weakness in fact encourage relations of care. Certainly this is familiar from my fieldwork among *bishōjo* game producers and players, but they also expand the recognition of the human and real other to include fictional characters (Sasakibara 2003: 105-107; Chapter 4 of this dissertation). These characters are also *kowaremono*.<sup>11</sup> They, too, are vulnerable and weak and exposed to the violence of precarious existence. They, too, are cared for in shared life. Anthropologist Lisa Stevenson writes about “life beside itself,” where people in the Canadian Arctic survive, die and live on otherwise. “Can we imagine,” Stevenson writes, “another form of caring, that conceives of life both in its

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<sup>10</sup> Here I follow philosopher Judith Butler in her consideration of how the “framing of reality” is part of attempts to “regulate the understanding of violence, or the appearance of violence within the public sphere” (Butler 2010: xii; also 12). Insofar as this makes some violence unreal and normalizes others forms as part of reality, “this regulation of violence is itself also violent” (Butler 2010: xiii). One can easily think of how first-person shooters and other war games function in this way as part of the framing of violence. For Butler, “The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (Butler 2010: xiii). What undoes the frame is the recognition of shared conditions of precarity. “As we watch video or see an image, what kind of solicitation is at work? Are we being invited to take aim? Are we conscripted into the trajectory of the bullet or missile? Or is there another solicitation that works through the prior one, a solicitation to apprehend the precarious conditions of life as imposing an ethical obligation on us?” (Butler 2010: xvii). This ethical obligation resonates with my read of *bishōjo* games (Chapter 4). In the case of *bishōjo* games, however, producers, players and characters are involved in “relations of love or even of care” (Butler 2010: 14), which Butler wants to move away from in suggesting something much more impersonal and anonymous. I agree with Butler that, “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (Butler 2010: 14); and that, “Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live” (Butler 2010: 14). *Bishōjo* games and the culture surrounding them, however, suggest that characters can also be “living” and subject to “care.”

<sup>11</sup> Depending on the ideographic character, *mono* can mean both “person” and “thing.”

exposure to death and in its imagistic relation to the other, to others?" (Stevenson 2014: 15). While Stevenson is asking about a form of care that does not simply try to extend life without consideration of whose life, I wonder if we might consider the conditions of life and death with fictional and real others as another form of imagistic relation.

Let's take Stevenson up on her challenge and try to imagine. Three images. The first is of a man sitting in a restaurant.<sup>12</sup> He is Japanese, probably in his forties, overweight and balding. He has a large white bandage on his left cheek to cover an open sore and his left eye is swollen and red, possibly infected. He is at a table for two, but is not waiting for anyone. People pass behind him to get to the salad bar, but he is alone at the table. Well, not exactly. He is sitting next to a pillow upon which is emblazoned the image of a *bishōjo* character. The cute girl is slight, thin and nude except for a white bra, collar and two ribbons in her hair. The man is leaning in close to the pillow and hugging it – in public, under the bright lights of the restaurant. And he is smiling. Weakly, but smiling. He looks at the person holding the camera and at you looking at the image. He is making a claim and we are in an ethical relationship with him as a human being (Azoulay 2008: 18-23, 147-150). This is real. The character he cradles in his arms – beside him, smiling and looking kind, looking out at you with massive eyes – is real. This is his wife. He has her, holds her, and is not alone. The second image is of a man on a lawn next to a busy street.<sup>13</sup> It is daytime, but he has laid out a futon and is lying on it. He has multiple cute girl pillows, including two body pillows that appear to be related to *bishōjo*

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<sup>12</sup> See: <<https://jaredinnakano.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/2dlove.jpg>>. The photo was taken by journalist Lisa Katayama for an article titled "Love in 2D," which was published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2009 (Katayama 2009). While she speaks of the "phenomenon" of *moe* and Japanese men in love with characters and body pillows, this man, "Nisan," is the main example and he comes off as pathetic in many ways, as revealed in comments posted about the story and its inspiration of an episode of the situational comedy series *30 Rock* later in the year. It turns out, however, that "Nisan" is a man who performs his affection for fictional characters in public as a gambit for recognition, and he played Katayama to get this image out there as part of a social game in making his love and relationship visible and "real."

<sup>13</sup> This photo was taken after in Odaiba after the Comic Market in August 2014. The photographer is Ramon McGlown, who kindly shared the image with me.

games, sex and all. Wearing a cute girl bandana, sunglasses, a cute girl shirt and blue jeans, he is on his side, arms and legs wrapped round one of the pillows, looking at you. As others walk by on the sidewalk, this man performatively sleeps with cute girl characters in public. He seems about to break into laughter. The third image is from Akihabara.<sup>14</sup> A computer store on Chūō Street is advertising body pillows featuring cute girl characters from *Love Live!* A sample is in plastic wrap and bound tightly with cord, but the character inside seems to be pushing against her constraints and about to burst free. Behind is a sign reading, “Who will you sleep with? Feel free to tell the staff inside in a loud voice!” Everywhere images of these cute girl characters beckon you to them and inside, where the staff awaits your passionate declaration of love.

Now, then, let’s try to imagine, together, the lives of these others and other ways of life. Let’s try to take the care necessary to see “another’s point of view” (Haraway 1988: 583). Is it so strange that *bishōjo* characters might be others with whom we are in relation in life beside itself? That the cute girl character can be part of a shared social world, a “shared fantasy” (*kyōdō gensō*) that challenges commonsense “reality” (Editors 1989: 3)? That certain spaces and gatherings can act as “a ‘platform’ to share fantasy” (*gensō wo kyōyū suru ‘ba’*)? That, just as was the case with a group of “broken people” in Northern Japan (Nakamura 2013: 129-131), acknowledging and living with imaginary others socially can be a form of care that saves lives? That perhaps these men are not broken at all? That they might not need to “get a life,” because they have one already, which they share, or want to share? If the sexuality of *bishōjo* game players, among those identified as “otaku,” “hovers between the thrill and shame of playing with one’s self” and “sex with an image” (Lamarre 2006: 375), then we can also play with others.<sup>15</sup> If

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<sup>14</sup> This is one of a series of photograph that I took in August 2014.

<sup>15</sup> As anthropologists Don Kulick and Jens Rydström put it, “The exploration and fulfillment of erotic desire involve reaching out beyond the self to engage with others – be this in real life or in fantasy. In this sense,

“many otaku have actually ‘come out’ and thereby proclaimed a sort of sexual identity” (Vincent 2011: xxiii), then they need someone to come out to and with. Someone to see and experience the imaginary relationship as real. To share it. Reparative work can be done by simply acknowledging that the *bishōjo* character is real, the relationship is real and the person who laughs and loves is real. The reparative work begins with playing together and sharing imagination. That, too, can be a form of care. The character says I love you to the player in *bishōjo* games, but cannot do so beyond the game. The player hears it in his imagination in a relationship that goes beyond the game. We can share that imagination and hear those words, together. And we can say them to one another: I love you. That, too, I learned from *bishōjo* game players (see Chapter 6 of this dissertation). That, too, can be a form of care that supports life beside itself.

## **7.2 The End: Death and Rebirth**

Depending on your perspective, Akihabara is the center and the end of the world. It is the best and worst. Heaven and hell. Surrounded by images of *bishōjo* characters in various states of undress and engaged in explicit sex acts, one might even think that we are in the Biblical end times and humanity is nearing its ultimate destruction. For critics, this is Japan at its most abnormal, and it is already an abnormal nation, so that is saying something. Political activists come to Akihabara and demand that Japan do more to live up to global norms in regulating imaginary sex, violence and crime. Politicians in Japan call for a return to normal, by which they mean a nation that can stand on its own on the global stage. They see problems in the declining marriage and birth rates, the shrinking population of workers, the perceived flight from sex and

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sexuality – even when it is solitary – is always social” (Kulick and Rydström 2015: 120). This is perhaps even truer when the sex in question is imaginary, which can lead to intimate sharing of imaginary sex.

social responsibilities. They blame youth, foreign powers, a bad economy, a constitution imposed by the United States that bans the country from having a military with full powers. Everywhere things are abnormal, and need to be brought back to normal. They recruit Japanese people angry and frustrated with life, and turn them against others. The fiery rhetoric of Japanese nationalists demanding a return to normal is accompanied by natalist policies to control bodies and discourage abnormal desires and angry young men lashing out – at women, Chinese and Koreans, queers, it doesn't seem to matter – for being denied a normal life. The dynamic, which is prevalent in many parts of the world, is what activist Guy Standing refers to as a “politics of inferno” (Standing 2011: 132-154), where economic, social and ontological precarity leads to violence. Always, but at these times especially, we must be careful about directing anger toward the abnormal, the other, the pervert.

In contrast to the inferno is heaven, but let's imagine that there is no heaven above or hell below, just the world, and imagine a politics here. What would a politics in contrast to the inferno look like there? Perhaps something like a politics of *moe*, an affective response to fictional characters that is so often experienced as burning passion and love. A passion and love that is performative and shared, socially. Such a politics might include facing and acknowledging violence in ways that does not lead to violence. For example, a separation of fictional and real others, which allows for working through violence in ways that does not lead to violent acts that diminish the lives of others. In order to play with one's self and with others and to play violence with fictional and real others, one must embrace the abnormal, other and pervert in one's self and others. Looking back on my experiences in the field, I have come to share the position that there is an ethics in facing and sharing sexual desires (Sasakibara 2003: 101, 105-109, 113), even if, especially if, they are dangerous and potentially harmful. This is an ethics that begins

with the “acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself” (Warner 2000: 35). It begins with these words: “I am a beast” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 277). By working through what is abject and least reputable in one’s self, players enjoy a “special kind of sociability” (Warner 2000: 35). They act carefully and interact ethically. Conversely, we need to be very careful of the will to construct discourses about the deviant other located elsewhere, who then becomes the target for critiques of violence that exists outside and elsewhere. Put simply, the construction of the imaginary other allows for the construction of the imaginary self. That self is “normal.” That self is a pure subject that does not mean any harm and is in fact incapable of it. That self is the one that does not face or work through its capacity for violence, which becomes an unacknowledged – repressed, denied, projected onto others – violence. This is the self that interacts with fictional and real others in uncritically violent ways. Acknowledging and sharing that which is most abject and least reputable in one’s self – playing with one’s self and others, playing sex and violence – contributes to an ethics of life, as does recognizing shared desires, weakness and vulnerability. Considering the “complex and fragile character of the social bond” (Butler 2010: viii), and the complex and fragile social bond with characters both fictional and real, might contribute to conditions in which violence is less possible and life is more livable.

Whether or not this leads to a politics that burns as hot as the inferno – lights a fire under people and moves them, but does not lead to burning others or the world – I do see in it a politics of imagination. *Bishōjo* games are sexual imagination. As “imagination” (*sōzō*), something thought and made, these games are shared. *Bishōjo* game players, who embrace “the freedom of imagination/creation” (*sōzō no jiyū*)<sup>16</sup> and the “abnormal” (*abunōmaru*) and identify as “perverts” (*hentai*), are at odds with

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<sup>16</sup> This term was given to me by Sugino Nao, who worked in the *bishōjo* game industry and went on to found the Contents Culture Institute, in a personal interview (March 16, 2015).

everyone normal, it seems. They reject the solution of the state imposing regulation of imaginary sex, violence and crime – regulation that is increasingly normal around the world (McLelland 2013) – and instead regulate themselves. This takes the form of the ethics of *moe*, or the action and everyday practice of drawing and insisting on lines. Even as one experiences *moe*, or is moved to an affective response by a fictional character, which is “real” in its own right, the character is separate and distinct from a “real” person, or a human being that is real in different ways, “three-dimensional” as opposed to “two-dimensional,” “natural real” as opposed to “manga/ anime real” (Chapter 2). This separation is a media literacy and ethics learned socially in informal peer interactions (Chapter 3). It is not always clean or clear, and can be ambivalent and come with the potential of harm, which is precisely why it is insisted on in everyday practice and struggle to draw and maintain the line with others (Chapter 5). Thus separate from “reality,” one can explore fiction that is real and moving on its own terms. Nothing is repressed, nothing is held back, and much of what is imagined – thought and made – is perverse, violent and disturbing. *Bishōjo* game players take a stance against violence and harming others not despite playing perverse, violent and disturbing games, but because they do (Chapter 4). And, finally, movement in response to fictional characters, characters that are real and movements that are shared, supports life (Chapter 6). Encounters with fictional and real others increase the body’s power of activity.<sup>17</sup> In a world where people say that the social is in decline and disconnection and despair are on the rise, what I encountered in contemporary Japan was social connection and joy. I encountered men who might be considered losers or failures imagining and creating shared social worlds where they live with fictional and real others, which increases the

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<sup>17</sup> Here I am thinking about political thinker J.K. Gibson-Graham, who advocates a politics around “new forms of community energized by pleasure, fun, eroticism, and connection across all sorts of divides and differences” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 18). While I like energy, eroticism and connection, I am hesitant to use the term “community.”

body's power of activity. They were alive, active, moving in the world.<sup>18</sup> They might be perverts, and we might think that what they imagine and their imaginative play is abnormal, but the only metric by which this should be stopped is evidence of "demonstrable harm" (Bering 2013: 232), which I did not find in my fieldwork.<sup>19</sup>

To increase the body's power of activity, and to act in ways that are not harmful to other bodies, one needs an ethics of bodies in relation to one another. Among manga/ anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game players specifically, this is the ethics of *moe*. As psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki sees it, "there is a certain sincerity and ethics in a disassociated life lived with self-awareness" (Saitō [2000] 2011: 172). That is the ethics of Sasakibara Gō, who is aware that media affects him and that he has the capacity to harm, and plays through affective responses to the vulnerability and weakness of cute girl characters, which become targets of violence and care (Chapters 2 and 4). Taking responsibility for the capacity to harm, the responses and the actions is the ethical thing to do. We see the ethics in Ōtsuka Eiji, who cultivates an orientation of desire toward fiction as such, even as he refuses to distance himself entirely from a child molester and

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<sup>18</sup> I am thinking here of Butler, who writes, "Survival depends less on the established boundary to the self than on the constitutive sociality of the body" (Butler 2010: 54). Reading the poems of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Butler explains, "the body is also what lives on, breathes, tries to carve its breath into stone; its breathing is precarious – it can be stopped by the force of another's torture. But if this precarious status can become the condition of suffering, it also serves the condition of responsiveness, of a formulation of affect" (Butler 2010: 61).

<sup>19</sup> At the end of his book *Perv*, Jesse Bering concludes: "To guide us forward, we must emblazon every star in the sky with the reminder that a lustful thought is not an immoral act. And our handrails would have to be painstakingly carved from the logic that in the absence of demonstrable harm the inherent subjectivity of sex makes it a matter of private governance. Finally, and most imposing of all, we'd each have to promise to walk this brave new path completely naked from here to eternity, removing this weighty plumage of sexual normalcy and strutting, proudly, our more deviant sexual selves. *You go first*" (Bering 2013: 232-233). To sum up my own work, the abnormal imagination of *bishōjo* game producers and players did not lead to "immoral acts," but rather ethical activity. There was no demonstrable harm, but sex was a matter of social governance rather than "private" in the sense of individuals. This is what it means to walk together as people who have shed sexual normalcy and strut their abnormal sexual selves with pride. If we re-read the conclusion of anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin's "Thinking Sex" in terms of imaginary sex, violence and crime, then Bering's point and my own become even clearer: "Ultimately, of what possible social significance is it if a person likes to masturbate over a shoe? It may even be non-consensual, but since we do not ask permission of our shoes to wear them, it hardly seems necessary to obtain dispensation to come on them" (Rubin 2011: 181). Now change "shoe" to "cute girl character." This is a strong position against virtual regulation, but I argue that such acts are of social significance, which I explain in this conclusion.

murderer who confused and conflated fiction and reality to deadly effect (Chapter 2). In Ataru, who understands that media affects, but, having grown up in an environment supporting an orientation of desire toward fiction, is confident that it is cute girl characters, and nothing else more “real,” that he desires, which is why he is not a “harmful person” (Chapter 3). Kōta, who plays through *bishōjo* games that simulate sex, violence and crime involving cute girl characters, but then is furious that real girls and women are being bought and sold as idols, which he sees as a form of use and abuse. A man who calls himself a “two-dimensional *lolicon*,” or someone attracted to cute girl characters in manga, anime and games, but not young girls (Chapter 2). Tarō, who thinks “*lolicon* is righteous” and, surrounded by tens of thousands of fanzines featuring sex and violence involving cute girl characters, recoils at seeing drawings that are “real and dangerous” (Chapter 5). *Bishōjo* game producers and players recoiling when Fukumimi, one of them, confuses and conflates fiction and reality in a discussion of underage sex (Chapter 5). Together, they draw lines and insist on them. One can see the ethics at *Hajikon*, where men and women, fictional and real, actual and virtual bodies, media and material come together in an affectively charged space to allow for powerfully moving and pleasurable shared interaction with cute girl characters, who are clearly separated from flesh-and-blood women in the room (Chapter 6). Because lines are understood and respected, sexual play with fictional and real *bishōjo* does not lead to sexual tension between men and women, and sexual violence toward cute girl characters is not threatening to real women. Even when they are involved in the scenes of violence, the women respond by playfully interacting with the men and laughing at and with them.

The separation of fictional and real is not complete or clean. Precisely because the affective response is ambivalent, Harata Shin'ichirō explains – precisely because it might

be to something more “real” than the character, blur boundaries between fiction and real and lead to harming real people – manga/anime fans generally and *bishōjo* game players specifically insist on the distinction between fiction and reality in practice (Chapter 5). Performing the response and playing together, socially, is a way to work through what Harata calls “the performative ambivalence of *moe*.” There is certainly danger in being shut off from the world and without others to help draw and negotiate lines between fiction and reality, and *bishōjo* game players recognize this danger. As Harata and many others argue, what is necessary is media literacy and ethics, which need to be learned. That learning occurs in interactions with others in the world (Chapters 3 and 5), even when, or perhaps especially when, lines get blurry, things get dark and ethics become murky in “game worlds” (Jenkins et al 2009: 24-26). The solution is not to ban the game, but to play and learn from it. This is very much in line with research in developmental psychology, which suggests “that children with a high ‘fantasy orientation’ – that is, children who are more imaginative – are better at discerning fantasy from reality” (Laycock 2015: 289-290). In sustained engagement with fantasy, they learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Other studies suggest that people who fantasize are generally more aware of the implications of violence and less likely to act violently (Laycock 2015: 193). We see this in Japan with “otaku,” who grew up in relation to fiction and developed “an affinity for fictional contexts,” which is a form of “fantasy orientation” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 16). As Saitō puts it, “otaku” develop “an orientation of desire” toward “fiction itself” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 16, 30). Interpreting studies on fantasy and play in imaginary worlds, religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock argues that, “To avoid the dangers of corrupted play, we must learn to walk between worlds” (Laycock 2015: 290).<sup>20</sup> This is a media ethics and literacy that comes from “wayfaring,” or

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<sup>20</sup> By corrupted play, Laycock means play where the boundaries that set it apart from other parts of life are

following the lines of others and moving with them in the world (Ingold 2011: 149, 162, 179). We learn to draw lines by walking them with others. If, as Saitō argues, we have “the right to be perverts” in “the imaginary” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 31), then this is because we take responsibility for our perversions and imaginings. We face them, work through them, share them. This is an ethics of queer life, an ethics that supports life, in all its queerness, rather than taking it away. It is an ethics that supports the life of the imagination, in all its perversity, rather than taking it away. Saitō completes his thought: “If there is a certain sincerity and ethics in a dissociated life lived with self-awareness, it is because hypocrisy and deception dwell in the falsely coherent life” (Saitō [2000] 2011: 172). This is the hypocrisy and deception that imagines perversion in others, which keeps it safely outside the self. Hypocrisy and deception that imagines the self as pure and incapable of harm while others are perverse and only capable of harm. All while imagining perversion and harm in others and not facing them in the self and working through them socially.

This dissertation has ethnographically explored the tension and ambivalence of an open and public culture of abnormality, perversion and imaginary sex, violence and crime. I have identified how social learning and support have led to the development of media literacy and ethics. I moved with men who struggled in everyday life and interactions with fictional and real others to draw lines and conduct themselves ethically in the world. They faced their capacity for violence and harm and struggled to be nonviolent. They rejected calls for a return to “normal,” which in Japan are accompanied by violence from men demanding something more from women and society and the nation demanding something more from the military to rattle sabers with its neighbors.

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crossed (Laycock 2015: 286-290). These boundaries are what I have been calling lines, most importantly the line between fiction and reality.

In the face of that violence, and the violence of everyday life in contemporary capitalist society, these men struggled to live and to live differently. Here were men who did not want “Japan” to return to its status as “normal” or to return to their place in such an imagined nation. They celebrated the end of Japan – saying “Nihon owata!” or “Japan is over!” – as the beginning of something new – “Nihon hajimata!” or “Japan has started!”<sup>21</sup> That tension between the Japan that ends and begins, between the imaginary “Japan” of the past and future, is an inhabited one. These men, who failed to be “normal” or had been failed by the “normal,” or failed to desire to be “normal,” were more willing to push back on and cross the normative boundaries of the society, nation and world. Calls for keeping gaming, gamers, Akihabara, events and Japan “weird” are part of a politics of imagination that pushes back against normalizing, which comes with regulation and normalized violence. These abnormal men had their own norms of violence, and sexual violence, which are ambivalent and in tension with other norms and realities. For all of this, I recognize that these men were trying to imagine – to think and make – other worlds and other ways of being, seeing and acting in the world. A world sustained and sustainable through collective practice and activity. A world of fictional and real others that impinges on us and moves us to response, which we are responsible for (Lamarre 2006: 383; Butler 2010: 34).<sup>22</sup> Rather than closing this ambivalence and tension down, I have tried to leave it open and to imagine and live

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<sup>21</sup> These phrases are slang coming from otaku communities online, which intentionally butcher Japanese. So, *owatta* and *hajimatta*, or the past tense of the verbs “to end” and “to begin,” are shortened to *owata* and *hajimata* and written in katakana.

<sup>22</sup> Writing of the movement of “otaku,” or manga/ anime fans, media theorist Thomas Lamarre argues that desire moves in a perversion that does not settle into fixed forms (Lamarre 2006: 383). The corollary to perversion is proliferation, as in perverse movement leads to the proliferation of the character in media and material form. So it is that movement, or shared affective response to characters, *moe*, “generates a world, a reality” (Lamarre 2006: 386-387). This is where I find Butler useful, because she argues that precariousness “relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world; responsiveness – and thus, ultimately, responsibility – is located in the affective responses to a sustainable and impinging world” (Butler 2010: 34). My position, then, is that “otaku” movement in shared affective response to characters creates a world, and movement in that world is perverse, but we are responsible for our responses in a sustainable and impinging world.

other responses with others in the world. This is my own politics of imagination, which comes out of a dissertation on virtual regulation and the ethics of affect in contemporary Japan. This is not the only story of the politics of imagination, virtual regulation and ethics of affect. Others wait – for example, female fans of comics, cartoons and computer/console games in Japan and beyond<sup>23</sup> – to be told. Just as “Japan” ends and begins, so too does the story.

### **7.3 The Beast that Shouted “I/Love” at the Heart of the World**

It has been a rough couple of days for Ataru. Work has been particularly demanding, and he looks worse for the wear. He broke up with his girlfriend, or perhaps she left him, but either way he is single again. Single, but not alone. We are commiserating tonight over ramen in Akihabara; close to midnight, only a chain store is open. It is too late for dinner, and too dark to be out, but Ataru just got back and is hungry. He slurps his noodles, grimacing. The flavor is fine, just fine, but certainly nothing special. Ordering a beer and lighting the first of what is sure to be many cigarettes, Ataru settles into his seat. For whatever reason, probably a lot of them and

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<sup>23</sup> Although in this dissertation I have focused primarily on male players of *bishōjo* games, I do not want to give the impression that “otaku” culture is in any way solely a male domain. While often omitted from histories of manga and anime in Japan, girls and women have been important players in fan culture since at least the 1970s. For example, the first anime fan club of which there is historical record was dedicated to *Triton of the Sea* (Umi no Toriton, 1972) (Sasakibara 2004: 21). Based on the manga by Tezuka Osamu, directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki and featuring a twist ending that calls into question the distinction between good and evil, *Triton of the Sea* attracted older fans to anime, which had been primarily for children. Attracted to the charismatic male protagonist, girls and women dominated the rosters of *Triton* fan clubs. While *Space Battleship Yamato* (Uchū senkan yamato, 1974-1975) is often remembered as kicking off the anime fan movement in Japan, few realize that girls and women journeyed to the production studio to pay homage (Clements 2013: 148). During the 1970s, attendance at the Comic Market, founded in 1975 and now the world’s largest gathering of manga and anime fans, was dominated by girls and women (Shimotsuki 2008: 18). It has been ever since, and remains so today. Nevertheless, because of the overwhelming influence of male critics writing histories biased toward male genres (Clements 2013: 148) as well as the stereotype of hardcore fans as male (Kam 2013b: 163-165), girls and women have dropped out of the history of manga and anime. This has changed in recent years, as manga, anime and games targeting women have done phenomenally well. So, while male fans have Akihabara in Tokyo, female fans have Ikebukuro in Tokyo. While male fans have *bishōjo* games, female fans have *otome* games, which are a growing industry in comparison to declining *bishōjo* games (Yaraon 2013; Sakakibara 2016). While male fans have their own ethics of affect, so, too, do female fans separate fiction from reality (Galbraith 2015b). So while the relation between men and cute girl characters is where the potential for harm is most immediate, calls for virtual regulation are most persistent and the ethics of affect are most clearly defined, there is much work left to be done beyond that and this dissertation.

none in particular, Ataru starts to wax philosophical. “Have you heard of the simulation hypothesis (*shimiyurēshon kasetu*)? It’s about reality. All of this is just a simulation on a computer somewhere. You, me, all of it. The scenario may be bad or good, and all that you can do is let it play out. But what if you treat the simulation like a computer game? Our choices matter. You play through and then start again. I’ve played all these scenarios in all these games, so I can play through to the end, no matter what.” I nod in agreement, but have nothing to say, because I really don’t understand. Ataru has been my guide and teacher in the world of *bishōjo* games, and a friend who I have been hanging out with in Akihabara for almost a decade. What is he trying to tell me? Reality is a simulation, but it is also a computer game. There are choices and consequences. The game affects you. It is playing you, but you are also playing it. So play on, and play through the pain. Play with care, but not the kind of care that invests everything in something, which might make one feel like something bad is the end of everything. The simulation and game do not end – not really, anyway – so there are other scenarios and moments and endings. The thought makes me smile. Ataru responds in kind. The food, drink and company are starting to warm us up. The ramen is fine, and so is the night. In Akihabara, there is plenty of light in the dark.

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## Biography

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