

Fan Agency and Participatory Culture in the Making of a Virtual Icon

This visual essay uses the globally circulated figure of Hatsune Miku to examine how digital art, participatory fandom, and virtual performance intersect with questions of identity, agency, and cultural production beyond traditional development paradigms. Development through arts and culture, in this case, is an affective process—one shaped by user-generated creativity, transnational flows of media, and the formation of online communities. My project of fan art challenges fixed notions of authorship and voice, amplifying alternative forms of expression often excluded from institutional narratives of progress and innovation. Central to this exploration is the issue of media representation, where fan art and digital media invite new conversations on the ownership, transformation, and democratization of creative works.

The tensions fan artists raise reflect broader cultural debates on authorship and ownership echoing Lawrence Lessig's (2004) critique of the corporate control of cultural works, particularly his argument that restrictive copyright laws stifle creativity and limit the freedom to remix and share. I examine the evolution of digital phenomena and related tensions raised by the ongoing global participatory, cultural practice and creation around Hatsune Miku, a 16-year-old digital character, who exists entirely in virtual media, originally developed as vocal synthesis software by Crypton Future Media (Lam, 2016). As part of this initiative, Crypton launched PIAPRO.jp, a platform for collaborative content creation, and in 2012 adopted the Creative Commons License for Miku's original illustrations (Crypton Future Media, 2025), embracing a more flexible approach to intellectual property and allowing fans to reinterpret Miku's image without traditional copyright constraints. This decentralized model blurred the lines between creator and fan, fostering a culture of co-creation. Empowering fans worldwide to engage with Miku's identity and generate content freely, fans contribute to Miku's evolving persona through fan art, songs, performances, and adaptations, which shape and reshape her representation (Anzai, 2012) while maintaining a shared narrative (Lam, 2016).

Crypton Future Media's decision to minimize intellectual property conflicts and allow fans to freely interpret Hatsune Miku proved beneficial for both the brand and the fanbase. Hatsune Miku's transformation from a vocal synthesizer product to a global cultural icon reflects Crypton's strategic support of creative freedom. This grassroots marketing strategy helped Miku gain recognition far beyond Japan, attracting a global fanbase. Fans were empowered to shape her narrative, deepening their emotional connection to the virtual idol. As fans shared their creations online, Miku's visibility grew organically, generating free publicity and contributing to her viral success. By encouraging fan-created content like fan art and remixes, Crypton fostered a strong sense of community and loyalty and transformed a virtual pop star into a cultural phenomenon. These contributions are far from derivative; instead, they are central to her ongoing evolution beyond her initial purpose to become a global cultural icon, shaped by fan-driven reinterpretations in music, art, and storytelling.

Crypton's embrace of participatory culture has been central to Hatsune Miku's evolution, fostering emotional connections from her fanbase. The participatory model of content creation actively shapes her narrative, ensuring her relevance in an ever-evolving digital landscape and solidifying her status as a global icon. By leveraging user-generated content, Crypton has transformed a product into a shared cultural phenomenon.

The transformation of Hatsune Miku from a virtual pop star to a global cultural icon highlights the ethical complexities surrounding digital media and intellectual property. It also demonstrates how fan communities, through their voluntary, creative, participatory, and transformative contributions—including fan art, original music, animated videos, and code-based performances—shape the character's representation and narrative.

These grassroots practices illustrate the dynamic, decentralized nature of authorship and its far-reaching implications for cultural production.

My visual essay is a reflection exploring how fan communities and participatory authorship are reshaping our understanding of ownership and creative agency in the digital age. Grounded in personal engagement with digital media and creative practice, it considers how acts of collaboration, circulation, and reinterpretation challenge conventional ideas of authorship. My work emerges from lived experience and interaction with online platforms, user-generated content, and the affective labor of fandom (Hardt, 1999). Hardt describes affective labor as the site where the boundary between productive labor—traditionally associated with economic value—and reproductive labor—linked to care, emotion, and social reproduction—begins to collapse. This idea is especially relevant to my practice, which engages fan communities not only as audiences but as co-creators whose emotional investments, collaborative exchanges, and identity work constitute an essential part of the cultural production process. By foregrounding these dynamics, my work contributes to broader conversations about how affect functions as labor in participatory digital cultures. The following section focuses on the figure of Hatsune Miku as a lens through which to examine these dynamics.

Reframing Authorship in Participatory Digital Culture

The fluidity of Hatsune Miku as a virtual persona, highlights the adaptability of digital creations and the central role fan communities play in reshaping them. Heather Warren-Crow's concept of "plastic images" (2014) provides a critical lens for understanding the fluidity of digital media as it refers to digital visuals as flexible, malleable forms that continuously change and resist fixed meanings. The plasticity of Hatsune Miku's image highlights how digital visuals—such as customizable avatars and morphing characters—challenge traditional notions of authorship and ownership. Miku's evolution underscores how digital phenomena blur the boundaries between individual and collective creation, illustrating the manipulability of media and the shifting nature of authorship in the digital age. Henry Jenkins (2006) highlights how fan communities transform media into participatory, co-creative spaces where the boundaries between creator and audience dissolve. Miku's evolution exemplifies this dynamic, where fans actively contribute to her narrative, challenging traditional intellectual property frameworks that prioritize original creators' rights over fan contributions. As Jenkins suggests, fan communities redefine media culture, and Miku's participatory model demonstrates how collaborative creativity reshapes the roles of creators and audiences. In these participatory spaces, fan artists become co-creators, reshaping characters and narratives, and blurring the lines between creator and audience.

The phenomenon of remixing and reinterpreting digital representations within fan art communities, however, raises important ethical questions about authorship, ownership, and intellectual property. Fan art stands at the forefront of this debate, as it thrives on the remixed and reinterpreted works of existing characters. Because fan artists often transform characters like Hatsune Miku without explicit permission from their original creators, they challenge traditional copyright boundaries and prompt a reevaluation of intellectual property laws in the digital age, where ownership is increasingly ambiguous.

As digital artists navigate intellectual property and creative freedom, they engage as prosumers—simultaneously consuming and producing cultural content. This echoes Toffler's (1980) view of contemporary society entering a "third wave" that partly signals their reintegration through "the rise of the prosumer" beyond the traditional separation of production and consumption (p. 265). Tapscott (2009) argues that prosumers emerge from pop culture, actively participating in the production and circulation of cultural texts. Humphreys

and Grayson (2008) explain that fan artists embody a dual role of creator and consumer, cocreating within fandoms. Fan artists are key contributors to this dynamic, reshaping and sharing their creations within broader cultural contexts. This highlights how fan art, as a form of collective cultural production, can reshape cultural narratives and provide marginalized voices the opportunity to influence visual culture. In the next section, I present my 2019 zine using Hatsune Miku as a medium for self-expression and communication for the project *Plastic Existence*. I explore fan art's plasticity and the desires motivating fan artists using the zine format to bridge the gap between digital and physical media.

Fan Practices and the Fluidity of Media Authorship

Rooted in DIY culture, the zine (short for fanzine) offers an alternative to conventional authorship, much like fan art and digital media. Published independently, usually in small scale editions, they provide spaces for personal expression, to challenge cultural hierarchies. The tactile, self-published nature of the work emphasizes individual agency while drawing on collective visual languages, allowing me to reframe existing media through a personal lens.

Zines have long subverted traditional notions of authorship, offering a tangible space for personal expression outside mainstream media (Baker & Cantillon, 2022). Like fan art, zines prioritize grassroots activism and creativity, thriving on collaboration and community (French & Curd, 2021). The zine format emphasizes the intersection between individual expression and collective collaboration, illustrating how individual contributions can shape shared narratives. This format allows me to explore these themes physically, adding a layer of tactile engagement while participating in the broader culture of remixing and reinterpretation. By adopting the zine format, I reflect on remix and reinterpretation as creative strategies; I physically embody the tension between individuality and collectivity, the real and the virtual.

Much like zines, digital culture embodies a blend of individual creativity and collective participation (Condry, 2013). Fan communities are key to this process, emphasizing the collaborative nature of modern digital representation. As contributions from fans accumulate across platforms such as video-sharing sites, forums, and social media, they create a dynamic, evolving effort that reflects a collective narrative. This participatory storytelling challenges traditional notions of representation and authorship as fixed and static. Digital platforms enable users to actively participate in the creation and curation of content, reinforcing the idea that media representations are not singular but constantly evolving through collaboration.

Online fan communities, powered by new media technologies, have fostered dynamic online spaces for interaction, content creation, and reinterpretation (Condry, 2013). Fans deepen their emotional connections with virtual idols like Hatsune Miku through what some scholars call "idol worship" (Li & Chen, 2018; Zhang, 2018), which transcends traditional fandom, involving not just content consumption but active participation in shaping the idol's public persona and narrative. Fans engage in cultural and creative activities such as creating fan art, composing songs, and attending concerts, which cultivate a sense of intimacy with the idol. These actions transform fans into co-creators, imbuing the idol with deeper emotional significance and reinforcing the idol's ongoing evolution and narrative. Through this participatory process, fans collectively redefine the idol's representation, turning it into a shared cultural project. These interactions foster both individual and collective representation, enhancing community cohesion and deepening fans' relationships with the idols (Zhang, 2019).

Below are pages from a zine I created, where I wrote a poem about the evolving transformation of media representation and authorship. The design reflects the fluid identity in digital media as each page displays the repeating poem line: *I am*. The typefaces and unnatural hues featuring vibrant gradient backgrounds, shift from page to page, creating a sense of constant change. My aim was to use this tangible, physical zine to evoke transformation, allowing readers to experience the dynamic nature of digital media representation as they flip through the pages. My poem, *Plastic Existence*, examines the fluidity and malleability of digital media representations. It reflects how these representations—and the media conveying them—are constructed, manipulated, and reshaped. Through repeated phrases, predominantly completing the sentence *I am*, the poem emphasizes how digital media is in constant flux, shaped by forces beyond our control, yet still actively participating in the creation of media narratives. The changing typefaces and colors mirror the mutable nature of representation, inviting readers to engage with the instability and constant reconfiguration of how media is portrayed. Each page, a fragment of an ongoing process, demonstrates how digital media representations are not fixed, but shaped by interaction, technology, and culture.



Figure 1: Pages 1–4



Figure 2: Pages 5–8



Figure 3: Pages 9–12



Figure 3: Pages 13–16



Figure 4: Pages 17–20



Figure 5: Pages 21–22

In my practice as a fan artist, I engage with Saito’s (2007) concept of “asymmetrical desire” by reimagining characters like Hatsune Miku to fulfill personal fantasies and emotional needs (p.245). Saito’s theory applies to how fan art projects personal emotions and unmet needs onto characters, often diverging from the original creators’ intentions and challenging conventional ideas of authorship. In *Plastic Existence*, this dynamic surfaces through the poem’s protagonist—an imagined figure who simultaneously embodies Hatsune Miku and the broader fan collective. The speaker’s fluid, shifting declarations echo the fan artist’s impulse to reconfigure media icons into vessels of longing, identification, and creative agency. Fragmented and unstable, the speaker’s identity mirrors the affective landscape of digital fandom, where selfhood is continually reshaped by mediated fantasy and communal desire. As such, the poem becomes a site of convergence and reinterpretation—where media, authorship, and subjectivity dissolve within an ongoing process of transformation.

The evolution of digital platforms calls for innovative approaches to managing visual culture. Through the exploration of Hatsune Miku and fan art communities, this project challenges traditional notions of authorship, ownership, and ethics, underscoring the dynamic relationship between individual creativity and collective

reinterpretation. Hatsune Miku operates under specific intellectual property guidelines. The original illustrations of Miku are licensed under CC BY-NC (Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial), meaning they can only be used for non-commercial purposes and must be attributed to Crypton Future Media. However, adaptations of the official illustrations are not automatically licensed under CC BY-NC unless explicitly specified by the creator. Fan art created by other artists is copyrighted and requires explicit permission from the original creators. This illustrates the balance between creativity and copyright, where fan contributions are welcomed, but legal boundaries must be respected (For creators, n.d.).

Regarding the use of other fan artists' work in the zine, I initially incorporated images from fellow fan artists to create a collage of Hatsune Miku. Addressing the tension between homage and appropriation, particularly in a project that explores authorship and representation and the ethical concerns of using someone else's work without permission, I reached out to the artists whose Miku images I wanted to use. Since they were from around the world, I contacted them in Chinese, Japanese, and English across various social media platforms. The responses varied—some artists did not reply, others declined, and a few granted permissions for personal use only. The results of this outreach can be seen in the pages of the zine below.

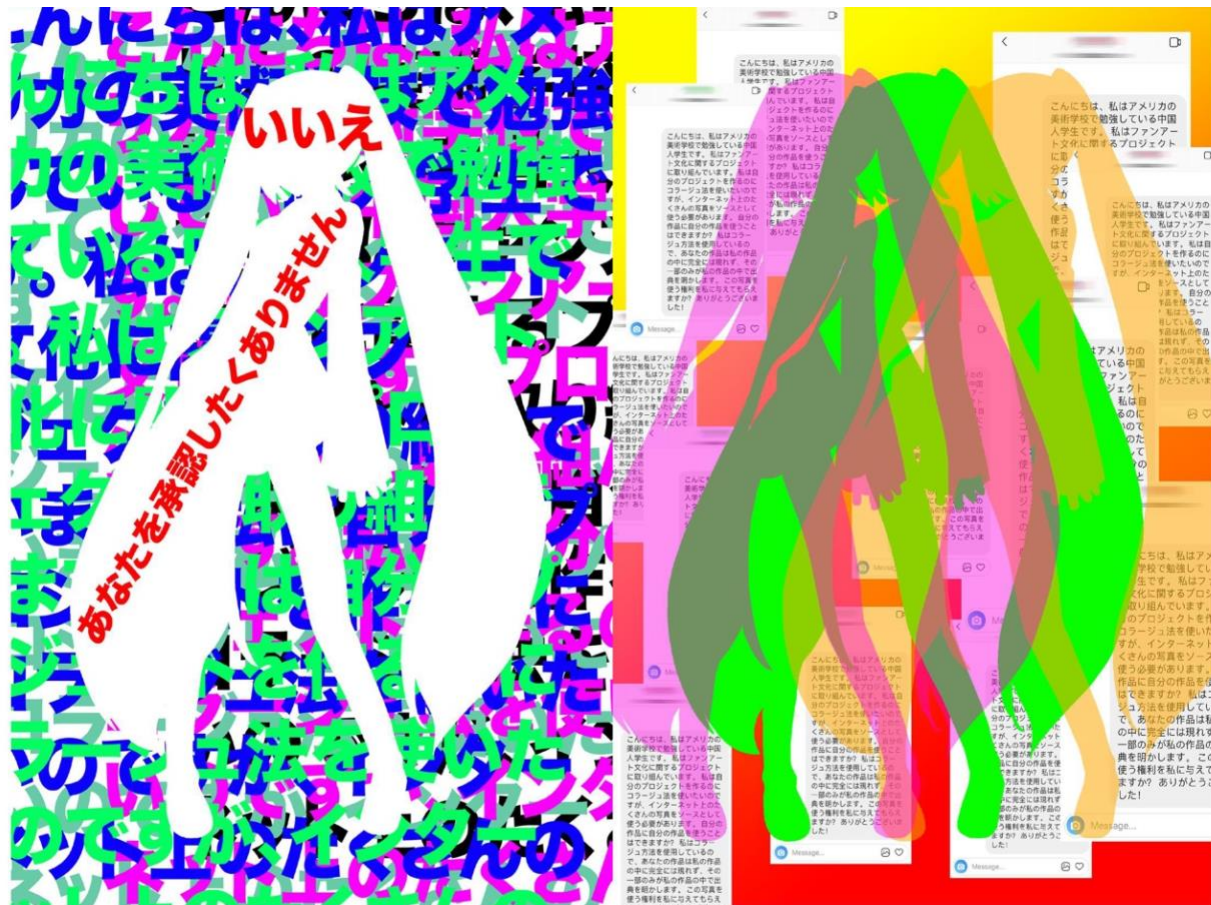


Figure 6: Pages 23–24: Two consecutive zine pages featuring vibrant gradient backgrounds and repeated text. Page 23 displays the permission request I sent to fan artists in Japanese, while page 24 shows the messages I sent, with repeated silhouettes of Hatsune Miku across the top.



Figure 7: Pages 25–28: Four consecutive zine pages featuring vibrant gradient backgrounds and repeated text. Page 25 displays the permission request I sent to fan artists in Chinese, while page 26 shows the messages I sent, with repeated silhouettes of Hatsune Miku across the top. Page 27 displays the permission request I sent to fan artists in English, while page 28 shows the messages I sent, with repeated silhouettes of Hatsune Miku across the top.

As a result, I decided to create two versions of the zine: one for personal use and another for commercial distribution. In the commercial version, I replaced the collage with my own fan art of Hatsune Miku. The version shown here is intended for commercial use. While the collage is absent from this version, I still acknowledge and include the names of the fan artists who granted permission for their work to be featured, as a gesture of respect and thanks for their contributions during the creation of this project.



Figure 8: Pages 29–30: Two consecutive zine pages. Page 29 features a Hatsune Miku fan art created by me, while page 30 displays repeated silhouettes of Miku alongside the names of fan artists who granted permission to use their work in the collage, limited to personal use only.

The experience of negotiating permissions and respecting fellow fan artists' rights highlights the tension between artistic freedom and ethical considerations in the digital age. While digital media facilitates the easy appropriation of others' work, maintaining ethical standards remains essential. As the creator of my fan art, I hold the copyright to my illustrations and can decide how to use them commercially. Regarding the legality of selling a zine featuring my own Miku fan art, it is permissible because it only includes my original fan art and does not incorporate third-party copyrighted content, such as fan art created by others. However, if I wish to include fan art from other creators, I must obtain their permission.

Revisiting Plastic Existence: Reflections and Contemporary Relevance

Characters like Hatsune Miku challenge the notion of stable, fixed representations, illustrating how fan art, as a form of digital expression, helps individuals navigate their place in an evolving digital ecosystem. Through this work, I challenge the notion of stable, singular representation and embrace the fluid, fragmented nature of contemporary media. The project's focus on the intersection of personal interpretation and collective digital engagement is equally timely with the increasing prominence of avatars, virtual identities, and online communities, we see how digital platforms shape personal and collective narratives. In a world where representations can be recontextualized, repurposed, and reshaped at any moment, I encourage viewers to question the boundaries between media, representation, and authorship.

Revisiting *Plastic Existence*, this visual essay is part of an ongoing exploration of the project's evolution, integrating my current research on digital media, fan culture and community engagement. As the digital landscape continues to evolve—shaped by social media, AI-generated art, and debates around intellectual property—the issues explored in 2019 have only grown more pressing adding new relevance to the project. The constantly evolving nature of digital representation and the complexities of authorship are now more pronounced, as generative AI, deep fakes, and content-remixing blur the lines between original and derivative work. The project continues to explore themes of representation, authorship, and fan community in a digital age, offering a lens through which to examine the ongoing evolution of digital culture and the ethical challenges surrounding intellectual property.

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