ReVisions

Reflections from the Computer Screen : An Examination of Western Romance/Horror Hybrid Visual Novels commentary on traditional Eastern VN Romance Tropes

David Neri

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David Neri

Leipzig University

In the 2017 IGN Entertainment annual game awards, the freeware visual novel (VN) *Doki Doki Literature Club*, created by Team Salvato, while not winning in any of the primary categories, came away with the People's Choice Award, determined by the reader votes rather than the selection of the IGN editors themselves, for each of the four categories for which it was nominated. In doing so, *Doki Doki Literature Club* beat out a number of AAA titles, such as *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Best of 2017 Awards, 2017) as well as fellow noteworthy indie titles such as *Dream Daddy*, *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. With the rise of an audience receptive to such games, questions begin to arise as to what differences such games and their audiences have to their Japanese predecessors. Little research has been conducted with visual novel audiences as a focus within Western scholarship, even less when one hopes to look at non-Eastern audiences for such an examination, where the medium has yet to gain the large popularity it finds in countries like Japan and South Korea.

In his description of the VN medium within Japan, Patrick W. Galbraith (2011) has noted the relatively cheap production costs, as well as the more localized elements and sales goals. These elements, which share many characteristics with the "indie" culture in which many western visual novels are prevalent, (Ohlew, 2014) provide a closer connection between the audience and the producer than the large teams and manpower which are put into AAA titles. The relationship with the creators, being closely tied with the niche audiences that they cater to, opens up a unique opportunity for understanding the feelings of the primary audience. Through this combination of participation and receptiveness, visual novel auteurs who find success can show how the western visual novel audience views themselves through the narratives espoused by the games they consume. With this in mind, this study will examine two American made visual novels which lie at the intersection of popular genres of the medium, the 2017 horror/romance hybrid visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club*, and *The Way We All Go*, developed by Ebi-hime and published by her and Sekai Project in 2015. Through an examination, making use of Narrative Criticism methods outlined by Sonja K. Foss' *Rhetorical Criticism*, this study hopes to highlight the potential ways in which the American visual novel community views the norms of the Japanese culture it has been influenced by, the narrative commonalities of the games examined,

as well as highlight the visual novel as a medium for further examination by game and communication studies fields within the English based academic community.

Literature Review

The influence of visual novels have to some extent been present within western gaming mainstream culture since the early 2000s, such as in their effect on the successful Ace Attorney adventure series, which found a relatively small but respectable success with western audiences (Ohlew, 2014). The widespread positive public and critical acclaim of *Doki Doki Literature Club* suggests a shift having occurred in the western viewer receptiveness to a genre which has, for the most part, been generally left unexamined by western audiences at large.

Of course, this shift in public interest was by no means an immediate event. A number of pop culture and geek publications noting a gradual rise of the receptiveness of western audiences to the medium (Valens, 2016), as well as its growth over the past seven years in the west as a "niche product." (Sevakis, 2016) This analysis has also been noted within the more mechanical academic gaming literature with Lebowitz and Klug (2011) noting, within their discussion of video game story branching, both the relatively small production requirements of the medium as well as their relative lack of attention it has received outside of its countries of origin. However, as the success of *Doki Doki Literature Club* alongside more mainstream western titles marks another step of this growing non-eastern VN subculture, a number of questions concerning this niche community arise.

As noted by Sonja Foss (1996) in her book's preamble to the Narrative Criticism method: "Narratives can be examined … for what they reveal about an individual's or a culture's identity. Because stories 'have to do with how protagonists interpret things, what things mean to them,' they provide clues to the subjectivity of the individuals and to the values and meanings that characterize a culture" (pg. 401). As noted in the paper's introduction, Galbraith's (2011) discussion of Japanese Romance VNs point to the relative closeness of the producers and consumers of the product, with low minimum production costs and team size requirements for the genre resulting in the congregation of creators outside the traditional videogame structures stretching as far back as the 1980s (Picard, 2013). In many ways similar to the western "indie" gaming subculture, these elements are reflected within the developers of the games examined within the study, with *Doki Doki Literature Club* being developed by the three person Team Salvato, and *The Way We all Go*, while published in conjunction with Sakei Project, was developed by the creator Ebi-Hime. While the exact nature of the term indie, and what it covers in regards to various medium cultures, Egenfeldt-Nielsen and Smith's definition of Indie games as "Independent games developed outside of the large studios (and often published without traditional publishers" (2015; pg. 21) and Lipkin's (2012) definition of the term as one of production rather than as one of aesthetics, despite its co-option by mainstream as the latter provide a

groundwork for the similarity of the concept of the indie community to Galbraith's Japanese localized and small scale VN production.

As Galbraith focused on romance VNs, the choice to look at the relationship within the romance/horror hybrid was made with two rationales in mind. The first, and less purely academic, reason was as a means of narrowing the selection of visual novels to use as artifacts for the study. The second reason was due to the nature of horror fiction itself. While scholarship surrounding video games has touched on its application of the horror genre, a much wider base of such scholarship has been centered around its older cousin on the silver screen. In her examination of the seminal modern horror classic *Halloween*, scholar J.P. Telotte (1987) noted the reflexive relationship of horror narratives to their audience, that the media serves a function of evoking a response in the viewer, heightened by: "referring back not only to its own generic workings, but also to its audience that, through its visual participation with the events unfolded, contributes to their impact" (pg. 115-116). Additionally, Telotte notes previous scholarship on the instructional nature of horror, pointing to R. H. W. Dillard's placement of the genre within the same sphere "the medieval morality play" (pg. 115). This becomes even more important because, as noted by Kawin (1987), in many of the best examples of the genre, the exotic elements of horror are often coupled with issues that can hit quite close to home, and that dealing with these issues is part of the purpose for the work's existence.

"Horror films often present us with images that are painful, grotesque awful - horrible to look at - but they regularly imply that these images somehow need to be looked at, that they show us something we might be more comfortable not to see but ought to see nonetheless" (pg. 103)

In *Coming to Play at Frightening Yourself*, Bernard Perron (2005) connects this concept of horror film to its video game counterparts. Although focused on the transition of fear, rather than horror, Perron points to the connected mechanics of film and video games in regards to both, noting the potential for video games to amplify the effects by moving the participant from the seat of an external observer to the illusion of participation within the narrative. When one takes into account the blank slates of the protagonists within many VNs, who are often meant to become a vehicle for the player rather than characters in the traditional sense (Galbraith 2011), this illusion, and thus the potential horror/terror and therefore receiving the messages of the text, may be amplified to an even greater degree, as in some sense the player inserts him or herself into the narrative. Taken together, these elements suggest a greater opportunity for discussing audience examination and critiques of the medium through this genre.

Methodology

The criticism method used for the study's comparison is taken primarily from Sonja K. Foss' (1996) Rhetorical Criticism. Within her discussion of artifact analysis, Foss outlines four steps in the

application of the Narrative Criticism Method: "The formulation of a research question … The selection of the artifact … the analysis of the artifact … [and] "the writing of the essay" (pg. 401). Of these four, this section of the paper is primarily concerned with the second and third step of Foss' method, with the first step being outlined within the following section of the paper and the fourth step being rather self explanatory.

First, Foss highlights that the application of Narrative Criticism requires, appropriately enough, a narrative to analyze. Foss identifies a narrative as a work comprising of at least two events, which share a causal relation and concern some sort of unified subject. (pg. 400) As storytelling games, both *Doki Doki Literature Club* as well as *The Way We All Go* meet Foss' standards.

For the third step of Narrative Criticism, Foss further divides the section into two smaller steps . First, the dimensions of the narrative within the artifact must be identified. Within her explanation, Foss (1996) highlights eight of these dimensions: Setting, (where/when the narrative takes place) Characters, (how the actors within the narrative are framed and act) Narrator, (how the narrative is conveyed to the audience) Events, (the actions which take place within the narrative) Temporal Relations, (How the events are connected to one another) Causal Relations, (the cause and effect relationships between the characters and events) Audience (How the narrative addresses the consumer) and Theme (the overt messages that the narrative espoused).

After these artifacts have been identified, the researcher must then determine the dimensions that he or she believes are the most important to the reading of the artifact, either due to unique attributes of the dimension itself or in the importance of the dimension in the context of what the researcher hopes to study. Finally, as the current study is making use of Narrative Criticism as a comparative tool between the two selected artifacts, a third impromptu sub-step, the comparison of dimensions, will take place at the same time as the previous step. This step aids in the choice of dimensions from one artifact which may resonate with dimensions found within the other as well as highlighting general similarities and notable differences between the narratives of the two works.

Research Questions

This methodology has led the study to concentrate on two specific research questions in the analysis of the two artifacts.

RQ-1: What notable complementary narrative dimensions are found within both *Doki Doki Literature Club* as well as *The Way We All Go*?

Following Foss' Narrative Criticism model, before the study can examine how the messages within the visual novels relate to the authors' (and by extension the audience's) view of their own culture, the dimensions by which these messages are formed within the narrative (and thus the

content of the messages themselves) must first be established. Given the relative ease of connecting similar (as opposed to notably dissimilar) narrative dimensions, it would be a logical starting point for the intertextual analysis of the artifacts. However, while not contributing directly to the examination of the American visual novel culture, the notable differences found between the two artifacts can alter the narratives of the examined works by steering the audience away from certain conclusions which, without these differences, would otherwise occur naturally if only the similarities were examined. Thus important non-complementary dimensions will also be noted if they indeed alter the overall messages of the narrative in this manner. Once establishment of the complementary narratives has been accomplished, the second research question can then be addressed.

RQ-2: In what ways, if any, do these shared dimensions conflict with the commonly held tropes of the Japanese Visual Romance Novel as outlined by the literature available.

After having establishing the messages of notable narratives dimensions found within the artifacts, the study will proceed to its culminating question by comparing these messages to the themes outlined by Galbraith within his examination of Japanese visual novel gaming culture. Such an analysis aims to provide insight into how the Western visual novel community views itself as compared to the more established Japanese VN community.

Analysis

The uncomfortable nature of intimacy and depersonalization

Touching directly on the subject of intimacy within the visual novels is a logical starting point, given Galbraith's focus on the subject. In particular, both narratives take great pains to deconstruct the ideas of intimacy which are prevalent within the Romance genre. This deconstruction is primarily done through the use of Character and Causal Relation dimensions. Within his discussion of techno-intimacy, Galbraith (2011) points to previous scholarship of the safe otherness of the characters within the Romance Visual Novels both within the events and characterization:

… as Honda Masuko describes them, 'something evanescent, something that has no shape or actuality. Should we risk articulating this idea in words, we might label it 'the illusion of beauty.' Not only women long for the transcendence and liminality of shōjo. Akagi makes this clear when he states that what men desire is not real girls per se, but rather a sort of 'girl-ness' (shōjo sei), symbolized by 'cuteness.' The female characters in bishōjo games are not representing three-dimensional women in their visual design or their personalities; the scenarios they find themselves in are equally unrealistic. These characters are based on what Saitō calls a "fictional context" (kyokō no kontekusuto) that is "deliberately separated from everyday life (pg. 8)

Such a description works quite well for establishing the norms of the genre, as it is this 'illusion' that both games deconstruct through an efforts to humanize and flesh out their characters and context respectively. Although similar in their ends, both games make use of the elements in disparate ways in order to do so. Within *Doki Doki Literature Club*, this humanization is done by a series of deliberate breaks in the 4th wall by some characters, one of whom, Monika, reveals her interest in the player, not the character he or she inhabits within the narrative, by addressing the player directly. This works to replace Masuko's "illusion of beauty" with one of reality, with the game going to great lengths to build up this illusion by visualizing the changing of code (which traditionally only appears when one manually enters console commands) as the personalities of some characters are altered, the use of external game files by the engine to figure out aspects of the player as well as the shifting of external files which are perceived as affecting the plot of the visual novel.

However, perhaps one of the most pronounced in the character Monika's section of the game, which abandons the visual novel mechanics, the player having little to no input as Monika recycles an extensive set of scripted lines on various topics, perceived as having the player all to herself, until the player chooses to delete her character file externally. However what is particularly noteworthy in this section the reversal of the bishōjo concept onto the player. While such a reversal does not concern itself with the physical aesthetics of bishōjo, it does comment on the otherness of the concept. Within the narrative, Monika, as a program, cannot see the player, and knows nothing about him or her, at one point even wondering on the player's gender. The player has no way to answer any of the questions she poses. Despite her character's obsession with reality (which is transferred onto her only connection to it, the player) Monika essentially reenacts the traits Galbraith identifies with bishōjo's one-dimensionality of its subject matter by reducing the player, in Monika's eyes, to the concept of 'being real.'

The Way We All Go takes a more traditional approach to this deconstruction of intimacy by its fleshing out of its primary characters. Within the narrative, the various girls which the main character interacts with, while at first adhering to established Romance VN archetypes, are fleshed out beyond said archetypes through further interaction. Notably, this is accomplished not only through discovery of the girl's interests, although this does occur, but also the ways in which the main character, Atcchan, has hurt them emotionally in the past and their own feelings about these actions, establishing a set of events to which the player cannot effect and is never shown directly. This problematic history becomes quite important to a number of narrative branches, in one case having a former friend, who is plagued by suicidal tendencies, describe her abuse at the hands of her former classmates and how Atcchan's friendship, and subsequent abandonment, have affected her, in sequence clearly meant to elicit horror and sympathy from the player. Unlike *Doki Doki Literature Club*, the focal character within *The Way We All Go*, is also fleshed out. Atcchan is not only named within the visual novel, he is also physically present, being described as short throughout the narrative as well as being presented artistically,

albeit rarely. Aspects of body is continually referenced within the game itself through internal monologue, to the extent where it might even annoy the player, with the monologue also focusing on Atcchan's indecisiveness and fears. Additionally, bizarre character traits are ascribed to him, most notably a love for hot baths taken to the extreme, where skin begins to peel off, which works to further distance him from the player.

In both cases, these elements work to disrupt the standard experience of playing a Romance VN through a further fleshing out of the characters presented and by moving away from the traditional bishōjo elements, as well as move against their passive consumption by the player. In both cases the characters within the VN are presented as 3-dimensional characters and one's interaction within the game, or in the case of *Doki Doki Literature Club* outside of it, must take such elements into account, inevitably altering the way in which the media is consumed and its messages received. This highlights a shift within the games from their cultural placement in the move from Japanese to American audiences.

Narrative elements within game mechanics

While having touched on narrative dimensions found within the mechanics of the games as they relate to characterization, primarily as a result of *Doki Doki Literature Club* where mechanics play a larger part in the narrative than the typical VN, the effect of these dimensions on the overall narrative is more prevalent in both as a means of deconstructing the player's agency. Perhaps one of the most recognized aspects of Romance VNs are the branching paths of narrative, with the choices presented to the player changing the outcome of the narrative, often by letting the player into a focus on a specific character by interacting with said character over others or by having his avatar act in a way the player knows will appeal to the character. In essence, such mechanisms allow for the player to have a limited control over the narrative, much in the vein of gamebooks like the "Choose your Own Adventure" series (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011). Much like their subversion of the bishōjo aesthetic, *Doki Doki Literature Club* and *The Way We All Go* set about subverting these norms in different ways, but primarily concern themselves with dimensions of setting, audience and temporal relations within *Doki Doki Literature Club*, and setting and causal relations within *The Way We All Go*.

Once again, *Doki Doki Literature Club* moves across the 4th wall in its deconstruction of common Romance VN sensibilities. While at first appearing to take place at a nondescript Japanese style high school, the game dips into the surreal by having the antagonist admit to the game taking place on the player's own computer, with the person she is talking to being the player rather than the character. This subversion and reveal is also used in the case of the game's ending. although appearing at first to have a number of branching paths typical of the Romance VN genre, all such paths, within the context of the game, eventually lead to one of two ends, with a player's specific end determined not by the choices that they make within the narrative but instead through manipulation of the game's mechanics.

Before this point, the game had already hinted at the player's inability to affect the narrative through normal means despite presenting the player with content which, through VN shorthand, suggests otherwise. Additionally, a number of elements are present within the game that falsely point to the player's ability to affect the narrative, taking the form of the text choices typical of VNs but also through the writing mini-game which, while affecting some dialogue and scenes, does not leave a significant impact on the overall narrative as well as direct endorsement of this false agency by the character Monika early in the game. These mechanical elements, and the narrative dimensions which they embody and affect, allow the deconstruction of the norms of game mechanics to become a central part of the game's overall narrative theme.

Unlike *Doki Doki Literature Club*, the setting narrative dimensions of *The Way We All Go* are coupled with dimensions of causal relations, rather than with dimension of audience. These setting dimensions do not necessarily refer to the narrative's location, which is a remote Japanese town, but its placement within time, namely occurring in the center of a story rather than having its characters start off as blank slates. While this is typical of some characters, specifically the 'best friend' archetype which crops up often in Romance VNs, every single girl that Atcchan interacts with has already been affected by his actions in some way, which in turn affects the agency of the player as he or she seeks to discover not only aspects of those Atcchan meets but of Attchan as well. This becomes quite clear when characters react based on the choices of the player are influenced within the narrative by events of which, unless played through again, the player will not have knowledge of. This lack of information bleeds into the player's effect on the events of the game, with the event that occur within the branches being influenced by the events outside of the player's control and not, within the narrative, by the player's choice. This, coupled with a vagueness of the outcomes of the choices presented to the player, create a situation of meta-gaming, where the player seeks alternate endings in order to better establish his or her knowledge of the events for further playthroughs in addition to seeking the ending for its own sake. Much like the games' deconstruction and subversion of the typical bishōjo characterization and intimacy, these themes work to similarly distance the player from the visual novel itself and further separate the works from the typical tropes identified by Galbraith with the Japanese VN audience.

Discussion/Conclusions

Taken together, a number of dimensions within both visual novels, while differing greatly in terms of their formation within the specific narratives, do end up pointing to a number of distinct similar themes. These themes, which seem to include the deconstruction of the bishōjo aesthetic and an examination of the concept of the phenomenon Galbraith defines as techno-intimacy, point to the potential for the western Visual Novel indie community as developing its own style and sensibilities distinct from the more histories eastern communities. These distinct traits, coupled with the large

amount of fanfare and critical success surrounding *Doki Doki Literature Club* as opposed to the earlier *The Way We All Go*, carrying the game into eyes of mainstream audiences, suggests a recent development of the western visual novel community for games which examine the common elements of the mediums genres. The commonalities found within these games, as well as their departure from the traditional previously identified dimensions of Japanese romance visual novels, point to a new and, with the success of *Doki Doki Literature Club*, potentially burgeoning field of study within both the field of communications and game studies as the western indie visual novel community grows and further defines itself with their texts. If such a boom were to occur, a large scale examination of the games having been produced within this period might provide an even greater insight into the appetites of the western visual novel community.

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