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# The Blurriness of Magic Circle

Even though themed as a modern Japanese dating-sim, Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC) is a psychological horror metagame. The player, playing as the male protagonist in the game, has one day been invited to join his childhood friend, Sayori's literature club. There he meets three other girls, Natuski, Yuri and the club president Monika. Natuski, Yuri, and Sayori could be chosen through options to get closer to and discover more of their secrets. The five of them hold club meetings four times, exchanging poems and critics, before the school's cultural festival happens, on which day the male protagonist discovers the suicide of Sayori no matter which girl he chooses to get close to. Then the game is rebooted with the cover image of four protagonist girls changing into three, with Sayori's image replaced by mosaic. The second playthrough is the same as the first time, except with all previous references to Sayori be either completely removed or replaced by glitches and meshes of portions of other characters' images. In the second round of the game, Natuski commits suicide and Monika deletes all other characters. On the third round of the game, the player is placed in a room with only Monika where she explains to the player that she knows she is only a character in a game and she is able to delete files and modify other character's personalities. The only way to escape from the game is to go into file's system and deletes Monika's character file.

DDLC uses many similar concepts in metafiction [1], a form of literature that constantly reminds the reader to be aware of them reading a fictional work, especially the breakdown of the magic circle which is an imaginary playground of the game separated from real-life [2] (Huizinga). The intention of the breakdown is to blurry the boundary between the game and real life. However, the magic circle itself is not an absolute concept where standing inside will

completely separate the players with the real life. Certain blurriness exists between real life and the magic circle already and most of the players acknowledge the blurriness as they are playing because the action of play has to come from real life. [3] This paper concentrates on the fictional world of DDLC, exploring how even though three different elements, including the deliberate use of Japanese Culture, the acknowledgment of magic circle in the plot, and the easter egg, try to break down the magic circle in DDLC and blend the game with real life, they in fact utilize the blurriness between the game and player to create a even stronger feeling of isolation.

DDLC was created by Team Salvato leading by Dan Salvato, located in Idaho, United States. It was, however, created in modern Japanese dating sim style with only English subtitles. (Japanese subtitle was not added until a year later) DDLC's plot, cultural reference, anime style etc. are all in Japanese style. For example, the depiction of the high school classroom and the residential house are similar to that of real Japanese locations, and the use of the key event, cultural festival, is a special event that only happens in Japanese high schools. However, people can only download the game where it will explicitly show the developer's nationality, steam, itch.io or Team Salvato's home page. This display combining with the fact that people can only play with English sub creates a strong feeling of contradiction with the game's cultural reference and anime style, confusing the players by leading their expectations to be a real Japanese dating sim yet losing the main elements that creates such feeling, the developers' nationality, the Japanese subtitles, and voice over. Players are constantly reminded by the anime style that this game should not have anything to do with anything in the western culture. Yet at the same time, they are continually contradicted by the English subtitles that it is indeed created in the western culture, pulling them out of the magic circle and making them aware that this is only a game. However, the players are always subconsciously aware that they are only playing a game instead of actually being a character in the game. And the illusion of immersion is only created by the thoroughness and persistence. If that thoroughness and persistence are broken at any time, players will instantly realize the existence of the magic

circle, creating a wall to isolate game life and real life. Just like DDLC, it tries to remind player with its contradicting visual style and subtitle, but result in a feeling of inconsistency instead.

Monika in DDLC explicitly reveals herself conscious of the world around her being inside a game. The action is to remind the players that they are merely playing a game instead of being immersed in the plot, blurring the magic circle and blending the boundary of DDLC and reality. For example, Monika said in the second round of the game that "she knew she was a character in the game". This acknowledgment fits in perfectly with the fact that the players are always aware they are only playing a game, thus effectively breaks down the magic circle, enlarges the effect of it, and makes the players think the characters in DDLC exist in real life and the game is merely a prison for the characters in it. Many other visual effects also function the same way. For instance, when Sayori was first said to be "deleted", the plot that involves her in the first round of the game turns into mosaics and unreadable text, creating an effect of computer glitches. Combining with Monika's statement to "delete" Sayori in the file, the visual effect creates a stronger feeling of being in a game for the player. Another example that attempts to achieve a similar effect is when Monika called out the player's name in real life and the fact that they are streaming, if they really are. However, even though the game uses multiple ways to convince the players to believe that Monika is not a character in DDLC but a virtual personality that exists in reality, it only creates an even larger isolation between the player and the game, making Monika seems like a game character more than ever. Because the players subconsciously understand that this is only a game. Trying to either let Monika say she knew it was a game, "delete" Sayori or call the player out in real life would result in the players trying to figure out how they did all these incredible stuff in the computer program, again, because they know it's only a game. And when they try to figure it out by searching on the internet or reading the game's comments, everything the game builds up towards collapses, making the players more conscious about the existence of the game than ever.

Last but not least, DDLC contains a number of easter eggs, which are mostly hidden directly inside game files instead of in-game content. [4] Trying to access the file is an action of blending the game and reality together. Most of the easter egg is encoded and decoding them requires the help of a real life 64-bit decoder. For example, transferring Sayori.chr to Sayori.jpg would get a coded message that leads to a QR code. A QR code requires a smartphone with a QR scanner app installed on it. The decoded message blends the game with everyday life by involving the player's smartphone. However, the discovery of the easter egg has so many impossible steps that it hinders the effort of a casual player who is normally DDLC's targeted player and does not possess the knowledge of decoding messages. Desperately wanting to know more about the easter egg, he/she will search for the internet for the answer. And everything collapses again.

In all, acknowledging the existence of a magic circle could be risky because of the blurriness around it and the fact that most players subconsciously know that they are still just in a game. If poorly executed, players will not only not experience the blend of the game and real life, but instantly being ejected outside of the circle, leaving a worse experience. DDLC tries to recognize the magic circle, however, most players impede the effort by just being a normal, casual player, creating a stronger feeling of isolation between them and the game.

References:

[1] Waugh, Patricia. Metafiction – The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. London, New York: Routledge. p. 2. , 1984

[2] Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture, Nature and Significance of Play As a Cultural Phenomenon, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955

[3] Mia Consalvo, There is No Magic Circle, Online, Accessible, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343575, 2009

[4] N. Jayden, Doki Doki Literature Club - All Secrets and Easter Eggs of DDLC + Project Libitina, Online, Accessible, https://indiefaq.com/guides/134-doki-doki-literature-club.html, 2018