

Technologies of Undressing:
The Digital Paper Dolls of KISS

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...for it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope . . . It is if, then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains . . .
(Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*)

Input: keyboard and mouse. Output: sound and visuals. The distinctive challenge of interactive cultural products lies in the liminal space *between* the boundaries of input and output, the space in which rigidly defined choices unravel, beyond all design, into the emergent complexity of culture. Case in point: KISS.

Forget Gene Simmons. KISS is a computer program for dressing and undressing digital versions of paper dolls. It is non-commercial freeware, distributed freely over the Internet. Originating in Japan, KISS enjoys an international following of loyal fans that continue to propagate its technical and visual culture.

KISS is imminently interactive. In a digital context, “interactivity” usually refers to the navigation of a system by way of designed choices. But in an extended definition, interactivity acknowledges the larger social and semiotic structures of which the interactive object is a part. KISS demands an interdisciplinary reading that incorporates both technological and cultural analysis. And as interactive culture, KISS is radically hybrid, a trans-cultural synthesis of disparate parents.

KISS and Kisekae

The word *Kisekae* in Japanese means “changing clothes.” Kisekae paper dolls can be found in the backs of manga, the thick comic-book magazines that saturate Japanese mass culture. In 1991, a Japanese programmer with the moniker “MIO.H” was inspired by the cut-out dolls in a girls’ manga to create KISS. MIO.H’s digital version of Kisekae, named *KISS* for Kisekae Set System, is software for viewing and playing with computer versions of paper dolls.

In Japan, Kisekae is an activity for little girls. But in the transformation from paper doll to computer doll, from Kisekae to KISS, a diverse audience has emerged. Expanding quickly from a highly localized phenomenon, KISS has in recent years acquired an international fandom among anime lovers, digital art hackers, and pop culture aficionados.

KISS has been re-tooled since its origins on Japanese NEC computer architecture to become cross-platform freeware distributed over the Internet. Versions exist for the MAC, Amiga, DOS, and a variety of Windows platforms. Its most visible

audience are the largely male artist/programmers who develop the visual and technical culture of KISS. Over mailing lists and websites in America, Japan, and France, they discuss the latest KISS dress-up dolls while hacking the bugs in the newest KISS software release.

The Envelope of Innocence

KISS software is divided into "data sets" and "viewers." Each data set features an illustrated dress-up doll. A KISS viewer is the program that allows you to look at and play with the data sets. Superficially, KISS seems to offer the same kind of play that can be found in its paper progenitor. The dolls can be dressed and undressed by dragging clothes and accessories from the margins of the computer screen onto the body.

The technical wit of KISS is that it is not purely flat, but exists in a two-and-a-half-D space: each item of clothing "knows" where it belongs in the third dimension relative to all of the other elements. This means that all the clothes combine seamlessly: a jacket will never fail to fit *over* a blouse, regardless of which item was placed onto the doll first. Click and drag a cigarette into the naughty schoolgirl's outstretched hand and it will fit *over* her middle finger and *under* her index finger. Drag it onto her mouth and the filter end will disappear beneath her pouty upper lip.

The resulting interaction is both satisfying and addictive. Many of the costumes are fantastically intricate, with layer upon layer of interlocking garments. Manipulating the clothing on the sheathed virtual bodies is sinuously intoxicating. An effortless engagement ensues, as the user moves and removes clothes, gliding them across the flat nonmateriality of the computer screen.

While the occasional giant robot doll can be found, KISS data sets overwhelmingly feature adolescent girls. Rendered in a variety of Japanese cartoon styles, KISS dolls range from plaid-skirted schoolgirls to pointy-eared pixie elves to leather-clad dominatrices. Some are popular animated characters, from the Japanese Sailor Moon and Ranma 1/2 to the American Batgirl and Pocahantas.

Their bodies are posed in the fashion of glamour pin-ups and manga heroines, making for a curiously double sexuality. Miming the porn archetype of the underage schoolgirl, KISS dolls are at once garishly innocent adolescents and hypersexualized objects, a complicity of awkward pubescence and demure seduction. The doll bodies come with a staggering array of clothing, jewelry, pocketbooks, footgear, and undergarments, as well as the occasional samurai weapons, sci-fi armor, and bondage accessories. The taxonomy of objects extends into fetishized minutiae, including tiny gem earrings, multicolored hair barrettes, spaghetti-thin belts, and even a soiled sanitary napkin. Arranging and rearranging these garments on the body of the doll is how one plays with KISS.

Undress-up Dolls

Unlike their paper counterparts, the primary activity of KISS is to *undress*, rather than to dress the figure. This trajectory is hardwired into the interactive structure of the software. Removing the clothing is easy, but putting together a complete outfit is a painstaking task: none of the intricate garments “snap” into place.

Each data set comes with several different “cells” or pages, each page offering the doll in a different set of clothes. When the computer user opens a new page, the doll pops up on the screen fully dressed. This means that the user’s first action is invariably to take off a piece of clothing. Exploring the range of possible looks is as simple as paging through the pre-arranged outfits. Actually dressing the doll becomes a redundant activity.

The inevitable gravity of a KISS interaction is to dismantle the prefab outfits, the cursor slipping each garment off one by one. With a fluid ease, the clothes move from the body, the undergarments quickly becoming visible. And the open-ended play of paper dolls shifts into a game of interactive striptease.

But at the expected climax, there is a sudden obstacle: the undergarments do not come off. A special feature of the KISS software is that bras and panties on most of the dolls actually resist the cursor’s tug of removal. Only after a protracted struggle of 20 or 30 click-and-drags does the underwear relent and slip off of the body.

Sexual Technologies

The desperate clicking and dragging necessary to strip the doll is a richly perverse spectacle, advancing the interactive trajectory towards an inevitable ending. Both cursor on screen and hand on mouse wiggle in parallel masturbatory motion, frantically stroking the crotch and breasts. The implication is absurd: rub the hot spots enough and the doll will be coaxed into taking it all off. In a spiraling crescendo of strange sexual technologies, the gestures of the user are conflated with the on-screen narrative of soft-core foreplay.

But once naked, the body itself is a disappointment. With no garments left to maneuver, there is no more interaction, no more simulation of pleasure. There is nothing left for the user to *do*. An impenetrable plastic surface, the pubescent KISS doll simply gazes back at the user with Japanimation eyes. The sought-after body is merely background, its flatness indivisible from the computer screen.

The KISS doll as sex object is a ripe metaphor for the fetishized objects of everyday digital life: the keyboard, the monitor, the mouse. KISS simply makes explicit the sensual interaction between user and computer, a tableau for the obsessive relationship between culture and its technological tools.

The most obvious reading of KISS' sexual narrative is the structuration and frustration of male desire. But the subtle interactive contradictions of KISS make this straightforward digital rape scenario problematic. In KISS, it is the *activity* of undressing, as programmed into the interaction, is privileged as a source of pleasure, not the doll body as object.

The adoring audience of KISS is largely male. So why are these guys playing with dolls? In the unforgiving glare of conventional wisdom, boys who play dress-up with dolls endanger their heterosexual adult masculinity. Sexualized as KISS may seem, the eventual disappointment of having "nothing to do" with the passive doll body signals the limit of male heterosexual interaction. The Freudian distinction between narcissism and desire, between "to be" and "to have," becomes muddled. Girls' presumed "identification" with dress-up dolls, redirected at KISS's male otaku audience, imbricates cross-gender and queer readings.

The few KISS sets that do deviate from the typical female adolescent play out these possibilities. In them, bugs, cakes, spaceships, and robots can be dissected, de- and re-constructed. The "KISS Set for Tough Men" features a bald, weakling KISS doll whose questionable masculinity can be replaced with female features, hair, or clothing. Such a set mocks the gendered presumptions of KISS, literalizing the possibilities for cross-gender identification within the content of the data set itself.

The Cultural Body of KISS

The radical disappointment of the revealed doll body results not just from frustrated desire but also from KISS' status as a collection. The KISS doll is a virtual object defined by the layered garments that trace and conceal its form. As the user undresses the doll, clothing accumulates around the edges of the screen, each stiff garment an effigy of the body. Through the play of KISS, the body is produced and reproduced, cloned and replicated. But it is never really complete. An effect of interactivity, KISS is not a set of separate, beautiful items, but a collection of objects that are contingent on one another through movement, association, organization.

The structure of KISS is a collection, a series of parts that flirt with coherence but ultimately resist closure. KISS is a collection of clothes that frame a body, a collection of pages that describe a doll, a collection of dolls on the Internet. This diffusion and multiplication displaces the fixation on the singular body, realigning pleasure in favor of many forms and their inter-relations. The body becomes a layer among many others.

Any collection presumes to be a collection of wholes. At the same time, any collection presumes radical incompleteness, staving off chaos as it gathers and organizes. KISS plays out this double-identity in a particularly exquisite fashion, all parts clearly visible but none of them resolving into self-containment.

Contrast KISS to the collectible phenomenon of Barbie. In Mattel Media's Barbie Fashion Designer (Barbie's most successful digital product to date) the user composes a complete Barbie outfit from an impressive array of open-ended possibilities. However, the final output of the game is a noninteractive 3D animation of Barbie modeling the user's style choices, all parts distilled and compressed into a seamless phallic fetish. KISS, on the other hand, works in reverse fashion, displacing coherence, troubling the divide between made and unmade.

During this century, particularly after the war, the standards of beauty that many Japanese have aspired to have been not those of Asia but the West. Round eyes, as opposed to the graceful, simply curved Asian eyes with their epicanthic fold, have become a sought-after commodity because they are regarded as more expressive.
- from *Manga! Manga!* by Frederick L. Schodt

Although anime does often strike us as utterly different, or "other," it also quite noticeably resembles - and is influenced by - American mass culture and generic narratives. That Americans might be interested in looking at their own culture through Japanese eyes tells us that Americans' feelings about their own culture are deeply bound up with America's evolving relationship with Japan.
- from "Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm - Japanese Animation in America" by Analee Newitz in *Film Quarterly*

*It is now impossible to write or even conceive of 'Japanese' popular culture without involving much of the rest of the world, just as we have never been able to isolate the 'popular' or 'culture' itself outside of its complements. . . (John Whittier Treat, *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, p.13)*

Japanimation Eyes

As a process of culture, KISS is a hybrid phenomenon, mutating beyond the problematic dichotomies of East and West, Japan and America. There is a certain play between these geographic bodies and the graphic body, between national cultures and the culture of KISS. This play is nowhere so exquisitely stylized as in the eyes of the dolls.

Eyes are the most prominent feature of manga and anime characterization, massive dewy orbs that dominate the cartoon face. Grossly stylized Western anatomy, these Japanimation eyes have paradoxically come to represent the whole of Japanese popular culture. And they are themselves part of a larger set of Westernized features. Pert aryan noses, elongated bodies and legs, and blonde, brown and red hair have all been enveloped into the retinue of Japanese pop representation.

The eyes of manga, anime and KISS characters are symbols that combine and reposition the shifting self-images of Japan and the West. Within the eyes is the

infinite reflection of a cross-cultural imagery, distended through globalized media and computer networks. Just as the strange interactive technologies of KISS embody sociosexual seduction, the impossibly large eyes point to perversity manifest in visual style, the style of the trans-cultural *hybrid*.

Making the Strange

A hybrid object presents itself curiously, not as an aesthetic object, an object of contemplation, but as an object that is both the source and subject of *effects*. The hybrid object is constituted by its network of relationships, existing as a function of the experiences it produces. There is a way in which all of popular culture is in some way hybrid, to varying degrees and extremes.

One effect of hybridity is disorientation, a pleasure in displacement. In *Re-Made In Japan*, Mary Yoko Brannen comments on the recontextualization of Disneyland from California to Tokyo. She finds the Japanese version of Disneyland a construction of cultural consumption “that takes two forms: making the exotic familiar and keeping the exotic exotic.”

This logic of the hybrid resembles *ostraniene*, a notion put forward by the Russian formalist literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky. In Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose*, translator Benjamin Sher explains *ostraniene* as a “process or act that endows an object or image with ‘strangeness’ by removing’ it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions.”

With a machinic vortex of diffuse desire, KISS induces a highly specific form of *ostraniene*. Wrestling the activity of paper dolls out of its traditional context, KISS voraciously hybridizes, from the radical appropriation of its anime aesthetic to its de-centering mode of production and distribution.

June 25, 1996 (Tue)

Some users are under a notion that there is a large gap between Japan and where they are. This is absolutely wrong. Most Japanese companies have a subsidiary or branch office abroad . . . As for me, I travel abroad a lot and have many acquaintances overseas . . .

June 24, 1996 (Mon)

Many people have been asking for more KISS sets. But if you try to make some yourselves, you’ll know that it requires some time. If you do not have time yourselves, or cannot draw yourselves, it is the same here in Japan. There is no company developing KISS sets. These sets are made during developers’ spare time . . . In all, if you are having problems, I am too . . . We would be really pleased to see more KISS utilities. Since there are more people outside Japan than in Japan, there should be more people able to draw as well. We are very disappointed that there are still so few. I would appreciate more mails on what you have done instead of empty talks on what you want and what you want to do. Nevertheless, we will be making more KISS sets here in Japan.

- Selections from Web postings by H. Ozawa, KISS developer

Recombinant Naming

It is not easy to create a KISS data set. Constructing the doll and the garments that wrap it requires both visual and programming acumen. The developers of KISS necessarily combine two disparate skill sets. This hybrid skill set reverberates into the personas of the KISS creators. A downloaded list of KISS artists, for example, reveals a blend of anonymous cyber-handles, anime appropriations, and Japlish stylings: "A7M2," "Five Pennies," "G Hammer," "Ghost Attack," "Light," "Mb," "Mimimi," "Nifty," "Oh!Ze," and "Soi and Tonto," among others.

Melody-Yoshi's home page provides a further example. A bilingual web site devoted to KISS, visitors can peruse information, enter a short comment to a discussion group, or view Melody-Yoshi's personal profile, where the programmer's real name is revealed to be Hirohito Yoshimoto. Hirohito's fictive female name "Melody-Yoshi" combines English and Japanese into an alias that resembles nothing so much as a KISS character name. Compare it to KISS dolls like "Bunny Gal Usa," "Karen-Chan," "Belldandy," "Cotton," and "Yoshinga Sally." Melody/Hirohito is a case study in interchangeability. The developer smoothly blends author and subject, appropriating the very hybridity of the artifacts s/he creates.

The most comprehensive KISS website, "The Big KISS Page," is maintained by American student Dov Sherman. In addition to extensive data on KISS, an early version of the site contained a photo album where Dov strutted his stuff dressed as Edward Scissorhands, Barbarella, and a Japanese schoolgirl in miniskirt and tights. Dov's enthusiasm for KISS and for fantasy costuming links the world of digital dress-up with the realm of style and transvestitism.

Production and Proliferation

Radical interchangeability is hardwired into the structure of KISS, spilling into the relationships between its fans and its developers. Its status as a freeware entity, divorced from commercial production, means that the consumers of KISS are also responsible for its proliferation.

This movement from viewing to producing constitutes the online discourses of KISS. On Dov Sherman's Big KISS Page, the information structure of the main menu proceeds from downloading a viewer and data sets to downloading the tools and resources for making them. Email list discussions often bristle at the divide between devoted developer and mere user. The true KISS connoisseur engages the material, but only in the service of creating new works.

The economy of production is geared to the public domain instead of the marketplace. Being a viewer comes with a certain responsibility: to propagate

and evangelize KISS in the world. Other fan cultures, such as those of Star Trek, Sci-Fi, Anime, and especially fanzines, provide a populist precedent. But the de-centered, non-commercial software of KISS makes it a ready-made circuit where fans blur into manufacturers and distributors, collapsing the space between a commercially made product and its consumers. As a fledgling node of pop culture, KISS elegantly blends the production of culture with the culture of producers.

Play by Design

Technology. Aesthetics. Desire. Hybridity. The pleasure of KISS is the play of KISS. In a 1995 interview, Paul Virilio distinguishes between two kinds of play. On the one hand, there is the rule-bound play of a game like a boardgame, where players follow the rules in order to experience the play of the game. The second kind of play is the "free play" of a steering wheel, where the play exists as the interstitial space of freedom between rigid structures.

KISS embodies both kinds of play. It is at once a systematized game, constituted by its interactive structure and programmed code. Yet it is also radically hybrid, interstitially playing between desires and modes of production, between digital code and cultural codes. Dressed in the garments of pop culture, KISS arranges and re-arranges, collects and reproduces, undresses - almost - and plays on.