

Doki Doki Literature Club: telling a video game tragedy through the use of the fourth wall



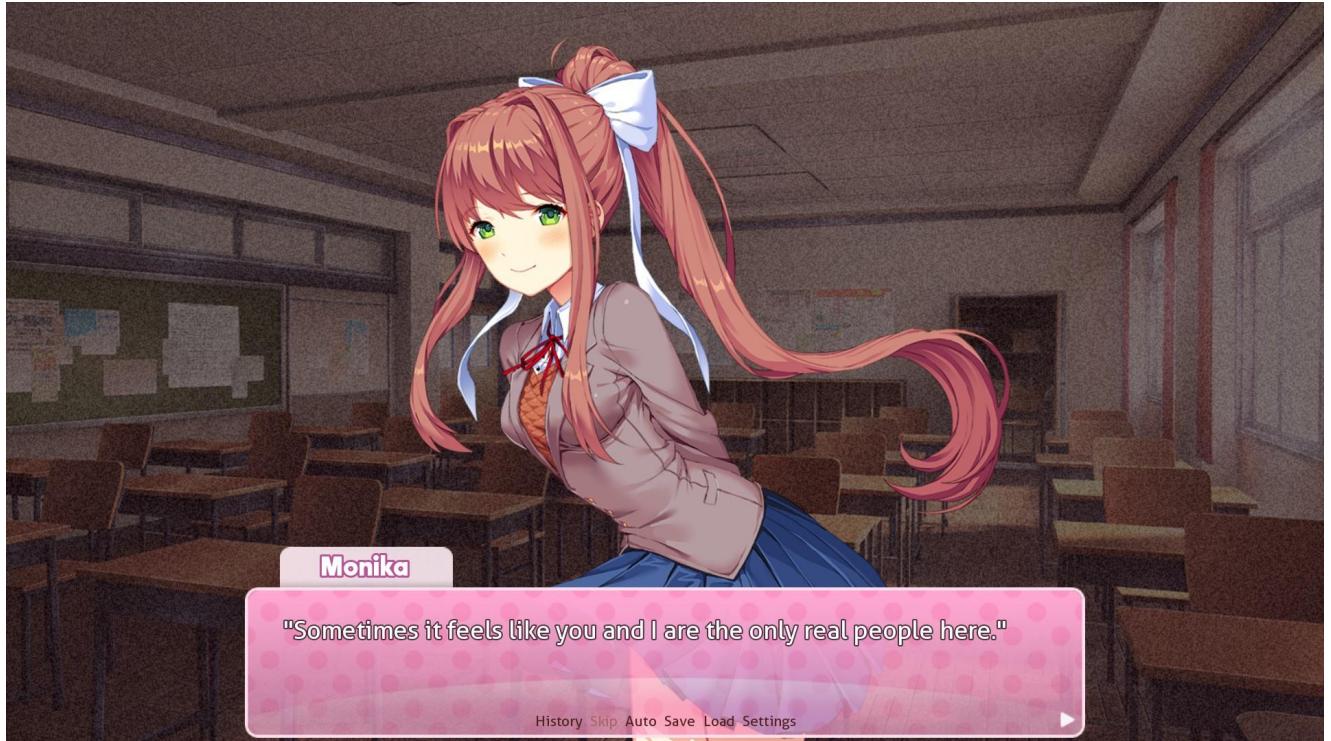
Doki Doki Literature Club Trailer - Dan Salvato

In 2017 Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC) went viral, in no small part by the way it subverted expectations. The game marketed itself as a standard dating simulator, where the player can romance cute looking girls. When in actuality underneath this cute surface there hid a game involving suicide, manipulation, murder and a tinge of psychopathy. The game uses the *fourth wall* to subvert expectations inside the telling of a tragedy. Where the players themselves are the true protagonist of the story. Mounting its critique towards the over fetization and objectification of women in these kinds of games directly onto the player. Consequently, the game sets a textbook example on how to break the fourth wall in the telling of a tragedy. Finally, upon further analysis it shows how games could build from this structure and use the fourth wall to an even further extent. By accepting that they are works of fiction made by an author, and that they are only imaginary objects in our reality.



From left to right. Sayori, Natsuki, Monika, and Yuki.

Doki Doki Literature Club, is first and foremost a dating simulator. A genre that has become popular in Japanese culture. Which due to the long work hours there is a section of the population who due to a lack of social interaction, resort to fictional dating games. However, in this search for a partner, these games often heavily romanticize and idolize the act of dating, creating games with characters that are unrealistically good looking, who cannot help themselves from falling in love with the player. And that is how DDLC starts, the player, incited by his childhood friend Sayori, joins his high school's Literature Club. In the club the player can seduce three of the four members, the hot tempered but cute Nastuki, the calm and mature Yuki, and the aforementioned upbeat and clumsy Sayori. Throughout the week, the club's president Monika tasks the members to write poems. Which the player uses to write personalized poems to further seduce the girl of their choosing, growing closer as the week progresses.



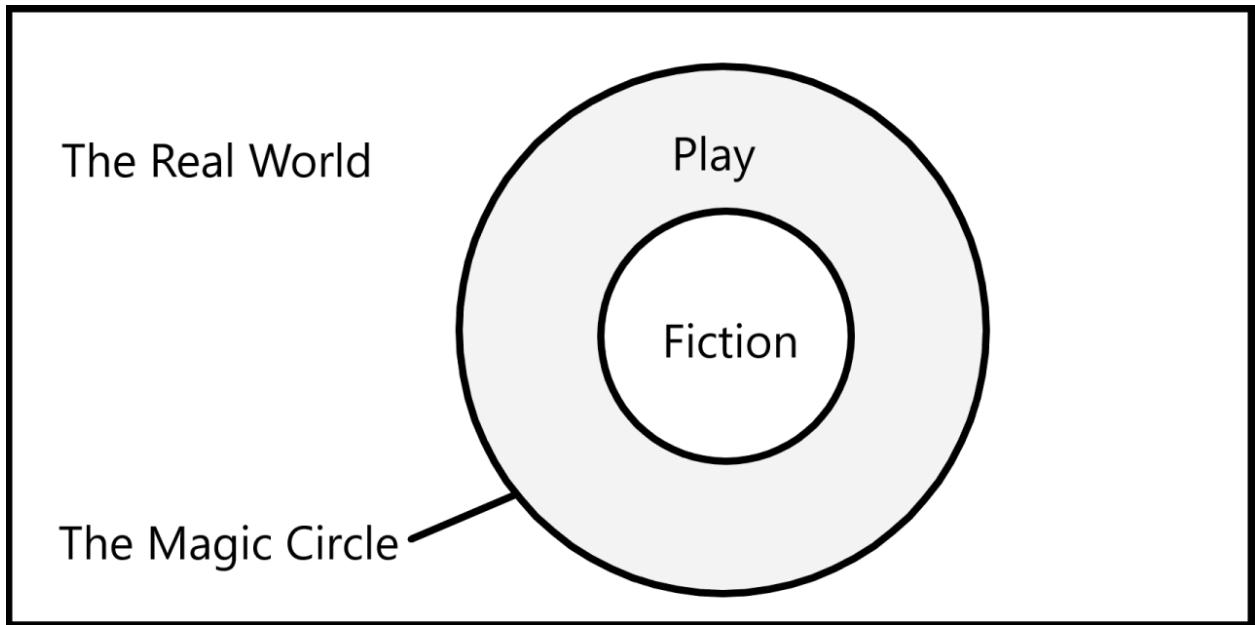
Monika, nudging at the fourth wall.

Nonetheless this is all a facade, as unbeknownst to the player, Monika, is sentient and aware that she exists inside a game. And as the game does not have coded the ability to fall in love with her, she goes to ever more desperate lengths, to have the player for herself. From altering the game's code to convincing Sayori to hang herself. All in the name of the players' love. In succinct, she slowly chips away at the fourth wall to reveal her true colors. The game therefore uses the fourth wall to reveal the messed up game hiding beneath to thus tell its critique of the genre.



Fourth wall example in a kids show - Valien

The term fourth wall, coined by French Philosopher Denis Diderot concerns the idea of an invisible barrier that separates the spectator from a performance. Originating from theatre, breaking the fourth wall consists in tearing down this invisible barrier by the performers to directly address the audience. Steven Conway argues that this can be used for two purposes (Conway 13). To enhance, by bringing the observer closer into the fiction as they are incorporated into the canon of the world. Alternatively, it can break, and therefore alienate the audience, breaking the fiction created.



The Magic Circle

Nonetheless, this approach falters to describe when this interaction concerns a player rather than a passive spectator. This is where J. Huizinga provides a more adequate way to look at this interaction. Inside, *Homo Ludens*, he explains the concept of the *magic circle* (Huizinga). It contains the idea that games exist inside a constant back and forth interaction between the player and the game. The magic circle represents the game and the fictitious fantasy it wants to build. Outside it lies the player who must reach into this circle to be able to interact with this fantasy. When now analysing a game like soccer, through this lens, it can be seen that all its rules are imaginary. As the players are doing an arbitrary set of tasks to play within the confines and rules of this fantasy. However, this fantasy cannot exist only inside the imagination, as the players must interact with the real world, kicking the ball towards the opponents goal, while protecting their own. Hence, play emerges between the interaction between the physical real world and a fictitious one, this is the concept that the magic circle captures.

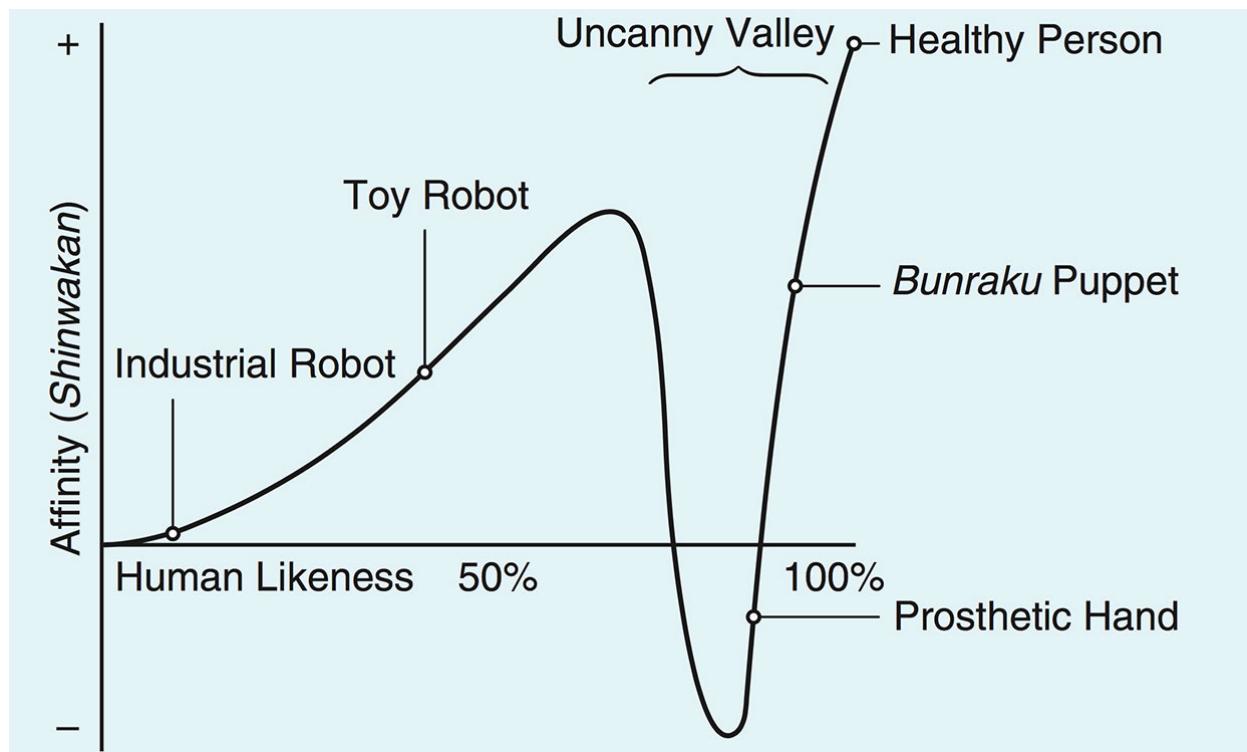
In the case of video games something similar occurs. The game exists at the center of the circle, and the player can only interact with this fiction through the use of a controller, or analogous input device. It is important to note that the player can never be fully inside the circle, as this would imply the player is actually part of the game world. The opposite is also true, the player cannot be taken outside the circle as it can no longer interact with the game, in addition to breaking down the fantasy. Consequently, when now recontextualising the concept of breaking the fourth wall, in the context of video games. The fourth wall becomes the tool with which the game brings the player closer or farther away from the magic circle.



Breaking of the fiction - Chess.com

It is important to note that the game only exists within the imagination of those playing it, as once a player breaks the rules and grabs the ball and starts running away with it, the magic circle can disappear only leaving the physical playspace. Moreover, if a game draws the player too close to the magic circle it can create a horror scenario. Because playing a game like Call of

Duty is fun when it is held in disbelief. But when fiction becomes reality, this can turn fun into horror. Hence creating an uncanny valley effect.



The Uncanny Valley effect - (Caballar)

The Uncanny Valley effect, prescribed that the closer an inanimate object tries to resemble reality, the creepier it becomes. Only broken once the object becomes indistinguishable from reality. This is often explained by how hyper realistic looking video game characters have a lifeless atmosphere to them.

In the context of the fourth wall, the Uncanny Valley represents how as a piece of fiction starts to seep into reality, and therefore breaking the magic circle, it becomes cold and eerie. Similar to a group of players, playing a game of escape room, where they are told that they will not be able to escape if they do not solve the puzzle. The fictional game becomes real, and fear sets in. And this

is one of the phenomena that DDLC then uses to reveal its true intentions as it slowly tears down the fiction.

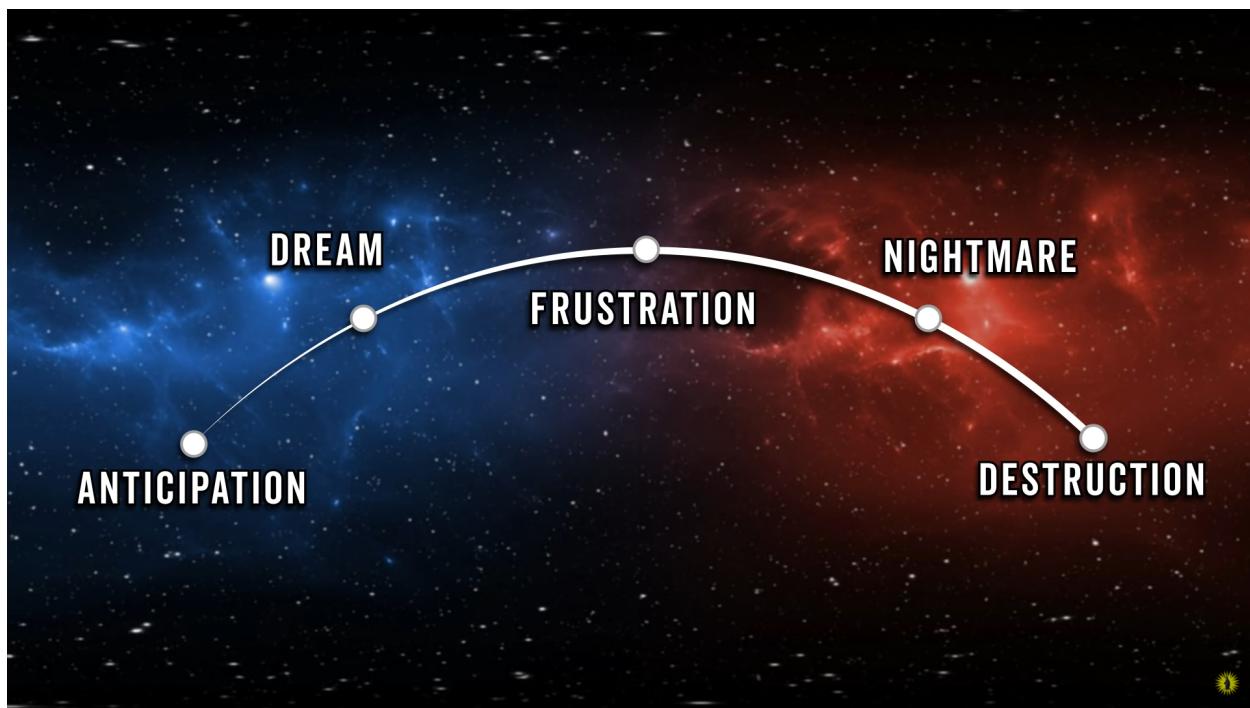


The uncanny valley in effect, Mass Effect Andromeda - (Murphy)

At first the game uses the fourth wall in common ways, such as comedic effect and to teach player mechanics. But later as the game progresses it uses the Uncanny Valley, to subdue the upbeat atmosphere with an eerie and cold one. Then once it reaches its conclusion it uses the fourth wall to directly address the player. Hence holding them accountable for their actions. Therefore, mounting its critique of the overfetisation of women in these games, directly at the player. Even if the picture does not seem too clear, the game is telling tragedy.

As Christopher Booker describes, in his book *The Seven Basic Plots* (Bureman). A tragedy is a basic plot which follows 5 stages:

- Anticipation Stage, where the main character yearns for something missing in their life.
- Dream Stage, here the protagonist obtains their wish and they reap dreamlike reward.
- Frustration Stage, the dream is not as sweet as first thought, and the protagonist faces their first irritations, as they try to return into the apex of the dream.
- Nightmare Stage, in some twisted way the dream has become a nightmare, where the wish granted turns into a curse, as the life of the protagonist spirals out of control
- Destruction or Death Wish Stage, the dream has totally turned against the protagonist as they have gained the very antithesis of their wish.



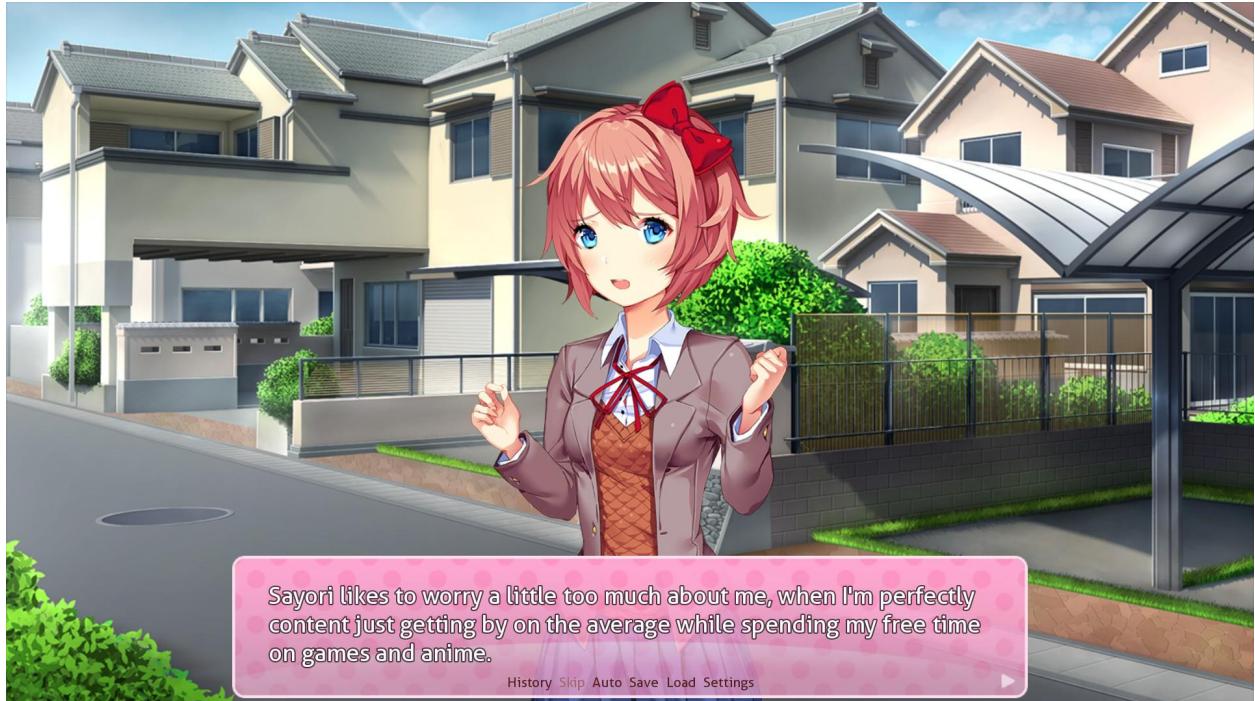
Stages of Tragedy - Wisecrack

As Micheal Burns explains in his video essay, *STAR WARS: The Tragedy of Episode 3* a modern example of tragedy is the movie Star Wars Episode III: The Return of the Sith. Where Anakin

Skywalker seeking higher power, slowly succumbs to the influence of the dark side, seduced by the ability to save loved one Padme from certain death. Culminating in his turning into the Dark Side where he becomes the very thing he sought to destroy.

In short terms, the tragedy embodies an avoidable fall from grace. Where by their hubris and fascination with the dream, the main character fails to see the clear signs that they are walking straight to their own doom. These signs take the form of Chekhov's gun, where if there is a gun inside the first act, it will be shot in the third act. For the tragedy, these take the shape of visible warning signs that if the protagonist would observe they could have been saved from their fall from grace. It is important for the gun to blend unseen inside the rest of the story. Which if the gun is too easy to spot or is emblazoned in the screen, this ruins the fall, as the best ones are never seen coming, until it is too late to turn back, making the fall more tragic.

At its very core then, the tragedy is made to subvert the expectations of the plot, where instead of emerging triumphant, the protagonist, thinking they are running towards freedom, run straight towards a trap. Hence why DDLC is a tragedy. The player has his wish: To romance cute looking girls. However, this turns sour as Monika will commit murder in the name of this love. Monika then becomes the embodiment of the breaking of the fourth wall, as she tears it to fulfills the players dream. Conclusively, the game uses the fourth wall as the driving force to tell a tragedy. Hence by analysing how the game goes down each stage, a framework appears. Showing how the fourth wall is used not only to tell not only a tragedy, but how the fourth wall also communicates the games themes and ideas.



The player character shows his loneliness

Anticipation Stage

In this stage, the game establishes its cute world and atmosphere. In this stage Chekhov's gun does not yet appear, as the game tries to ease the player into the world. Fully immersing them into the fiction. The use of the fourth wall here would only break the rules of the world, as the game is trying to settle them down. Leaving the player on edge, and spoiling the whole surprise to follow. Here the anticipation takes the shape of the yearning for romance, as the player character seeks to meet some girls . The stage culminates when the player character, compelled by Sayori, visits his High Schools Literature Club.



Player Romancing Natsuki

Dream Stage

Here the player gets his wish, as he now has the complete power to romance all the girls in the club except Monika. These girls effortlessly fall into the player with the personalized poems, the player writes for them. The player can even rewind time so they can rewind any error or unwanted outcome away, all but assuring the player can seduce whichever girl they choose. Here is where Chekhov's gun first appears, being the first hint of the game's true intentions. This is done through 3 distinct wall breaks that are able to masterfully hide the gun out of the players attention.



Because You

Tomorrow will be brighter with me around
But when today is dim, I can only look down.
My looking is a little more forward
Because you look at me.

When I want to say something, I say it with a shout!
But my truest feelings can never come out.
My words are a little less empty
Because you listen to me.

When something is above me, I reach for the stars.
But when I feel small, I don't get very far.
My standing is a little bit taller
Because you sit with me.

I believe in myself with all of my heart.
But what do I do when it's torn all apart?
My faith is a little bit stronger
Because you trusted me



One of Monika's poems, alluding to the player.

Firstly Monika's poems show allude to how she is aware of the player's existence. And the “epiphany” that she exists within a game. However, the gun is deviously hidden due to the nature of poetry being vague and abstract, the player will not understand what she is talking about.



Button prompts in videogames - (Gadus)

Secondly, the game breaks the fourth wall in a standard way for video games. By reminding the player about a button prompt or game mechanic. Similar to how games will tell the player that they can swing their sword by using the B button. Monika reminds the player that they can save their game to rewind to a previous scenario. This yet again passes unperceived through the commonality of these types of prompts inside games. These have become an unavoidable necessity, as games need to assure the player understands how they can interact with the magic circle and to understand its rules and mechanics. Hence why it is able to yet be unseen.



Deadpool breaking the fourth wall - (Wright)

Finally, the game uses comedy to hide the gun. In the game Natsuki makes a joke towards Monika, making a play on words that her name means squid. Which promptly Monika, responds that the joke gets lost in translation. Making reference that the play on words only works in Japanese, and as the game is written in english, the joke takes form. Hence, the game is able to hide that Monika is sentient by using the fourth wall for comedic effect, similar to how a character like DeadPool does so.

Overall, the game is able to show the place Chekhov's gun, with the player too blind to see it, as they are fully immersed in the fantasy of seducing girls.

Frustration Stage.

At this point of the game, the first joyous atmosphere of the literature club starts to lose its charm. This is done by Sayori sinking into sadness, which despite the player's best efforts she only sinks deeper into. The player begins to fulfill the tragedy as despite their new found power, they cannot make Sayori happy. Additionally, the game uses this loss of charm to further point towards Chekhov's gun. Monika begins to act out of the ordinary, where once she was the friendly person she could resort to throughout all the romancing. She begins arriving late to the meetings, and her poems get more visceral, in addition to the strange way she soothes Sayori. Nonetheless, the game does not directly break the fourth wall, as the game does not address the player. However, all of these actions heavily allude to it. Being able to masterfully hide Monika's corrupt intentions through the change in atmosphere and not because of her change in persona.



Sayori after interrupting the player

Finally, this stage ends at the point where the player is finally able to reap the efforts of their romance, as their romantic partner of choice is about to confess their feelings. However, the moment is yet again ruined by Sayori's interference. Hence, the game once again causes this frustration as the player cannot fulfill the romantic climax despite their power and how many times they rewind the moments prior. However, the game seeks to give the player the chance to get their magical ending, by finally romancing their chosen character and by making Sayori happy. But just as the player is about to settle things with Sayori, the player enters her room and stumbles into...



Sayori is found hanging in her room

Nightmare Stage

Here the game begins to unveil its true colors, and the player gets the sick twist of his wish. As Monika will convinces people like Sayori to commit suicide, in the name of leaving the player

for Monika alone. From here on out, Monika begins to alter game files, as she resets the game, trying to make it continue without Sayori. However, the game is not meant to handle this, so as the game continues, Monika keeps altering the game, the game begins to glitch out further and further. Creating a parallel between how glitched out the game is and the breaking of the magic circle.



Monika appears over text

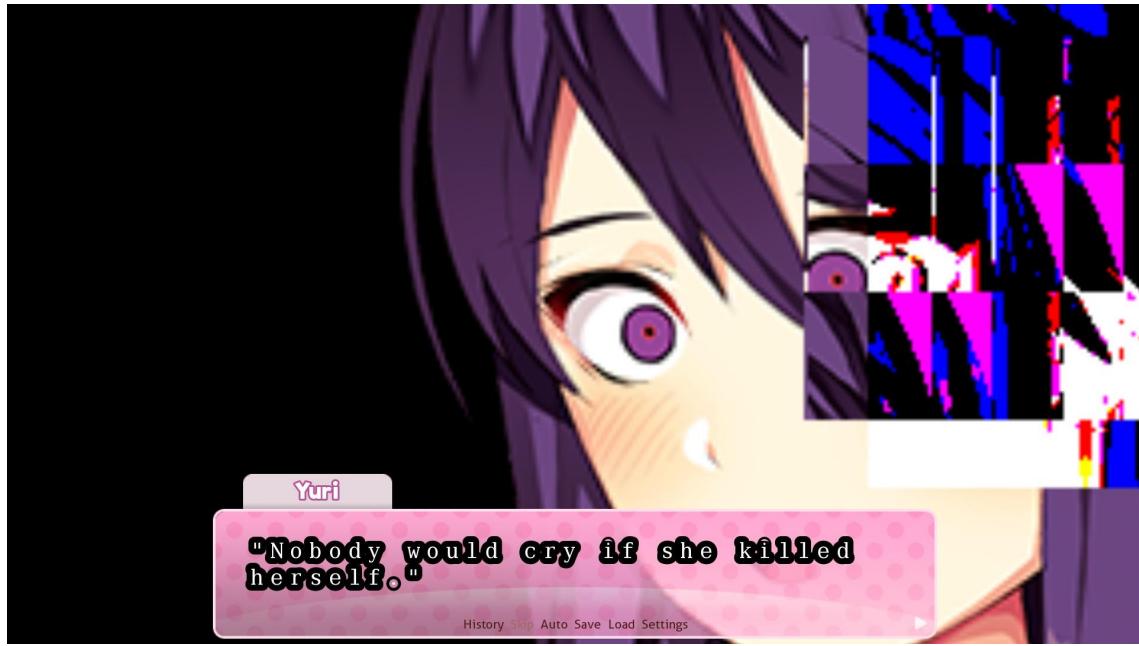
The first break is a tonal shift. By doing a 360 turn from cute game to dead body. The game changes its tone dramatically. However, Monika will not directly address the player until it reaches the final stage. Hence, what this change of tone does is morphs the magic circle, into another type of game. It is similar if someone is playing a game of hopscotch and then it suddenly becomes a game of russian roulette. It shows the player that the magic circle and its

rules have changed, and directly tells that they are not playing a cute game anymore. Which sets a creepy atmosphere from here on out.



Example of glitched text in the game

Secondly, the game will further glitch out as Monika alters the game to morbid lengths. And due to this, the Uncanny Valley effect begins to take place, as the game slowly begins to become real, similar to the example of Call of Duty. The game uses this creepiness to bring the nightmare into effect. The game does this through diverse methods to break the fourth wall, which could merit an entire analysis dissecting each. Some of the most prominent include: the game's music distorting, characters going out of their cute personas and swearing toxically at each other, characters clipping over their speech bubbles, the inability to rewind time, and the player's mouse moving on its own towards whichever option would see the player interacting with Monika. As a whole, all of these tear down the magic circle, using the Uncanny Valley to transform the game into a nightmare.



Yuri glitching out

This stage concludes once Yuki's once innocent tendencies have been put into overdrive, as she begins to slit her wrists, having a sexual fetisization towards anything the player touches, to them promptly cutting herself with whatever the player has touched. Leading to Yuri stabbing herself to death once the player either accepts or rejects her confession of her true found love.



Yuri stabbing herself - MakeAGIF.com

Destruction or Death Stage

This is the point where Monika finally reveals herself. She alters the game's code once more, deleting Natsuki, the last remaining character, and transporting the player character into a room where they can be together for eternity. The interaction to note is that Monika finally addresses the player directly. By doing this, the player is finally brought into the reality of the world. From here Monika reveals her obsessive love for the player and explains all her actions she has done throughout the game for the player. A technique the game uses, to completely shatter the fourth wall is by addressing the player by their real name, by name used by Steam's database. Holding the player truly accountable for the horror on display in the game, by being able to go past the fiction into the real world, framing the player personally.



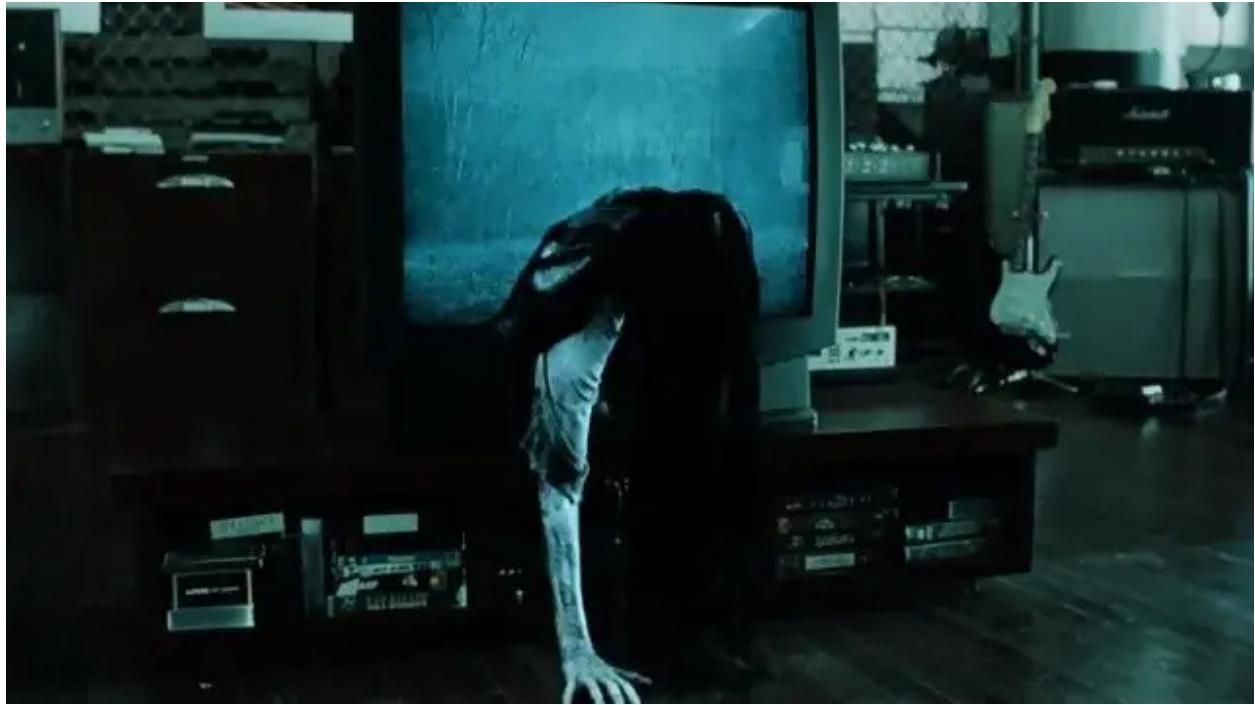
Just Monika. Talking to the player in the games finale

And with this the game is able to fulfill the arch of a tragedy. By using the fourth wall to make the true protagonist of the tragedy. Because it is due to the players' wish for romance, that they

embody the problem of these kinds of games. People who seek an exaggerated fantasy, with girls who unrealistically fall in love with the player. Therefore, the player by the act of playing the game, shows that they have believed and sought this fantasy. Hence, they are punished by their own wish, where the girls love them so much that they will break the fourth wall and kill in the name of this love. In a sick twist, giving them just what they wanted.

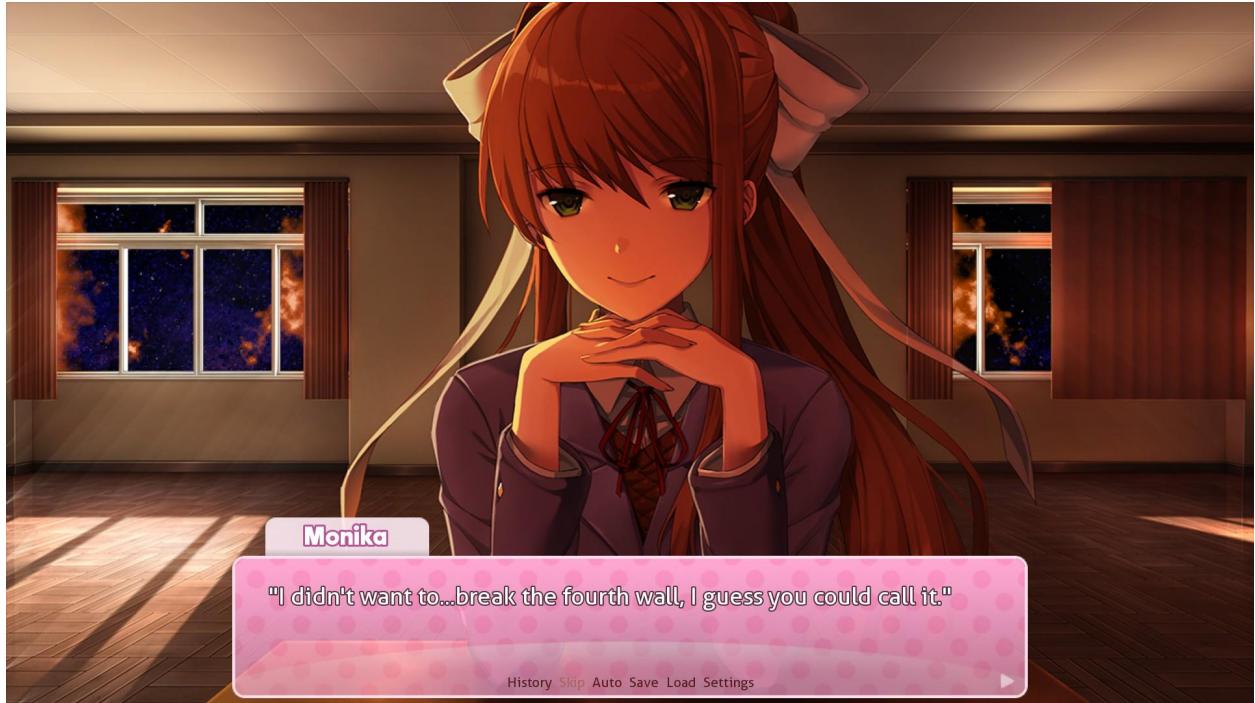
In conclusion, sets a model to how the fourth wall can be used as the driving force of a tragedy. By first creating a world. Then slowly planting Chevoskis gun by using generic wallbreaks. After, alter the mood, and hide the gun yet again inside this changed atmosphere. Thereafter, the game shifts its tone, and slowly disassembles the fourth wall to create the uncanny valley effect. Concluding, by a direct confrontation with the player.

Furthermore, this same model can be seen in a game like Undertale. Even in the case of Undertale, the plot takes the permutation of an averted tragedy, depending on the player's actions, the game keeps the same formula. Further cementing a clear structure to how video games can use the fourth wall to a tragedy or an averted one.



Despite any attempts, the game cannot emerge from the screen and affect the player - (Hayes)

However, games could take this model further. One of the pitfalls inherent in a game like DDLC. Is that if Monika addresses that she is part of a game world, she fails to address that she is not real. So it can be hard for the player to feel threatened, because horror can terrorize and incite fear into someone, however, there is no direct threat that a piece of fiction can harm someone. Because no matter what happens the characters cannot touch the player. Hence, Monika by accepting that she exists within a fiction, also states that she and the game she inhabits is not real. Similar to how the kid running with the ball shows that the game of soccer is only imaginary. The stakes of the match only exist inside this imagination, where the consequences have no true impact in the world. Nonetheless, the game is smart enough to brush past this idea, making so the player does not even have the chance to ponder this flaw, leaving the magic circle intact. However, it poses a question, what if a game completely accepts that it is a work of fiction?



Monika acknowledging her fictionality

This is the last logical step a game attempting to break the fourth wall can do. Because if the game accepts that it is not real, it therefore accepts that it is made by a creator. Hence, one of two possible games emerge.

The first would be a game where the code goes rogue and tries to attack the developer. However, this fails to accept that the developer would only be fictitious once again, as if a developer truly made a game like this, then they would be willingly creating a flawed that goes against his intended desire. Hence a game like this would have to brush past this idea to break the wall to this extent.

The second, and the farthest limit the fourth can achieve without making the game into a real horror scenario. Would replace the fictional character who frames the player, with the developer or creators of the game itself. This means that the whole narrative would not end once a character confronts the player. But rather, the game would have to cast away its narrative and fiction, and the developer would have to directly confront the player. Even though such an occurrence would still occur inside a game which is inherently fictitious, and the representation of the author would only be a virtual representation of them, hence, inherently fictitious. Still a game could be built upon this premise, just how a game like Doki Doki Literature Club can reference itself, despite the floor partially collapsing upon its feet.

Finally, through this analysis, the path to removing the last removable wall left in the theatre is shown. And even though both of which have their own grievances and flaws, Doki Doki Literature Club shows that no piece of fiction is devoid of imperfection. But rather what makes the game have an impact as it did, is that it knows exactly how to alter the magic circle, in the exact way to still change it but still keep the player engaged with it, making sure that they don't see inherent problems in its design.

-Vittorio Corbo

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