

Adult Computer Games and the Ethics of Imaginary Violence: Responding to Gamergate from Japan

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Introduction

The threat was real and had to be taken seriously. She had received and read hundreds of similar messages and posts on the internet and social media, but this one included her home address. With the address redacted, it read: “I’m going to go to your apartment at **** and rape you to death. After I’m done, I’ll ram a tire iron up your cunt.”¹ The sender also promised to harm family and friends but reserved an especially imaginative and graphic brutality for her. So it was that Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist critic of sexism in computer/console gaming in North America, was forced to call the police and leave her home in August 2014. Sarkeesian was neither the first nor the last victim of backlash from gamers to perceived attacks on their community and culture, which began with organized campaigns against female game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu and came to a head with threats to bomb and shoot up venues hosting advocates of change in computer/console gaming. Having risen to prominence with her crowdfunded video series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” Sarkeesian was a high-profile target, and news of attacks such as the one in August 2014 served to galvanize a counter movement against the gamers harassing her and others. Events were such that the moment was deemed “Gamergate,” a

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struggle against “traditional, patriarchal, dude-dominated gaming culture,” if not also “a battle for our cultural soul” (Dewey 2014). Widely discussed and debated, Joss Whedon, Stephen Colbert, and many others weighed in on Gamergate and spoke with Sarkeesian to get at the issues, which led to taking a stand against gamers. Predictably, gamers and their allies responded by digging in their heels in opposition to “social justice warriors,” and name-calling intensified on both sides. By the beginning of 2015, gamers appeared as psychopathic cyber-terrorists and rapists in an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (de Segonzac 2015).

Amidst all this, Japanese computer/console games have been highlighted as examples of how sexism and sexual violence are normalized, which need to be problematized as part of the battle for our cultural soul. When a Japanese artist known for producing “adult” (read: pornographic) manga was tapped to design the costume of a female character in the fighting game *Soulcalibur*, for example, a commentator on the feminist website *The Mary Sue* was fed up with familiar and predictable defenses:

And don't even start with any garbage about “cultural differences” or “freedom of expression” or any of that. [...] Geek culture is still largely exclusionary to women, and choices like this only serve to drive away *half* of the consumers who buy these products. This is especially toxic in the gaming industry, which fosters a culture of violent and terrifying misogyny through its objectification and devaluation of women both in-game and out (Maggs 2015).

If the costume of a female character raises concerns about objectification and violence, then these reactions are more pronounced in response to Japanese adult computer games. Labeled and zoned for adult consumption, these games can contain explicit and extreme depictions of sex, which is increasingly out of sync with global standards. (For an overview of relevant laws, see Galbraith 2017.) When one such game, *RapeLay (Reipurei)*, 2006), where players simulate raping girls and women, circulated online, it inspired the organization Equality Now to launch a global campaign against “Japan: Rape Simulator Games and the Normalization of Sexual Violence” (Equality Now 2009). In Japan, activists such as Nakasatomi Hiroshi, co-founder of the Anti-Pornography and Prostitution Research Group, agree that adult computer games are part of a culture of sexual violence and should be banned by law (Nakasatomi 2013). If gaming and pornography are what psychologist Philip Zimbardo calls “a deadly duo” contributing to toxic masculinity (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2015, xviii, 20-21, 27-29), then they seem to come together in Japanese adult computer games. Critics have been harsh: such games reveal “a social illness that’s embedded in Japanese society” (Alexander 2009) and have “no place in

our communities” (Lah 2010). Imagined as a deviant other and source of contamination (Hinton 2014, 56), Japan becomes a target of criticism as objectionable content slips across its borders and spreads around the world like an infectious disease.

This article is a response to Gamergate from Japan, where the author was conducting fieldwork with producers and players of adult computer games from 2014 to 2015.² Distinct from the mainstream North American games that are often the focus of critics such as Anita Sarkeesian (more on this distinction below), adult computer games raise questions about seemingly commonsense positions taken during and since Gamergate. Specifically, this article focuses on issues of objectification and sexual violence raised by Sarkeesian, who is put into dialogue with Sasakibara Gō, a manga/anime critic that has similar concerns as a player of adult computer games in Japan. In brief, Sarkeesian sees the games that she plays and critiques as part of a culture of objectification and sexual violence, while Sasakibara sees the games that he plays and critiques as a way to recognize his capacity to act and harm others and adopt an ethical stance against violence. Although many have at least heard of Sarkeesian and are familiar with her argument, the same cannot be said of Sasakibara, who is virtually unknown outside Japan. This is despite a career as an editor and manga/anime critic that began at Tokuma Shoten Publishing in 1985 and led to frequent collaborations with Ōtsuka Eiji (Ōtsuka and Sasakibara 2001; Tomino et al. 2002; Ōtsuka 2003), who is described as “one of the most important writers on fan cultures” and “anime and manga subcultures in Japan” (Marc Steinberg in Ōtsuka 2010, 99). In introducing Sasakibara, the point is not to challenge or discredit Sarkeesian, which many have endeavored to do, especially online, and which often devolves into personal attacks and attempted character assassination. This article is not a setup of Sarkeesian that makes her stand in or speak for all feminists or critics of computer/console gaming in North America, which would be as unfair as it is unwise. Rather, the purpose is to put Sarkeesian, as an influential and individual thinker, into dialogue with Sasakibara, who is also an influential and individual thinker. As with Sarkeesian, the article does not intend to make Sasakibara stand in or speak for all gamers or critics of computer/console gaming in Japan. He is not a representative of, or a way to introduce, “Japanese game criticism,” whatever that might mean. Instead, by staging a dialogue between Sarkeesian and Sasakibara on issues surrounding objectification and sexual violence, this article opens a space to consider again the Gamergate moment and its lessons. Beyond any empty gesture of siding with or against “feminists” or “gamers,” North America or Japan, Sarkeesian or Sasakibara, the article is dedicated to the proposition that thinking with them, together, can lead to something much more substantial and ultimately productive. Amid widening divisions and deepening antagonism, taking the time to respond carefully to Gamergate from a less immediate position might be the key to learning something from it.

Tropes vs. Women in Video Games

Born in Canada in 1983, Anita Sarkeesian critiques sexism as a cultural issue, which is a position associated with second-wave feminism. In distinction from feminism concerned primarily with suffrage, second-wave feminism focuses on cultural forms of sexism that marginalize and oppress women. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, a strong strain in North American second-wave feminism—which saw insights such as Laura Mulvey’s (1975) identification of a “male gaze” in classic Hollywood films and Jean Kilbourne’s (1979) documentation of destructive images of women in advertising—was advocacy against pornography as part of “rape culture” (e.g., Dworkin 1979). Collectively known as “the feminist sex wars” (Bazon 2015), which speaks to their ferocity and pitch, battles over pornography divided thinkers and pitted them against one another. While anti-pornography activism fell out of favor in the 1990s and 2000s, concern about media representations of girls and women contributing to sexism and sexual violence continue. In 2011, Sarkeesian, founder of the website Feminist Frequency (Sarkeesian 2009), began producing videos critiquing media tropes that she argues reinforce damaging stereotypes about women. In 2012, she crowdfunded a video series titled “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” which highlights sexism in computer/console gaming, and began releasing episodes for free online from March 2013. Of Sarkeesian’s many critiques, three stand out: (1) essentialized and exaggerated gender and sexuality in computer/console gaming; (2) computer/console gaming as a boys’ club; and (3) objectification of female characters and sexual violence toward them. These critiques are laid out in videos released in November 2013 and June 2014, which come in the middle of the series and present some of Sarkeesian’s core arguments. They also generated enough buzz to make her a target during Gamergate.

In the episode “Ms. Male Character,” Sarkeesian (2013) draws attention to issues of character design and conceptualization. She begins with a discussion of *Pac-Man*, a Japanese game released by Namco in 1980, which is credited with introducing the idea of “character” into computer/console gaming and popularizing computer/console gaming with women (G4 2002). While Sarkeesian (2013) highlights comments by designer Iwatani Tōru that reveal “regressive personal or cultural notions about women,” it is the North American mod-cum-official-sequel, *Ms. Pac-Man*, that she takes to task. Ms. Pac-Man is not only the first playable female character in gaming, but also the first “Ms. Male character,” which Sarkeesian (2013) explains as a category of female characters “defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection or occasionally through promotional materials.” Such female characters tend to have symbolic markers of gender: they are coded with pink and pastel colors; decorated with bows, makeup and jewelry; have large eyes with long lashes,

hair in pigtails and emphasized breasts and hips; wear skirts, high heels and midriff-baring outfits; and so on. “Gendered signifiers” turn a collection of pixels into a “female” (Sarkeesian 2013). Often Ms. Male characters come with one-dimensional personalities that are “feminine,” which are composites of shallow stereotypes about women (i.e., vain, spoiled, emotional, timid, weak, easily injured). Sarkeesian is also concerned about the sexualization of these characters, which was apparent from the beginning with Ms. Pac-Man: when personified, she looks like Marilyn Monroe with a pink bow. To give a name to this phenomenon, one might call gender/sex essentialism, emphasis, and exaggeration in virtual worlds “virtual sexism” (see also Onoda 2002; Robertson 2010).

In the episode “Women as Background Decoration: Part 1,” Sarkeesian (2014) draws attention to sexualized female characters and the dynamics of violence against them. She again returns to origins, this time *Computer Space* in 1971, which was the precursor to *Pong* and the computer/console gaming revolution in North America. Promotional material for *Computer Space* shows a woman in a see-through nightgown posing next to an arcade cabinet for the game. Noting the prevalence of sexualized women in early advertisements, Sarkeesian (2014) argues that this reflects attempts to sell games to boys and men, which contributed to the emergence of a “boys’ club” atmosphere. When graphics developed to allow for it, the bias made its way into games, where women were portrayed as “eye candy” and background decoration:

These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumably straight male players. Sometimes they are created to be glorified furniture, but they are frequently programmed as minimally interactive sex objects to be used and abused (Sarkeesian 2014).

One might add that the boys’ club atmosphere expanded along with the gaming market, for example at industry conventions, where attractive women (“booth babes”) were paid to wear the provocative costumes of sexualized female characters to draw attention to new and upcoming releases. In these ways, gaming was, and Sarkeesian (2014) argues continues to be, presented as “for men,” and women were and are peripheral and/or ornamental. For Sarkeesian (2014), in gaming, “women predominately exist as passive objects of heterosexual male desire.” (Harkening back to Mulvey 1975.) Nonplayable female characters are often reduced to “nonplayable sex objects” (Sarkeesian 2014). Ultimately, games, female characters and women are all presented as objects to play with.

This introduces Sarkeesian’s critique of objectification in computer/console gaming, which is one of her most consistent and fundamental concerns. Like anti-pornography feminists (MacKinnon 1982, 541; Dworkin 1987, 122-147), Sarkeesian (2014) argues

that objectification shades into sexual objectification and violence. Raising important issues of power, Sarkeesian (2014) explains the core dynamic as follows:

Sexual objectification is the practice of treating or representing a human being as a thing or mere instrument to be used for another's sexual purposes. Sexually objectified women are valued primarily for their bodies, or body parts, which are presented as existing for the pleasure and gratification of others.

In this interaction, men are sexual subjects, the ones that look and act, and women are sexual objects, the ones that are looked at and acted upon. Building on the work of Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher interested in feminism, law and ethics, Sarkeesian (2014) identifies five aspects of objectification in computer/console gaming: instrumentality, commodification, interchangeability, violability and disposability. Instrumentality refers to "the use of virtual women as tools or props for the player's own purposes" (Sarkeesian 2014). Closely related is commodification, where virtual women as objects can be bought and sold. As the value is now exchange, virtual women are interchangeable. Treating virtual women as objects serves to "dehumanize" them, and, as objects, they are violable: "Once a person is reduced to the status of objecthood, violence against that object becomes intrinsically permitted" (Sarkeesian 2014). After use and abuse, the object is disposed of and a new one obtained.

While sexual objectification is common in media, Sarkeesian (2014) argues that games pose a particular problem because of interactivity, which encourages players to actively participate in the objectification. At a basic level, players cannot help but treat nonplayable characters as objects to be acted upon because that is indeed what they are within games: objects constructed and placed in the virtual world for the purpose of player interaction with them or action upon them. Further, as Sarkeesian (2014) points out, some games allow and even encourage sexualized violence against nonplayable female characters. In the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (from 1997), for example, players replenish health by paying prostitutes for sex, but can retrieve the money spent by killing them after the transaction. "In this way," Sarkeesian (2014) explains, "these systems work to facilitate male violence against women by turning it into a form of play."³ Some might respond that not all players use and abuse nonplayable female characters, but Sarkeesian (2014) finds this to be irrelevant because:

[A] sex object is still a sex object, regardless of whether or not you personally choose to use and abuse her, and that fact, in and of itself, still communicates extremely regressive ideas about women. Indeed, nothing about the designs, behaviors or

mechanics associated with female characters that serve as background decoration encourages or engenders any sort of human empathy. In fact, quite the opposite. The rudimentary algorithms governing interactions lead the player to interface with these characters in ways that can only be dehumanizing and exploitative. As sexual automata, they don't have any individuality, they don't have their own stories, players are never supposed to identify with them or care about them, outside of what they can offer sexually or materially. They exist on the outskirts of humanity, placed beyond the reach of empathy by their creators.

While primarily focusing on those used as background decoration, Sarkeesian suggests that objectification of nonplayable female characters in general discourages human empathy, concern and care. "Since these women are just objects," Sarkeesian (2014) argues, "there's no need or reason for players to have any emotional engagement with them." Indeed, she wonders if such engagement with these objects is even possible.

For Sarkeesian, beyond the games themselves, there is a cultural critique to be made. The "player character"—that is, the player's character—using virtual women in the game is depicted as powerful, and the player behind that character feels strong and in control. "These interactive algorithms," Sarkeesian (2014) holds, "transmit cultural messages of near constant affirmation of male heterosexual dominance." In the games that she analyzes, Sarkeesian (2014) contends that women as sex objects exist for men and their pleasure, which negatively impacts the way that men think about and value women and contributes to tolerance of sexual harassment and violence. Put bluntly, affirmation of male heterosexual dominance—power over, and license to, female bodies—is part of what second-wave feminists have called rape culture (for an overview, see Thorn 2012, 11-12). Adult computer games in Japan have also been said to "normalise and promote sexual violence against women and girls" (Nakasatomi 2013), but the specifics of these games open into questions about objectification and its consequences.

Adult Computer Games in Japan

In Japan, "adult" (*adaruto*) or "erotic" (*ero*) games are a niche market that is distinct from the mainstream of globally recognized franchises such as Super Mario Bros, Final Fantasy and Pokémon (Mizuho 2014, 117-118). Labeled "R-18," only players age eighteen or older can purchase them. Rather than consoles or mobile devices, adult games in Japan are usually played on computers, but they are not networked or multiplayer in ways familiar from North America. Featuring graphics that are rarely computer-generated or realistic, they also do not allow players to freely roam in open environments. Instead, players read onscreen text and make choices in something approaching choose-your-own-adventure

novels. Despite their seemingly rudimentary and outmoded design, newly released adult computer games cost around US\$100 each. In recent years, adult computer games have had difficulty attracting new players (Sakakibara 2016), and the market has been shrinking for some time (Yano 2014). Today, most adult computer games sell only 1,000 to 2,000 copies (Kagami 2010, 136). As a niche, adult computer games appeal to dedicated players with specific demands. While titles such as *RapeLay* draw attention, Kagami Hiroyuki (2010, 128)—a scenario writer that started his career at Illusion, the company behind *RapeLay*—estimates that adult computer games focusing on sexual violence make up only 10 to 20 percent of the market. These are also not the bestselling titles, which instead concentrate on interpersonal relationships, romance and melodrama. Regardless, most include explicit sex scenes. Some game makers remove these scenes for later “general” releases on home consoles and mobile devices, and the overall industry trend is toward what Kagami (2010, 136-138) describes as “de-pornification” (*hi-poruno-ka*), but sex is still very much a part of adult computer gaming in Japan.

More than sex, adult computer games in Japan are fundamentally defined by their focus on interactions with characters, most prominently *bishōjo* or “cute girls.”⁴ With interaction in mind, there are eight identifying features of adult computer games: (1) characters that the player character interacts with are seen from a first-person perspective and speak directly to the player character, who is for the most part unseen; (2) important characters will often have a recorded voice for lines of dialogue, but the player character typically does not; (3) characters appear as a series of still images, for example, changing from one static facial expression to another as the interaction proceeds; (4) designed to be visually appealing, the characters have a distinctly cartoony look that recalls manga and anime; (5) below characters onscreen is scrolling text in a box, which tells a story that frames and motivates interactions; (6) the story takes a least several hours to complete; (7) along the way, the text presents the player with choices, which can impact character interactions and the story; and (8) there are multiple possible endings. Over the course of the game, the player interacts with characters in ways ranging from casual conversation to coitus.

Narrowing the discussion to adult computer games featuring *bishōjo*, which are the most common, many of Anita Sarkeesian’s points are relevant. For example, in adult computer games, female characters are defined as such by emphasized hips and breasts, costuming, and so on. Inhabiting the player character and seeing through his eyes, the player is encouraged to gaze at female characters, who quickly become sexualized and objectified in images of body parts, various states of undress, and sex acts. In many cases, players interact with female characters as sex objects to use for personal gratification. Relations of power are crucial to consider here. By definition, *bishōjo* are “cute girls,”

with cuteness referring to not only roundness and softness but also something “vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced” (Kinsella 1995, 220). If cute objects are “the most objectified of objects” (Ngai 2005, 834), constructed to be weak, vulnerable and acted upon, and if cuteness is, at times, an “eroticization of powerlessness” (Ngai 2012, 3), then this is on parade in adult computer games (Taylor 2007, 201). When not depicted as weak and vulnerable, female characters are stripped of their power, choose to relinquish it, or are relationally less powerful than the player character (Taylor 2007, 201-202). Operating his character, the player can end up with a female character based on his choices, but they are ultimately just that—his choices. The player is the subject that acts, while the female character is the object to be acted upon.

Like Sarkeesian with mainstream computer/console games in North America, it is objectification that gender and media scholar Emily Taylor finds most problematic about adult computer games in Japan. Nonplayable female characters, Taylor (2007, 202) argues, are constructed to be weak, dependent, and immature, which is to say they are constructed to lack libidinal agency and be perfect objects for presumably heterosexual male players. Adult computer games, Taylor (2007, 202) continues, speak to a desire for simple relationships where men are in control and satisfied and women have no needs or expectations.⁵ Put another way, players have no responsibility to nonplayable female characters, whom they can freely use and abuse as objects. By Taylor’s (2007, 203-204) estimation, adult computer games speak to male insecurity in Japan, where players are often stereotyped as failed men incapable of courting “real women.” In danger of being feminized, players assert difference from and dominance over female characters to reaffirm their masculinity. Adult computer games have been described as a “mechanism of masculine recovery” (*dansei-sei kaifuku sōchi*) (Kagami 2010, 119), which Taylor points out involves constructing women as objects. Seeking to reaffirm their masculinity, men in positions of weakness unable to dominate real women turn to virtual women that have no agency (Taylor 2007, 202; also Naitō 2010).⁶ In this way, the weak dominate the weaker to feel like men, which props up hegemonic masculinity and power relations. In a second-wave feminist critique of sexist culture, this is an issue “no matter how seriously or lightly they [players] may regard the computer-mediated intimacy” (Taylor 2007, 205).

For all the resonance between Sarkeesian and Taylor, there are differences between mainstream computer/console games in North America and adult computer games in Japan that need to be taken into account. In contrast to the games that Sarkeesian plays and critiques, Taylor (2007, 198) describes adult computer games as “interactive *anime/manga* with erotic content.” After noting that these games include sex and share an aesthetic with manga/anime that is distinct from “reality” (Minotti 2016), it is worth considering what interactive means. In adult computer games, the player looks at still

images of characters, reads scrolling text, listens to background music and character voices, and selects from prompted choices. Hours can go by before a choice appears, and, most of the time, the player is looking, reading and listening. Given the mountains of text in stories that can be quite long and involved, it is perhaps not surprising that adult computer games are sometimes called visual novels or novel games. At the center of the screen and story, nonplayable female characters—even when they are exaggerated gender stereotypes and sex objects—are never reduced to background decoration or a personality that is simply “female,” which Sarkeesian (2013) calls the “personality female syndrome.” In adult computer games, a female character is not only defined as a “female character,” but also a character in contrast and relation to other characters (Taylor 2007, 201). Each character has a personality and story that the player learns about over the course of protracted interactions. Nonplayable female characters in adult computer games are not interchangeable, because each is a unique character that the player spends time with and comes to know, if not also care about.

Rather than fast-paced action in open worlds, adult computer games focus on branching narratives where the player makes deliberate choices and faces consequences. The most significant and sometimes sole form of player input, choices impact character interactions and the story, which the player is involved and invested in. In interaction, the choice to act is highlighted. Consider for example *Kana: Little Sister* (*Kana imōto*, 1999), which Taylor (2007, 196) introduces:

Taka, the protagonist, can potentially form a relationship with only two female characters: Kana, his sister, who is two years his junior; and Yumi, his first love from elementary school. Kana suffers from chronic renal deficiency, a debilitating disease that forces her to spend most of her life in the hospital. *Kana* [...] is an emotionally poignant game; it starts when Taka is age seven and continues linearly until he turns twenty.

To clarify, pursuing a relationship with Kana means not doing so with Yumi and vice versa. The player must choose, as well as make choices as the relationship develops. Taylor quotes a player writing in praise of *Kana* in contrast to what s/he perceives as the limitations of many computer/console games in North America:

[T]he cast of characters you will encounter in this game are vivid and captivating, each with their own personality. You will get a feel for what each of the individuals are actually like. I love the personalities [...] which] are not the typical corny stuff you would expect from a video game (cited in Taylor 2007, 207).

Note the player's stated love for the personalities of characters, who matter, as do choices made in relation to them. Protracted interactions with a nonplayable female character—who is seen from a first-person perspective and given a face and voice, which the player comes to know in intimate detail—contribute to regarding her as “something more than a mute, passive object” (Greenwood 2014, 250). Adult computer games, and more specifically the nonplayable female characters in them, make “emotional demands” (Greenwood 2014, 238, 245). Indeed, adult computer games such as *Kana* are emotionally demanding enough that some players burst into tears, which has earned them the nickname “crying games” (*nakigē*). Focusing on interactions with and between characters, adult computer games can be moving.

This seems far removed from the objectification of female characters and casual use and abuse of them in the games that Sarkeesian plays and critiques. In adult computer games, action takes the form of deliberate choices, which impact developed characters that the player knows, if not also cares about. Not all players care to the same extent, but it absolutely does matter “how seriously or lightly they may regard the computer-mediated intimacy” (Taylor 2007, 205). Further, there might be different cultures of gaming, encouraged by different game designs and mechanics, which encourage care for rather than violence against nonplayable female characters. Adult computer games in Japan point us in that direction. When critiquing sexism in computer/console gaming and its potential to contribute to violence, instead of dismissing “cultural differences” (Maggs 2015), we must consider them. For his part, Sasakibara does much to assist by sharing his experiences as a self-reflexive player of adult computer games in Japan.

The Ethics of Imaginary Violence

Born in Akita Prefecture in 1961, Sasakibara Gō has been editing manga (for example in *Monthly Shōnen Captain*) and writing professionally (for example in *Animage* magazine) since the mid-1980s. Responding to classic approaches to media effects, many in Japan have vigorously argued against the possibility that manga, anime, and computer/console games are connected to violence (Fukushima 1992; Saitō 2000; Kagami 2010), but Sasakibara is instead determined to face it. Pointing to *Captain Tsubasa* (*Kyaputen Tsubasa*, 1981-1988), a popular manga about soccer that was adapted into an anime series beloved in Japan and around the world, Sasakibara (2014) argues:

Kids started playing soccer in Japan after *Captain Tsubasa* came out. Many of Japan's top players today loved the work as kids. So we know that manga and anime have an effect on people. Of course they do. People claim the influence when it's good and deny it when it's bad. I think that's dishonest. Humans are affected by everything

around them, including media. The question is how do humans think about this effect?
What do we do with it?

After embarking on a career as a critic and coauthoring the book “*Manga and Anime*” as *Culture* (*Kyōyō toshite no “Manga, Anime,”* 2001), Sasakibara turned to adult computer games, which feature manga/anime characters involved in sexual and sometimes violent scenarios. While classic approaches to media effects might suspect connections to sexual violence, in the early 2000s, players of adult computer games in Japan were instead increasingly vocal about their love for the characters that they interacted with (Azuma 2001; Morikawa 2003; Honda 2005). Even as manga/anime fans called favorite characters their “wives” (*ore no yome* or *mai waifu*), which anthropologist Ian Condry understands as a gambit for social recognition of these relationships (Condry 2013, 200-203), players of adult computer games stood out. Put simply, these players insisted on relationships with characters, which is a phenomenon less associated with computer/console gaming globally and more with manga/anime fandom in Japan. (For an introduction to the culture of character affection in Japan, see Galbraith 2014.)

While he did not start writing about adult computer games and the culture of character affection until the early 2000s, Sasakibara gained firsthand experience as a player from the late 1990s. First encountering adult computer games in 1998, when the industry was undergoing a renaissance that led to more developed stories and characters, Sasakibara (2014) noticed unexpected similarities to *shōjo* (for girls) manga, which he had been reading since the late 1970s:

When I started playing adult computer games, what surprised me was how poetic and lyrical the text was. The stories focused a great deal on the feelings of the girls. They were sweet (*yasashii hyōgen*). But, as the stories proceeded, the games turned into pornography. That problem of sexuality was what most interested me. The games brought together poetic love stories like *shōjo* manga and sex scenes like pornography for men. Adult computer games are a poetic and lyrical world, a world of emotions, like *shōjo* manga. At the same time, they are pornography.⁷

Sasakibara describes adult computer games as “media that allow for gazing at women as objects for the fulfillment of sex-love desire, while at the same time depicting the interiority of women” (Sasakibara 2003, 108). In this way, nonplayable female characters are presented as both sex objects and subjects with interiority.

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

American anti-pornography feminists as Catharine MacKinnon (1982; 1997) and Andrea Dworkin (1979; 1987), but in fact argues something quite different. By Sasakibara's (2003, 104) estimation, the player of an adult computer game becomes immersed in its reality, or "a person involved" (*tōjisha*). As such, the player cannot claim distance and detachment from the game and what happens in it. Game mechanics reinforce this involvement by allowing, and indeed forcing, the player to make choices. The player takes action in the world, which has consequences in the story that involves him. In terms of game design, Sasakibara (2003, 105) argues that it is crucial that choices are made in relation to characters. In addition to the gaze of the player seeing the nonplayable female character onscreen from a first-person perspective, Sasakibara (2003, 105) draws attention to the gaze of that nonplayable female character, who is "looking at me" (*watashi wo mitsumeteiru*). The character stares out of the screen at the player, whose gaze she meets and returns (see also Greenwood 2014, 243).

For his part, Sasakibara experiences this as not only a personal interaction but also an interaction with another person. Tellingly, he chooses to refer to nonplayable female characters as "humans" (*ningen*) (Sasakibara 2003, 105), which suggests something quite different from "nonplayable sex objects" (Sarkeesian 2014). If the games that Sarkeesian plays and critiques feature mechanics and designs that conspire to make nonplayable female characters into objects—nonhuman, subhuman—that do not receive human empathy, then this is not the case in the adult computer games that Sasakibara plays and critiques. Instead, when making a choice, Sasakibara (2003, 105) considers how it will impact the character that he is interacting with, who he knows, if not cares about, and is "someone" (*dareka*) looking back at him: "I decide my feelings for 'someone,' the one looking out from inside the monitor screen at me, the player, and take the action of decisive participation, which will affect the other." As a person involved, the player is responsible for his involvement, which "may hurt the girl in front of my eyes". This girl is "a unique and irreplaceable 'someone,' not a simple two-dimensional image or 'thing'" (Sasakibara 2003, 107).

To demonstrate this, Sasakibara shares his experience of playing *The Eternity You Desire* (*Kimi ga nozomu eien*, 2001), which tells the story of a high-school senior (the player character) who cannot decide his future path. His friend, Hayase Mitsuki, is sporty and pals around with him, but that seems to be the extent of their relationship. One day, Mitsuki introduces the player character to her friend Suzumiya Haruka, who is shy but eventually works up her courage and confesses her love to him. The player character and Haruka end up dating and, while 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 the story takes an unexpected turn

when Haruka is in a traffic accident and ends up in a coma. Three years later, Haruka is still unconscious in the hospital and the player character is with Mitsuki, who long had feelings for him but held back. The couple is finally ready to move forward with their life together—then Haruka wakes up. She is still in love with the player character and does not know how much time has passed and how many things have happened. The player character wants to tell Haruka the truth, but the doctor warns that he must not do so for risk of psychological shock. The player character goes to visit Haruka, who asks him to intertwine his fingers with hers and say the words of a charm, which they had often done when together. The interaction proceeds as follows:

(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 check 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...? Do you not know it?”

With a puzzled face, Haruka asks.

(Player): “N, no...”

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

The player is conflicted, but a choice must be made. The text is full of long pauses and ellipses to slow things down and allow for imagining the scene and filling in the blanks. After playing the game this far, the player cannot help but think of the meaning of this action and how it might impact Haruka and Mitsuki. All the while, Haruka appears onscreen as a still image of a small, fragile-looking girl, sitting up in a hospital bed; drawn in the style of manga and anime, she has massive, emotive eyes that stare directly at the player character and, beyond him and the screen, at the player, who sees her from a first-person perspective. All the text appears in the box below her image onscreen, but her lines are also recorded by a voice actress and heard by the player as he reads along. The voice belongs to a character, but also someone human. It quivers. Seeing Haruka in all of her vulnerability, seeing her face and hearing her voice, Sasakibara recalls vividly the emotional demand of the game and character. Playing through this scenario, he could not help but be a person involved. In fact, Sasakibara (2003, 107) characterizes the guilt he felt at the time as something like “criminal accomplice” (*kyōhansei*).⁸

Guilt suggests a sense of responsibility, which is a point that does not escape Sasakibara (2003, 106). The player must take responsibility for his capacity to hurt the other, which is his capacity to make a choice and act in the world. For Sasakibara (2003, 109), the player, as the subject acting upon the object, is the “sex that injures” (*kizu tsukeru sei*). From here, Sasakibara (2014) makes connections with sexual violence:

What is the violence of men? It’s having a body that is capable of rape. I do not intend to rape, but my body has the capacity to do it. This is the biggest problem of men, and also the one that they least want to face. The capacity to do violence. No man wants to face it, but all men must.

This resonates with the position of North American anti-pornography feminists that, in the context of fundamentally unequal relations of power, sex is violence (MacKinnon 1982, 541; 1997, 159, 165; Dworkin 1987, 122-147), but Sasakibara sees violence as something that one can do through action, not a revealed truth. By facing their “assaulting desires” (*kōgeki-teki na yokujō*) and capacity to do violence, Sasakibara (2014) argues that men can take a stance against sexual violence.

Adult computer games stage a confrontation with the self as actor and “self as victimizer” (*kagaisha toshite no boku*) (Sasakibara 2003, 108). In adult computer games, players are the sex that injures, “an existence that hurts her” (*kanojo wo kizu tsukete shimau sonzai*) (Sasakibara 2003, 109). That she is designed to be a cute girl—weak and vulnerable—highlights the dynamic even more. If “cuteness names an aesthetic encounter with an exaggerated difference in power” that has the “capacity to convert a

subject's veiled or latent aggression towards a vulnerable object into explicit aggression" (Ngai 2005, 828), then adult computer games encourage, even force, thinking through that encounter. While not entirely pleasant, Sasakibara (2014) argues that it is individually and collectively good to take responsibility for one's capacity to act and hurt others. Rather than deny that one is capable of violence, or, worse, to project that refused and repressed violence onto others (Kipnis 1996, 7-9), it is better to take responsibility for it and act with care. Awareness of relations of power opens them to scrutiny. In this way, Sasakibara (2014) argues that the player of adult computer games becomes aware of "his own violence" (*jibun no bōryokusei*), or desire and power to act.

This is the beginning of what Sasakibara (2003, 101) refers to as his "ethics" (*rinrikan*). In the adult computer games that Sasakibara plays and critiques, the player spends time listening to and learning about female characters, which is part of "ethically facing" (*rinri-teki ni mukiau*) them (Sasakibara 2003, 113). In his ethics, Sasakibara insists on acting with care and consideration, even when the other is just a "fictional character" in a "game." This ethics, according to Sasakibara (2014), has real social implications:

It's about self-consciousness toward violence (*bōryoku ni tai suru ji'ishiki*) and overturning power. It's not only about whether one does or doesn't commit acts of violence, but also recognizing the violence in oneself. It's about throwing away one's power, rejecting violence and not becoming a person who commits violent acts. [...] 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.

In statements such as this one, Sasakibara seems to be hinting that adult computer games provide a way to work through relations of power and adopt an ethical position against hurting others.⁹ It is not that Sasakibara and adult computer gamers like him are not playing through scenarios of sexual violence, because they are, in addition to scenarios of emotional drama. In fact, as Sasakibara (2014) points out in the juxtaposition of *shōjo* manga and pornography, these things can coexist in the same adult computer games, which is out of sync with global norms (Azuma, Saitō, and Kotani 2003, 180). Rather than normalizing sexual violence, however, Sasakibara suggests that confronting the ugly parts of desire and relationships can lead to an ethics like his own.

Conclusion

As played and presented by Sasakibara Gō, adult computer games in Japan speak to fundamental debates in second-wave feminism that began in the late 1970s and continue

to this day. During the feminist sex wars, Catharine MacKinnon (1997, 168) famously argued that pornography expresses the essence of sex under patriarchy as the “forcible violation of women.” She boiled it down to the following equation: “Man fucks woman; subject verb object” (MacKinnon 1982, 541). Under patriarchy, sex is something that men do to women, which is fundamentally violent. This critique would seem to extend to adult computer games in Japan, which MacKinnon (1993, 103) might describe as another all-too-familiar example of sex between subjects and objects, people and things, real men and fictional women. However, for Sasakibara, female characters in adult computer games are not simply objects. While MacKinnon (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988, 38) argues that in pornography “women are reduced to subhuman dimensions to the point where they cannot be perceived as fully human,” Sasakibara (2003, 107) experiences humanization of the object onscreen into “a unique and irreplaceable ‘someone,’ not a simple two-dimensional image or ‘thing’.”¹⁰

If Anita Sarkeesian (2014) is concerned that gamers acting on objects, and especially “nonplayable sex objects,” are part of a culture of sexism and sexual violence, then Sasakibara is playing a different game entirely. In this game, actions and their consequences are carefully considered in relation to nonplayable female characters that are also significant others. While by no means overcoming sexism, in playing adult computer games, Sasakibara recognizes the capacity for violence in unequal relations of power, much as anti-pornography feminists did in North America (Dworkin 1979; 1987; MacKinnon 1982; 1997). Today, many are comfortable responding to critiques of sexism and sexual violence by saying, “Not all men.” This not only closes down discussion, but also allows for the fantasy of the pure subject incapable of harm: not me, not all men, not my problem, not a problem. In contrast, as presented and played by Sasakibara, adult computer games in Japan contribute to scrutinizing and challenging relations of power and one’s capacity for violence. Involved in relationships and actions, the player of adult computer games is not allowed to be a pure subject incapable of harm. Facing his “assaulting desires” and “his own violence” (Sasakibara 2014), the player develops an ethical position and acts with care.

Amid calls to “ban all games that promote and simulate sexual violence” (Lah 2010), one might ask if simulating and promoting are the same thing. Resonating with Sasakibara (2014), others argue that simulating violence can contribute to “an ethics of imaginary violence” (Bastow 2015) and understanding violence and its consequences (Laycock 2015, 190-193). Demands such as those made by Sarkeesian to remove sexism and sexual violence from computer/console games (Totilo 2015) disallow the kind of play described by Sasakibara. Of course, Sasakibara does not speak for all men, Japanese or gamers, but, in the wake of Gamergate, he provokes us to rethink positions that can seem

at times like commonsense. Moving away from battle lines and trenches, we can have more productive discussions in response to Gamergate and issues raised by that moment.

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Notes

1. The victim made the post public at <https://twitter.com/femfreq/status/504718160902492160/photo/1>.
2. Fieldwork in Tokyo between April 2014 and August 2015 was conducted with approval of the Institutional Review Board of Duke University (Protocol C0044).
3. This is a core argument against adult computer games such as *RapeLay*, which turn sexual violence into interactive entertainment (Nakasatomi 2013).
4. Indeed, in casual conversations in the field, adult computer games were regularly referred to as *bishōjo* games.
5. This is also the understanding of pornography advanced by Kagami (2010, 111-114), but he does not problematize it in the same way as Taylor.

6. “When the privilege of men to express their own will is negated, the symbol of ‘woman’ (*josei*) as a commodity property circulated among men comes to be replaced with the proxy symbol of the ‘young girl’ (*shōjo*). Once the positions of the symbols of ‘woman’ and ‘young girl’ are reversed, the young girl is, through her youthful innocence, made to lack a will of her own and the ideals and delusions of the male gender can be freely projected [...] In other words, such a symbol possesses an extremely favorable set of conditions for the expression of masculinized desire” (Naitō 2010, 328-329). The next step is from dominating actual girls to virtual ones, who have no libidinal agency or will and can be dominated freely, which is to say that the virtual girl is the perfect sex object (Taylor 2007, 202).
7. Although he uses the term “pornography,” Sasakibara recognizes that the line between “porn” and “not porn” is contested as part of an ongoing “power game” (*pawā gēmu*). This resonates with anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin’s (2011, 261-265) approach to the politics of sexuality.
8. Consider once more the example of *Kana: Little Sister*. What if the player chooses to pursue a relationship with Kana, his sick sister in the hospital? Not only is this taboo and might hurt both of them, but it would definitely hurt his first love, Yumi. But could the player choose to advance a relationship with Yumi and not his sister, sick and in love, if Kana desired it? Would the player have sex with Kana or keep it platonic, which would mean giving up sex scenes? What if there was a choice to cheat and be with both Kana and Yumi? Would the player do it? Feel guilty?
9. Statistics are always problematic, but scholars (e.g., Schodt 1996, 50-53; Diamond and Uchiyama 1999, 11; Kagami 2010, 182, 319) point out that reports of violent sexual crime are significantly lower in Japan than in North America, and from this argue that sexually explicit media does not reflect or feed into a culture of sexual violence.
10. 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” (in Fiennes 2006), then, in adult computer games, players such as Sasakibara are emotionally, seriously engaged and do not stop short of the act, which they feel responsibility for.