

# **Game Cutoffication: A Violent History of Gender, Play and Cute Aesthetics.**

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## **Abstract:**

The contemporary consumer aesthetic of 'cute' has a dark history, seeped in international politics and negatively gendered connotations. Yet, we are sold cute in a variety of forms as positive 'play'. This talk will focus on the culture of cute games and electronic toys in the context of gender and history to discuss what types of games are being played with cute objects on cultural and personal levels.

## **Introduction**

Cute is a hugely popular contemporary aesthetic. Whilst cute is not only produced and consumed in Japan, the Japanese variety of cute, known as *kawaii*, is the focus of this paper. In this paper I will track the progress of this aesthetic: from dark origins rooted in the politics and emotions of post-war Japan and how it was, initially, at least, associated with *bishojo* (or young female) rebellion to the contemporary class of cute which appropriates cute as a national brand of cool, deployed to communicate images of an ideal and submissive feminine and how the soft power of cute has transformed through so-called subversive arts which speak to the creepier side of cute culture. This is cultural landscape of cute, but this discussion is also deeply concerned with play. The cultural context of cute does not seem particularly playful and, yet, 'play' how cute is packaged and sold as well as how it is critically framed in scholarship.

Accordingly, this paper is in two parts. The first focusing on the history of *kawaii*, culturally and critically, and the second acting as a response through game analysis which unpacks the difference between the play that is professed in the marketing of cute and the play that is actually possible with cute playable artefacts, specifically games and game-like digital toys. Ultimately, these findings suggest that not only is cute not that cute but it is not very playful either.

## What is Cute?

Cute may seem like a relatively intuitive category. We know it when we see it. But, the definitional work on cute reveals layers of complexity. In order to deconstruct the characteristics of cute, I will deconstruct the images of *kyarakuta* (characters). Drawing from existing definitions, cuteness can be broken-down into three dimensions: 1) look or appearance, 2) a contextual level of behaviour and narrative, and 3) emotional affect which is produced in result of the two the previous levels.

In terms of the first level of cuteness, appearance, there are recurring attributes of cute that have, for many, come to define cuteness. Sharon Kinsella (1995), for example, describes cute thus: “Kawaii or ‘cute’ essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearance.” (Kinsella 1995, 220) In terms of body representation she lists common features including: “stubby arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes... nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs or pigeon feet.” (ibid)

On the second level we have a supporting set of behaviours and contextual representations which communicate cuteness. This includes the stories behind a character and the pose in which the character is captured. In the *San-X* universe of cute, each character comes with a brief contextualizing narrative which contributes to their cuteness – the narrative of the Sentimental Circus gang, for instance, begins: “after the whole town is felt asleep quietly, neglected toys are awakening one by one and gathering together.” ([san-x.net](http://san-x.net)) Other stories are equally tragic in nature but the presentation of these narratives is also important to cute effect. They are always brief and intentionally use broken English in their translations on their localized websites. These strategies enhance the adorable weakness and infantility of the cute characters strengthening their emotional call and their appeal.

There is also the performance of cute. As Kinsella described, cute displays vulnerability and weakness, cute bodies are “designed to be physically frail to emulate the weaker members of society.” (Kinsella 1995, 236) Cute, accordingly performs weakness. As Daniel Harris (2000) observes cuties are at their cutest when depicted “in the middle of a pitfall or blunder,” for example, “Winnie the Pooh, with his snout stuck in a hive” or “Love-A-Lot Bear, in the movie *Care Bears*, who stares disconsolately out at us with a paint bucket overturned on his head...” (Harris 2000, 6) The combination of physical frailty and performed deficiency of cuteness is integral to the final effect of cute, and that is emotional affect.

In one of the earlier critiques of cute, Dr. Katsuo (1988) describes the compounded effect of cute saying that: “cuteness has three basic principles. The first is having features of an infant, such as a wide forehead, small chin, big eyes, low nose, small lips and white skin. The second is an ability to arouse the protective instinct in others. The third is the desire of a cute person to be liked. This is accomplished by expressing weakness.” (Katsuo in McVeigh 1996, 295) Katsuo gets to the crux of the combined importance of a appearance and context in evoking empathy, sympathy and pity and a desire to nurture, protect or care for the cute object.



**(Figure 1: Tarepanda, San-X)**

Let’s read the elements of cute against a particular body, that of Tarepanda (see *figure 1*). Tarepanda translates roughly as “lazy panda” and is quintessentially cute in body, behaviour and, in turn, affect. His features include: large black vacant eyes and a dot nose which together constantly convey a sad, droopy expression, a squat body with impossibly dumpy limbs. Tarepanda’s form usually appears to be squashed to the floor, splayed out flat on his stomach, or else slumping over food or luxuriating/being stuck in an object. Whilst possessing four legs, they are never used, instead the panda locomotes by laboriously rolling around at 2.75 metres per hour according to the company literature. Tarepanda invites the emotional responses of pity, empathy and a desire to take care as not only can this bulbous body not do anything for itself, it doesn’t want to.

The universe of cute and cutified objects is expansive: cute is painted onto everyday and mundane object in order to make them more appealing as with the cutification of household appliances like the Domo Toaster or Hello Kitty slowcooker, there are cute trinkets and stickers to customize mobile phones or computers which serve to soften hard technology, and then cute is all over lunchboxes, tissues, bedding, pyjamas, and teddy bears. Most explicit in the last, but very present in all the rest, is the softness of cute. In plush toys, this is a tactile quality whilst in others it is an effect. As Siane Ngai (2005) reminds us a cute thing with its dumpy rounded body “depends on a softness that invites touching.” (Ngai 2005, 816) Again the simplicity of features is important here, Ngai continues: “the less formally articulated and bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes...” and the more it suggests its “capacity for being held”, (Ngai 2005, 815-6) hugged and squashed. The ‘soft’ of cute persists in the political and affective aspects of cute and contributes to the most cited definition of cuteness as “a complete lack of anything observably threatening.” (Shiokawa 1999, 94)

### **Cute Histories and the Politics of Style**

That is what cute is, and it comes from an interesting place and the following is a brief history of kawaii in the culture. There are perceptible reasons as to why cute would emerge as a highly popular aesthetic in Japan. This often attributed to a diminished sense of national confidence in post-war Japan. With diminished military and economic power, particularly in respect to the United States, numerous scholars observe that the time, place and social attitude are deep determinants in the appeal of an aesthetic which celebrates smallness and helplessness (Ngai 2005, Harris 2000, Shokawa 1999, Allison 2006).

The kawaii aesthetic of Japan is also connected with the concept of ‘cultural odorlessness’ (Iwabuchi 2002). A strategy for bolstering consumer confidence in Japanese products outside of Japan affected by removing any sense of national identity in their works. This was more immediately effective in Japan’s consumer electronics industries whilst in cuteness, the odorlessness is often owed to an influence of American styles – especially that of Disney - in the appearance of cute characters. (Kinsella 1995, Ngai 2005)

Another factor in the popularity of cute in Japan is attributed to a rebellious movement beginning in the 1970s which involved the invention of a new style of writing. Popular

largely amongst pre-teen females, this style became known as “kitten writing”. Whereas traditional Japanese script has hard, defined lines, kitten writing was presented in nonsensical prose, with rounded symbol formation, combined the Anglicized katakana symbols, inserted English words such as ‘love’, with random use of exclamations-points, and what we might call emoticons, in the form of hearts and smiley-faces. Kitten writing was difficult to read and research conducted by Yamane Kazuma (quoted in Kinsella 1995) in 1985 showed that over 50% of students aged 12-18 were using this style of writing. The phenomena became a huge discipline problem in schools.

By the 1980s cuteness had exploded and cute had become a form of identity. A way that people presented and wanted to be perceived by others, manifest in fashion and manners. In terms of cute fashion, the look of the early 80s is pink, dreamy, frilly and fluffy and still heavily feminine. By the late 80s this style of ‘fancy’ cute had been replaced with a more androgynous tom-boy cute style, with dungarees and slogan or character hoodies. The adoption of cute fashion was frequently accompanied by feigned childlike manners, appearing naïve and shy, speaking with lisped pronunciation and posing with pigeon-feet, for example.

Kinsella observes “young women were the main generators of, and actors in, cute culture. From the consumption of cute goods and services and the wearing of cute clothes, to the faking of childish behaviour and innocent looks, young women were initially far more actively involved in cute culture than were men.” (Kinsella 1995, 243) of course, men were also interested in cute but for their role was more frequently that of passive observer of cute performance. At least until the later 80s where androgynous fashions invited them to the culture. Kinsella also notes at this point that whilst Euro and American parents might be bemoaning their sons adoption of aggressive, punk and grunge manners, Japanese mothers were lamenting that their boys were dressing like girls.

The phases of kitten writing and early kawaii fashion are described by Kinsella as a rebellion. Although it bears no resemblance to the aggressive and sexually provocative rebels of western youth culture, she claims that cute carried an important point in Japanese culture. Popular with people well into adulthood being a cutie was a way of denouncing traditional Japanese, neo-Confucian ideas of femininity and social convention. The expectation of obedience across female life (first to their fathers, then to their husbands and later to their own children) and the masculine pressures to work hard and fulfil ones obligations to society

(a work ethic in which *karoshi*, or death by over work was a real concern) over the self were directly effaced by cute. Being cute as an adult was a rebellious act bound up in a nostalgia for childhood, specifically feminine childhood, a point between work and marriage where females were perceived to have the most freedom in society.

By the framing of females as the arbiters of culture and agents in a rebellion. A specifically soft rebellion, Kinsella introduces the ways in which *kawaii* has been feminized and infantilized in Japanese culture.

### **Cute as Not: Return of the Politics**

Cute did not entirely manage to stay cute, however. The fad and ethos of cute which Kinsella presents was heavily criticised by traditionalists. Cuties were pejoratively dubbed ‘moratorium people’ (Kinsella 1995) as a generation unconcerned with the up-keep of cultural values. And by the early 1990s the potentially rebellious aspects of cute had been coopted and converted for value campaigns and other reductive means. It is this generation that causes Brain McVeigh (1996) to write quite condemningly on the nature of cute. In his writings, cute is a communication tool for softly promoting values, particularly about ideal femininity, and represents a re-asserting of control of cute and control through cute as a medium.

There are a variety of campaigns and events which trigger this perspective, examples which are cited elsewhere (Kinsella 1995, Yano 2013). To name but a few:

In the mid-90s s Hello Kitty hard-work campaign called ‘Hello Work’ was born, attempting to align the cute rebellion with more traditional values of ones contribution to society. Japan Air adopted a new, and controversial, Minnie Mouse uniform for its female flight attendants. Hello Kitty was named UNICEFS special friend of children in order to promote girls’ education and combat gender discrimination. In response to this one commentator from the Japan Times (an English language, publication in Japan) demands: “someone needs to explain how a cat with no mouth can be a spokesperson for anything – especially girls education – and how an image that embodies female submissiveness is supposed to help banish gender-based stereotypes.” (quoted in Yano 2013, 165) Finally, the in 2010 the Creative Industries Office is established with the sole long-term strategy of capitalizing on the reputation of ‘Cool Japan’, based on the rising international popularity of Japanese pop

culture including cuteness. By this point, it is worth noting, that the odorlessness of cute – and Japanese culture generally – has become an odour. One fetishized in other cultures and capitalized on internally.

It is in this vein that McVeigh declares cute a method of ‘soft power’ (Nye 2004) , he says: “Cuteness is an expression of socio-political theory visible in the commodities of everyday life that touches upon the relations between the powerful and the less powerful: family structure, the ubiquitous hierarchical junior/senior relations, and, in particular, male/female relations. Being cute toward those above is often a way of obtaining favours and attention, while displaying cuteness to one’s subordinates is a method of appearing non-threatening, thereby gaining their confidence, and, perhaps more cynically, control over them.” (McVeigh 298)

In the mid 90s we also see what I would term ‘counter-cute culture’. One manifestation of this movement has been termed a ‘subversive form of play’ by Christine Yano (2013) and involves hate groups. There are an abundance of Hello Kitty hate forums and anti-fan groups online, such as Hello Kitty Hell and Goodbye Kitty, you can even ‘like’ I Hate Hello Kitty on Facebook. These 2.0 groups also inspire types of anti-fan artwork including Hello Kitler (Hello Kitty dressed as Hitler). The other, is a more coherent artistic movement which engages with counter-cute sentiments – that of Superflat.



*(Figure 2: Nice to See You Again, Yoshitomo Nara)*



*(Figure 3: DOB, Takashi Murakami)*

Two of the most notorious artists in this camp are Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. Nara often plays with the infantility of cute, depicting children in violent contexts either wounded or with the clear ability to wound (see *figure 2*). Murakami's work also often explores cuteness through apparent subversion, his infamous DOB series (see *figure 3*) draws attention to an 'otherness' imbedded in the cute aesthetic. I will be returning to this subject in greater detail in the final section of this paper, but it is worth foreshadowing Superflat and counter-cute at this point in terms of placing this within a continuum of the culture of cute.

### **Cute as Play?**

With the cute context established at this point I will turn, briefly, to the impetus and direction of my research interests in cute, games and play. Looking through the writing on cute and kawaii, I am struck by how often cute is directly referred to as 'play'. Whether it is Christine Yano looking at counter-cute arts and practices and a subversive sort of play with the core concepts of cute, or Anne Allison's contention that cute as a consumer aesthetic constitutes a type of 'postmodern play' in which the universe of cute object, toasters, lunchboxes, hair clips, etc. "blur the distinction between play and non-play," (Allison 2006) play is often a conclusion or punctuation to the thesis. This is the case in the seminal texts (Allison 2006, Harris 2000, Kinsella 1995, Shiokawa 1999, Ngai 2005, Yano 2013) on cute culture and an assumption which trickles down into the works influenced by those core texts (Ivy 2010, Raine 2011, Beynon 2012).

Very little of the literature on cute engages directly with games. In the form of pseudo-exception: Anne Allison (2006) talks about the ludic universe of Pokemon though there is no direct game analysis, and Larissa Hjorth (2011) studies the ways in which cute is used to customize and accessorize gaming technologies in the Asia-Pacific. There are no instances of the examining cute as it is executed in games and what type of play is afforded.

This play aspect nags at the game scholar in me, not because I am pedantic about the word and refuse to let the intended meaning lie, but because play is a nebulous concept and I am interested in flowing these ideas to a play-centric conclusion. The motivation for this study also comes from observations that the majority of cute objects appear playful but are rarely playable. In other words, cute seems to invite play but less often afford that type of interaction. As such, I am interested in the ways in which concepts of cute are deployed in

games and what types of play they offer. And I want to spend the latter half of this talk providing a couple of my observations on cute games and play.

As a way into to this discussion, I frame the remainder of this paper as a response to a brief blog post by Ian Bogost (2009). Inspired by a cute viral which he received by email of Koda the dwarf miniature pony, Bogost ponders the problem of agency and cute in games. His problem is grounded in the apparent physical and performed weakness or deficiency of cute things. He offers this observation:

Pokémon or Yoshi or Kirby are enormously competent, which isn't necessarily how cute reads. A truly cute character or situation doesn't just relate to its appearance and features, but also to its abilities. But I can think of precious few characters from toys or videogames or other media that are cute in this way. Mostly such characters appear, rather than behave.

(Ian Bogost, 2009)

At length, this is my two part reply...

### **Capitalising on Emotions, Playbour and Labours of Love – Animal Crossing**

In the first, there are a huge variety of games that feature helpless characters. The majority of non-player characters (or NPCs) that you meet in game worlds could be described as helpless. The only pre-programmed purpose of an NPC's existence is to be weak and request your aid, as the player with agency, to help them. They are our call to action, they set us quests and give us things to do in the game. Cute, needn't be pointed directly at the avatar in this respect, but the other in-game bodies and other designed aspects.

When it comes to playing with this type of cute characters there are a couple of strategies frequently employed which cling tightly to the concept of cute and produce particular kinds of play and particular types of affect in the player.

In order to demonstrate a particular type of cuteness expressed through NPCs and gameplay, it is helpful to offer multiple examples to preface a more involved analysis. The type of

games I am referring to capitalise on player's emotions and position them in a play situation that involves care giving or protection. Examples of this type of game include: *Harvest Moon*, *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*, *Floating Cloud God Saves the Pilgrims*, and the *Animal Crossing* series. In *Yoshi's Island* the player is tasked with protecting a baby version of Mario who is on a bubble riding the back of the avatar. The aim is to avoid collision or harm which will cause the baby Mario to float away crying at which point the player has failed to protect the infant and has failed at the game. *Cloud God* is a scrolling shooter in which the avatar is a God floating on a cloud who is overseeing a pilgrimage to a promised land. The pilgrim bodies are marching at a fixed speed on the platform below and the gameplay involves shooting at future obstacles and intercepting projectiles directed at the pilgrims. At the end of each level a stat screen displays the ghost bodies of dead pilgrims, reminding the player how many pilgrims they have lost along the way.

Whilst I see a variety of games as falling under this particular brand of game cutification, I would like to present a few observations from a case study of the most recent *Animal Crossing* title for the Nintendo 3DS.

In this game the player is cast as the new mayor of a town and are in charge of keeping the towns people happy. This involves expansion by building more facilities and landmarks, the planting of trees and flowers as well as the locating and seeding of a variety of fruits to make the town beautiful. Alongside this the player can build and expand their own home and they must dedicate time to fishing, catching bugs and shaking trees to collect fruits before selling on their loot in order to pay for all of this progress. Other elements of play involve engaging the inhabitants of the villlage, they set short-term and long-term goals for the player.

Responding to their (re)quests builds your personal popularity with individual villagers and stops them from moving out of town and collective popularity impacts the overall town morale and your reputation as Mayor, because there are also political points to be gained in the game.

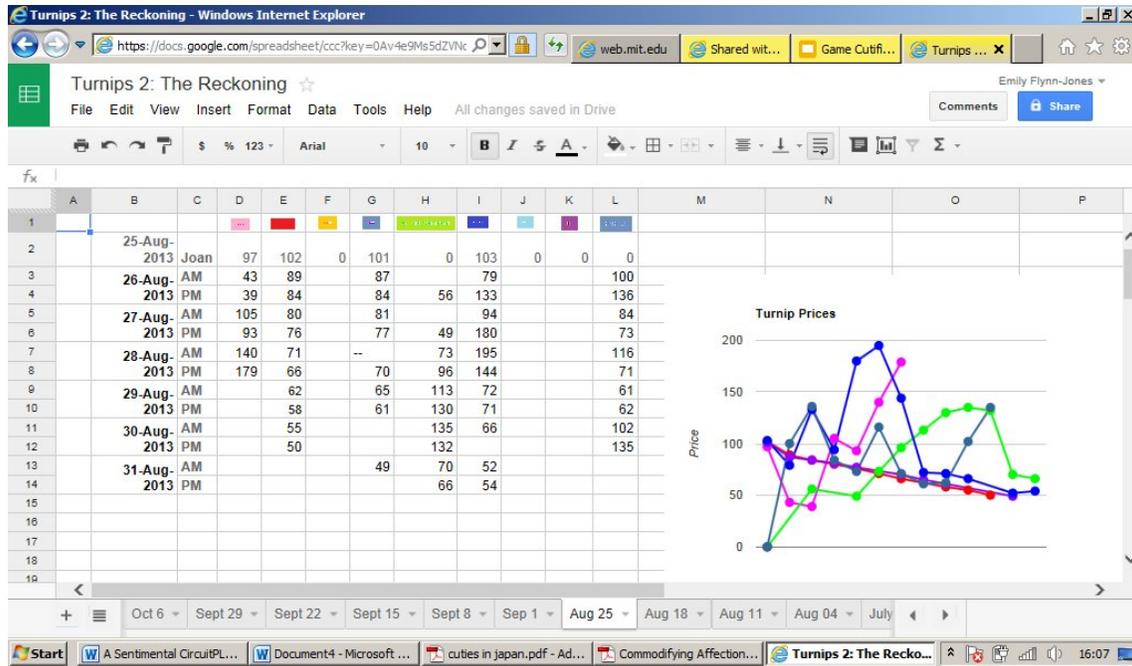
The characters of *Animal Crossing* land are quintessentially anthropomorphic cuties in both physical and performed attributes. They perform cute in very specific ways so as to emotionally impact the player getting them to act on their behalf. The way this is immediately conveyed to the player is through a fixed set of animated emotions. For example, when a character has forgotten to return an object to another villager they are nervous and embarrassed by their lapse in etiquette and so they sweat and panic and plead with the player

compelling them to mediate the situation. When they ask the player to swap items with them or buy something they no longer want there is the risk of upsetting them if the request is declined. A negative response causes them to walk around in a thunderous mood and be mean to you temporarily. If the request is granted sometimes they dance around singing afterwards. So there are explicit emotion-based suggestions at work to guide a player's interactions in the game.

What is more interesting to me, however, is the type of play that this game produces. Firstly, the so-called play of the game would better be described as labour, and, secondly, the collective, cooperative play from the community which I was involved with personally suggested a cutification of the group overall.

For 4 months I was a member of a small *Animal Crossing* community, with approximately 7 active players at any given time. We played together remotely online and locally at social events even specific *Animal Crossing* events such as organised picnics. During my time I logged over 300 hours of gameplay. Towards the end of my stint I began to realise how much the things that I was doing in the game were beginning to feel like the hard work that they had always actually been. For example, watering the 200+ flowers in my town everyday takes 30 minutes and this is only one of many day-to-day maintenance activities. Of course, you can always make it more work for yourself and that is what me and the community did.

There is a way to make a quick buck in your town. That is a weekly gamble. On a Sunday morning you invest a lot in turnips – this can only be done at this time – and the rest of the week the value of turnips go up and down in your town. You have to sell them by the following Saturday or they spoil and become worthless. It's an in-game economy called the 'stalk-exchange'. In order to maximize our earning potential we created a shared spreadsheet (pictured above). This system requires that the player log-in to both the game spreadsheet at least twice per day to update the information. After doing this for a few weeks recognisable patterns emerge about the game economy and one can predict which player might have a price spike. When a good price is quoted (generally over 200 Bells – the in-game currency) the community arranges visitation to the town and cashes in their turnips for the best possible profit so that they can take the winnings home and re-invest in town initiatives. *Animal Crossing* was serious business in my play community.



(Figure 4: Animal Crossing spreadsheet tracking the value of turnips)

Whilst the experience of the *Animal Crossing* community offers rich incites to the cuteness of games there is only scope for one more example in this paper which reflects on the play and interaction of the community itself. We became accustom to ‘cute gifting’ (a practice of kawaii). There was an unspoken rule about initiating new community members which involved more experienced players going to their town and furnishing them with rare and hard to find objects and giving them tips to playing the game, ultimately daving valuable time and money early on. Having benefited from this myself, I paid it forward to newer players.

I also observed that we talked about the game in particular ways game – and we talked a lot about the game. We had emotional investments in characters and would lament when a new character moved in that wasn’t “cute enough” or that their personality “didn’t fit in” (there are 10 character types). We were also embarrassed if our town was a little unkempt and didn’t want others to visit until we had cleaned up. We were also excited to share our new designs, decorations and layouts. We all had aspirations for the future of the town and researched the thousands of items available in the game and hunted for them, for ourselves and for others. We played at large social events, at bbqs and in bars. Whilst in-real-life socialising was going on around us, we were all huddled in a circle, screens alight, playing

together. Others commented that it was either ‘sweet’ or ‘sad’ that we were so engrossed in this game, which led me to the realization that by playing this game together we, the players and as a community, had become cute.

To summarise the *Animal Crossing* experience and critically contextualise it, the characters are cute in the tradition sense of the concept: they are helplessness and act as the invitation to action, or more specifically labour, whilst that surface and superficial playfulness of cute coupled with the affordance of cute customization in the game, helps to conceal how much labour is involved. Julian Kücklich (2005) might call this ‘playbour’, a system which presents us with playful interactions but which relies completely on our efforts and our contributions to create content. Labour disguised as play. The case of *Animal Crossing* also calls to mind Sherry Turkle’s (2012) ideas of ‘alive enough’ and ‘always on’ and her observations of play with *Firbies* and *Tamagotchi* toys and how the emotional investment in these playthings might further be explored in connection to their apparent cuteness.

### **Pocket Monsters, Violent Emotions and Dark Play**

There is a second aspect to consider in responding to Ian Bogost’s issue with cute and agency and the question as to whether cute things, particularly cute avatars, retain their cuteness when they are very capable rather than helpless bodies. There is a way of answering in the affirmative. The ‘yes to cute’ argument requires evoking a darker side of the cute concept. A darkness which is alluded to in the previously reference counter-cute.

One can, however, understand Bogost’s premise when looking at the likes of Kirby who is a big blob of pink cuteness but also goes around eating things and then spitting them out at other things as projectile weapons. Kirby is not particularly helpless at all. The performance element of cute is absent and so as an agent in-game, Kirby’s status as cute is complicated. There is also the ‘cute ‘em up’ genre to consider. In the example text of *Deathsmiles*, for instance, there are only four operational buttons in the control scheme, all of which refer to a fire command of sorts. In the cute ‘em up, as this clearly demonstrates, the only thing that the cuties in the game are capable of is violence.

This may seem a million miles away from the fuzzy-wuzzy, cuddly, soft, complete lack of anything harmful notion of cute. However, I want to describe why it is well within the concept of cute to be aggressive.

First, let's think about the affect of cute. That is the emotional sphere of cute that evokes pity and feelings of caring, as well as a desire to touch, cuddle and care for a cute thing. Ngai, observes that our translation of a cute object goes beyond those positive feelings and actually descends into aggressive ones. She says: "it is crucial to cuteness that its diminutive object has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien—that is, that it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feeling or attitude towards it." (Ngai 2005, 816)

Take a cute plush animal for instance. The soft, squishy body that invites touching constitutes a deformity when the body is crushed during the performance of a hug. She continues: "the subject's awareness, as she gazes at her little object, that she maybe willfully imposing its cuteness upon it, is more likely to augment rather than detract from the aesthetic illusion, calling attention to an unusual degree of synonymy between objectification and *cutification*." (ibid) In other words, when we look, when we decree something cute we are actually committing an act of, what Harris strongly calls, 'sadism'. Discussing cute things, in this specific instance, he is referring to children, he says that cute is "something we do to them. Because it aestheticizes unhappiness, helplessness, and deformity, it almost always involves an act of sadism on the part of its creator, who makes the unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize." (Harris 2000, 5)

In this accusation the creator of cute is as much the designer as it is the beholder of cute. In other words, we project greater weakness and fragility onto cute objects, more than they convey even themselves. In this respect Ngai says: "We can thus start to see how cuteness might provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones. For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle." (Ngai 2005, 816)

In this respect, cute avatars are the perfect conduits for more violent and aggressive game spaces.

The other way that I would like to describe the more violent and aggressive manifestations of cute in games is based on the physical aspects of cute. Whilst the anatomy of cute was discussed in the opening of this paper, it neglected to mention that there is, in fact, something inherently monstrous about the bodies of cute things.

Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2007) describes the cutie as freak. She says “freak – an embodiment of monstrosity – is usually recognized by his unusual physiology that transcends the norms of the body... the general attributes of freaks are: too few (or none) or too many limbs growing out of most inappropriate parts of the body; the absence or distortion of body proportion leading to monstrous forms and abnormal size... (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2007, 217) Taking this lens to any of the cutest idols, the freak anatomy is apparent. Read in this way Hello Kitty, has had her claws amputated, her teeth pulled and mouth sewn up. A body which has been mutilated. Her large head suggests hydrocephalus. Hello Kitty certainly meets the criteria of freak.



(Figure 5: Ironman, Nendoroid)

Some varieties of cute are hyper aware of this cute/monster relationship. That is why we see the likes of Gloomy Bear and the Nendoroid SD brand (see figure 5), which standing for Super Deformed explores the fine line by taking already cute characters and squashing them under the cruel pressures of cuteness.

Brzozowska-Brywczyńska goes onto describe the limits that regularly prevent the cutie from becoming monstrous and it has to do, again, with that emotional level of cute. The disempowering feelings of pity and sympathy (those cruel emotions that Harris and Ngai reference) are what deprive these monsters of their monstrosity.

The cute but violent avatars in games can be understood in terms of this freak discourse as cute bodies which have made the transformation and the transgression into monstrosity as

empowered rather than pitiful cute. The freak teratology of cute contributes to an understanding of powerful game bodies imbued with the potential for aggression and violence, framing them distinctly as cute instead of an opposition to the concept. Like the Pokemon, or Pocket Monsters, which are temperamental beasts able to change from passive pet into furious monster at any moment, bodies which evolve incrementally to expose more of their monster and less of their cute: videogame cute represents this monstrous secret that the concept of cute harbours.

### **Conclusion**

This paper introduces my research interests in cute, particularly as a complex, unusual and counter-intuitively creepy aesthetic. The context and concept of cute suggest numerous paths for extended study: for instance, the gendering and infantilizing of cute could be tracked through ‘girly’ and ‘pink games’ which encourage the performance or rehearsal of femininity and the ease with which a cute game recommends itself to a young audience could be queried. The nature of a cute ‘softness’ when it comes to software could also be examined, whether cute creates an easier access to complex or unfamiliar interfaces or how games often try to emulate the tactile qualities of cute through the design of patchwork, textile landscapes. It is also essential to address cultural specificity, how cute operates in different culture and how it is localized and interpreted across cultures.

In terms of the more insidious nature of cute developed here – produced by historical context, politics, capitalism, rebellion, insidious gendering, subversions and as a shadow ever present in the concept and construction of cute – the picture of cute at play begins to take shape. The more cute games I play and the more I consider how play is defined in connection to cute, the less I find it playful at all. And that represents my research interests in cute.

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