



XBOX 360

GAME OF THE YEAR

NTSC



MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

i encountered sword art online in a very... neuroplastic state, shall we say. that is, i discovered it when the first season of the anime was airing, when i was twelve years old. it was the summer before 8th grade started.

now some of you may feel that this is old enough to know better, but the fact of it was that i didn't. i was in that state where you simply absorb everything that is trendy and go "huh. ok." so if you think about it, it was actually pretty normal that-

alright i'm lying. i'm lying and i really need to stop. i thought kirito was cool. i thought sword art online was cool. and i'm not fucking joking. i thought this for quite a while.

here is some photographic proof of this. i held onto my belief in kirito's coolness for a devastating amount of time. i am really

anyway, back to 2012: i was sort of aware at the time that this was cringe. i'd told a friend i was watching a new anime i liked and that it was called "sword art online." she sent me back a screenshot of it being under the harem genre, captioned "LOL." this conversation happened on kik btw. i'm trying to paint you a picture here.

anyway so i had to defend myself. "it's different!" i told her.

i mean, it wasn't. it really was just a harem anime. i didn't know that yet though.

when the first season of the anime ended, i began reading the light novels on baka-tsuki dot org. i quickly finished those, and then started reading other light novels on the site. for those of you who were contemporaneously reading webnovels, i can sense your dismay. you know exactly the kind of shit i was

December 1, 2013 at 3:17 PM

kirito is really cool

testing the limits of people saying "cringe culture is dead" by airing all this out.

hoovering up.

yeah. look. the fact of the matter is just that i became straight up obsessed

with 1) death game series, 2) isekai series, 3) male power fantasy series, and of course, 4) the unholy combination of all three.

at risk of overreading my own personal history—and middle school cringe everywhere—i want to use this as an entry point to talk about perverse identifications. specifically, the kind with a blithe innocence about them, and an incredible sense of the unironic.

i have obvious intellectual predecessors here. i am indebted to eve sedgwick on many levels - think “queer and now,” where she writes:

in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival

which seems a bit overblown now it implies that sword art online perhaps helped me survive. well, nonetheless! the point stands that reading between the lines and maybe even overreading are important tools in the arsenal of both queer kids and queer theorists. i

think even sword art online’s biggest haters—maybe especially its biggest haters—would agree that it contains many “sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other” and thus we could so queerly interpret it.

it’s fine you doubt me, by the way. you may still think this is a silly project. but for me, that’s part of the point. lauren berlant, in *the queen of america goes to washington city*, introduces and defends their method for the text, which deliberately draws upon pop culture and other “low” archives.

These materials frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life. In this book I am conducting a counterpolitics of the silly object by focusing on some instances of it and by developing a mode of criticism and conceptualization that reads the waste materials of everyday communication [as important].

don’t worry, that’s the last big block quote of theory you’ll see from me for a long time. berlant argues that it is because

these materials circulate so widely and theoretically trivially that they are formative and worth studying. that's why my sword art online thing is deliberately perverse on multiple levels—it draws upon a highly idiosyncratic archive, materials of which were never really intended for me at all.

that's a big part of its appeal, to be honest. when you identify with things that aren't for you, like a costume you're trying on, it's partially because they're not "supposed" to be for you that they're so compelling. and in the process of reading it so askewly, you make it into something entirely else. this is how the mainstream accidentally becomes a little bit subversive, through the interplay of mistaken subject and mistaken object.

and these mistakes, these failures are actually the modality through which we can access sword art online's lesbian reading.

**i. the
klein
problem**

some of you - those of you who ever read or watched sword art online - will recognize the humor inherent in that phrase, "sword art online's lesbian reading."

to those of you who grew up significantly less geekily, here's a quick run-down. sword art online is a series of webnovels written by kawahara reki from 2002 to 2008. by 2009, it'd begun traditional publication as young adult novels in japan and by 2012, an anime adaptation was airing. the series follows kirigaya kazuto, a fourteen year old who goes by the username "kirito" and becomes trapped in a virtual reality mmorpg called sword art online (sao) alongside his fellow gamers. in sao the game, infamously, if you die in the game, you die in real life. he goes on deadly adventures to clear the game and hopefully eventually log out, in the process wooing the hearts of several girls and showing off his extremely powerful gamer skills.

(this is the arc i'm going to be mostly focusing on, because this is the part that sold me on the series as a child. there's more to the series - after he clears the game, he con-

tinues to be embroiled in various deadly virtual reality games, all of which need his special video game prowess to resolve.)

you can see—if you are a sympathetic kind of person—why this might so entrance a twelve year old me. now let's get into my reading of this first arc.

kirito's first day in sword art online is spent with a random guy named klein. klein is new, truly new to the game, while kirito, who participated in the beta test, has a comparative advantage. kirito ends up teaching klein how to fight in this cutting



edge completely immersive virtual world.

i am going to say something controversial which is why i am offering this disclaimer first: i do NOT think kirito and

klein are or should be in a romantic relationship. this is for many reasons, the first of which is that i am twenty two years old. the second of which is that klein is ALSO twenty two years old by complete coincidence. remember that kirito is fourteen.

that said (the audience audibly groans) it would be disingenuous of me to pretend that kirito does not have a crush on klein. i sense your disbelief—the third reason is that this IS a series aimed at heterosexual teenage boys. i will not speculate on why kawahara reki wrote this way, but in the light novels, kirito's narration does describe klein in a way that is distinctly homoerotic.

his early narration is mainly characterized by his intense attachment to klein. he will have several female love interests in the books to come, and he will never describe them the way he describes klein or invest his emotional energy in them the way he thinks about klein. when they meet, and they're both in their game avatar forms, kirito is immediately struck by klein's avatar's appearance. he says klein's avatar looks "like a calmly

handsome warrior from the sengoku period," and he admires klein's avatar's "low vigorous voice." he repeatedly mentions over the pages to come how klein's eyes sparkle, how they sparkle with intelligence, and how delicate they are.

actually, kirito is a prickly character in the first arc of the series. he admits that he doesn't get along with real life people, much less strangers in video games. klein is the first person to grow close to him during this time period. he had been the one to approach kirito and ask for help. kirito was so taken aback by how "shameless and demanding" klein was to a stranger, he accepted. but in the end, klein "had a side to him that grows on you, and [kirito] didn't find this uncomfortable either." after spending some time together, kirito makes a tentative overture of friendship to him, but falters dramatically when klein tells him that he's planning on spending time with other friends later, even though kirito is welcome to join.

it's at this point they discover they can't log out of the video game. they ultimately are forcibly

teleported to a central gathering place, where the creator of the game, kayaba akihiko, announces that all ten thousand people in the game are currently trapped there until one of them manages to clear it. should someone outside the game attempt to remove the vr headset from a player in the game, the headset will electrocute the player's brain. should a player character in the game lose all their hp, the headset will also fry their brain in real life. kayaba leaves them with a parting gift: he removes the facade of the avatars and makes every player character have the appearance of that player in real life.

we get klein's appearance at this point:

His long, sharp eyes had become sunken and shone brighter. His delicate and high nose had become hooked, and a slight beard now appeared on his cheeks and chin. If the avatar had been a young and carefree samurai, this one was a fallen warrior—or maybe a bandit.

i'm sorry man i just find this description a lot. this is one of the major reasons he's so fascinated by klein. he's both

compelled and repulsed by klein's rough demeanor, which is reinforced by klein's actual appearance. oh, his eyes are even brighter than how they sparkled earlier, he looks like a fallen warrior, he's rugged, and roguish.

by the way, we also get kirito's, which i'll discuss much later:

Black hair lay neatly over the head, two weak-looking eyes could be seen beneath the slightly long hair, and a delicate face that made people mistake me for a girl even now when I go out in casual clothes with my sister.

anyway, kirito immediately grasps how dire the situation is. he explains to klein that because players are competing for resources and monsters to kill, it's in their best interests to quickly move out of the crowded starting area. but klein once more mentions his friends. kirito can tell klein hopes that they can all stick together, but kirito fears being responsible for that many newbies to the game. klein has similar insight into kirito—he can tell that kirito is struggling to refuse him. so he tells kirito to go ahead without him.

With my mouth closed, I was wracked by an indecision that I'd never felt before in my life.

Then I spoke the words that would gnaw at me for two years.

"...OK," I nodded, stepped back, and said with my dry throat.

you need to keep in mind that kirito is about to obsess for two actual years about this man he spent around four hours with. their parting is bizarrely ambiguous as well. kirito waves and runs off. klein calls after him.

"Hey, Kirito! You look pretty good in real life! You're quite my type!"

I smiled bitterly and shouted over my shoulder.

"Your look suits you ten times better too!"

for the record i do not endorse klein saying this to a fourteen year old. i am simply saying that this summary and selection of quotes is all kawahara reki gives us about klein to explain why kirito is obsessed with him. because klein, we will eventually learn, remembers kirito but does not spend two years obsessed with a teenager he

met once. so clearly, klein is memorable for reasons wholly in kirito's head rather than any intrinsic noteworthiness to their encounter.

in aggregate, the impression we receive of klein from kirito is that he's incredibly bright and charming, that kirito wants to spend time with him and him alone, that kirito decides to turn away from him before he can disappoint klein by not being able to live up to his expectations, and that kirito regrets that decision for years.

it's at this point that astute readers will comment, "wait, you said this was a lesbian reading. why have you been talking about this massive bizarre one-sided teenager crush that klein is hilariously and canonically unaware of." the first reason is that, again, it would be disingenuous not to. the second reason is that klein forms an important paradigm through which we can examine how kirito will continue to think about his sexuality and gender. any reading at all of kirito's romantic life has to deal with the klein problem.

ii. the

nsuna

solu[★]tion[★]

luckily for both us and kirito, that looms hugely in his relationship with the girl who becomes his long-term romantic partner: yuuki asuna.

for those for you who aren't sao-heads, aincrad—the name of the setting of sword art online the game—is a floating castle composed of 100 floors. each floor is a world unto itself that looks like a normal pseudo medieval fantasy setting. it contains regular monsters to fight for loot and experience, npcs that give quests and items, and of course, one big, bad boss monster to defeat. when that boss is defeated, the next floor is unlocked.

when the first floor's boss is found, the serious sao players get together to form a party to defeat it. this is where kirito and asuna meet, though we only learn about this in the second volume. her two big high-gloss personality traits are that 1) she's very good at sword art online and 2) she's very normal. she's in the game on accident, and she's genuinely pretty well-adjusted. the two hit it off. we'll return to this.

the thing is, the first sword art online novel only

sort of resembles the anime adaptation that more people are familiar with. this is not to say that the plot changes dramatically, but rather, the order in which it is relayed is. while the anime relays the events of the arc in chronological order, the first volume of the novel series instead only contains the most important events and relays them at a breakneck pace. all of the harem stuff, all of the filler, is actually quarantined into its own separate sequel, volume 2. so in volume 1, we get the klein introduction blow-by-blow, and then all of a sudden, it's two years later. again, this has the effect of making the original much more intensely structured around klein than the anime.

at any rate, we meet asuna in volume 1 because kirito has come across a rare food drop. it's actually so rare that he can't cook it himself. luckily for him, he coincidentally runs into his friend asuna, who is one of the few players in sao who has trained up their cooking skill. asuna, he notes, is also one of the few female players—and one of the even fewer beautiful ones. he describes her appearance in glowing terms:

The small face, which was surrounded by long straight chestnut hair that was split neatly in two, was egg-shaped, and her two sparkling hazelnut eyes were almost blinding.

that was tongue in cheek, in case you can't tell. i'm sorry, i really just don't think that "egg-shaped" is the most romantic way you can describe a beautiful girl. that said, her eyes do also sparkle. it's unclear whether this is the only way kawahara describes people kirito likes, or whether he likes her eyes because of their resemblance to klein's.

he does think she is beautiful though:

That face, it was definitely not a human's. With smooth skin and the shiny hair, it was too beautiful to belong to a life form.

again, reading this, you would be forgiven for wondering what exactly he finds attractive about her. her inhuman face? her egg-shaped head? but it is her inhumanity that he's actually most attracted to. he immediately follows up that:

But to me, the face didn't look

like it was made from a bunch of polygons anymore. I could accept that it was what it was.

If I returned to the real world now and saw an actual person, I'd probably feel pretty disconcerted

this does sort of make a sort of teenager-y gamer sense. i could imagine a sixteen year old boy being immensely charmed by a girl who looks just like a smooth doll final fantasy character. but i am also interested in reading this further.

taking this a step further, kirito thinks she's beautiful precisely because it verges upon the uncanny. he's able to interact well with the sort of popular beautiful girl that outside the game he'd never be able to talk to, not simply because this is a power fantasy about gamers being desirable, but because asuna herself similarly seems better suited for a game than real life.

the thing about their interactions is that technically speaking, they're fanservice-y. yet they're played so completely sexlessly that it's sometimes hard to imagine them as a romcom moment. it is bizarrely unhorny despite its

valiant attempts otherwise. there's a scene where kirito accidentally grabs and gropes asuna's breast. but it doesn't really matter. he isn't actually aware of what it was—or even who it was he was grabbing—until after the fact. he actually only gropes it because he's so confused what this “something strange and full” was. a couple chapters later, kirito eats mayonnaise off asuna's fingers. but it blips by so incredibly fast with both characters having so little reaction to it, you might not even realize it happened. it's this combination of breakneck pacing and romantic ineptitude.

it may come as a little bit of a surprise, then, that the two actually also have sex in the first volume. there's a whole plotline where kirito loses a duel to asuna's guild leader heathcliff, and as a result temporarily joins her guild. however, one of the guild members, jealous of his closeness to asuna, poisons kirito in a remote location and begins torturing him to death. luckily, asuna arrives in time, and saves his life. he kisses her and they both vow to protect each other with their lives. they go back to her house, have sex, and

then in the very next chapter get married and set upon a honeymoon in the sao countryside.

this is actually the plotline that made me first joke that they were lesbians, because they immediately uhailed and began living out this cottagecore lifestyle. but i digress. back to the sex and what kirito thinks of it.



at this point in time, asuna is seventeen and kirito is sixteen. so i'll keep the descriptions of her naked body to summary. what's notable he uses clinical descriptions, with a hilarious technical tinge. he describes the particle effect on her naked skin. her hair is silky (i'll give him that, that is a traditional descriptor of attractiveness). in his funniest descriptor of all, he claims her naked breasts are so perfect as to be UNRENDERABLE BY GRAPHICS ENGINES??? yes, you're inhabiting the mind of a sixteen year old gamer boy, but this takes it to comical extremes—this is a sixteen year old gamer boy who seems to have

never even watched porn.

the sex scene itself is fade-to-black. kawahara reki actually did write the sex scene and post it online as an extra, but it, for obvious reasons, did not make it into the published volume. my point is not just that sao feels sexless because everyone is like sixteen years old and kawahara is already doing a lot considering it's a young adult novel—which is true—or that it may just be limited by the author's prose - which is also likely true.

what i want to highlight here is how incompetence defines kirito, specifically in how he feels able to relate to both men and woman. this is very often true for these sort of male power fantasy novels. rather than have a perfectly competent, handsome, and likable main character—who runs the risk of being wholly unrelatable—it makes sense that instead authors choose to feature main characters who are powerful *because* of their failures.

in kirito's case, because he's a good gamer at the expense of everything else, the power fantasy he comes to live out is "what if being a good gamer was the

only thing it takes to succeed?" kirito isn't ugly, but he's perhaps a little too feminine to be classically handsome. kirito isn't unlikable, but rather he's too prickly to have many friends. we'll discuss all of these at length, but let's begin with the last one first.

what's really interesting about asuna is that she, narratively speaking, functions as a do-over for klein. here is kirito's chance to finally make it right.

i should clarify one thing here first. my sao-ologist colleagues may point out a more obvious do-over for kirito. kirito wasn't always a loner in game. at one point over the two year timeskip, he joined a guild called the black cats. the black cats were average players, and they asked kirito for help training one of their members. kirito hid his true prowess, because by the way beta testers are super hated in sao because they have more knowledge and experience that they only unevenly share with the rest of the playerbase.

ultimately the guild took on a dungeon that was too difficult for them, and every

single member died except for kirito. kirito blames himself for not being able to protect his comrades and wonders if they had known his true skill, would they have taken him more seriously when he expressed trepidation about the dungeon. he was particularly close to one member, a girl named sachi whom he was asked to train.

reading his relationship with asuna through this lens, we see a movement from partnering with girl he couldn't save to a girl who saves him. that is, a girl whom he can stand side-by-side with. and that's true. but sachi's story is relayed in just a couple pages, and we never actually even see her speak (in the light novel). so i'd like to suggest that asuna's foil is rather a character who's given a lot more narrative weight—klein.

klein reappears when kirito and asuna are in a dungeon together. it's somewhat farcical at first; klein hits on asuna, kirito jabs him, etc. but then kirito begins wallowing in self-hatred. klein had protected and raised his friends alongside himself. they'd all survived.

He had managed to bear the weight that I had run away from in fear two years ago, on the day that this death game began.

Ignoring the self-hatred that had settled deep in my heart...

walking away from klein on the first day of sao is something that weighs on kirito heavily, especially considering that his first attempt at finding a replacement for klein and his friends ended horribly. it validated his fears that he was insufficient both for klein as well as compared to klein.

that said, klein is also the one who starts kirito on his path to healing, as the catalyst for kirito and asuna forming a more clear romantic connection within their relationship. first, he comments to asuna:

“Ah— Asuna-san, how should I put this...that guy, Kirito, please treat him well. Even though he's not very good with words, isn't very fun, and is a battle-crazed idiot.”

he's effectively handing kirito off to asuna. when kirito sputters “Wh-what are you talking about!?” klein explains that it's “remarkable” that kirito is

in a party. "Even if it's because you fell for Asuna..."

kirito becomes defensive at this, denying it, while everyone (including asuna) smiles. this is actually the first time their relationship has been clarified as romantic in the entire text thus far. all their interactions prior to this point relied heavily on "we are a guy and a girl who hang out one-on-one" for any romantic subtext.

asuna, who is bright and likable in the same way as klein, continues throughout the novel to drag him into social situations, to push him out of his comfort zone, and grow as a person. in many ways, she is a replacement for how kirito used the symbolic figure of klein (as something to live up to) without any of the negative baggage (and is more societally acceptable, to boot). the two become two sides of the same figure for kirito.

i say this because asuna is similarly the one who facilitates the "confession" of a sort from kirito to klein. klein continues to appear at random throughout the novel as a friend and side character, but his next and final major appear-

ance is at the end of the novel. kirito is planning to sacrifice himself in a duel against the creator of sao, waging his life for the freedom of all surviving players.

he bids his friends goodbye, one by one. but kirito's final words are to klein.

I gazed straight into those deep eyes of his and took a deep breath. This time, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't control my faltering voice. "Klein. That time... I'm really sorry... about leaving you. I've always regretted it."

that was a more dramatic confession than asuna got and it's literally right before the climatic battle of the whole goddamn book. do you understand why i'm so intent on arguing that kirito achieves social/romantic catharsis through their unified figure.

after that tearful goodbye to klein, he offers the following narration:

Finally, I turned my gaze back to the girl who had allowed me to say the words that had been buried deeply within my heart for two years.

he doesn't actually say anything to her, for the record. this scene begins with asuna—she's the reason kirito enters into this duel, for her future—and ends with klein—he's kirito's last regret, his past. it's all very dramatic.

at any rate, this is why asuna has to be the klein solution. i've been consistently arguing that a large part of her appeal to him is "she's klein but a girl" and i suppose you could argue that this is just refitting homosexuality into a heterosexual schema. you could also argue that i'm undervaluing platonic relationships by assuming that because this is intense it's romantic.

but the reason i think we ought to prefer my reading is because sao has weird things to say about the "male" part of male power fantasy, that continue to complicate the emotional landscape of the novel.

iii.

gamer-

gender

remember when i said i'd return to the problems of competence and appearance within the male power fantasy genre? well. i'm talking about them both once here.

one of the largest problems with kirito is that he's kind of a flop.

and something he struggles with is that sao is one of the best things that happened to him. it really is just what he's best at. even after he escapes sao, in the arcs to come, he basically makes going into virtual reality death games his career. he's an incredibly isolated person who is alienated from his own self, his desires, and his body (which is, of course, exacerbated by the conceit of vr).

this is partially why the novel was able to achieve massive popularity. what if your mother was WRONG and being a gamer is just as important as doing your homework, or whatever. kirito adapts so well for out-of-universe reasons. people are interested in him being cool, not him having realistic crises about adapting to the virtual world or crying about wanting to go home.

but analyses like that are less interesting to me than the story that ends up getting told because of those genre pressures. and the story that gets told is a story in which being a failure and embracing failure is deeply freeing.

one of the most obvious ways kirito is a failure is related to gender. klein basically serves as a referendum on masculinity, which kirito has a complicated relationship with. something that he continually returns to is his in/ability to provide for others. can he take care of klein and his friends? can he take care of the black cats? can he take care of asuna?

even outside the virtual world, we learn in volume 2 (which contains all the filler stories) his relationship to his cousin is defined by this. his family is heavily into kendo and runs a dojo out of their home. although kirito was pressured to practice kendo, his true passion lay in gaming and computers, inspired by his adoptive mother's influence. it was his younger cousin and adoptive sister, suguha, who instead decided to step up and practice extra on his behalf, becoming an

accomplished practitioner
in the end.

My grandfather had hit me pretty hard... but when he did that, my sister started crying and protected me by saying that she'll do even my share to make him stop hitting me. [...] But I always felt sorry; I always wondered if that were really something she wanted to do and if she resented me.

so kirito's failure to live up to expectations is something that dominates his psyche as the novel timeline begins. his relationships are defined by that. there's a fairly straight line from suguha (whom he believes he let down) to klein (whom he spends years trying to atone to) to asuna (whom he shares a mutual relationship of obligation with).

suguha to asuna also represents a transformation of his perception of women. kirito has repeatedly benefited from women's... shall we say... displays of chivalry towards him. but where he perceived suguha becoming a kendoka as a burden that he allowed her to take on, when asuna saves his life, it's nothing but a relief. all he has to do is swear to do the same.

this suggests, of course, that he's matured. but it also suggests that his understanding of his relationship to expectations themselves has also changed along the way. failure, after all, can be freeing.

this is the actual thesis of the zine, the part that i think we've all been waiting for. sword art online serves as the prototype for reading "gamer" as a gender unto itself. it fascinates me: being a gamer is a type of masculinity, but it's not... a very good one. no offense-i'm a gamer!

it's a kind of failed masculinity. it's nerdy; it aspires to redblooded violence, but settles for a digital substitute; it comes part and parcel with other assumptions of substitutions, that you get in game what you can't get out of life itself. and it's defensive of itself, because being a gamer is defined-in this view-as a sort of gender incompetence.

look, we say to the gamer, you're not very good at being a man. and sometimes it is very freeing to stop trying.

the strongest articulation we have of kirito giving

up on being a man takes place volumes later. i know i said i would be focused on sword art online's first arc—the one that actually takes place in sword art online—but i will freely admit that the third arc, the gun gale online arc, compelled me for reasons i couldn't articulate at the time.

kirito never looked particularly masculine. we have in an earlier section a quote of he himself stating that he was often confused for a girl. asuna comments that his appearance in sao was feminine as well. and his model in the anime far more dramatically resembles the proportions of the teenage girls around him than any of the boys or men. but it's taken to extremes in gun gale online. the premise of gun gale online is that kirito, this time, is going into a vr first person shooter type competitive game to discover the truth behind people dying in the game and dying in real life. (it's not the vr headset that's killing them again, don't worry. they have consumer protection laws in sao now.)

gun gale online randomly assigns you an avatar. you literally can't change or customize it. if you want

a particular look you have to sell your own account. i literally don't know of a single game that forcibly assigns you a random look like that. but for whatever reason... kawahara reki made his vr game work that way.

the look that kirito receives is obviously one of the rarest possible avatars. it's implied literally no one else has it. the second someone else sees it they beg to buy it from him. it looks like this:

The height was obviously shorter than [Kirito's last avatar], and furthermore, it was thinner. The hair color, without changing, was still black but the hair flowed smoothly from the top of my head to around my shoulder-blades. My face was, just like my hands, an almost transparent white, and my lips were a vivid crimson.

The eye color as well, even though it was black identical to the hair, it was shining excessively. Those eyes that were fringed with long eyelashes raised a pure yet bewitching sight from the mirror, so much so that I unintentionally forgot that the image was of myself and let my eyes wander freely. Again, I looked at the facade, and let out a long sigh.

yeah kirito looks like an extremely cute extremely feminine girl. every single person who sees him during this arc thinks he's a girl. kirito can't sell his avatar because it's associated with his account,



the one he originally went into sao with, then played the game of the second arc with, and then finally converted to this game. and he refuses to create a new account because you know. reasons. so basically all his friends (who don't recognize him) unknowingly call him a sexy girl constantly.

he's like. i promise i get nothing out of this. because actually, he explains, you literally can't change your gender in vr because it gives you dysphoria. but sometimes because of your brainwaves players will randomly be

assigned a character of a different gender and no one knows why. i'm not kidding.

The recent VR games, for almost all of the titles, forbid changing the sex of the player and avatar. The reason is because the long-term use of an avatar of the opposite sex results in adverse effects for the spirit and body that cannot be ignored. However, I have heard that because the identification of the players' sex occurs due to the players' brain waves, in extremely rare cases, due to some impulse the system decides with the opposite sex, players have been startled when they dive in.

by the way kirito doesn't experience dysphoria, whether social or physical, during this arc. after he says all that, he just moves on with his life and starts infodumping about how gameplay changes when you have a gun.

when he meets the girl who is the "love interest" (he remains in a monogamous relationship with asuna the whole series, but every arc, he tends to meet a new girl who falls in love with him over the course of them growing closer together to solve the arc or side story's mystery.), she obviously also thinks he's a girl.

On reflex, I thought to clear up my gender but right on the verge of doing so, I stopped.

the reason why? if this girl realized he was a guy, they might have an awkward moment. that's about it. kirito concludes that he believes "use whatever you can use." he does not clarify the situation until later that day, when the girl begins changing in front of him, and he feels guilty. yeah.

anyway, the thing we should look to is how this is situated within the context of sao's genre: it's a harem novel. it's a wish fulfillment power fantasy novel. it's about the most id-y of ideas. and yet somehow gun gale online's power fantasy is that you can be a cute girl with no social repercussions. well, it's also about having secret powers (swordsmanship) that are really useful for defeating people who look down on you (because they have machine guns and you have a sword).

at any rate, kirito embraces the idea that he can be closer to the main girl of the season as a girl. everyone loves him. no one is threatened by him—certainly not in the way that he once felt towards klein, that

mix of "what if i was like you, i can't be like you, i want you, i hate you, i'm repulsed by you, you're a vision of the life i wish i could have had."

back to my original thesis though. something that's crucial to me about this girl fantasy is firstly that it's easy to disavow. he was force femmed by virtual reality, let's be real. but having no choice not to be a girl is the same sense of failure that we see in gamer identity itself. actually, kirito articulates the failure of manhood intrinsic to gamerhood at the start of volume 5, the book that begins the gun gale online arc. he's explaining to the bureaucrat who tasked him with investigating the game why people like video games and why they might enjoy violence within them.

So, about this superiority complex, it's surprisingly hard to fulfill in the real world. It's not something you can get unless you work really hard. You'll have to study hard to get better grades, to get better at sports, become cooler, or more attractive... All of which require a lot of time and energy and there is no concrete guarantee of payoff, above that the requirements are near impossible to achieve anyway.

this is why sao is a gamer novel. it's not just that it's about games or that it's about games as failure, which are both true. it's also just dedicated to making visible how all of these power fantasy novels are games in themselves, where making progress through them allows the reader to experience the rewards of adulation with no risk.

so for kirito being a gamer isn't just a survival mechanism, or a hobby, or a job, or whatever else. it's his gender because it's easier than being a man, or being a woman for that matter either.

iv. game

over

that begins to get at what's important to me about this idiosyncratic terminology. the gamer lens gives us the ability to talk about gender failure without assigning it to all trans people—it's instead a distinct genderqueer modality informed by being a complete and utter flop.

i used to think about monique wittig's essay "the straight mind," where she famously argues that if "'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems[,] Lesbians are not women." over time though, not to be too facetious about the whole thing, but i ended up feeling that nah, some of you wenches really ARE women.

this is part concession to social reality and part concession, period. that is, an acknowledgement of defeat by social codes that appear impenetrable without some bizarre schema (e.g. gamerhood) to structure how you yourself encounter them.

gamerhood, in particular, allows you to cast yourself as underdog to the whole affair. nerds famously have persecution complexes, after all. it's perfect, really, because so internal-

izing gender incompetence as your gender expression in itself is absolutely a gamer (derogatory) posture. it's like calling yourself a gendercel (this is a joke).

at some point, i think, a close reader will set down the zine, and go "why did you come up with a bunch of problematic language and kirito analysis to explain that you're literally just nonbinary and depressed?"

well, 1) because it's entertaining. but 2) i think there's something productive we can salvage from this approach. metaphors let you approach something obliquely, and trace its contours. it's helpful for some things that feel overwhelming to look at head on, like a deep, deep sadness. i think it's fun to try to unmake the problem with its own tools, or whatever it was that audre lorde said not to do.

something i like thinking about instead of monique wittig: in 1999, under alter ego clover paek, director erika cho made and starred in a short film, "we got moves you ain't even heard of (part one)". it's about ten minutes long, and it's mostly clips and audio from *the karate kid*

(1984) reimagined by being intercut with original footage by cho, all to the soundtrack of bananarama's cruel summer.

in cho's vision, an invitation to show one's karate moves cuts to a rendezvous where she eats an anonymous lover's ass in an outdoor night scene. ralph macchio-as-daniel becomes a voyeuristic spectator. clips of daniel walking turn into cruising. daniel's mother becomes erika cho's, urging her to take off her sunglasses and reveal a spectacular black eye. the audio in a scene of daniel getting beaten is replaced with lesbian porn—yet the groans aren't too far off. when daniel falls in a restaurant, dropping spaghetti all over his white pants, it cuts to cho, masturbating with a handful of spaghetti. every so often, daniel's laughing audience reappears onscreen.

the film concludes with cho interviewing ralph macchio, also played by cho. cho's macchio gives nonsensical, contradictory answers, all with a backdrop of changing grainy photos of outdoor sex. in the end, we return to a scene of daniel's "cruising," which leads him to none other than mr miy-

agi. to be continued, the ending screen says.

it's a funny movie. i find it creative and challenging and resonant, all the more for how odd and explicit it is. there are a couple lines of thoughts i want to bring out, with my readings of them heavily indebted to nguyen tan hoang's analysis.

first, i like how cho returns the film's gaze by making daniel into the voyeur. it's a gorgeous reversal that deliberately and counterfactually reverses the power dynamic at play; cho playfully acknowledges the impact of being interpellated by media by arresting daniel as queer subject. this recontextualization is so appealing to me—she makes his influence on her speak on him instead. this is obviously the same sort of process i have going on with kirito in my essay.

second, i like how cho presents the problem of the underdog. as nguyen writes:

Cho finds the moments when Daniel suffers most spectacularly at the hands of the macho bullies most generative for Asian dyke erotic appropriation.

that's what allows for cho's identification, really, are those scenes of humiliation. what is fascinating about karate kid, and what cho's film makes visible, is that it's daniel's identification with, for instance, a brutalized asian boybutch that both facilitates the violence against him as well as offers his way out (karate).

but nguyen also acknowledges that daniel eventually wins in the original movie—something cho doesn't allow him in her short film.

Cho remains stuck on the earlier moments of the film, finding an emotional payoff in replaying those humiliating scenes over and over like an obsessed fan with her favorite movie. Instead of moving forward in the narrative to see the underdog overcome his limitations and triumph, Cho's moment of truth involves a repetitive looping back, a constant looking behind to re-touch the past in order to feel and receive it differently.

this temporal backwardness mirrors the nostalgia that we've both mined in our respective projects. yet that queer time sits side by side with a film much more adult than the original movie ever was. to resolve

this, i return once more to eve sedgwick, following nguyen's lead.

the thing is, shame is kind of what haunts this piece. i called the series cringe. it's something i enjoyed in my tweens (a famously cringe time). and it is an imperfect series, to say the least. it's about what you do when you think what you want is always out of reach, so you convince yourself that the substitute is better.

in "shame and performativity: henry james's new york edition prefaces," sedgwick writes that shame is peculiarly both "contagious and individuating." we transmit it to each other, even as it makes us more isolated than before. it's in no small part because of this process, she writes, that shame is "the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop." she also references silvan tomkin's point that shame is activated by "the incomplete reduction of interest or joy." when we encounter a boundary that attempts to make our own pleasure strange, that, then, is how our self is formed.

so, she writes, queer has force because shame does:

If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy.

this is, for me, the point of it all. shame is what made us. but rather than let it fester, i've been trying to let it generate—let it generate over 7000 words of beautiful nonsense that creates its own kind of meaning. shame has its own readings, its own ways of seeing, its own genders, and its own possibilities contained within it. this whole project, ultimately, is my attempt to let shame be the start and not the end of me.

it's also about why i really did like sword art online.

hi everyone. this is my sword art online zine "game of the year." i hope you enjoyed reading it. it's about a lot of things personal to me, like things i'm embarrassed about. and also sword art online. this has been a project ten years, or maybe just five months, in the making. depending on how you count. (from when i started thinking about these ideas vs when i created a google doc, respectively.)

i would like to thank the following people for their invaluable help: spec for providing beautiful and quick edits to my creative conjugation; chris for being my partner in lesbian kirito crime through a beautiful late night sao symposium; le and insy for being my involuntary design counsel; kathryn, who will never read this, but who tried to warn me back in 2012 about sword art online; and, of course, y/n for being my friend :)

xoxo tshirt. 11/6/22.