Mark Nickerson

March 15, 2018

Doki Doki Literature Club!: The Novel Visual Novel

Surpassing one million downloads in just under three months (Salvato "1 Million Downloads!") and touting an Overwhelmingly Positive status on Steam with some 78,556 reviews, Team Salvato's *Doki Doki Literature Club!* has established itself as one of the most engaging examples of interactive media of the past year. The atypical visual novel dating simulator—an instant hit among longtime fans of the genre and newcomers alike, leaves many wondering how a visual novel from a relatively unknown developer could garner better reviews than some triple A titles released around the same time. In an attempt to write off the success of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (*DDLC*) by attributing the game's popularity to the low entry threshold of the genre, we grossly simplify what makes this game stand out. While the game doesn't shy away from embracing such tropes that have become fixtures of visual novels, lead developer Dan Salvato uses this familiar narrative to force players to critically engage with the game. Players are encouraged to manipulate and delete files—with a treasure trove of Easter eggs hiding just beneath the surface. With relaxed intellectual property restrictions (Team Salvato, "IP Guidelines"), Team Salvato has allowed for a booming modding community to spring up around the game, thereby insuring a continued interest. As *DDLC* breaks the conventions of how players traditionally interact with media, it simultaneously signals to the industry that such games are worth exploring. Through this popularity, the gaming community is inviting more developers to investigate the relationship between gamers and the content they consume.

Dating Simulations: A Closer Look

As a genre, dating simulation visual novels are fairly formulaic. Browsing Steam's selection of top selling visual novels bearing the tag of "dating sim," we're inundated with thumbnails of mostly hypersexualized girls all of whom appear as if they've been snatched from a Japanese anime or manga (see figure 1). Seen in top sellers like HuniePot's *HuniePop*, Neko Works' *NEKOPARA*, and Soviet Games' *Everlasting Summer*, the narrative typically follows what is known as a harem—which "tend[s] to be about two or more women who are attracted to a single, usually very plain, main male character" (von Feigenblatt). With a limited number of sets, characters are paraded through with variant dialogue options based on player-selected responses. After a series of interactions, the protagonist is eventually given the option to pursue a romantic relationship with one (or more) or the supporting female cast. Despite player intervention, these games have a linear story progression—there is no way to slow the movement from plot A to plot B. No matter who you decide to romance in *NEKOPARA VOL. 1*, the protagonist still opens his confectionary shop and his little sister still comes to visit. For a genre all about choice, the player ultimately operates in a very confined narrative given restricted options. Any dialogue-based interaction with a character in *HuniePop* is boiled down to three response options—one of which will be deemed the "correct" response to further your relationship with that character. By actively participating in this limited space, players are ultimately subjected to a game's ability to "fetishize control" (Galloway 93)—something that Alexander R. Galloway notes games do very well:

> [T]here emerges a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability of the game to mimic and extend that political reality, thereby satisfying the unrequited desires contained within it (83).

Cultural anthropologist Patrick W. Galbraith establishes this parallel in his analysis of the concept of moe. "[R]ecognizing the conservative nature of otaku sexuality," players engage with their "one true love, and then [imagine] perverse sexual interactions with the same character" (Galbraith). Galbraith points out that it is because of the postmodernity of such players of dating sims that gives them these "multiple personalities," borne out of the bombardment of media. Quoting philosopher Azuma Hiroki, Galbraith establishes that otaku have been trained since adolescence "to be sexually stimulated by looking at illustrations of girls, cat ears, and maid outfits" (qtd. in Galbraith). This parallel in the player's appetite for control whilst operating in an arguably controlled environment is the exact idea that *DDLC* explores and exploits.
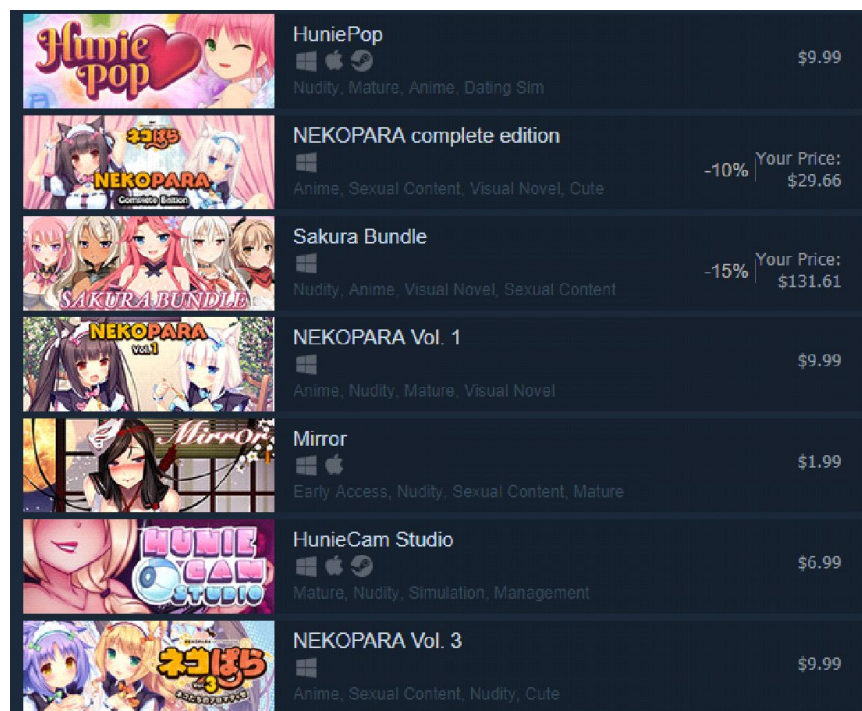

Figure 1. Images of top selling dating simulator games on Steam ("Browsing Dating Sim").

Establishing the *DDLC* Narrative

Doki Doki Literature Club! initially follows the formula established by the genre. You play as a silent male protagonist who, after being goaded by your female childhood friend, Sayori, joins the newly formed High School literature club. The supporting cast consists of four females: The A+ student and club president Monika, the bubbly and positive club vice president Sayori, the pensive and mysterious Yuri, and the child-like Natsuki—all of which are romanceable except for Monika. The game progresses as expected, where the player even partakes in poem writing minigames in which they are tasked with writing poems to garner the attention of the club member they wish to romance.

Eventually, it is revealed through an encounter with Monika that Sayori has been struggling with depression. The game seems to frame this conflict as an opportunity to explore the intricacies of mental health awareness—with Monika even consoling Sayori. After an apparent resolution and a refreshing point of character growth, the player goes to Sayori's house to be met with the sight of Sayori hanging from the ceiling—a clear suicide. This is where the metanarrative of *DDLC* becomes clear, where it's made blindingly obvious to the player that they're no longer playing your run of the mill dating sim. Something sinister is at work here, and the player is just along for the ride. The game automatically resets, and you're brought back to the title screen—only there is no Sayori (see figure 2). The player then plays through the game in the exact same sequence of scenes and dialogues, only with slight variations. All your previous saves have been deleted, and as there is no Sayori in this universe, Yuri is the club vice president. Occasionally the music drifts out of tune, segments of dialogue are corrupted and unreadable, and the character sprites are sporadically replaced with "glitched" versions of themselves. As the story progresses, it is revealed that Monika is somehow self-aware and is

forcing the death (or simply deleting the character file of) the other characters you chose to romance—with the ultimate goal of there being "just Monika" left (*Doki Doki Literature Club!*). Distraught with living in a digital space, Monika strives to break out of the prison she's confined to. It is important to note that as Monika "deletes" other character files, the game is permanently altered—only amplifying the feeling of the game playing you more than you're playing the game. There is no way to return to a previous save where other characters are still "alive," and there is no way to restart a new game without first reinstalling it.

Figure 2. Sayori is now replaced with a glitched compilation of the other characters. (*Doki Doki Literature Club!*)

The Special Player

This departure from what is expected goes deeper as one community surrounding the game, namely the *DDLC* subreddit /r/DDLC, uncovered the multitude of ways one can engage with the game. One obscure way was in manipulating the contents of the character files provided by the game. This discovery solidified *DDLC* as a full-fledged ARG, warranting deeper investigation. In a post made by Reddit user Mithost on the subreddit /r/ARG, Mithost points out that the character files aren't stored in a computer-interpretable format. Manipulating the Sayori character file by first converting it into an OGG file and then using Sonic Visualizer produces a QR code (see figure 3)—which when scanned takes you to a website containing a "monthly examination report" for a mysterious Libitina. The Monika character file, when the extension is changed to a .png format, produces an image (see figure 4) containing what was determined to be "binary converted into a black/white pixel array." Once successfully converted to text, the document produced is a sort of stream of consciousness from an entity who appears to be the mysterious test subject Libitina. The Natsuki character file, when changed to a .png format, inverted, and flipped 180 degrees creates a skewed female face (see figure 5)—what Mithost claims to look less distorted when mapped onto a 3D model as a texture. Lastly, the Yuri character file, when converted to text from Base64, contains "an excerpt from a creepypasta written in 2015" confirmed to be written by Dan Salvato (Mithost).
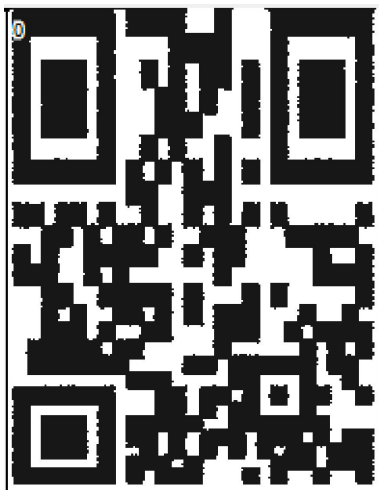
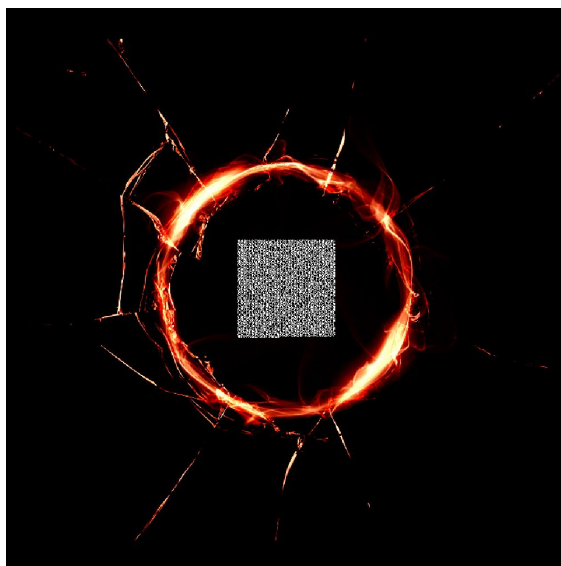Figure 3. The QR code produced by the Sayori character file (Mithost).

Figure 4. The image produced from the Monika character file (Mithost).

Figure 5. The image produced by the Natsuki image file (Mithost).

A more approachable, and arguably the most clearly intended way for players to interact with the game comes in the form of deleting various character files at particular points in the game. Proactively deleting Monika's character file prior to playing results in an existential and painfully self-aware Sayori begging you to "[m]ake it stop," before being shown the image of her hanging herself, again (*Doki Doki Literature Club!*). However, if a player jumps through enough hoops—romancing characters in a certain order and deleting character files at appropriate points in the game they will experience the "fulfilling" or "best" ending (lonnie). This ending sees a version of the literature club where Sayori is the Literature Club president (see figure 6), where she addresses you directly—saying "[y]ou really didn't want to miss a single thing in this game,

did you?" (*Doki Doki Literature Club!*). After this brief (and surprisingly emotional) interaction with Sayori, the screen fills with static and a disembodied voice—assumedly Monika—performs a vocal version of the game's theme song. After the song and the following credits, we're left with a handwritten note from Dan Salvato giving just a glimpse into why he created this game.

Salvato, in his note (see figure 7) titled "To the special player who achieved this special ending," remarks that *DDLC* is his "love letter" to the "ability of visual novels—and games in general—to tell stories in ways not possible using traditional media." With this we begin to unravel the greater goal Salvato attempted to reach with this game. Noting that his favorite types of games are those "that further pushes the limitless bounds of interactive media," it's no surprise that Salvato would hold his own work to such a standard.
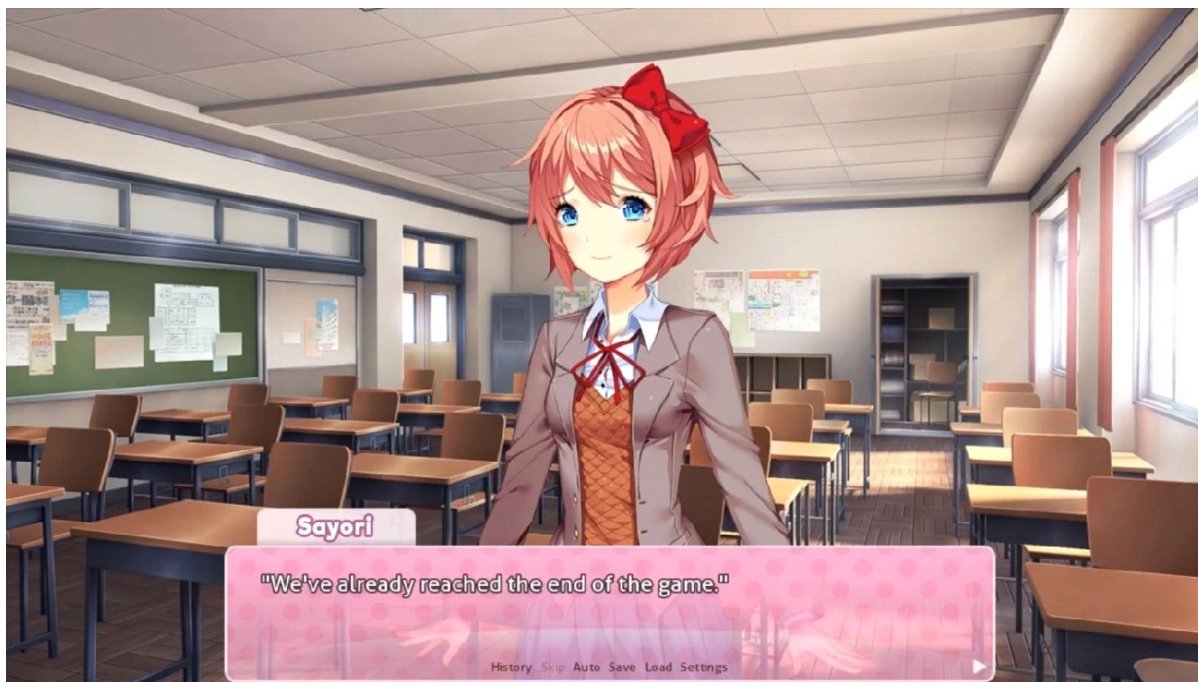

Figure 6. Sayori saying goodbye to the player after they have achieved the "best" ending (*Doki Doki Literature Club!)*

To the special player who achieved this special ending.

For years, I have been enamored by the ability of visual novels — and games in general — to tell stories in ways not possible using traditional media. Doki Doki Literature Club is my love letter to that.

Games are an interactive art. Some let you explore new worlds. Some challenge your mind in brand new ways. Some make you feel like a hero or a friend, even when life is hard on you. Some games are just plain fun — and that's okay, too.

Everyone likes different kinds of games. People who enjoy dating sims may have a heightened empathy for fictional characters, or they might be experiencing feelings that life has not been kind enough to offer them. If they are enjoying themselves, then that's all that matters. That goes for shooting games, casual games, sandbox games — anything. Preferences are preferences, and our differences are the reason we have a thriving video game industry.

My own favorite games have always been ones that challenge the status quo. Even if not a masterpiece, any game that attempts something wildly different may earn a special place in my heart. Anything that further pushes the limitless bounds of interactive media.

I extend my true gratitude to all those who have taken the time to achieve full completion. I hope you enjoyed playing it as much as I enjoyed making it.

Thank you for being a part of my Literature Club!

Love,
Dan Salvato

Figure 7. Dan Salvato's letter to those who complete *DDLC* completely (*Doki Doki Literature Club!)*

Power to the People: The Modding Community

A subset of the /r/DDLC community is the /r/DDLCMods community. Although significantly smaller in size, this modding community has produced an open source modding template to significantly aid in the creation of fan made content. Using Team Salvato's (fairly liberal) intellectual property guidelines as a sort of "moral compass," users create anything from prequels and alternate stories to reskinned sprites to be shared amongst the community. With top posts being riddled with teaser videos for new user-made experiences, this active community has currently five completed mods—each offering a different opportunity for players to interact with the base game. *Doki! Doki! RainClouds*, for example, is an unfinished yet promising fan creation reimagines the *DDLC* storyline through the eyes of Sayori (paulchartres). With 45 total official mods in development, budding game designers and lovers of the *DDLC* universe created by Team Salvato are pursuing their own goals of making rich and interactive stories.

The most popular mod, with over 100,000 downloads, is *Monika After Story*—where players can "spend forever together" chatting and playing minigames with Monika ("Home" Monika After Story). This mod reflects the seemingly strange community desire for a more fulfilling and extended interaction with the very character ultimately responsible for the deaths of her classmates. Dismissing the fringe cases where players gravitate towards Monika due to her appealing sprites or because of her allure of being unattainable, Monika comes to represent a sort of commentary on the game and the genre itself. Like her, players are powerless in how they can interact with the digital space created by *DDLC*. With the game representing Dan Salvato's self-described "love/hate" relationship with the genre (qtd. in Jackson), we can start to reimagine the role of Monika as less of a foil to the protagonist and as more as a reflection of the player. With little stretch of the imagination, Monika can be seen as an insertion of Salvato into the

game—representing a remarkably human experience for players. Fitting in line with the narrative of the game, as there is a clear distinction between the omnipotent player and the ignorant characters, interactions with Monika are refreshingly human amongst the troupe of 2D characters.

Active Spectatorship

To better understand the appeal of spending eternity with Monika, I downloaded *Monika After Story* and set out on my journey (see figure 8). Taking place in the empty classroom that Monika takes you to at the end of the *DDLC*, the player is given three options of what they can do with Monika: talk, change the music playing, and play games. Talking gives the player options to probe Monika about the events of *DDLC*, with questions often revolving around why she made certain decisions, or if she has any regrets. These lines of inquiry often result in Monika blaming her behavior on a mixture of her love of the player and having no alternative course of action due to restrictions placed on her by the developer. Or, players can disregard such questions and ask more cliché questions like "would you be my housewife?" wherein Monika postulates about the appeal but is ultimately fearful of the regression such conversations could have on gender equality. As *DDLC* is a game that largely explores the boundaries of control, where both the player and the characters are subject to the developer's will, *Monika After Story* seeks to give a bit of that power (or at least the illusion of power) back to the player—all whilst reminding players who is really in control now (see figure 9). Despite the mod's more obvious flaws—where Monika's dialogue often departs from the source material and is somewhat out of character, or the inconsistent art styles when playing minigames with Monika, the mod successfully delivers an experience unique to the relationship developed between players and everyone's favorite digital killer.

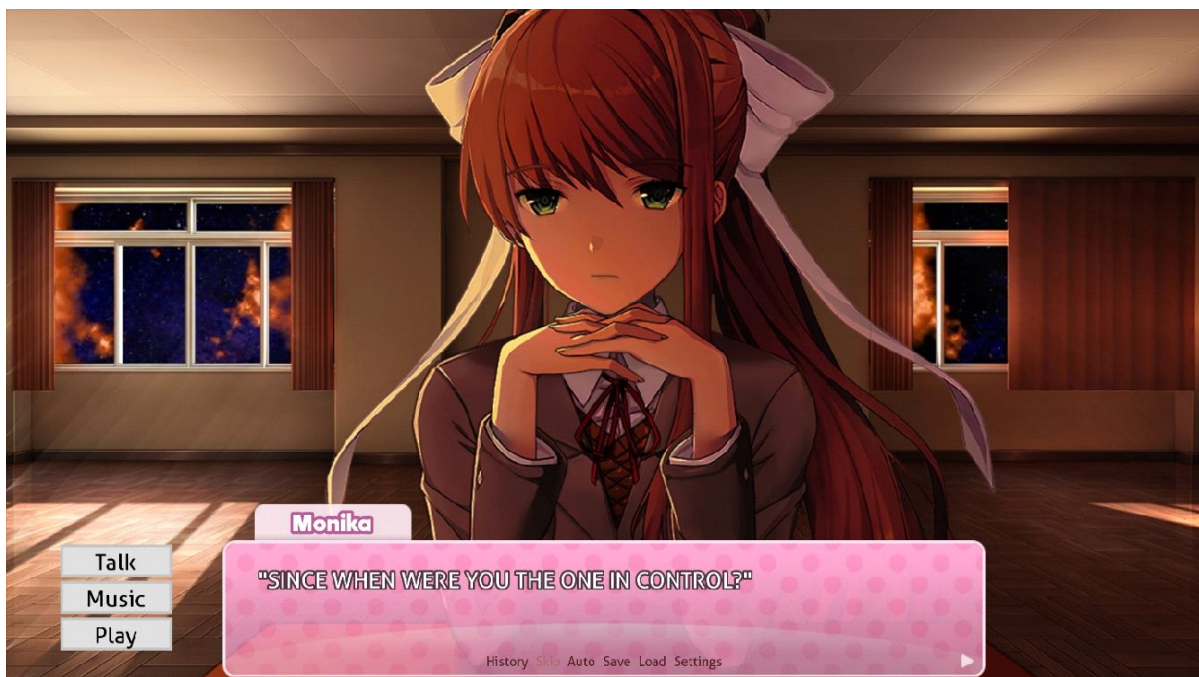Figure 8. *Monika After Story* start screen (*Monika After Story).*

Figure 9. Monika reminding players who is in control (*Monika After Story).*

Reworking the Narrative

Just as *Monika After Story* (and most other mods created by the community) seek to change the narrative of *DDLC*—I too resolved to tell a short story from an unfamiliar perspective. In *DDLC*, once Sayori is deleted from the game, her removal is never questioned by any of the characters. Wanting to investigate a story that empowered players to take action, I decided to create a mod where the main character is placed at the beginning of the original *DDLC* story—retaining his memory of the events that transpired. In my mod, entitled *DDLC – Die Another Day*, you play through an altered version of the first chapter of *DDLC*, where your persistent internal monologue reflecting the determination to save Sayori and the others from Monika colors your interactions with the characters (see figure 10). As *DDLC* examines the relationships between players and the media they consume, my goal with this mod was to place "myself" into the game. The protagonist that players control is no longer playing the part of the ignorant main character, but rather reflects the omnipotence that someone who has already played *DDLC* would bring to a second playthrough.

Discussed by Angela Thomas in her analysis of writing fan fiction, the concept of fusing identities—where writers "insert versions of themselves into their characters" (Thomas 158), allows for writers to explore a more introspective analysis of issues in their lives. As I wrote more so from my own perspective than that of the original protagonist, my mod ultimately reflects the lack of control when operating in a digital space controlled by someone else. As I explored a new story that conformed to the source material as possible, I too was limited in how certain characters could be expected to interact whilst hopefully being able to pass as canon. This restriction, where I planned on staying true to the universe established by Team Salvato, that I placed on myself resulted in a reduced number of possibilities—paralleling the restricted options

players have when interacting with the game. I decided, then, that the main character really didn't have any more or less control over the outcome of the story simply because they knew what was going to happen. Perhaps as an homage to the Hellenistic concept of fate, Monika eventually stops the player's meddling in her affairs and resets the game. As always when it comes to *DDLC*, Monika (or Dan Salvato) is in control.

The Stakes of the Metagame

Growing beyond the scope of the intended experience, most mods developed by the community seek to add content to the base game—expanding the possibilities of player interaction with the universe crafted by Team Salvato. This type of engagement allows fans to engross themselves in new adventures and provides creators of such mods an avenue to develop and explore new identities. As Thomas notes, the process of creating fan made content for an established universe creates a dissonance between the virtual and physical boundaries established by our screens (Thomas 157). This disconnection then forces us to "rethink the idea that cyberspace is a disembodied space, since the lived experience of participating in virtual worlds becomes an embodied phenomenological experience" (Thomas 158). As *DDLC* seeks to transcend the visual novel genre and create an entirely different interactive experience, creating mods (with many starting out as fan fiction scripts) then becomes just another logical step towards players attempting to find their digital identity. By examining modding as less of a means of expressing a fan's commitment to a particular game and more as a way for individuals to experience the human condition in a digital landscape, we can better understand how modding can allow creators "a more introspective reflection into ways in which their characters might be facing issues and angst-ridden insecurities similar to those they face in their real lives" (Thomas 158).

Closing Remarks

Team Salvato's *Doki Doki Literature Club!* offers an interesting look into the tropes explored and exploited by the visual novel genre. Using the seemingly ubiquitous visual novel setup—relying on an undescriptive male protagonist being surrounded by a troupe of visually interesting female supporting characters, Team Salvato uses this familiar narrative to deconstruct the intricacies of such stories. The best way, it seems, to understand a genre and open it up to a critical discourse is through the lens of the genre itself. For some, playing a game that is designed to be a critical examination on the very mechanics utilized by the game has the transformative effect of changing one dimensional 'play' into a deeper discussion on the game being played—echoing Marshall McLuhan's notion that the medium is in fact the message.

As players are all but invited to mod *DDLC* due to the relaxed intellectual property restrictions, modders are granted the power to determine the type of story they want to play. The community, then, has the "freedom and power to author an identity" when interacting with the source material (qtd. in Thomas 160). For a game wrought in the allegorical control relationships between player, game designer, and genre-specific tropes, modding allows players to take back some of this control.

Works Cited

"Browsing Dating Sim." *Steam*,

    store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Dating+Sim#p=0&tab=TopSellers.

Doki Doki Literature Club!. Team Salvato, 2017.

Galbraith, Patrick W. "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan." *Ejcjs -*

    Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies, 31 Oct. 2009,

    www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html.

Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. University of Minnesota Press,

    2004.

"Home." *Monika After Story*, www.monikaafterstory.com/.

lonnie. "The Fulfilling Ending." *Steam Community*, 15 Oct. 2017,

    steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1170496801.

Jackson, Gita. "Doki Doki Literature Club's Horror Was Born From A Love-Hate Relationship

    With Anime." *Kotaku*, 20 Oct. 2017,

    kotaku.com/doki-doki-literature-clubs-horror-was-born-from-a-love-1819724999.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Mithost. "'Doki Doki Literature Club' Has More To It Than We Think. • r/ARG." *Reddit.com*,

    Nov. 2017,

    www.reddit.com/r/ARG/comments/71z2pt/doki_doki_literature_club_has_more_to_it_th

    an_we/.

Monika After Story, therationalpi, 2017.

paulchartres. "Very First Screenshot of DDRC (Doki Doki! RainClouds)! You Basically View

    the Game through Sayori's Point of View. • r/DDLCMods." *Reddit.com*, 31 Jan. 2018,

www.reddit.com/r/DDLCMods/comments/7tm84i/very_first_screenshot_of_ddrc_doki_d
oki/.

Salvato, Dan. "1 Million Downloads!" *Team Salvato*, 10 Dec. 2017,

teamsalvato.com/blog/1-million-downloads/.

Taylor, Emily. "Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture."

Southeast Review of Asian Studies, vol. 29, 2007, pp. 192–208.,

www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Dating-Simulation-Games%3A-Leisure-and-Gaming-of-

Jap-Taylor/f789057922bcbf331d205e6b68647e9b5fe1a42c?tab=abstract.

Team Salvato. "IP Guidelines." *Team Salvato*, 23 Jan. 2018, teamsalvato.com/ip-guidelines/.

Thomas, Angela. "Blurring and Breaking through the Boundaries of Narrative, Literacy, and

Identity in Adolescent Fan Fiction." *A New Literacies Sampler*, edited by Michele

Knobel and Colin Lankshear, vol. 29, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007, pp. 137–165.

Von Feigenblatt, Otto Federico. "A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Romantic Love in Japanese

Harem Animation: A Buddhist Monk, a Japanese Knight, and a Samurai." *Journal of

Asia Pacific Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 16 Sept. 2010, pp. 636–646.,

papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1760643.