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Blurring the Boundary of Magic Circle: The Application of Alternate Reality Game (ARG) Features in Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC)

ABSTRACT
On the surface, Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC) is a cute, typical romance visual novel. Yet, the *Psychological Horror* tag of DDLC on Steam and the repeat warning that "This game is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed". This evidence suggests that there are more secrets in DDLC than it seems. By playing DDLC, the players not only uncover the secrets of the female characters, but also discover the puzzles hidden in the game. The puzzle-solving activities in DDLC are similar to those in Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). In other words, the game incorporates some of the ARG elements. At the same time, this inclusion blurs the boundary of magic circle in players' common knowledge. Thus, by delving into the connection between DDLC and ARG features, this essay investigates the impacts brought by the incorporation of ARG features to the boundary of magic circle. The paper ends with speculation about the mode of experience unlocked with the application of ARG features in computer games.

INTRODUCTION
Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC) is like an iceberg. By looking at this computer game's promotional video and art style (Fig. 1a and 1b), it seems like a cute, typical romance visual novel. Yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg. After playing the game for a few hours, something strange happens, and much darker things are hidden below the iceberg. After all, there is a reason that DDLC is tagged as *Psychological Horror* on Steam (n.d.).

Fig. 1a DDLC's preview image on Steam (n.d.)

Fig. 1b Screenshot from DDLC

When playing DDLC, I found that the gameplay is innovative, as the playground for the player is not only inside the game's application window, but also outside the window. Games rarely require players to modify the files in their folders to continue progressing. This refreshes my definition of magic circle, because I usually assume that I only interact with the application interface to play the game. Yet, this is not the case in DDLC. At the same time, the techniques I used in DDLC remind me of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). For example, during my gameplay, a paragraph of random letters is shown on the interface, and I can decipher it with Base64 code. Although DDLC itself is not an ARG, as confirmed by DDLC's creator that the recovered information are easter eggs that are not related to DDLC (DivineDespair, 2017), it is insightful to dissect how DDLC's inclusions of ARG features impacts the mode of experiences of play. By exploring DDLC and its ARG features, this essay examines how the

incorporation of ARG features in DDLC impact the boundary of magic circle, and ends by speculating the mode of experience in computer games unlocked by ARG features.

There are several remarks regarding this essay. Firstly, it only analyses DDLC, a free visual novel computer game developed by Team Salvator in 2017, not DDLC Plus, an expanded, paid version of DDLC published for consoles and computers in 2021 (FANDOM, n.d.). Moreover, the term *player* will be used to refer to the *protagonist* of DDLC. In addition, as the game contains graphical depictions of heavy subjects, including suicide and self-harm ("Doki Doki literature club! warning," n.d.), this essay will not show any image that contains those elements.

This essay is organised into seven major sections. This section highlights the importance of the topic by contemplating its background and motivation. Following this introductory section, the second and third section explains the concepts of magic circle and ARG, respectively. The fourth section features the basic information and summary of DDLC. The fifth section highlights the ARG features in DDLC, while the sixth section connects DDLC and its ARG features to the magic circle concept. The final section concludes the essay by providing a summary addressing the research question and speculating on the mode of experience in computer games unlocked by ARG features.

MAGIC CIRCLE

The concept of the magic circle was referenced by Huizinga (1949) when elaborating on the limit of play, stating, "the arena, the card table, the magic circle, …, etc., … are temporary worlds within the ordinary world". This notion gave insight into the special meaning of things inside the magic circle. This term has a similar meaning on the subject of games. According to Brown (2015), the magic circle is "the area within which the rules of the game apply, a special space, ideally but not necessarily demarcated by the rules within which play occurs. It need not be a physical space, but can instead be virtual or a frame of mind."

ALTERNATE REALITY GAME (ARG) AND ITS FEATURES

Alternate Reality Game (ARG) is a game genre that "[tells] stories through the deliberate synthesis of myriad textual products" (Garcia & Niemeyer, 2017). In other words, "ARGs are immersive, interactive narratives told across multiple platforms" (Janes, 2020). This form of transmedia storytelling makes ARGs "[situate] as a primary reflection of how the *real* world and imaginary narratives intersect" (Garcia & Niemeyer, 2017).

In the form of scavenger hunts, ARGs prompt players to puzzle-solving activities or challenges (de Beer & Bothma, 2016). By solving or completing them, players uncover hidden information related to the narrative and more puzzles (de Beer & Bothma, 2016). Typical ARG puzzle-solving skills include deciphering morse code, destegging pictures, and file extension conversions (Le, n.d.). Usually, players share their findings, working in collaboration with others (de Beer & Bothma, 2016). Broadly speaking, ARG's gameplay tasks include puzzle solving, new information compilation, information collection, information dissemination, and hypothesis creation (de Beer & Bothma, 2016).

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB! (DDLC)

This section introduces the basic information about DDLC and summarises the game. The game contains four acts categorised by fans (FANDOM, n.d.). Also, Act 1 and Acts 2 to 4 have two completely different themes. Thus, the summary below is divided into Act 1 and Acts 2 to 4.

Basic Information

Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC) is a free Ren'Py-based visual novel computer game developed by Team Salvator, released on September 22, 2017 (Steam, n.d.). Centres around a Japanese high school's Literature Club, DDLC features a male protagonist, who the player controls, and four female characters: Monika (Fig. 1a), Sayori (Fig. 1b), Yuri (Fig. 1c), and Natsuki (Fig. 1d). Monika is the club's friendly, mature president; Sayori is the bright, cheerful childhood friend of the protagonist and the club's vice-president in Act 1; Yuri is the shy, timid girl and the club vice-president in Act 2; Natsuki is the club's kind yet feisty member.

| Fig. 1a Monika	Fig. 1b Sayori	Fig. 1c Yuri	Fig. 1d Natsuki
(TV Tropes, n.d.)	*(TV Tropes, n.d.)*	*(TV Tropes, n.d.)*	*(TV Tropes, n.d.)*

Despite DDLS's cute anime style, the game contains psychological horror and "is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed" (Fig. 2a). At the beginning of the game, DDLC also advised players to check the content warnings (Fig. 2b) even though they contain spoilers. It is highly recommended that players be aware of them before playing DDLC because the game involves graphic depictions of those subjects, and the characters are portrayed realistically.
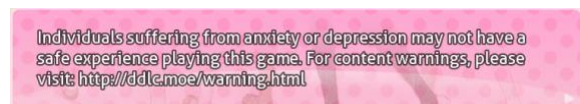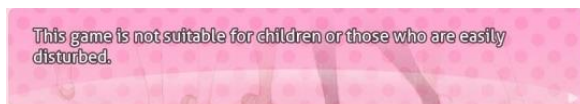
Fig. 2a & Fig. 2b Screenshots of in-game warnings

Summary of DDLC's Act 1

After starting a new game for the first time, the game introduces the player to their childhood friend Sayori who wakes up late, and they walk back to school together. Then Sayori convinces the player to join the Literature club, leading the player to meet Monika, Sayori, and Natsuki, who are part of the club. Like a stereotypical dating sim, the player's goal is to end up in a relationship with one of the female characters. The player can choose among Sayori, Natsuki, and Yuri (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Sayori (left), Natsuki (middle), and Yuri (right)

One of the recurring activities of the club is to write and share their poems with each other, and there is a mini-game for the player to do so. In this game, the player picks one word each from twenty lists, such as the one in Fig. 4a. According to the instruction of this game, as illustrated in Fig. 4b, the female characters like the player more if they pick more words that suit them. In other words, if there is a character the player wants to pursue, they need to select words relevant to that character to reach their desired ending. Which character the poem is written to is determined by who has the highest number of words about them.

Fig. 4a One of the word lists from the mini-game

Fig. 4b Instructions for the mini-game

Through conversations with the character, the players learn more about them. When the relationship between the player and a character grows to a certain extent, the game shows the CGs depicting intimate scenes, such as the ones in Fig. 5a and Fig. 5b.

Fig. 5a CG of Sayori

Fig. 5b CG of Natsuki

Things begin to go dark since the player realises Sayori has depression. The next day after she confessed her love to the player, the player discovers Sayori committed suicide at her home.

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After this shock, a black-on-white ending screen appears, as illustrated in Fig. 6, and the game forcibly brings the player straight back to its title screen, signifying DDLC has "ended".

Fig. 6 Ending Screen for Act 1

Summary of the DDLC's Acts 2 to Act 4

After Act 1 ends, the title screen (Fig. 8a) looks different than before (Fig. 8b), with Sayori being replaced with a mesh of each of the other characters and the "New Game" option replaced with a line of glitched text. At the same time, if the player goes to the game's file directory in their computer (Fig. 9), Sayori's character file, *sayori.ch*, in the *characters* folder is deleted, and an image file, *hxppy thxughts.png*, which is a child-like drawing of Sayori hung herself, is added.

Fig. 8a Title screen after Act 1 ends
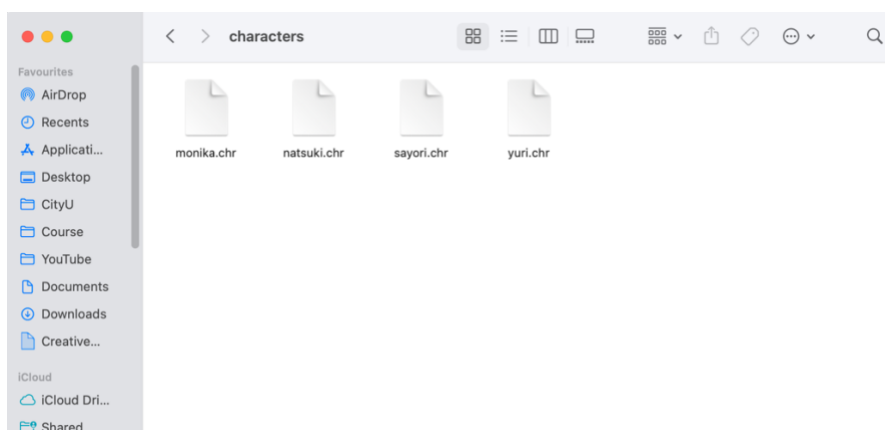

Fig. 8b Original title screen

Fig. 9 DDLC's characters folder on a macOS before the start of the game

Act 2 is the turning point in which DDLC switches from an innocent visual novel to a psychological horror game. The player enters this act after clicking the glitched-out "New Game" option. Act 2 starts the same as Act 1, except for Sayori's disappearance and glitch appearances. Despite without Sayori, the game corrects its narrative automatically. In Act 2,

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the player can still pursue a romantic relationship with either Natsuki or Yuri. Near the end of Act 2, Yuri stabs herself multiple times with a knife, and the player is stuck witnessing Yuri's dead body decaying over the weekend until Monika and Natsuki return to school. After Monika deletes Yuri's and Natsuki's character files, *yuri.chr* and *natsuki.chr*, she restarts the game and forces the player into Act 3. The act ends as Monika and Natsuki discover that the protagonist spent the weekend in the classroom with Yuri's decaying body after stabbing herself multiple times. Monika then deletes Yuri and Natsuki and forces the player into Act 3.

The entire Act 3 features just Monika. She talks to the player about random topics (FANDOM, n.d.), mostly staring at us same as the one in Fig. 10. This act begins to end when the player deletes Monika's character file, *monika.chr*, in the *characters* folder on their computer, namely killing Monika. As her dying grace, Monika reveals that she did not really delete her friends and restores them. This act ends when the player returns to the game's title screen, which displays Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki, but not Monika.

Fig. 10 The graphic throughout Act 3

Act 4 seems the same as Act 1, but without Monika and Sayori becomes the Literature club's president. Everything is normal until Sayori reveals to the player that she is now self-aware and traps the player with her FOREVER. Subsequently, Monika, in the form of a dialogue box, stops Sayori and deletes the game because she realises no happiness can be found here. Over DDLC's ending credits, Monika sings "Your Reality" with her voice.

ARG FEATURES IN DDLC
This section highlights the DDLC's ARG features. It is into four parts, according to de Beer's and Bothma's (2016) ARG components mentioned in the *ARG and its Features* section: puzzle solving, information collection, information dissemination, new information compilation, and hypothesis creation. The below information regarding the puzzles is heavily referenced to those found by the DDLC community, including on TV Tropes (n.d.), Reddit (Mithost, 2017), and YouTube (The Game Theorists, 2017).

Puzzle Solving
Regarding the puzzle-solving challenges, they are located in DDLC's application window, the magic circle, and the game folder on the player's computer.

In DDLC's Act 2, the puzzles are displayed as poems written by female characters. Suppose the player has written two poems written to Natsuki. In that case, her poem will be encoded in Base64 code as illustrated in Fig. 8a. Moreover, there is a special poem unlocked in the same

act, like the one in Fig. 8b, which has many blacked-out lines with only a few letters visible that spells "nothing is real?"

Fig. 8a Natsuki's Base64 poem in Act 2   *Fig. 8b One of the special poems unlocked in Act 2*

In the game's file directory, puzzles can be found in the *autorun* folder (Fig. 9a) and the *characters* folder (Fig. 9b) inside that *autorun* folder. New files appear in the *autorun* folder after certain events happen inside the magic circle. For example, after Yuri's death with the player is stuck with a decaying Yuri over the weekend, a new file called *have a nice weekend!* appears, containing a code as shown in Fig. 10. Each female character has a .chr file in the characters folder. Although it is not an extension recognised by the computer, opening the files in text format shows unreadable texts, such as *sayori.chr* (Fig. 11). The character files are the puzzles players can solve.
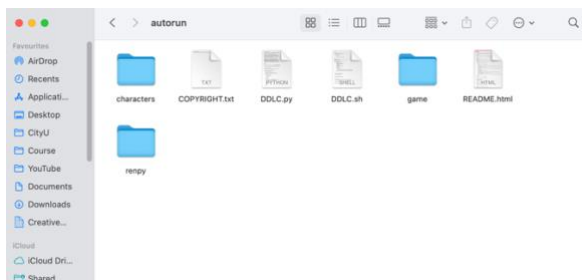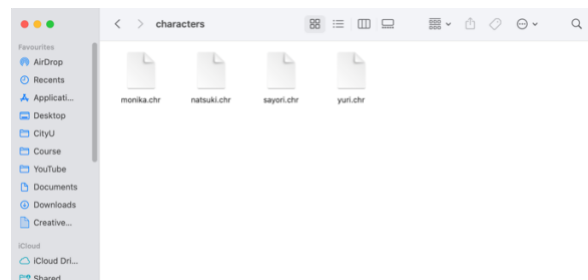

*Fig. 9a autorun folder in the file directory*   *Fig. 9b character folder in autorun folder*

Fig. 10 Code in the have a nice weekend! file

Fig. 11 sayori.chr opened in text format

Information Dissemination

After the players discover the puzzles, some share them on social media if they want to solve the challenges with others collectively. Usually, those discussions take place on Reddit, Twitter, and discussion forums. Take FANDOM's discussion forum as an example. Eggplant23 posted her discovery of *have a nice weekend!* file there and seek other players' insights on how to decode the puzzle (Fig. 12a). People replied to them by providing either their own (Fig. 12b) or others' (Fig. 12c) theories on the puzzle.
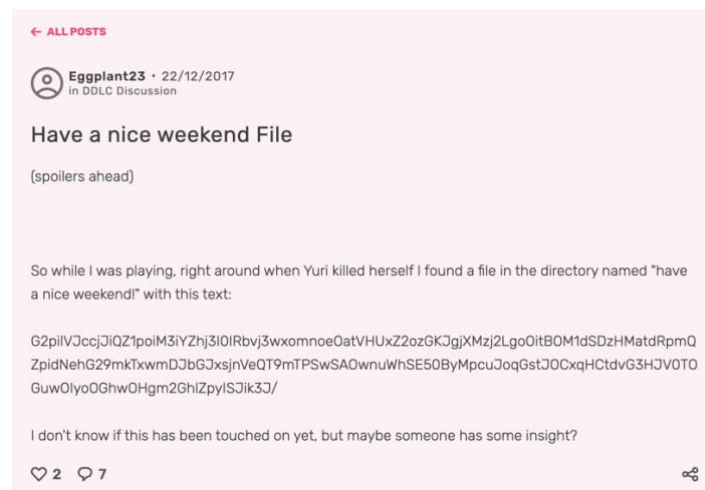
Fig. 12a Post by Eggplant23 on FANDOM's discussion forum (2017)

Fig. 12b Player's theory on the puzzle

Fig. 12c Player referencing other's theory on the puzzle

New Information Compilation

By attempting to solve the puzzles themselves and seeking help from other players when needed, new information can be compiled from those puzzles.

By decoding Natsuki's poem in Act 2 (Fig. 8a) with Base64 code, a poem called *Open Your Third Eye* is revealed, in which the poem describes how the writer feels pleasure from cutting up a woman (Fig. 13).

I can feel the tenderness of her skin through the knife, as if it were an extension of my sense of touch. My body nearly convulses. There's something incredibly faint, deep down, that screams to resist this uncontrollable pleasure. But I can already tell that I'm being pushed over the edge. I can't...I can't stop myself.

Fig. 13 The deciphered poem by Natsuki titled Open Your Third Eye

Regarding the special poem with several blacked-out lines (Fig. 8b), the player reveals the texts hidden behind those lines with Photoshop (Fig. 14). The recovered message mentions a character name that has not appeared throughout DDLC and the symptoms of an unknown disease.

Irregular heartbeat. Heart palpitations. Arrhythmia. I search and search, eyes scanning everything I can find on their symptoms. What is this? Shortness of breath? Chest pain? Dizziness? No. This is all wrong. Elyssa's symptoms are nowhere near this simple. I've seen it twice now. The screams of pain. Sickeningly pale skin. Vomiting blood. There is no other explanation, other than that Renier's information was a complete and utter lie.
This can't all be coincidence. It's not possible. I don't know how much of this Renier is behind. But I do know this: There is something horribly wrong with this family. And I accepted the invitation to become a part of it.
I can hear Elyssa's screams through the walls now. I listen helplessly. Renier said that he would be with her shortly. Is he in her room now? Why is she screaming even louder than before?

Fig. 14 The decoded special poem by using Photoshop (Sheen5911, 2017)

For the puzzle in the *have a nice weekend!* file (Fig. 10), the code is deciphered (Fig. 15) after putting through a vingere cipher with the key' libitinia.'

What is a man without knowing the rich aroma of the future;
the hot, complex balance of the present; and the bittersweet
aftertaste of the past?

Fig. 15 The decoded have a nice weekend! file

Sayori's character file sayori.chr (Fig. 11) can be solved by converting it into an OGG audio file with file extension conversion. After opening the sound file in the form of a spectrograph, a QR code is recovered (Fig. 16a). By scanning the QR code, the player gets the URL http://www.projectlibitina.com/, in which the website looks similar to the one in Fig. 16b.

Fig. 16a Recovered QR code from sayori.chr file ("Project Libitina," 2018)

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========================================================================
MONTHLY EXAMINATION REPORT                              January 5, 2004
========================================================================


====SUBJECT INFO

Name                                                  XXXXXX, Libitina
DOB                                                         01/05/2001
Sex                                                                  F
Age                                                                  3
Height                                                             35
Weight                                                             31
Wing                                                                A
Room                                                              114
------------------------------------------------------------------------
Significance Level (001-100)                                      100
------------------------------------------------------------------------


====SUBJECT NOTES

Last Updated                                              12/05/2003
------------------------------------------------------------------------
As of December 5th, 2003, all personnel are forbidden from editing this field.
All previous subject notes have been erased permanently.
Addendum: Introducing bias during testing as a result of personal attachment to
the subject will henceforth be punished by death.
------------------------------------------------------------------------


====PHYSICAL RESULTS

BMI                                                              17.8
HR                                                                 90
SP                                                                101
DP                                                                 59
TMP                                                              98.6

Eyes                                                           Normal
Ears                                                           Normal
Teeth                                                          Normal
Genitals                                                       Normal
Pain tolerance (01-10)                                            03


====PHYSICAL RESULTS (THIRD EYE)

HR                                                                160
Reaction time (ms)                                                  1
Strength                                                          N/A
Local distortion                                                  434
Distortion decay                                                   29
```

Fig. 16b Screenshot of http://www.projectlibitina.com/

Hypothesis Creation

With new information recovered by solving the puzzles, players create their hypotheses. Some of them share their write-ups of the puzzles and theories on the game with others. Redditor Mithost (2017) posted a detailed explanation of their way of solving the puzzle, which sparked an interesting discussion in the community. YouTube channel The Game Theorists (2017) covered their hypotheses in a two-part video series, which includes linking the information about the Third Eye from the puzzles to Yuri being Libitina. Unfortunately, their theories have been debunked by other players ("MatPat's DDLC Game Theory Deconstructed," 2018). In addition, DivineDespair (2017), one of the artists that drew the posters sold in DDLC's merchandise store, revealed that Dan Salvato, the creator of DDLC, mentioned that the Third Eye was more of an easter egg and not related to the game DDLC. Instead, the information found by solving the puzzles only teases Salvato's game he would release in the future.

DISCUSSIONS

This section examines how DDLC's Act 1 fits inside the magic circle and the remaining game blurs the boundary of magic circle with ARG features.

Inside the Magic Circle

If we ignore the bad ending at the end of Act 1, the graphics, story, and gameplay elements reflect that DDLC is a classic visual novel, like Katawa Shoujo and CLANNAD, suggesting that the magic circle is the area inside DDLC's application window (e.g., Fig. 7), which the player interacts with throughout Act 1. Inside this magic circle, the game rules of visual novels apply; these rules do not apply outside the magic circle. For example, the player can only

choose what they want to do if the game gives them options for them to do so. Moreover, the things players see and do in this magic circle have special meanings. The choices the player makes impact the routes and whether their goal of ending up with a specific character is successful. Also, the character's death that the player witnessed affects their feelings because this is someone they grow close to in this magic area.

Fig. 7 The area inside DDLC's application window

Blurring the Boundary of Magic Circle
There are four ways that the inclusion of ARG features in DDLC impact the boundary of magic circle: the hints that lead players to discover the ARG-like puzzles, the locations of the puzzles, the information recovered from the puzzles, and the sharing of puzzle information with other players.

The hints hidden in the gameplay lead players to discover DDLC's ARG-like puzzles blur the border of magic circle. DDLC establishes the magic circle in Act 1, giving an impression to the players that the area of the game's magic circle is the same as other stereotypical visual novels, in which the game's application window is the only 'playground.' Yet, Act 2 gives slight hints to the players that other things are happening, such as in the *character*s folder, implying that things that occur outside the magic circle have special meanings. Because of those hints, players begin to doubt where the boundary of the magic circle lies. When the player enters Act 3, Monika reveals her weakness to the player, which is her character file in the *characters* folder. Players can defeat, but also kill, her only when they access the folder in their computers and delete *monika.chr*. With this action, players step out of their usual magic circle, expanding DDLC's magic circle in their minds.

The locations of DDLC's puzzles also affect the boundary of magic circle. However, the extent can only be deduced based on speculation, as DDLC only has puzzles inside the magic circle and game folder in players' computers. As confirmed by DDLC's creator Dan Salvato in his Reddit AMA (dansalvator, 2017), he did not make any changes outside the game folder, such as the player's desktop wallpaper, explaining that "it's disrespectful to mess with people's stuff like that." If Salvato did change other areas in the player's computer, the boundary of magic circle would be even more blurry to the players. Plays can happen everywhere on players' computers, and everything on the computers can have a special meaning.

The new information compiled from the DDLC's puzzles expands the boundary of the magic circle to other platforms, like the website. Sayori's character file demonstrates that an unreadable text file can lead the player to a website after converting it to an audio file. The boundary of magic circle expands if the player participates in puzzle-solving activities.

By sharing players' insights on the puzzles with others, DDLC's magic circle is blurred and expanded. Because of technological advancement, many players post their findings on social media, discussion forums, and blogs. Sometimes, they engage in discussions with other players to make progress on the puzzles, while some proudly share what they have found or hypothesised with others. The DDLC's magic circle can exist wherever on the Internet as long as players post DDLC-related content there. In other words, the boundary of magic circle can be blurry because the circle can be anywhere and even expanded unexpectedly.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, by inquiring into DDLC and its ARG features, this essay investigates how DDLC fits inside and blurs the magic circle with its inclusion of ARG features. Even though DDLC itself is not an ARG, as confirmed by its creator, its gameplay elements are similar to the features of ARGs. For example, in the game folder, some puzzles can be found and solved with ARG techniques, like file extension conversions. Players also share their discoveries and hypotheses about the puzzles. As Act 1 does not involve any ARG features and Acts 2 to 4 do, their summaries are separated into two parts: Act 1 and Act 2 to 4. After that, the ARG features in DDLC are highlighted. Throughout Act 1, DDLC presents itself as a stereotypical visual novel, like Katawa Shoujo and CLANNAD. Thus, the discussions section first evaluates how DDLC's Act 1 fits in the typical visual novel magic circle, then dissect how the boundary of magic circle is blurred with the incorporations of ARG features in the remaining games.

Compared to other mainstream games, ARGs seems to be a less popular genre developers would go to when developing a new game. It is difficult to recall of any ARG when talking about games with famous IP. Yet, from my personal experience, ARGs are fun especially when the playground is so large that it is across different platforms. With ARGs' way of transmedia storytelling, there are endless possibilities because this makes people feel like everything is possible. Sometimes, when solving an ARG on one medium, the deciphered result directs the players to another medium. Then there may be more clues for them to dig into. This is also known as "a rabbit hole" in the ARG community. The interconnectivities of clues from different media make the gaming experience unique, because this can get unexpected and make players feel that it is genius for the game designer to make the ARG in this way. I believe this experience also applies to computer games incorporating ARG features, because those features provide more freedom for game designers to expand the game to different media, and create unexpected experience for the players.

Moreover, usually the puzzles in ARGs are complicated, so it is easier to work with other players collectively to solve them. With the popularization of social media, this collaboration can happen anywhere, anytime, and with many people. Therefore, usually if the player is stuck on a clue, they can find the ARG community to discuss. This is better to experience ARGs with a bunch of people than alone. By including ARG features in computer games, those single-player game can be easily turned into a multiplayer game for players to experience.

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