EXPOSING HEGEMONIES AND DISRUPTING CODES IN DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB!

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Abstract

Doki Doki Literature Club! explores the reader-cybertext power dynamic and locates its influence within the larger landscape of the developing genre of video games. It uses the inherent intermedial and ergodic nature of video games to augment a narrative of powerplay unique to the medium. This paper uses a psychoanalytic framework to illustrate how the Uncanny imagery crafted by the game's programmed glitches and manipulation of its ludic structure exposes and disrupts hegemonic tropes found in visual novel dating simulators. These manifestations of the Uncanny, juxtaposed with the aesthetic of a dating simulator, create an environment wherein the player is sexually and narratively castrated—stripped of the right to sexual expression and narrative control which are conventionally exercised in dating games. Moreover, it presents the question of authorial agency and primacy not only in an interactive medium but also in a greater literary tradition constructed and held up by inescapable mythic archetypes.

Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC) is a visual novel by Dan Salvato that received a considerable amount of critical attention for its unexpected nature as a psychological horror game. Dating simulators which incorporate elements of horror or tragedy are not new; Key, a prominent game development studio in Japan, has produced staples of the dating sim genre like *Air, Kanon*, and *Clannad* which are all known for their narratives of personal tragedy and drama. Internet cult hits like *Hatoful Boyfriend: A School of Hope and White Wings* and *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating*

Simulator incorporate horror elements like gore, torture, and mind control into their branching plot lines, and these subversive elements have only contributed to their popularity.

DDLC is unique in this landscape of visual novel dating simulators because it uses the ergodic nature of its medium to craft a narrative of horror. The term "ergodic" denotes literature which requires "nontrivial effort […] to traverse the text" and "entails a very different and highly specialized ritual of perusal" (Aarseth 1997, 2). While this definition does accommodate the ludic structure of preprogrammed games, it does not necessarily exclude static or non-ludic texts. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics can be considered ergodic literature of antiquity as they incorporate the architectural symbology of the temple to present non-linear narratives that require more effort from the reader to interpret than the simple turning of a page.

Consequently, it can also be argued that not all video games are ergodic. Some visual novels have no mode of interaction save for the clicking of a button and thus, entails no greater extranoematic effort from the reader than the turning of a page. Therefore, it is not interactivity or existence within a digital space that determines ergodity, but a mutually (if not equally) responsive reader-text relationship.

However, specifically because of its explicit ergodity, it would not be entirely productive in terms of literary analysis to refer to DDLC as a "narrative". Esteemed narratologist Gerard Genétte (1983) defines the "analysis of narrative" as "the study of a totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to the medium, linguistic or other" (25). While some visual novels can arguably be read as narrative texts, DDLC goes beyond awareness of its respective genre and form and makes the very source code of the software part of its story. It integrates the programming language of the Ren'py game engine to communicate important plot points. One instance of this is when the player witnesses Monika, the Literature Club's president and the game's primary antagonist, ostensibly deleting other characters like Yuri and Natsuki from the game using the command: "os.remove(characters/yuri.chr)" and

"os.remove(characters/natsuki.chr)". The player is also required to go into the computer's game files to progress the story, further bringing context to the forefront of the text. The succession of events present in the text simply cannot exist without the medium.

Hence, this paper will be using the concept of *ludus* to discuss the game's multi-layered and branching plot structure. According to ludologist Gonzalo Frasca (1999), ludus is "an activity organized under a system of rules" that leads to the production of possible narratives. "[W]e cannot claim that ludus and narrative are equivalent, because the first is a set of possibilities, while the second is a set of chained actions" (Frasca 1999). A single playthrough of the game is not ludus, but that singular session can produce a complete narrative—albeit one that can be further enhanced through interpretative insight gained by experiencing the game's entire ludus. "[I]t is possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery" (Aarseth 1997, 3).

The ludus scheme of dating simulators is particularly easy to map compared to other video game genres. The possible narratives are divided among the characters the player can choose to romantically pursue, and win-loss conditions are in terms of the players advances either being rejected or accepted. Initial exposure to the game's promotional art suggest something along the lines of that comfortably familiar experience: The player takes on the role of a high school boy who joins a literature club where he can choose between wooing his childhood friend Sayori, the quiet bookworm Yuri, or the spunky tomboy Natsuki. Every element, from the ambiguous suburban setting to the Ren'py game engine utilized, are genre staples of the free-to-download visual novel dating sim.

It is only upon a substantial amount of gameplay that the text starts subverting genre expectations and exposing itself as a psychological horror game. The light-hearted and sugary aesthetic of the game is juxtaposed with distortions in the soundtrack, faceless gameplay sprites, and unprompted and often violent behavior in character scripts, emphasizing a sense of unease through the ill-fit of imagery.

These audio-visual corruptions of traditionally non-diegetic elements are meant to simulate computer glitches commonly and organically encountered in the medium. It is revealed in the ludus that these glitches are manifestations of the character Monika altering the game's code.

The programmed glitch is a ubiquitous trope in different kinds of media. Audio-visual mutations, such as stuttering, white noise, and record scratches for example, have become integral to the DNA of electronic music and video. The programmed glitch in video games in particular has been used since the days of early point-and-click adventure games, often to poke at the fourth wall for humor. However, the programmed glitch as a technique integral to narrative stakes is a fairly recent development in video game story-telling. Subversions, deconstructions, and similar experimentation of form cannot be done without hegemonic recognition of formulae; after all, it requires a certain amount of time and exposure before an artform has conventions that are solid enough to break.

One of the most prominent of cybertexts that feature the programmed glitch is Toby Fox's *Undertale* released in 2013. Much like DDLC, *Undertale* also features an antagonist whose antagonism is expressed through a hyperawareness of the medium and exploitation of its form as a video game. Sprites would pixelate, error messages would appear, and save and load features would malfunction during the final act where the antagonist would be at his most powerful. Glitching, thus, was transformed from a shortcoming of the medium to a convenient narrative shorthand for the disruptive and destructive power of the antagonist. Furthermore, it was through manufactured corruptions of code that the game crafted a backdrop of dread during the final act when the player battles grotesque character sprites amalgamated with photorealistic parts.

While the image of a smiling human mouth superimposed on anime-style character's head is terrifying in its violent mismatch of aesthetic, the most effective horror element of DDLC is how it instills a sense of the Uncanny in the player. It is tempting to say

that this uncanny feeling stems from how the game blurs fiction from reality, diegesis from non-diegesis. Interactions with the virtual interface, like saving and loading, become consequential to the narrative, breaking a hegemonic convention to semiotically interpret the narrative and the interface independent of one another. This creates an uncertainty in the player when it comes to interacting with the text and its mechanisms. Once the simulated glitches start to appear, the player is made to question their source: Are they due to malfunctioning hardware, programmed into the software, or is there truly someone rewriting the game's code? What part of this inanimate machine is misbehaving?

However, as Freud (1919) states in his own exploration of the Uncanny: "[t]he theory of 'intellectual uncertainty' is […] incapable of explaining that impression [of uncanniness]" (221). Several texts across different media have acknowledged non-diegetic elements in a diegetic narrative. The simple incorporation of metatextual elements is hardly shocking; such narrative devices have been present even in the oldest of literary works. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, uses the image of a book to introduce its plot, bringing to the forefront a textual self-awareness necessary for metacommentary. The existence of metanarratives is neither uncomfortable or frightening in and of itself. Literary readers, "with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth" and quickly reestablish the lines between diegesis and non-diegesis (Freud 1919, 230). DDLC players are able to immediately recognize Monika's spontaneously developed self-awareness as part of the ludus of the game and thus, lose any intellectual uncertainty fairly early on in the session. Therefore, it is not enough to say that DDLC is Uncanny because it blurs the lines of fiction and reality.

Freud's conclusion as to what invokes the feeling of the Uncanny is the "fear of damaging or losing one's eyes" (231). Indeed, the theme of the eye and seeing are very prominent within DDLC. The three poems and the different versions of them that Monika presents to the player are meant to be read as metatexts to the game—she explains as much during the dialogue where she reveals that she has gained sentience and has been trying to communicate her awareness to the player via her poetry. As a result, her poems

involve the theme of seeing and disempowerment through the gaze. The final poem, "The Lady who Knows Everything", cements the relationship between omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence: "I look at her eyes and find no end to her gaze". Her unending gaze is evidence and product of her power. Monika's second poem, "Save Me", has two versions and alludes more to what is seen rather than who is seeing. Both versions of "Save Me" describe a chaos of colors and sounds experienced by the poem's persona. This mimics the computer processing data, as is implied by the use of trigonometric language and commands like "load" and "delete". Her first poem, "Hole in the Wall," presents a scenario where the reality of the persona "I" is reoriented through looking into a newly-discovered "hole":

I peer inside for a clue.

No! I can't see. I reel, blind, like a film left out in the sun.

But it's too late. My retinas.

Already scorched with a permanent copy of the meaningless image.

[…]

I realize now, that I wasn't looking in.

I was looking out.

And he, on the other side, was looking in. (Team Salvato 2017)

The other side blinding the "I" is a clear and violent imposition of power. This division between the two sides of the hole is further explored through the introduction of the "he" in the last line and how "he" is positioned relative to the "I". The "I" is "looking out" and thus contained, while "he" is "looking in" and thus observing. In other words, while the "I" is initially presented as the subject of the poem, the subjectivity is transferred to "he" through an act of violence against the eyes.

The player is also made to fear for their eyes while traversing the game. A majority of DDLC's preprogrammed "glitches" involve obscuring, removing, and replacing the character sprites' eyes, including a sequence where the player is faced with nothing but a floating set of purple, photorealistic eyes. The only character whose eyes are not defaced are Monika's, signifying her power and omniscience within the game. Additionally, her sprite is the only one that looks directly at the player—an indication of her awareness and her gaze piercing the fourth wall. The player's own "eyes" are threatened in that Monika corrupting the code blocks the player from seeing narrative outcomes that they were ostensibly supposed to have been privy to. The interface through which the player sees and interacts with the world is violently twisted through a series of alterations made by the game's antagonist: text boxes become pixelated, the mouse cursor transforms into a sprite of a dead girl, and the screen regularly blacks out and returns to the opening sequence without any prompting from the player.

"[A] study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration" (Freud 1919, 7). The threat of castration is even more stark against the backdrop of a visual novel dating sim which is supposed to be an exercise in sexual expression. The "glitches" made by Monika disempower the player, serving to create a feeling of impotence and blindness. Mechanisms which have long given the player narrative control—namely, saving and loading—are entirely nonfunctioning after the first portion of the game. Traversing the ludus in such a condition will no doubt invoke apprehension and terror in the player, as it would be very much like going through a dark wood with no means to defend yourself or escape should there be danger. In conclusion, the game is Uncanny and consequently horrific not because it makes the player uncertain of reality, but because it removes their agency in it—or at the very least, it appears to do so.

The ludic structure of video games has always brought about inquiries on the illusion of player choice and narrative agency. Aarseth (1997) states that readers of non-ludic texts engage with texts as powerless voyeurs. They "cannot have [a video game]

player's pleasure of influence: […] The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent" (3). Video games such as DDLC, however, require the input of the reader to be experienced. The essential introduction of reader influence inevitably creates a power struggle over the final textual output. "The tensions at work in a cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control" (3).

As is the nature of every struggle, there is always the possibility that the reader will lose. Aarseth (1997) calls this "the risk of rejection" wherein the physical and mental investment of the player either furthers their intimacy with the text or closes them off from it. The threat of rejection that Aarseth outlines stems from the fact that video games, even in their emerging abilities to tell more complex stories, have always been and are essentially games. Games have three essential components: "an explicit set of rules", "a defined space and time", and "a victory or a defeat" (Frasca 1999). Video games as cybertext, therefore, operate as spatio-temporal arenas wherein players are invited to this struggle of power. Video games present at least one "right sequence of solving that will lead to the triumphal denouement […]. Each time the player fails solving a puzzle, either the videogame ends 'wrongly' (and the player loses), or the player has to continue until she goes through it" (Frasca). It is usually only through "winning" that the player becomes intimate with the text, gaining interpretative insight and narrative control through their progression. Alternatively, failure to meet these "win" conditions result in the game's rejection of the player's attempt to assert influence over its semiotic sequencing.

Rejection upon failure takes on a specialized role in dating simulators. The game's rejection of the player should they fail to meet certain criteria is translated into romantic rejection. Visual novel dating simulators can reasonably be seen as games centered around romantic and sexual conquest. Therefore, simulating castration through the evocation of the Uncanny represents a violent disruption in power dynamics established by the tropes of the form and genre. However, it is necessary that the game first presents itself as the quintessential dating simulator to settle the

player in the conventions of the genre, because it is only through situating itself in a pattern can the game then proceed to disrupt it.

Dating sims have been problematized by critics and regular consumers alike in how they reduce romantic relationships into a heavily one-sided dynamic. This is brought to attention by Monika in one of her dialogue trees where she bitterly comments on how the characters are objectified as "a group of autonomous personalities designed only to fall in love with [the player]". Their affections are guaranteed—it is only a matter of inputting the right commands. DDLC questions this core idea by taking the motivation of the player (the actor) and seemingly applying it to one of the game characters (the acted upon). Rejection is expected in video games, but DDLC goes beyond expected player rejection in how it overturns player subjectivity and text objectivity. Players struggle for narrative control because they want "this text to tell [their] story; the story that could not be without [them]" (Aarseth 1997, 3). DDLC implants this exact desire as the driving force behind Monika's character, ostensibly setting her as an opposing actor instead of the conventional prize.

And thus, the game presents itself as a defiant text—one that denies the influence of the reader and seeks to shape itself. There is no part of the ludus where the player achieves their goal of sexual conquest. The player deleting Monika's character file before the initialization of the game only results in another character, Sayori, seemingly gaining Monika's self-awareness. Sayori anguishes, "Is this all there is?!" and then the screen transitions to a grainy image of Sayori hanging herself. The "best" end does involve some emotional intimacy with all three possible romantic interests, but its resolution is the game resetting itself, deleting all game data, and Sayori coming to the same "hellish epiphany" that Monika realizes—that "[t]he Literature Club is truly a place where no happiness can be found. To the very end, it continue[s] to expose innocent minds to a horrific reality—a reality that our world is not designed to comprehend" (Team Salvato 2017).

The common thread in these endings is that, while the player may be terrified because of the perceived threat to their agency,

for the characters existing within the game itself, their eyes have always been gouged out. It is only in the space of the Literature Club that they realize the "hellish" nature of their condition—the autonomous grind, the constriction of the two dimensions, the blithe disregard of what little personality they have. While this knowledge does afford them some semblance of power, it is still an epiphany of their entrapment within an incomprehensible system of realities.

While the game may simulate a feeling of helplessness for the player, its literary value lies in how it exposes the inability of the text to break out of hegemonic patterns. The text is not only beholden to its electronic source code but also the cultural codes that make up its ludus. Monika, no matter her level of self-awareness and criticism of the other girls' lack of free will, still follows the dating sim trope of being inexplicably and madly in love with the player. This is because her character, as something that exists within literature, operates on a deeper and more fundamental level of code and reality: myth and archetype. As the president of the Literature Club, Monika is the de facto "mother" of the others. Her character fulfills the Mother archetype presiding over a "place of magic transformation and rebirth" (Jung 2003, 15). She is sympathetic, wise, and helpful, but she is also secretive, seductive, and corruptive. As a dating sim character, she naturally suffers from a hypertrophy of her feminine aspects leading to a mother-complex:

> The exaggeration of the feminine side means an intensification of all female instincts […]. Even her own personality is of secondary importance; she often remains entirely unconscious of it, for her life is lived in and through others, in more or less complete identification with all the objects of her care. […] An unconscious Eros always expresses itself as will to power. […] Driven by ruthless will to power and a fanatical insistence on their own maternal rights, they often succeed in annihilating not only their own personality but also the personal lives of their children. The less conscious such a mother is of her own personality, the greater and the more violent is her unconscious will to power. (Jung 2003, 22-23)

While her actions are motivated by a desire to seize control of the game's code, she mounts no resistance to the more primeval code forcing her to fall in love with the player. In fact, she has very little personality that revolves outside of the player and the Literature Club—even more so than the other girls. She eventually realizes her maternal love for her friends and the player, and she decides to rewrite them into the game, "sacrificing" herself for their happiness. Her self-destruction can be read as an act of defiance against the ludic script, but it remains perfectly in line with her archetypal script. Moreover, despite Monika's show of rebellion against the genre and the narrative laid out for her, the player is aware that she was programmed to do so by the game developer. While she might be characterized as an entity that "brandishes [her] pen," it is impossible for her to be considered as an authority of the text; she is part of the text as much as her poems are. This complicates her acts of transgression within the text because they are motivated by regressive character traits and are dictated by an external, unacknowledged authorial fiat. Her defiance is more performative than it is "real".

Given that the text centers around the concept of hierarchies of reality, the differentiation of "real" and "simulacrum" within DDLC is blurred between layers of its established realities. Baudrillard's (1988) *Simulacra and Simulations* defines four levels of representation of reality:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.

2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.

3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.

4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (169)

Monika and the other characters of DDLC belong in the fourth-level of representation, their images and persona not meant to appear "real" in any sense nor to represent anything that can be found in "basic reality". Instead, they exist in the realm of the "hyperreal" "which is nothing more than an immense script and

a perpetual motion picture, […] this old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms" (170). Sayuri, Natsuki, and Yuri embody the disintegration of meaning with the construction of character within video games and fiction. The childhood friend, the tsundere, and the quiet lady no longer represent someone the player may encounter in true and lived experience but are now merely a simulation of an amalgam of ideas that exist and are propagated within the genre. Hence, this inevitability leads to an existential crisis over meaning which makes up the bulk of the ludic conflict: a sign that has no signified is essentially meaningless.

Simulations, be it video games or theme parks, are often machines constructed out of infantile projections of what is thought to be "real". *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is essentially an exercise in reframing and challenging those projections. It makes, what was previously a representation, the subject which seeks to present itself as itself, not separate from the external reality which birthed it, but existing despite that higher level of reality. Monika's attempt to establish a relationship with the player character is her attempt to discover meaning in an otherwise meaningless simulation. It is through her poetry that she tries to go beyond the boundaries of her reality, and it is through following the mythic archetype of the Mother that she eventually finds her peace. It is only within the Literature Club that it is possible to be liberated, but it is the Literature Club which also entraps. Literature is the code that makes expression of their agency possible, but it is also the grand structure from which we construct meaningless simulacrum that ultimately references nothing but itself.

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