
Playing with Feelings

Porn, Emotion, and Disability in Katawa Shoujo

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Katawa Shoujo is a bishoujo-style visual novel set in the fictional Yamaku High School for disabled children, located somewhere in modern Japan. Hisao Nakai, a normal boy living a normal life, has his life turned upside down when a congenital heart defect forces him to move to a new school after a long hospitalization. Despite his difficulties, Hisao is able to find friends—and perhaps love, if he plays his cards right. (Four Leaf Studios, 2012)

Described as a visual novel, but also often referred to as a dating-sim or a hentai-game/h-game, *Katawa Shoujo* (Four Leaf Studios, 2012) is an adult videogame produced by Four Leaf Studios, a team of amateur developers, and released for free over the internet. The concept of the game originated in artwork posted to the “/a/anime and manga” thread on the website 4chan, a general imageboard perhaps better known for its association with the genesis of the internet hacktivist group, Anonymous. The image, created by a manga artist RAITA, outlined a number of characters for a then hypothetical dating-sim called *Katawa Shoujo* (see figure 1), translated as “disability girls” (or given the more colloquial meaning of “*Katawa*,” Cripple Girls). This image sparked excitement and a sticky thread on the 4chan boards dedicated to the faithful development of the game around RAITA’s original model. The project commenced in 2007 and after 5 years of development and major changes to the team of contributors and the production system, the final version of the game was released in January of 2012 via Four Leaf Studio’s website.



Figure 1. RIATA's Original Concept Artwork, Inspiration for Katawa Shoujo

What is striking about the game is its subject matter. As its description on the studio's website indicates, it is an adult visual novel set in a fictional Japanese high school for students with disabilities. The action of the game centers on the player's navigation of the school's social setting and the development of a romantic, sexual relationship with one of the game's five female characters.

These relationships develop in the style of a dating-sim or a choose-your-own adventure; players make simple dialogue choices during the course of the game which open or preclude various narrative paths. The game tracks the player's rapport with women characters and based on their decisions different story arcs are opened or closed. A successful completion of the game will reveal one of the game's scripted conclusions, a "good" or occasionally "neutral ending". However, in keeping with the format of bishoujo-style visual novels or choose-your-own-adventure narratives, the player's decisions can result in a "bad ending". Most often in *Katawa Shoujo*, this bad ending follows from a failure to successfully court a character, arrived at through a series of incorrect dialogue choices. A bad ending also often finds the player/Hisao drinking on the school's roof with his comically misogynist roommate, Kenji, before falling to his death after a drunken-misstep. By comparison, the good endings generally find Hisao in a relationship with one of the women in the game; these arcs are punctuated by soft-core sexual encounters and ultimately culminate in a dialogue that marks a hope for their future and ongoing relationship. In these arcs, tensions over identity, character conflicts, trauma, and any other barriers to a relationship are reconciled. The player is left with an emotionally and sexually gratifying resolution.

As the game centers on a school for students with disabilities, each of the major characters embodies some form of disability. RAITA's original illustration provides the general framework for their appearance in game, their identities, and (loosely) the conditions for the player-character's interactions with them. All of the women in the game are illustrated as young, attractive, high school students. Rin (who uses prosthetic legs) and Emi are double amputees, Hanako is severely scarred by burns, Lilly is blind (so is the player's hall/roommate Kanji), and Shizune is deaf/mute. Even the player's character, Hisao, suffers from a heart condition, which affects him at moments of stress or heavy physical exertion. Ultimately it becomes a kind of convenient plot device, described sarcastically in the development blog as, "a variant of anime magic aids, a condition that has only minor consequences to the life of the character except when the plot calls for sudden heart attacks." Despite the cavalier

treatment of disability in this description of Hisao or in the initial construction of the women in the game, neither of which do much to challenge ablest body aesthetics, *Katawa Shoujo* strives for more than instrumentalist treatment of disability. The theme of disability becomes central to the relationships that Hisao cultivates with each of the women but the game avoids a representation of disability that defines relationships. In both the developer blogs and my own interview with Aura, one of the writers, disability is stressed as an initial character trait which when combined with broader personalities, interests, experience, and the setting open onto much more complex identities and characterizations. Diane Carr's (2013) recent work on disability in games goes much further than this paper could hope in terms of modeling a framework for studying representations disability in games. However, in light of Carr's writing, *Katawa Shoujo* might become a space in which we can recognize more robust treatments of differing ability at work in video games. The expressed intention of the authors and the work of the narrative arrangement is not to let disability become the fetishized feature of the game and the core element of the game's sex, even if the title and set-up seems to foreground it.

What the game becomes, as a result of this organization, is a surprisingly affective story driven by characters, relationships, and romance more than the hentai-manga that it initially appears to be. It is in this regard that the game takes on interesting import in pornography studies. Discursively, maybe ostensibly too, *Katawa Shoujo* is positioned as a porn game that fetishizes disability in a high school setting. Upon closer examination the game becomes a compelling exploration of otherness, trauma, and identity; a cheesy romance novel, an impressive example of collaboration and vision (from a group of amateur developers), and finally, a very personal, intimate experience for many players. In this complexity *Katawa Shoujo* produces representations of disability in porn that are potentially enabling as much as they are problematic. *Katawa Shoujo* is poised to defy expectations in an interesting way. For pornography studies this opens a window onto the complexities desire and identification in pornographic material.

In the introduction to *Bound and Gagged, Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1999), Laura Kipnis writes, “Whether pornography should or shouldn’t exist is pretty much beside the point. It does exist, and it’s not going away. Why it exists, what it has to say, and who pornography thinks it’s talking to, are more interesting questions than all these doomed, dreary attempts to debate it, regulate it, or protest it. Just what is pornography’s grip on the cultural imagination?” (Kipnis, 1999, p. x-xi) The question that Kipnis poses permits a fruitful interrogation of *Katawa Shoujo*’s politics and, perhaps by extension, the politics of fantasy, more broadly, to which it responds. The game is titillating, it is arousing but in ways that challenge understandings of what we want from or get out of porn. Considering its populist origins, its popularity as a game, and its failure (?) as hardcore-porn, *Katawa Shoujo* disrupts prevailing ideas about pornography, or at least the desires that pornography taps into. This game is weird, not because it centers on disability or because it positions itself as pornographic, fetishistic, or even perverse. It is weird, or more specifically out-standing, because it moves from these frames to develop a narrative and ludic structure which privileges affective decision making in the service of fantasies that challenge prevailing understandings of pornography.

Playing the Game/Choosing-My-Own-Adventure/Sim-Dating in the Virtual-Novel

In order to critically position *Katawa Shoujo* (alternatively, KS) it is necessary to begin by considering its form, its narrative structure, and the way its characters and relationships are revealed to the player. At a structural level the game world is introduced through a series of still images in combination with text-based dialogue and narration. Built on the Ren’Py engine for visual novels, the game reads like a comic book, it unfolds as a series of cells or frames (see figure 2). Dialogue appears along the bottom of the screen in text balloons, character sprites are placed in the foreground, and a filtered/edited photographic image is used as the background. Although there are numerous important exceptions to this, the sex scenes being one example, the game adheres to this general formula for the majority of

each of its character arcs. This system works because text, character models/sprites, and backgrounds may be positioned independently. Each of these elements becomes an asset that can be re-deployed and as a result characters, backgrounds, and even dialogue sequences reappear in each of the arcs. The exceptions to this model are the game's fully drawn scenes and the animation sequences that punctuate the end of the game's first act. The use of fully drawn still images allow for a comparatively greater deal of detail and representation at the expense of malleability. These are employed at crucial moments in the story- picnics, reunions, a track event, and, most notably, the sex scenes. In the sex sequences, still images are treated with minor adjustments for facial expression and movement that generate the illusion of cinematic progression or animation. It is also worth noting that although billed as a porn game, the use of still images to illustrate the sexual encounters in the game renders these moments decidedly soft-core (with the exception of one instance of fully represented penetration). Given their infrequency and their job punctuating key moments in the narrative these images (pornographic and not) are made available to players via a gallery in the game.



Figure 2. Two Examples of Individual Frames in Katawa Shoujo

In any play-through of the game, the player as Hisao must navigate a series of interactions in *Katawa Shoujo*'s first act. The decisions made here determine which story arcs will be available to the player in the game's later stages. The decisions that the game asks the player to make are simple, usually only consisting of a few choices, but any individual choice may determine the outcome of the game. *Katawa*

Shoujo opens on your character, Hisao, and a young woman, Iwnako, standing in the snow. When the first signs of Hisao's heart condition appear, this is marked in the game by a pulsing red frame around the corners of your screen as it blurs and fades to black. Although it is not a first-person videogame in the traditional sense, the visual style introduced here implies a perspective shared by the player and Hisao. Indeed, in a deviation from the comic book or manga to which we may compare KS's visual style, the game rarely features its protagonist onscreen. He appears only occasionally and almost exclusively in fully drawn still images. For the majority of the game the player and Hisao look in on the action from the other edge of the screen. In this visual arrangement, you are hailed by the formal structure of the game as Hisao.

As the game progresses, you find yourself at a new school and are confronted by your first decision. After an introduction to Akio Mutou, the homeroom teacher, you are asked to introduce yourself to the class. You may accept this invitation or may instead inquire about why you would want to, an expression of helplessness in the shadow of recent events. As it turns out, this decision has little effect on the story and regardless of your choice you are lead to a classroom where you say a few words before Mutou completes the introduction. Though this first choice has little effect on the narrative arc of the game, it invites you, the player, to empathize with Hisao. The choice to speak to the class expresses Hisao's renewed agency while the more passive response reflects a sense of futility in light of the medical diagnosis and the challenge of a new school. It is this level of empathetic decision making that guides the player through Katawa Shoujo. These types of choices which ask you to get into the characters' heads do not foreground your active embodiment of Hisao (in the way you might control an avatar in an action oriented game), but they do serve to connect the players selections directly to the narratological arc of the game.

Following this dialogue choice, your first class, and a series of introductions to Katawa Shoujo's periphery characters, you arrive at the cafeteria with the class representative (and potential partner later

in the game) Shizune and her friend, Misha. She asks if you have any other questions. At this point you may choose to “Ask about Shizune’s deafness,” “Ask about the library,” or explain that “I think I got everything I need to know.” Asking about the library will increase your standing with Hanako and Lilly. Asking about Shizune nets you no change and instead keeps all relationships neutral (which is essential to opening Rin’s arc later or avoiding, Hanako, Lilly, and Shizune’s path). Finally, asking no questions raises your standing with Shizune who prefers confidence and self-sufficiency. Unlike the first dialogue decision, this choice has a significant effect on your path through the narrative; the selection here forecloses certain relationships while opening others. Like the first it asks you, the player, to empathize with Hisao (and the characters around him) in order to progress.

Through a quick succession of these kinds of decisions, your relationships and standings change and gradually you embark on one of the game’s branching paths, a relationship arc with one of the women in your class. In my first play-through of the game, I made a series of decisions that culminated in an early morning meeting with Emi at the school’s running track. Emi, an amputee and avid blade-runner, challenges Hisao to a race. With Hisao’s heart condition in mind, Katawa Shoujo gives you the option to conserve yourself or to give it your all. This isn’t a dialog choice (like many of the early decisions); instead it is framed within Hisao’s own internal monologue. I chose the latter, which results in a familiar red glow around the frame of the screen, a visual suggestion of the heart condition and a reminder of your embodiment as Hisao. The race results in a trip to the school’s infirmary but also improves favor with Emi.

At this point the player has embarked on Emi’s romantic arc. In her story line you continue to join her for morning runs, you attend her track events, you meet her friends. All of which eventually develops into a narrative of intense closeness. The choices that you are given demand the same pattern of empathy that you have been asked to practice in relationship to Hisao, only now they center on developing

a relationship with Emi. Instead of directing the game towards a particular arc, at this point the player is positioned to move forward in the relationship (and towards the games promised sex scenes) or fail to cultivate a relationship and arrive at one of the bad endings. Then the plot takes a somber turn. Emi's physical disability temporarily confines her to a wheelchair and the player is tasked with comforting her without violating her sense of self-sufficiency. Following another major decision, a visit between Hisao and Emi turns into the game's first sex sequence. The soft-core scene is drawn from Hisao's perspective, emphasizing a shared gaze. Emi sits on top of you, she removes her shirt, then yours, and in a moment rendered more vivid by textual narration than the visual image, you stimulate each other to climax.

When the game, once again, takes a dramatic tone the player must work through mysterious tensions in order to save the relationship. It is revealed that Emi doesn't want to invest too heavily in your relationship. Initially this is framed as an extension of Emi's disability and suggests that the player will need work past her concerns about self-sufficiency. At this moment in the narrative of the game seems poised to restage meditations on disability and identity. As you try to work through this you learn that Emi's trauma is deeper – it is rooted in feelings of loss and a fear of abandonment. The player learns that Emi's emotional identity isn't simply an extension of her physical disability and that the tensions manifesting themselves now are rooted in her family history, not her embodiment. In this portion of the game, it is possible to make choices that are insensitive, either by misreading cues or by intentionally subverting the game's empathetic frame. These choices, cruel or simply accidental, lead you through a narrative trajectory that is shorter and less rewarding. In contrast, by listening to the advice of her friends or her mother and allowing her to re-assert her independence you arrive at Emi's "good ending". She opens up to you and the game concludes with a third sexual encounter between you and Emi. It is scripted as the most romantic and intimate of the three and it carries all the import afforded by the strides you've made in navigating a strained relationship. This sex-scene ends with

you and Emi in conversation – Emi’s last line of dialogue in the scene, “I love you, Hsiao.”

Certainly not all of the romances in the game are as fraught, or complex as Emi’s arc. Some are longer, some are shorter. Notably Emi and Lilly are the only to feature three sexual encounters. However, what we see in Emi’s plot line and which holds true across the game, is an emphasis on connection and identification. The gameplay and sex is titillating, but as much as (if not more than) it is visual, it is also intellectual and empathetic. The sex in the game is communicated to players via still images. An encounter in the track shed is rendered as a single still image marked by subtle changes to facial expression; the core of its development and imagery is textual. Likewise, the culminating sex sequence between Hisao and Emi is framed by dialog and plot to provide its erotic power. The visual component alone is simply a single image of Hisao and Emi entangled on her bed. In this regard it would be difficult to characterize the game as pornographic, if only because pornographic imagery makes up such a small portion of the game. At best, it contains moments of pornography in a scopic sense but these are fleeting. Instead, what seem to hold the greatest charge in this game are the ludic process, the romance, and the textual imagery. These are the elements which imbue the game and the sex with their import.

An additional example will be useful here. In the story arc for Shizune, the first sexual encounter between Shizune and Hisao takes place in a guestroom during a visit to her family. Shizune has tied Hisao by his hands to a chair (Shizune is deaf and mute, meaning that without the use of his hands to sign he is functionally bound and gagged). As a reminder of the player’s textual embodiment as Hisao, a blindfold renders both you (via the back screen) and Hisao blind. As a result, the following sequence begins only with Hisao’s internal monologue.

I can feel her leaning over me, and suddenly, something soft and moist touches my lips. My body tenses up in surprise. Fortunately, not as awkward a reaction as I could have

made. It was a quick peck, and I almost think that's the end of it, but then she kisses me again, more deeply this time. Her hands slide down onto my shoulders, up to my neck, and then back down again. Then across my shoulders and down my arms, I can feel the weight of her body on my legs, and the eroticism of the situation isn't lost on me. At this point I'm ready to open my eyes just a crack, but as if expecting it, she puts her fingers on my eyelids. Seconds later something ties my hands together at the wrists... (Katawa Shoujo, 2012)

All of this takes place in the darkness of a black screen, you are led along by the imagery of the narration and this text must carry the erotic force of the moment (see figure 3). Eventually you are granted sight but as the sequence progresses the solitary still image does very little to convey the action of the scene. Hisao and Shizune remain clothed in the visual image; the sex that occurs is only made manifest for the player in this flow of internal narration.



Figure 3. The image used for the clothed sex sequence with Shizune, it replaces the black screen which begins the scene.

Between these two examples, Emi's arc and the specific case of Hisao and Shizune's first sex scene, it is apparent that the titillating and engaging sexual elements of Katawa Shoujo are more directly situated in story and narration than imagery alone. Emi's story is loaded more heavily with plot, character development, and emotion than sex and visually erotic images; in this arc sex is imbued with meaning via a depth of narrative and a sense of progression. Likewise, in the sex scene between Hisao and Shizune, the player is encouraged to visualize the action, with the provided images offering very little explicit detail. In this light, the games sexual elements seem to be located in at the level of language and the narrative, rather than the visual. It is an intellectual explicitness before it is a scopic one.

In effect the game positions the player for a double reading in advance of the simple gratification of sexual images. A reading of affect and emotion (the player must be emotionally responsive to progress in the game) and a literal reading of the sex sequences at work in the game. Both of these readings trouble the visceral and immediate guarantee of satisfaction associated with pornography. Citing Marty Klein, Debbie Nathan explains that porn is often “‘all about the fantasy of ‘abundance...’ It’s like a fairy tale feast where the food is perfectly prepared and there’s more than enough for everyone.” (Nathan 2007, p. 34) This is not the pornographic fantasy activated by Katawa Shoujo, the scarcity and affect attached to sex change the way the game asks players to relate to porn. The player must work through affect and text to arrive at the sex in Katawa Shoujo and this disrupts the masturbatory immediacy often associated with pornography in the mainstream.

Interview with Aura

This understanding of the game as a disruption of generic pornographic aesthetics is complemented by an interview with one of the story writers, Aura. A lead writer for the game and one of the members who moved from the original 4chan sticky thread to

the consolidated team of developers who would become Four Leaf Studios, Aura, is responsible for Rin's narrative arc among other sequences of dialogue. In a discussion that centered on the game's production context and the Four Leaf Studios team's approach to the project, I asked what drew contributors/developers to the game. Aura suggested that the premise was intriguing: "An attractive combination of the familiar and the outrageous." (Interview with Aura, 2013) This was the idea of taking a familiar trope from anime and manga, the Japanese high school setting, and combining it with the outlandish concept of a dating-sim featuring characters with disabilities. This attraction extends beyond the developers; Aura also attributes much of the game's broader attention and relative internet fame to the terror and fascination associated with the general concept, "Journalists, bloggers, and whoever recommends *Katawa Shoujo* to a friend starts with the spiel about how the concept of a cripple teenage porn game made by 4channers is horrifying... 'but KS is really good, trust me bro.'" (Interview with Aura, 2013) In each of these cases the game's concept demands attention, due in a large part to the assumptions that this premise elicits. The danger of a fetishistic treatment of the challenging topics (and even more challenging representations) of sex, teenagers, and disability by members of an internet collective, 4Chan, most often associated with shock content and counter-cultural nihilism/anarchism. The prospect of this arrangement fascinates people. For Aura, the game's power to titillate precedes its content; at the conceptual level it activates something – curiosity and excitement, shock and revulsion, the familiar and the taboo. Perhaps it would be fair to say all of these are at work in producing the game's position in a social imaginary and in advance of any direct engagement with its material content.

This may explain why a community review of the game for Kotaku, is quick to address the treatment of disability, assuring readers that the game's politics is neither grotesque fetish nor "pity-porn," (AFLYINGIPIS, 2013) and that the characters are fully fleshed out. A staff review of the game for the same website begins, "When I first heard that a visual novel centered around dating girls with physical disabilities was being made, my first thought was 'only

in Japan.’ Of course, I was completely wrong.” (Eisenbeis, 2012) Indeed, these qualifications do the work of distancing the game from the pornographic. Marking the adult themes and content but separating these from the core of the game which is more than “porn”. Even in our conversation, Aura reveals his reluctance to call *Katawa Shoujo* porn. Less for reasons of modesty or propriety, but out of a fundamental awareness of what “porn” is supposed to look like, and what *Katawa Shoujo* ultimately becomes. Aura proposes a way of mediating this tension, “What if I told you we tried to make a porn game but accidentally flunked it and it became this touching romance thing instead or vice versa?” (Interview with Aura, 2013) In this conflict over what *KS* is about Aura and online apologists for the game express a need to bracket the soft-core from the hard, and porn from erotica, from romance fiction, and so on.

Because the sex of the game takes a secondary position relative to its story, Aura clarifies that as pornography the game may be a failure. The hentai/sex sequences are outshined by or, more precisely, fully subsumed in the narrative of the game. While players are excited by the sex, this is an extension of their investment in the story world. Aura posits that what players see in the game, and identify with, is an “otherness of being disabled,” and goes on to suggest that “it is very common for people to share their experience of reading *Katawa Shoujo* with other fans because, for a very large fraction, it is a very emotional experience.” (Interview with Aura, 2013) In many respects Aura is correct, the game largely isn’t porn. The sex becomes an infrequent component of the experience, and where it does appear, it is a product of narrative and description as much as raw visual images. The simple still images only work through the dialogue and narration of any particular sequence and carry the majority of their meaning in relationship to the plot and to the affects that it elicits. Aura offers instructive insight here, “*KS* is about reversing expectations, both inside the narrative and in the way it’s treated by the audience.” (Interview with Aura, 2013) On one hand we might see this reversal simply as a move from porn to romance – the failed porn text a space for more intellectual fantasies about romance and emotion. But there seems to be more to this reversal: rather

than see KS as one or the other, porn or romance, we might see it as both. The game is certainly positioned as porn and contains within it moments of pornographic revelation within the broader narrative, but this explicitness is complimented by long stretches of non-pornographic action and situated by robust literary description. When I asked how the team sought to handle the juxtaposition of the sex and the story, Aura explained that there was supposed to be no juxtaposition. That is, the sex, in the game is there as a part of the plot. In this regard, while the label “porn” may be tough to attach, the linkages between narrative, erotic description, pornographic images are so essential to the game that disentangling them becomes impossible. In effect, the game is designed to prohibit a clear demarcation of each of these elements. KS is porn tempered by frameworks that are often differentiated from pornography. The result is that through a troubling of the boundaries of the genre, *Katawa Shoujo* opens a consideration of desire and fantasy that reveals the complexities that porn is capable of and expands an understanding of desire.

Theorizing the Game: *Katawa Shoujo*, Porn, and Fantasy

By way of a conclusion, we must bring two framing elements to bear on this game. The first is Laura Kipnis’s work in *Bound and Gagged* introduced in the introduction to this paper, “Just what is pornography’s grip on the cultural imagination?” To this we will add, one of the concluding thoughts from her book, “It [porn] exposes the cultural psyche (as for Freud, Dreams were the route to the unconscious). So the question is, if you put porn on the couch and let it free associate, what is it really saying? What are the inner tensions and unconscious conflicts that propel its narratives?” (Kipnis, 1999 p. 162) The second framing though comes from the end of my discussion with Aura. At the close of our interview I asked if there were any questions I should have asked but didn’t, something that would be illuminating. The suggestion Aura posed was to consider why the team kept the sex in the game? Despite calls to excise it and the knowledge that without depictions of hard-sex the game could potentially achieve more widespread adoption, why make a porn

game and not just a romance novel? I speculated that this must have been a need to express something, an honesty or authenticity that the sex could capture. Aura's explanation was simpler: it had to stay, it was exciting, it was challenging, it was the hardest part, and it was what the team wanted.

In light of Kipnis and Aura's questions, we have to discuss *Katawa Shoujo* in terms of pornography. Not because it is or isn't; but in a discursive relationship with porn we can put it on the couch, as Kipnis proposes, and we can ask it about desire, and fantasy, and identity. *Katawa Shoujo* has a lot to say in this regard. A game originating on 4chan, it is expected to be troublesome, violent, exploitative – a cripple teenage porn game. While it is possible to approach the game with these intentions, *Katawa Shoujo* resonates with players on much deeper emotional levels, inspiring identification and the exploration of romance, relationships, trauma, identity, etc. It seems to have a lot to say about desire. More than titillating images of naked disabled girls, the game points us to a desire for connection and stimulation beyond the scopophilic and fetishistic. *Katawa Shoujo* puts porn in connection with a much wider range of expressions than it is often afforded. In this light it seems much more difficult and problematic to start drawing lines.

In an essay critiquing the myopia of anti-porn feminism, an early entry in this ongoing debate, Joanna Russ (1985) argues that pornography be understood from perspectives which see it as more than a matter sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Although these concerns remain prescient to her, she also sees porn opening up discursive space which shouldn't simply be met with a retreat into "decency issues." (Russ, 1985, p. 62) Instead, Russ proposes a view of this moment as a "democratization" of pornography." (Russ, 1985, p. 62) It's in this light that we may read *Katawa Shoujo*'s project as potentially progressive. If Russ sees women's erotic literature as a parallel to pornography's self-serving and masturbatory fantasies then *Katawa Shoujo* potentially offers a move in the opposite direction, connecting pornography to fantasies of empathy and emotion. *Katawa Shoujo* is attuned to issues of otherness, its ludic structure

rewards understanding over self-gratification and it ties these impulses to sexuality in a progressive way. Its treatment of disability is attached to this aesthetic, the characters in this narrative are allowed to be complicated and resist reduction, even if they do remain within a limited fantasy aesthetic.

Ultimately, *Katawa Shoujo* may or may not be pornography. At any rate, the term in this context is terribly difficult to pin down. What is important is that in its connection to porn and its failure to fully measure up it illuminates a more extensive range of desires additional to the pleasure of hardcore sexual imagery. This doesn't erase this desire; to the contrary it places it in direct connection with a spectrum of other complex affects. In *Katawa Shoujo* we expect porn, and we get a bit, but we also get a narrative that aims to inspire identification, romance, and love – the game won't let us parse these. What makes *KS* weird or uncommon is its capacity to bring these disparate elements together into a cohesive text. In denying this division, porn and sex aren't abhorrent fantasies distinct from more “ethical” or moralized desire; rather these exist in a continuum, an intense thicket of fantasy.

At the end of our discussion *Aura* expresses some frustration with the game and a desire to start from scratch and make it better, a dissonance experienced in looking back on it. Perhaps as a provisional conclusion it is most productive to explore something like a feeling of dissonance. In exploring *Katawa Shoujo*'s textuality and expression it becomes a means to open our understandings of desire and experience in media around issues of sex, romance, and identity. Its treatment of disability avoids reduction and fetish but also infantilization, victimization, and mockery. However, the game also seems open to a question of dissonance broached by Loree Erickson in her essay *Out of Line* (2012). Erickson explains that in editing her own queer-crip-porno, she is concerned that she is actually re-centering some of the dominant aesthetics she hopes to challenge. If Erickson struggles to navigate representational politics then *Katawa Shoujo* is certainly hemmed in by dominant aesthetics. Its treatment of disability is progressive as much as it is ambivalent and problematic.

For all that it can do, there is also a lot that Katawa Shoujo cannot or does not do. There are also things that Katawa Shoujo can do that still need to be identified. Although this paper has explored the challenges to dominant understandings of porn and desire that Katawa Shoujo opens, there is still the question of what this paper has left closed. Its ludic interface and branching narratives are more intricate than this essay discusses. Players' relationships to the text are open to readings in which the productive possibilities may not be realized. Its treatment of romance, gender, able-bodiedness bear further explication as do its politics of identification and fiction. These are themes that still have to be interrogated, and the progressive or reactionary implications articulated. I don't intend this as a pessimistic conclusion, only as a point from which to begin future work and practice. In keeping with Kipnis's model, perhaps the solution is more porn games on the couch.

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