Adolescence 2.0:

A cross-cultural look at youth through the eyes of an artist

By Genevive Bjorn

"There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age." — Sophia Loren

Tara Knight works as a tenured professor in the department of Theater and Dance and U.C. San Diego, where she teaches a range of art courses to undergraduate and graduate students. She also conducts research and collaborates with colleagues from multiple departments. Workday aside, she describes herself first and foremost an artist. She trained as a filmmaker and animator, and then helped to create the field of digital projection in theater set design, a practice that has been widely adopted by art house theaters. Her work has evolved along with technology and digital media, and she currently directs a series of experimental films, called *Mikumentary*, which both document and participate in their subject of socially constructed art in Japan through the lens of adolescent pop culture. Specifically, Knight documents the vocaloid phenomena called "Hatsune Miku".

Most Americans have never heard of Hatsune Miku (or Miku). But in Japan, Miku is ragingly popular, similar to Brittany Spears in the 1990s. Like Spears then in America, Miku now in Japan represents popular notions of adolescent beauty: a petite sixteen-year-old female frame, doe eyes, long hair tied into ponytails and a schoolgirl outfit that partially covers her emerging, womanly body. Miku

sings what everyone loves to hear, songs about life and love.

Figure 1: Crypton Future Media's initial box release in 2007 of vocaloid software for a new character called "Hatsune Miku"

Unlike Spears, Miku is not a biological being; she lacks blood and bone. Miku is digital, a series of open source creations made entirely by her fan s. In other words, Miku is both star and fans at the same time. She appeals to a broad swath of Japanese society—from pop music lovers, to aspiring songwriters, to corporate sponsors. Her fans include an unusual mix of pre-pubescent teens and corporate men over the age of 50. When Tara Knight began publishing her research about Miku, Miku's fans engaged directly with the work, evidenced by thousands of comments posted on her *Mikumentary* clips. Knight purposely does not edit fan comments because those represent yet another dimension of Miku's collective-yet-singular identity.

When Crypton Future Media released Miku on August 31, 2007, as a new vocaloid character, she was no more than a picture on a box of software (Figure 1). Within two weeks of release, the company sold out; and Miku ranked on Amazon.com as the #1 selling software. Her fanbase and identity grew rapidly. Miku's synthesized voice comes from open-source computer code made by Crypton and modified entirely by fans. Fans create her music and moves. Fans also create her physical and technical traits, such as height (158 cm), weight (42 kg), zodiac sign (Virgo) and tempo range (70-150 bpm). In 2009, Miku transitioned from a computer software marvel to a full-fledged pop star

when gave her first 3D concert with more than 10,000 fans present in person and millions more watching online. Her most popular song entitled "Ievan Polkka" (translation: Eva's Polka) comes from a popular Finnish song with lyrics written in the early 1930s to a traditional polka tune. User "Otomania" of the digital collaborative "Nico Nico Douga" (similar to YouTube.com) wrote Miku's version of Eva's Polka shortly after the software release. The song has spread virally across the web through multiple fanmade video representations garnering over 20 million views collectively on YouTube.com. One example is located at http://goo.gl/s4NDg. Miku has become "the world's most popular virtual pop idol," according to anime blogger Richard Eisenbeis of Kotaku.com.

Knight believes that Miku represents more than a new kind of pop star. She believes Miku embodies a new type of art based on collective authorship, where contrary to conventional wisdom, artists do not benefit from distance to their subjects and fans become the artist. Moreover, through Miku, fans of any age can express themselves as an adolescent. Knight explains that it makes perfect sense for Miku to arise in Japanese adolescent culture as a 16-year-old girl because possible future identities remain culturally open for girls only until age 16; and for boys, only until age 15. Steinberg notes that adolescence is a period marked by many possible identities and requires social context (*Adolescence*, Chapter 10, 2014). In other words, Miku represents a time in life for Japanese immediately before identity experimentation ends and adult world responsibilities become fixed. Further, technology deeply influences Japanese societal contexts for identity, and Knight points out that there are hundreds of vocaloid characters in a wide range of personalities for people to use, experiment with and share. Knight thinks that Miku is the most popular vocaloid character because she allows people whose identities have become socially fixed, such as 50-year-old men working in companies, to again experiment with identity possibilities in a socially acceptable way (with the major

caveat that they continue working to provide for their families and support society). In other words, older fans can become young again in the digital space.

What is true of adolescent culture in Japan does not directly translate into other cultures because the period of adolescence is socially constructed and definitions of adolescence vary (Smetana, J.G. et al 2006). Adolescence extends longer in the U.S. up to age 25, sanctioned broadly by the staging of adult privileges across late adolescence, including: voting at age 18, drinking at age 21, and renting cars at age 25; combined with a cultural sanction on postponement of family creation. Knight compares the notion of adolescence in Japan with the U.S. by describing her senior year in high school, which she spent in Japan as an exchange student: She was 17 at the time of the exchange, well within American adolescence, but clearly past the age of adult identity fixation for Japanese. The school placed her in a class of 15-year-old students because they were active in constructing and experimenting with culture and would help her gain more insights and experience a more positive exchange. At first Knight balked at being with younger students, but she quickly saw the wisdom after a few encounters with students her age, whose faces were buried deeply into study books for adult-world entrance examinations. They appeared to have lost interest in cultural exploration without a goal.

Miku came to Knight's attention in 2010 while she doing research for a film about how digital technology changes art and culture. She resists using the word "new" because of severe overuse in the art world; but Miku was truly new, representing a shift in art authorship as profound as the massive spread of literacy beyond monastery walls after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1450. Knight was initially put off by Miku's large fanbase of older men, suggesting cultural condoning of pedophilia and hypersexualization of girls in Japan. Knight also had concerns about Miku's appearance, validated by research about the harmful effects on girls of perfect body images displayed

in media (Dittmar, H. 2009) After more research, Knight realized that younger female fans focus on cute representations of Miku shown in their cosplay. Younger fans also express feelings of self-empowerment and self-expression that route through Miku, akin to a post-feminist way of viewing women dressing up in short skirts. !Older fans enjoy Miku for other reasons. To older fans, Miku represents the adolescent time in life lost to adults (also shown in their cosplay), and she presents opportunities for creative expression otherwise lacking in much of the Japanese adult workaday world. In the process of researching Miku, Knight also became a fan and co-creator, and in the process, broke a major art-world taboo of maintaining distance from the subject. She shares an experience common to many other fans, where Miku has re-awakened her adolescent sense of possibility and empowered her to experiment with her working identity as an artist. Several of her recent artistic choices reflect what appears to be a period of experimentation for Knight, marked by radical departure from art world norms, including: directing an interactive, social-media based documentary without any "talking heads" published for free on YouTube; and co-writing a song for Miku, thereby becoming a fan of her own work. Knight says that one of the most valuable insights that she has gained from studying Miku is freedom to again experiment with her own identity, exactly what she has not done since she returned from her student exchange in Japan knowing she wanted to become a filmmaker.

Knight's perspective on adolescence extends beyond art to her daily work as a teacher and advisor, which she began in 2006. She works with undergraduate and graduate students typically of ages 18 to 25. She teaches large survey courses to 100 or more freshmen, facilitates small graduate seminars for six or less Master's students, and runs myriad courses of all sizes in between. She observes three major developmental transitions in her students: first between sophomore and junior

year, which for most students occurs between ages 19 and 20; then between senior year and the first year of graduate school, which occurs between the ages of 21 and 22; and again between second and third year graduate students, which typically occurs between the ages of 24 and 25.

In the first transition, she describes students shifting away from rote learning, memorization and wanting to know the right answer—cognitive habits she attributes to their K-12 training—to deeper conceptual thinking defined by feeling comfortable with being wrong, not knowing the right answer and making meaningful connections to other experiences and knowledge. She also sees during this transition an increase in autonomy, where students want to choose more of their subjects, grading criterion, tasks and groups. Autonomy and relatedness are two of three fundamental psychological needs (the third is competence or mastery), which when met "lead to enhanced self-motivation and mental health," according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. 2000, pg 68). Knight describes her interactions with sophomores and juniors as most enjoyable because they are more often deeply engaged and motivated than younger students. In Knight's frame of reference, sophomores and juniors are highly self-determined.

Knight describes a second major transition after senior year, when first year graduate students, typically about age 22, think they have achieved mastery and lose motivation for deeper learning. It is also possible during this period that extrinsically motivated students (e.g., getting good grades in order to get into graduate school) have lost their external motivation because they are in graduate school. For those that remain extrinsically motivated, they need time to establish new goals, perhaps getting into a major art show or getting a job. Knight explains that most art students who make it to graduate school feel intrinsically motivated by the work because artists hang on the lowest rung of the social value

hierarchy, and if the work itself is not satisfying, there is little other in professional reward. Still, extrinsic motivators lurk in the art world.

She observes that many students change again between the second and third year of graduate school, when they realize they are competent, but not masters; and that motivates them to re-engage with deeper learning. Knight describes these transitions as landmark features of her teaching experience at a four-year research university and offers a disclaimer: generalizations about the trends that she observes probably do not apply to everyone and probably do not apply to young people of similar ages outside of academia because of the highly constructed environment within a research university.

With these transitions in mind, Knight taught a mandatory freshman writing course to non-art majors in which she challenges rote learning and memorization, gives no right answers, requires analytical writing and empowers students with a higher degree of autonomy than they expect, including how they are graded. Many students react with frustration and some with anger, and her evaluation forms often reflected 30 percent or more of the class "strongly disliking" the course. Still, Knight treats all of her students as deep learners in training and used the power of teacher expectations to push her first-year students outside their training and comfort zones. She knows her students are capable of learning more deeply, and views exposing them to the process as her responsibility (McLeod 1995, pg. 372). Knight also receives hundreds of emails from students in their senior year thanking her for the mandatory freshman course (which is no longer mandatory, but elective, and her approval ratings have risen to 90-100 percent, accordingly). Students explain that she challenged their thinking and expectations, which they hated at the time, but helped them become more successful in their majors..

In conclusion, I suspected before interviewing Knight that she carries a unique perspective on adolescence because she studies the intersection of technology, art and adolescent culture and identity in Japan while at the same time she teaches and advises people in their late adolescence at a major research university in the U.S. I discovered during the interview that her experience with adolescence goes far deeper that I initially understood. Through her work, Knight has reconnected with her own sense of teen spirit and found license to experiment with her adult identity as an artist and confront major professional taboos. She passes that freedom along to her students even though many resist initially but thank her later. Moreover, Knight's work with Hatsune Miku challenges the notion that adolescence is a life stage we outgrow and reveals that digital technology, when applied to art and culture, suggests that even the most socially fixed among us can regain access to many possible identities through creative expression.

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