

Imaged Voices— Envisioned Landscapes: Storylines of Information-Age Girls and Young Women

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In Information Age societies around the world, adolescents are storylining—that is, creating and sharing their own stories and images of who they are and how they would like to be in the world. The youth meet in real or cyber spaces to plan, write, and illustrate stories that incorporate either originally conceived characters or adapt characters from published sources. Insofar as these young people intimately identify with the characters of their stories, storylining may be understood as a kind of socio-aesthetic play. By projecting pieces of themselves into the fictive characters of the collaborative story, they are practicing, correcting, and mastering concepts of self in relationship to others. Simultaneously, their imaged voices are filling the vast spaces of silence between those versions of society presented by traditions of *reality* and those versions their stories suggest as possibility. Indeed, they are conceptualizing new selves and social environments of the 21st century.

Introduction to an Information-Age Youth Culture

My interest in storylining behaviors and expressions began several years ago with a retrospective inquiry into the early cyber-play activities of my daughter, Josephina, and her friends. Born in 1980,

Josephina was a first generation Information-Age¹ child. As she entered early adolescence, she, like many of her peers, seemed to spend a great deal of her free time interacting with other youth via computer communications. Much of this communication involved little more than gossip exchanges conveyed through instant messages or e-mails. Eventually, however, simple conversation evolved into collaborative endeavors of creative writing and storytelling among the group of female friends who identified themselves as members of an exclusive *community* they called The Trinity Group².

These young people became the gatekeepers for my explorations. The initial data for this study came from conversations and both formal and informal interviews with three of the young women who had belonged to the original Trinity Group. My investigations quickly expanded to include dozens of other young storyline authors and artists whom they introduced me to or whom I discovered through Internet searches. Data collected from these new subjects included sample images and stories downloaded from their publicly posted web pages, person-to-person e-mail exchanges and interviews, and information copied or downloaded from their online journals (*blogs*). Throughout the latter period of data collection, there was an effort made to identify, through active questioning and passive reading of online postings, subjects who began their present writing or art-making by storylining in early adolescence. Interview questions included several aimed at eliciting reflective responses concerning the evolutionary process of storylining and the subjects' perceptions regarding their aesthetic preferences and development, conceptualization of self and society, and sense of personal growth.

What emerged from the investigation was an awareness of the global nature of this creative socio-aesthetic phenomenon. Around the world, adolescent girls and (to a somewhat lesser degree) boys, who are permitted freedom of mobility and/or access to computers, are

gathering in real and cyber spaces to create and share stories whose heroes may defy the mainstream cultural conventions of gendered-role-relationships and aesthetic traditions within the young author/artists' local societies (Chen, 2003; Manifold, 2003; in press). The activity may begin when small groups of children, who know one another from the neighborhood playground or classroom and who share a common interest, gather together online to converse and create story plays; or, individual children may seek out and join web-based storylining groups. In this latter case, the child may never actually meet his/her storyline playmates.

As in many role-playing game scenarios, a particular storyline is usually initiated by a player-participant *op* (or operator), who establishes basic guidelines for the creation of characters and, consequently, loosely defines the parameters of stories action. So, for example, when a Trinity Group *op* dictated that each member of the group "come up with a character that is based loosely off of you," the selection of an appropriate character was not taken lightly. Each understood that basing a character on oneself was "far more difficult than it sounds," (Courtney, personal correspondence, February 19, 2001). Often this involved the identification of a perceived flaw in one's own personality or physical self, then inventing a fictive character capable of overcoming, working around, or otherwise manifesting freedom from a similar flaw. The fictive personas, who might appear as other genders or species³, don fantastic forms, such as unicorns or cyborgs, or possess superhuman/supernatural powers, such as the ability to read minds or fly, were placed in situations which forced them to conceptualized viable solutions to everyday problems. Regardless of how theatrical the invented story characters appeared, these adolescent storyliners understood the *stuff* of creative manipulation to be their own undeveloped, inadequate, undesirable, or wished-for attributes. Thus, the invented story served as a safe place for experimenting with *real* self-possibilities.

Storyline authors flesh-out their fictive creations by giving them elaborately detailed bios (or invented personal histories and corresponding psychological profiles), then setting them in contexts that require them to interact in accordance with those individual and interrelated histories. Storyline art evolves as authors seek to visually represent tacit intricacies of relationships, motive, and action. Of course, as they work together, the storyliners may find that certain of their group have better skills in one creative area than another. One may be better at character or plot line development, another might be a skilled drawer of human or animal form, and another a better colorist. Thus, the young people quickly discover that specialization facilitates production of more skillfully crafted stories and artworks. Attention to excellence of literary and visual craftsmanship is encouraged by the desire to compete with others, individually and as groups, and be favorably judged by those in the worldwide arena of like-interest peers. This requires that all the collaborators must grow together in terms of their respective artistic abilities and rise to comparable levels of skill. For, as Josephina explained, "If the author is much better at words than the artist is at creating images, then the whole of the work will be incongruous, uneven—and the soul of the work will be lost," (personal communication, December 20, 2001).

Attention to the critical opinion of one's peers around the geographic world also promotes the globalization of literary and artistic tastes. *Manga* and *animé* are now the globally preferred literary and visual models for the storyline narratives and illustrations of adolescents (Chen, 2003; Manifold, 2003), even though these models present a complex, culturally specific iconography (Levi, 1996) that is largely unfamiliar to those of non-Japanese cultural heritage. *Manga* and *animé* stories often deal with dark themes of rejection or alienation, betrayal, rape, incest, suicide and other horrors of the most intense nature (Drazen, 2003; Levi, 1996). Frequently, imitative storylines also

address tragic themes. However, most storylines imitate *shōjo* (or *shoujo*), a female-targeted genre of *manga/animé* that focuses, not upon graphic description or portrayal of violence or mayhem, but upon the motivating factors and emotional consequences of such actions.

The tendency to focus upon aspects other than plot action is particularly evidenced in illustrations by storyline artists. For example, Anke, an artist contributor to Elfwood⁴, a popular website of storyline and fan writings and art, explained her work by stating, "I chose scenes and characters that tend to be overlooked by other artists, scenes not charged with great action or emotion or drama" (Eissmann, 2003). Despite the darkness of the manga and *animé*-like storylines, these tragic tales are illustrated with romantic lyricism. Furthermore, the most tragic characters or plot situations are often among the sensitively and beautifully illustrated. When asked to provide some rationale for this, Josephina replied, "A lot of beautiful art may come out of grief. Beautiful images of suffering may be more touching than graphic images [of horror]" (personal communication. December 12, 2003).

Storylining as a Female Preferred Role-Playing Behavior

In my explorations of storylining, I am finding examples of both male and female young people who engage in collaborative and individual writing and art making activities. However, there does seem to be a higher incidence of female than male participation. Similarly, other researchers have found that more females than males engage in this particular type of socio-aesthetic play behavior (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Harris & Alexander, 1998). They insist that when boys do write and create storyline art they are less inclined to work collaboratively and are more likely to adapt and extend the stories of published authors than are girls. It has become a common notion that males prefer role-playing game play or fan-fiction writing (writings that merely extend the actions of commercially produced narratives) to original story and

art making (Bleich, 1986; Clerc, 1996; Harris & Alexander, 1998). However, there are caveats to theories of distinctly divergent male/female preferences. Youth culture aesthetic tastes change quickly. For example, a very recent study reveals predict that, although the majority of those engaged in video role-playing games of the past have been males, female players have begun to surpass male players in certain kinds of role-playing game activities (Wright, 2003). Art forms that only a few decades ago were created to appeal specifically to female audiences are now found to be popular with male audiences as well (Thorn, 1995; Izawa, 2001; Levi, 1996). Furthermore, because youth who engage in the online activities are known to sometimes disguise their real genders (O'Brien, 1999; Turkle, 1997), the distribution of participants by gender may not be accurately assessed. There may be many more males (or fewer females) participating in either storylining or creative fan culture activities than would admit to doing so. This being said, the majority of subjects whom I interviewed and studied were—or identified themselves as—female. Thus, for purposes of this paper, particular attention will be paid to the storylining behaviors and expressions of adolescent girls and young women. Likewise, female preferred models and expressions of storylining art and literature and related feminine perceptions of self and society will be described and discussed.

Images of Self-in-Other

Early in my investigations, as an educator and a parent, I was both disturbed and intrigued by the stories and visual images the Trinity Group girls created on their alter-egos characters. According to Sennett (1992), "The more people interact . . . the more they become dependent on one another. People come to depend on others for a sense-of-self. One manipulates one's appearance in the eyes of others so as to win their approval and thus feel good about oneself" (p. 117). Therefore, when I saw their drawings of female characters displayed erotically in

scanty costumes even though the story plots clearly presented females in empowered roles (as for example, environmental activists or champions of the oppressed), I was compelled to question the rationale for the author/artists choices. However, Josephina explained her character Jade by saying, "In reality, I was the slowest of the [Trinity] group to develop breasts, but my character was the most sensual, voluptuous, flirty, even a little raunchy, and the most overtly sexual." Josephina described how this gave her insight into how others might one day relate to her as she matured into a more overtly sexy female. She came to recognize that an open advertisement of sexuality—through erotic pose and unabashed posture—had the disadvantage of inviting unwanted advances; therefore, her invented alter ego is shown wearing a prominently displayed dagger as weapon of defense. Over time, the Jade character evolved to rely upon more intellectual, attitudinal, and martial art skills as strategies of negotiated sexual interactions or defense, thus mirroring Josephina's growing confidence in her own maturing female body and gendered psyche.



Courtney, another Trinity Group member, developed the physical characteristics of womanhood quite early. Perhaps this helps us

understand why she intentionally depicted her character, Nitric, as androgynously as possible, with cropped hair, dressed in a mannish jacket, shorts, and cuffed boots. Nitric displays no weapon of defense, possibly because her appearance dis-invites sexual advances⁵. The androgyny of Courtney's alter ego may reflect Courtney's desire to remove sexuality as a factor to be addressed in various interactions. "In real life others react to you—and you adjust your behavior towards others—based on a perception of your sexuality. Nitric doesn't have to deal with that" (Josephina, personal communication, September 14, 2003). As a consequence, Courtney, through her character Nitric, could focus on the freedom of unsexed action.

Imagic Genres: *Shōjo*, *Bishōnen*, and *Yaoi*

Although early drawings by members of the Trinity Group were influenced by reliance upon Barbie fashion templates as drawing aids, as two of the girls demonstrated more drawing talent and took over the role of group artists, their work began to reflect the growing global-youth-phenomena interest in manga and animé-style imagery. Early artworks seemed to imitate the wide-eyed features and cartoon-like forms of *shōjo manga/animé* like *Sailor Moon*⁶ and *Fushigi Yugi*⁷. *Shōjo* is a Japanese term for women's comics. These stories, written by and for women, present a generic counterpoint to *shōnen*, or male oriented comics, which involve considerable action (Thorn, 1995) and, like early American action comics, present strong male heroes with subordinate female heroines. The protagonists of *shōjo* are generally females in a wide range of unconventional roles. Although commercial *shōjo* is widely popular among American audiences, American girls often complain that the central characters of Japanese *shōjo* are portrayed as "whiny and ineffectual" and modify their own stories to correct this perceived weakness. "Our storylining differs from animé because we like our females to be stronger. Our females characters tend to be more

autonomous and mature than the female heroes of Japanese stories" (Mason, personal communication, December 11, 2002).

Japanese *shōjo* and *shōjo*-like storylines emphasize emotion, character development, interactive personal relationships, and situational drama over action (Levi, 1996; Thorn, 1995). That is, they focus on narratives that "are often better conveyed visually than through words or actions" (Thorn, 1995). The visual illustrations presented in *shōjo* comics tend to be soft and dreamlike. Enormous eyes convey expressions of intense emotion. Other softened, prettified images and decorative motifs symbolize inner feelings, passages of time, or other abstract story elements (Izawa, 2001; Levi, 1996; Thorn, 1995). Thus, the style employs *symbolic iconography* (Stephens, 1998) rather than literal presentation. For example, flowers or other nature motifs, use of color and lighting, and stylized facial features and expressions all carry symbolic meaning (Levi, 1996). *Shōjo*-like stories and imagery also employ realistic fantastica (Manifold, in press) and emotional realism (Jenkins, 1992). That is, regardless of how impossible, fantasy-like, futuristic or other-worldly the images or situations, the work contains truths that provide a frame of reference for interpreting and modeling daily experiences and relationships (Jenkins, 1992; Thorn, 1997).

As they matured to early womanhood, the Trinity Group girls were attracted to imitate *bishōnen* imagery and a few of the group came to prefer *yaoi* stories and images. Commercially available Japanese *shōjo* often feature an unconventional variety of *bishōnen*, or androgynously beautiful bisexual or homosexual characters (Thorn, 1993; Manifold, in press). These inspired imitation by storyliners, including the Trinity Group authors and artists and others who were the subjects of this early study. Many also acquired a preference for *yaoi*, or erotic art and literature that features homosexual relationships between male characters. *Yaoi* stories, like *shōjo* comics, are almost exclusively created

by and for women. Although the few male subjects who were participants of this study seemed alternately indifferent to or repulsed by this type of erotic storylining, nearly all the female subjects expressed either acceptance or overt preference for it. Indeed, one might wonder why stories about male homosexuality should so fascinate heterosexual⁸⁷ teenaged girls and young women. Levi (1996), who has examined the popularity of this genre, suggests that girls and young women may be attracted to reading or writing *yaoi*-genre stories by virtue of narrative presentations of equality and communication in romance—two uncommon aspects of heterosexual relationships in most patriarchal societies. In same-sex romance "both characters may be portrayed as equally strong and equally vulnerable, equally dominant and equally submissive" without either quality being permanently linked to sexuality or gender (Jenkins, 1992, p. 194). Such stories allow readers to imagine loving relationships between equals (Lamb & Vieth, 1986). This explanation alone, however, would not account for the fact that *yaoi* or boy/boy love stories seem more popular among heterosexual girls than do *yuri*, or girl/girl love stories. In this regard, one member of the Trinity Group indicated that her appreciation for *yaoi* came from an ability to identify with the feelings of sexual attraction to males in ways she could not feel attraction for females.

I like to put myself in the position of the character of the story. *Yuri* deals with romantic/physical relationships that I have put aside in my mind as unappealing. I'm sexually attracted to males, not females. So I would not be able to imagine myself reacting to other women the way main characters in *yuri* do. (Mason M. personal communication, September 10, 2003).

Thorn (1993, 1997), in exploring the feminine fascination of *yaoi*, sees evidence that a female, who is not yet or not entirely comfortable

with her sexuality, may find same-sex relationships appealing because the stories expose her to a non-threatening male sexuality that allows her to “make sense of the mysterious male animal by casting him in terms she can understand” (Thorn, 1993). Yet, this may be too easy an explanation. Most of the female subjects of my investigation did not express notions of feeling particularly threatened or disconcerted by the ‘mysterious’ male, although they expressed some curiosity about what it might be like to enjoy male privileges of action. On the other hand, curiosity about male privileges did not translate into acting with the promiscuous abandon that has been an applauded male behavior in some patriarchal settings. For as one subject pointed out, “although mass media presentations (most of which are created by men) would have you believe otherwise, American women are strongly influenced by traditions of Judeo-Christian / Puritan morality to be and remain sexually pure or loyal to a long-term partner.” Instead, she suggested that, because feminine sexual desire generally resides in the brain - triggered by the senses (touch, taste, smell, sound and sight), the sensual beauty of *yaoi* might appeal to critical aspects of a female’s sexual arousal, while fantasizing *yaoi* storylines would “allow her to experiment with virtual-sex possibilities without being unfaithful to her partner, acquiring a bad reputation, or risking sexually transmitted diseases” (Mason M. personal communication, September 10, 2003).

Finally, many of the female subjects of this study gave curiosity about the forbidden in sexuality—rather than the mysterious male per se—as the motivating basis of interest in *yaoi*. In other words, *yaoi* may appeal simply because it allows exploration of cultural taboos. Homosexuality is a largely forbidden and hidden aspect of American culture. “So, it compels us to want to get into the minds of those who are forbidden or think forbidden thoughts,” (Aurora J., personal communication, July 28, 2003). It may be the mysterious, forbidden, aspects of homosexuality that holds irresistible appeal for adolescent girls and young women.



A visual-style related to the interest in *yaoi* narratives was observed in the prevalence of the *bishōnen* art. Depictions of effeminate, often bisexual, young men and warriors characterize the *bishōnen* or beautiful boy style. The original Japanese form was intended for female audiences, and *bishōnen* images were generally created by female artists rather than for or by gay males (Levi, 1996). As a visual style, *bishōnen* has come to be widely imitated by female storyline artists. Perhaps the lush, sensual, imagery may permit the female viewer to imagine herself in a different role and setting than that of the supportive adoring sidekick. She may “want to be an adoring goddess for a while” (p. 130). Yet, one nineteen-year old Canadian *yaoi* writer and *bishōnen* style artist explained it simply as a refined *feminine* sensibility.

I’m an aesthete at heart. Beauty absolutely enraptures me. I like beautiful men. I like beautiful women. In American society, beautiful men are something that’s not really... hmmm...respected? Appreciated? And the Roman version of beauty is still too masculine for me. Then there’s the Asian style of beauty—slender men, androgynous, graceful and sleek. I liked that... that’s how I got roped into the *bishōnen* style of art. (Ruaki, personal communication, December 12, 2002)

Mentoring and Moving On

As the original members of the Trinity Group grew older, their interests in storylining changed. Some gave up the activity in favor of other interests. Of those whom I interviewed, one had become more interested in writing; two had pursued serious art interests and were enrolled in art schools and were preparing for careers in art related fields. A similar falling-out into specialized writing, art, and non-art interests was evident in the larger study population. Some attended art schools, colleges, or universities to prepare for art or writing related careers. A great many, however, did not seek or receive any formal instruction in their area of creative interest. Albeit, they continued to study, practice, and develop their writing or art making skills in peer mentoring settings. In fact, peer mentoring in the techniques of storyline style works was highly sought after and practiced by both those who received formal training and those who did not. Those who studied their craft in formal settings of art schools, colleges, or universities, often found that their preferred aesthetic styles of expression were neither appreciated nor encouraged by their academic instructors. Therefore, they turned to peer mentors for encouragement and instructional support of their work.

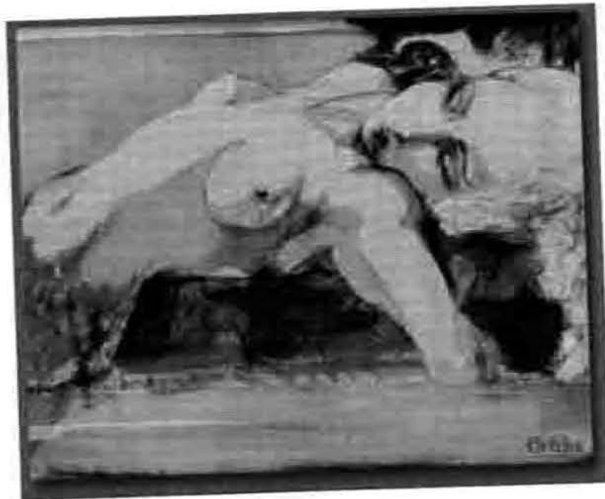
Both the formally and informally trained displayed their work online in community-interest-group websites, inviting others to comment upon, critique, and encourage or correct their efforts. The more skilled storyline writers and artists offered technical tutorials or gave instructional advice to the less skilled members of this vast online community. Lave and Wenger (1999/1993) have described this "circulation of knowledge among peers and near-peers" as having an exceedingly rapid positive effect upon learning" (p. 93). Indeed, many of those young women who claimed to have had only peer mentors as instructors exhibited works of such remarkable quality as to rival that of their academically trained peers.

Regardless of whether or not the women were exposed to academic education in writing/art, the preferred aesthetic models and expressive styles of these young women authors and artists appear to have gone through evolutionary change. Older adolescents and young women showed great interest in Euro-American art and literature. They expressed recognition that Euro-Western models, because they are culturally familiar (and therefore more easily understood and accessible to aesthetic manipulation than the iconographic symbology of Eastern traditions and philosophy evident in *animé*), hold greater possibility for metaphoric association.

Animé and *manga* show adolescents certain forms of being. But, when the fictives you've invented as pieces of your self or the characters you've adapted as part of your self no longer present possibilities of growth, you move on to seek more universal complex forms that are modeled after great works of art, like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *Harry Potter*. These are more richly descriptive [for Westerners] and have more varied visual and plot forms. Their archetypic messages become more important (Josephina M., personal communication, June, 14, 2003).



Along with academically accepted authors like Shakespeare, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and J. K. Rowlings, older female storyliners are drawn to works by writers of fantasy, gothic horror, and science fiction. An early preference for Japanese visual styles and stories—and particularly the intrigue of metaphoric and iconographic symbolism, inclines storylining authors and artists to find equally symbol laden works within Western tradition. Older European traditions as expressed Celtic legends, Arthurian tales and stories of medieval chivalry and knighthood, European fairytales, Victorian era literature, and arcane tales of Judeo-Christian mysteries seemed to fascinate and inspire the authors. Storylining artists also looked to Euro-American canons of art styles for inspiration, of particular interest are highly realistic, romantic, and symbolic works. (See Figure 4) Favorite artists and art styles include the Pre-Raphaelites, Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Klimt, Mucha, Turner, the Walt Disney artists, Arthur Rackham, N. C. Wyeth and other Brandywine illustrators, and contemporary artists like Michael Whelan and Dave McKean.



Elements of the Japanese inspired *manga* and *animé* are not being discarded, however. Rather, they are being adapted to and incorporated in popular Western forms. Stories continue to be *shōjo*- and *bishōnen*-like, whether the young authors choose to write and illustrate original or fan-fiction-based works (i. e. works based on Western pop-culture characters). *Yaoi* reappears as slash, stories of boy/boy or girl/girl, based on characters from British and American television, movies, literature. Slash also is visually presented in more “realistic,” less *animé*-like styles (Courtney, personal communication, August 28, 2003). So, although these works exhibit *manga* and *animé*-like characteristics of symbolic iconographism, emotional realism, and real fantastica, the symbols used, ways emotions are revealed, and the magical or fantastical powers assigned to the characters clearly reflect Euro-American styles and cultural traditions.

The Appeal of Role-Play: Caveats and Implications

Why should such highly culture-specific or theatrically artificial aesthetic styles as Japanese *manga* and *animé* or Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite, and Art deco styles appeal to Information-Age adolescents and young women? The subjects of this study pointed out that the narratives of these genres often deal with dark, brooding, psychologically complex, or symbolically secreted subject matter at a time in their lives when they are becoming personally and too-often painfully aware that life in school and on the streets is not as simplistic or Disneyesque as many adults would like to believe it to be. They consider adult attempts to shield them from ugly realities are both insults to their intelligence and futile shields from societal assaults. Awfulness of every variety and form assails them every day, whether conveyed through mass media or dumped literally on their doorsteps⁹.

Therefore, preferences for symbolic iconographism, emotional realism, and real fantastica may represent attempts to both distance participants from too intense and in-your-face emotional experience.

Early in the 20th century German playwright Bertolt Brecht argued that viewers want and need some artificial distance from too-realistic experiences. Distance allows the viewer some space for critical contemplation, while lack of distance overpowers (Jenkins, 1992, p. 61), rendering the viewer weak and vulnerable. Although realistically depicted, the impossibly fantastic physical features, costuming, and settings employed by these young authors and artists permits them to distinguish and articulate between that which is not real - the outer physical -and that which is or *might be* real - the inner being, meaning, or emotion. At the same time, by projecting an undeveloped quality of self or a desired self-reality into a character of the story line, the participant can give distance to that corresponding aspect of self. Self-distance permits the creator to adapt, adjust, or craft certain physical or psychological attributes of the fictive character as if the creator was the character. It gives each member of the group an opportunity to practice a particular attribute or skill and to explore the effects and consequences of possessing such an attribute or skill in interaction with others. In so doing, the participants virtually experiment with possible solutions to the most intense, complex, or tragic problems of real life. The immediate goal may be to craft a coherent character, thereby stabilizing the fictive character so it might serve as an external point of reference for the actions and interactions of other characters within an invented story. Nevertheless, as a side effect, the adolescent may discover empowering qualities of self, conceive real solutions for social problems, and envision a more utopian global future.

The redefinition of male-female gendered roles and ways of being may suggest both a practical way of being in an Information-Age society and may presage an opening up to greater possibilities for personal feminine autonomy. Rather than clearly defined roles or a hierarchical social order, this role-play suggests a social environment of equalized yet differing powers, as in *Rock-Paper-Scissors* play, where

empowerment roles differ and are equalized by being shifted from one to the other depending on factors of the moment. Adopting another persona also makes demands on one's understanding of self and suggests an opening up to acceptance of other ways-of-being. It encourages reflection upon the way ideas about self-image, gender, and place in the social environment shape our expectations (Turkle, 1997). This possibility of developing a self capable of seeing through other gender/cultural perspectives may—as a side effect—encourage the development of true empathy for the Other.

But we must not be too quick to applaud the socio-aesthetic phenomena of storylining as having altogether utopian consequences. There may be dangers in presenting the horrific as beautiful. Even when suffering might be more touchingly portrayed with lovely images than with graphic detail, might this beautiful mask also shield from facts of horror that should be dealt with in fact not fantasy? Injustices, hatreds, violence upon one other and the environment may call for enraged action rather than sentimental reaction. There are suggestions that the re-visioned social landscapes embrace some dangerous stereotypic ideals. Issues of racism, ethnic conflicts, or ageism are oddly missing from the narrative/illustrative storyline repertoire. Visual presentations of characters tend ubiquitously to exhibit the slender androgynous form, straight hair, and blend of delicate Asian and Caucasian features that are typical of *manga* and *animé* imagery (Manifold, 2003). This appears constant regardless of the actual race or culture affiliation of the young author/artists. In other words, while girls and young women of the Information Age may be envisioning less gender specific/restrictive roles for themselves in their narratives, the social landscapes and body images they project may be of sentimentalized, confining, or stereotypic ideals.

In the end, there is still much that we do not know about the nature, processes and effects of storylining behaviors or the resulting

products of those behaviors. We do not know with surety that the new stories and images being projected represent positively empowered possibilities of being, reinforce old stereotypes, or present new self-limitations. We do not know the full nature or extent of the situated teaching/learning procedures of storylining. We do not know whether these adolescent fantasies are being translated into the real social environment or are merely providing virtual escapes from social environments that the young authors/artists perceive as restrictive. It is unclear as to whether or not the adolescents and young women who engage in these activities are fully aware of the possibilities and ramifications of enacting their fantasized realities. Certainly, as outsiders to the phenomena, we are unenlightened in this regard.

Further study of the phenomena is important, for it might better enable educators to critique the projected visions of Information-Age girls and young women. Also, an examination of the informal way that storylining participants instruct, mentor, and critique one another's work can provide curricular models for educators. This knowledge would both inform us regarding a little known aspect of female youth culture and permit educators to plan and develop effective classroom curricula and instructional strategies for the education of positively empowered adolescent females of Information-Age societies.

Notes

¹ The Information-Age began in the United States in 1979 with the sale of the first personal home computers to the general public. It spread to other post-industrialized countries as computers became available to the middle-classed public (Stephens, 1998).

² The group, at its largest, consisted of eight members.

³ Animal forms adopted as personas for storyline play are referred to as *furries*.

⁴ See <http://elfwood.lysator.liu.se/elfwood.html>

⁵ Although one might argue that Nitric's costumed appearance would not dis-invite lesbian approaches, lesbianism was neither addressed nor overtly suggested in any of the Trinity storylines featuring the Nitric character.

⁶ The *Sailor Moon* series, by manga artist Naoko Takeuchi, was introduced to Japanese audiences in 1995. According to Drazen (2003), "The shows been a hit in Japan, in the U.S. and Canada, in Poland, in the Philippines, in Brazil, and especially on the Internet" (p. 11).

⁷ The *Fushigi Yugi* series was created by Yu Watase.

⁸ Among those interviewed for this study, only one male and two females identified themselves as preferring same-sex or bi-sexual relationships. All others indicated heterosexual preferences. While it is possible that due to the social prohibitions against homosexuality other interviewed subjects might have been hesitant to admit privately entertained homosexual tendencies, without any reported or observable evidence to the contrary, I am bound to accept statements claiming heterosexuality as genuine.

⁹ For an interesting discussion of this, see Latham, R. (2002). *Consuming youth: Vampires, cyborgs, and the culture of consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Questioning Fantasies of Popular 'Resistance': Democratic Populism and Radical Politics in Visual Cultural Studies

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This is the second part to a complementary essay that appeared in JSTAE (jagodzinski 2003). It was also written in 1998 and is being revisited some six years latter given that the cultural landscape in art education is slowly turning its sights towards visual cultural studies, a position JSTAE has been exploring for almost a quarter of a century if we take into account our earlier "Bulletin" publication, which began in 1980. The theme of silence arises, for me, a question of what is a radical politics at the turn of the century? It seems that the only game in town is that of neo-liberalism, while the question of 'democratic populism' as a form of liberal pluralism continues to be debated within cultural studies. This essay critiques the question of 'pleasurable resistance' as it manifests itself in popular cultural forms as examined mostly by John Fiske, an exemplary left-leaning critic. It may seem anachronistic to analyze the *Newlywed Game* and Madonna, given that both 'forms' are in their retirement years. Her clone, Britney Spears, is slowly supplanting Madonna, while *The Newlywed Game* has been replaced by 'reality television,' which ironically subverts it. We now have the *Bachelorette* and even a television series where the sanctity of marriage has to be subverted in order to win a million dollars: *My Big Fat*