Doki Doki Literature Club: Cute Girls, Violence, and Your Computer

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Joining the Club

     Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC) is not what it seems. Something cruel happens beneath the atmosphere of cuteness. Do not fall for its cute music. Do not fall for its cute aesthetics. Do not fall for its simple gameplay. Most importantly, do not fall for the "cute" girls.

Despite its aesthetic and use of the Japanese onomatopoeia for the sound of a heart beating (Doki Doki) in its name, *DDLC* is entirely an American-made game, intended for American audiences. Given that there is a slew of popular Western Dating Sim Visual Novels[1] like *Dream Daddy* or *Boyfriend Dungeon*, the design decision to feign this aesthetic feels appropriative. However, *playing* it reveals a more complicated, adaptive relationship with its referent. *DDLC* quickly sheds its mask, revealing a surreal horror visual novel where the AI becomes self-aware, cannibalizes game files, and accesses personal information about the player on their computer. While still a meditation on relationships, the meta-narrative of *DDLC* takes a decidedly weird turn emphasizing relationships between people and technology.

In this article, I argue *DDLC* employs what I call an internet aesthetic that emphasizes the player's computer as a meta-site of performance in a way that makes for weird human interactions with technology and "Others" through technology. Like the internet, the game unites and decontextualizes various cultures and subcultures, creating a meme-like product equal parts pastiche and collage and highly viral. *DDLC* draws from the internet practices of meme-making, anime fandom, and the creation and circulation of creepypasta[2] to flip the gamic gaze back on the player and show their complicity in the casual violence of life online. Moreover, like the internet, *DDLC* seems safe until it is violent, authentic until it is false, distant until it is too close.

While the horror meta-game may lead to amelioration for some, my analysis here is more interested in the scenario presented to players and their responses to what was asked of them. Because the player occupies multiple positions during the performance—both actor and audience—Diana Taylor's notion of scenario provides a generative framework for the

analysis of video games as performance. In her book *Performance*, Taylor describes the scenario, which she derives from *commedia dell'arte*, as "portable, flexible frameworks for thinking and doing." Taylor cites numerous examples of simulated scenarios preparing folks for actual practice, such as pilot training and safety drills. Scenarios provide a space where the body learns along with the mind. This process continues into digital spaces too: "Digital platforms create their own experiential environments allowing us to work, interact and experience on multiple levels simultaneously" (Taylor 2016, 137). Taylor argues that people navigate these spaces through avatars. Avatars are digital bodies through which players perform their role within a game's scenario.

With the scenario as my theoretical framework for understanding digital game-play, I consider the player's interactions with the characters and environment that comprise and surround the performance. In addition to my experiences, I analyze the choices made by other players that I interviewed for this project. The players range from graduate students to game designers and from Peace Corps employees to YouTubers. The interlocuters in this project were identified through the popcorn-method from folks that I know from in-person and online gaming communities; in this process interlocuters that I knew in these communities put me in touch with other interlocuters, and so on. As such, a diverse array of perspectives is included here both in terms of racial and gender identity. Likewise, I draw from internet discussion boards like the fan-made Wikia-site[3] and Steam Forum.[4] The emergent similarities and differences across the different playstyles provide insight into *how* the game operates and *how* meaning becomes embodied through play.

The scenario that *DDLC* performs takes place on the player's computer. The numerous easter eggs and random number generated (RNG) "glitches" (not true glitches but random events that are meant to look and feel like them) make it so that no two players experience the game the same way. However, the plot of the game—aside from a few paths chosen by the player—unfolds across three acts and an epilogue. Act One takes players through a school week with the club as they prepare poems to share at the school's festival. For most of this act, the game operates like a dating simulator, with players choosing which girl to spend their time and writing poems between days as a mini game. Across the act, players witness the worsening depression of one of the girls, Sayori, culminating in her suicide.

The game resets, and Act Two begins with the player's save file erased and the title screen image "glitching."

Act Two follows the same pattern, but this time it is Yuri who takes her own life, after she becomes increasingly paranoid that she is not in control of her mind. Monika, the club president, reveals that she has been tinkering with the "code" of the game so that she could be alone with the player. In Act Three, players—if unable to "beat" the game—are forced on a several-real-world-hours-long "date" with Monika. She uses data acquired about the player to guess their real name. To "win," players must access the local files of the game that have been installed on their computer along with the rest of the game. Players open the character folder and delete Monika's file, which triggers the epilogue. A new version of *DDLC* opens, in which Sayori returns as the self-aware president, and, like Monika, inflicts violence onto the other girls. Monika returns as a virtual ghost and ends the game because playing it can only lead to more pain. Ultimately, Monika frees the player and the girls.

The action repeats. The outcome is always violent. Repetition is central to *DDLC*. The existing critical conversation on the game emphasizes its importance. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Games Criticism*, Christopher Barkman (2020) looks at the frequency of fourth wall breaks in *DDLC* and other games and concludes that it disrupts the relationship between user and technology. Likewise, Sara Bowden's article in *The Soundtrack* (2020) considers the disturbing impact of nonlinear music on the player throughout *DDLC*. They argue that music lulls players but that occasional glitches in that music add to the overall feeling of dread that the game produces. The aesthetic analysis here builds upon the narrative and sonic work of my predecessors. Approaching the game through the valence of performance studies, however, emphasizes the implications of repetition on memory—specifically, memories of and with technology.

The Performing Player

The human body performing alongside technology no longer feels like a novel concept in performance studies circles. While the current discourse linking games of

theatre is robust,[5] as evidenced by the recent special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* and Lindsay Brandon Hunter's *Playing Real*, the conversation linking video games and performance studies owes to earlier works linking mediation and performance. Before digging into an analysis of *DDLC*, I will outline how understandings of "performance/play" and "performer/player" from performance studies and video game studies can complement one another and lead to a more puckish way of understanding performances with and through technology while adding to the growing lexicon of games studies.

Scholars working in both disciplines understand that, although mediated, play is inherently live. Their inherent compatibility appears across the three edited collections from editors Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, who place makers and theorists in direct conversation with essays and responses occupying the same page. While technological advances complicate some of the practical claims, the theory underlying these essays still boasts massive value. The first installment, *First Person*,[6] features several attempts to reconcile theatre and performance studies with new media and video games. In a response on pleasure and play in interactive games, Richard Schechner wrestles with the relationship between player and media: "Interactives yield an additional dividend of apparent action and choice. The player leaves the voyeur chair and makes decisions that affect the outcome. Gaming is more complex than simple receiving" (Schechner 2004, 192). Games put players into the action, but they are not fully free to do as they please. They are operating within a scripted world. As a formal tendency, visual novels occupy a near extreme of scripted outcomes, but players still find some agency in how they explore the story.

In single-player games like *DDLC,* Non-Player Characters (NPCs) serve as virtual co-stars, ensuring the player knows their role, and enhance the immersive-ness of the performance. Their actions prompt the player's reactions. Categorizing virtual games as "hollow" because of the low stakes for these virtual characters, Schechner writes, "the most interesting part of gaming— any kind of gaming— is the narration created by the players, not the figures or characters. Actors are always more interesting than characters" (Schechner 2004, 196). Embracing Schechner's framework for understanding game performance while pushing against his claims on NPCs, I suggest player narration emerges in dialogue with these characters. Through immersive conversation the player's story

comes into being. After all, the player of a visual novel boasts some of the least agency possible in gaming. Highly spectative, they still contribute to the narrative action and keep the game moving.

However, the inherent gender and power differences defining the relationship with NPCs in *DDLC* necessitates a turn to the vibrant conversation in game studies around the theoretical concept of *the gaze*. In her work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," influential feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that the camera objectifies women's bodies and places the viewer of film in a masculine subject position—reinforcing patriarchal systems, values, and power structures (Mulvey 1975). The pervasiveness of this phenomenon has led to its use and adaptation across media including video games.

Some games scholars adapt Laura Mulvey's ubiquitous notion of the gaze in film to the gaze in gaming, paying close attention to the uncanny relationship between a player and their avatar. The works of Amanda Philips and Hazel Monforton, both games scholars and designers, are particularly pertinent to the experience of playing *DDLC.* In their book *Gamer Trouble,* Amanda Phillips describes the "Gamic Gaze" and distinguishes it from the notion of the gaze that emerges from film studies. Phillips describes the gamic gaze as "a visual field that gives voyeuristic access to the virtual world, which is then complicated by a recursive set of multisensory input and output that serves to invoke a sense of copresence (commiseration) with the avatar." Like Taylor, Phillips describes a level of access that promotes immersion and memory. Phillips points out that the gamic gaze does not, like the camera, require a first-person perspective to operate. The gamic gaze is recursive: "While the visual is predominant among the data streams and transmits spatial and corporal information, it is bolstered by audio and tactile information channels that are then returned by the gamer in a forward looking, anticipatory loop that engages digital and physical bodies" (Phillips 2020, 135). The exchanged gaze exposes the circuit of power that flows from player to avatar and back.

Following this circuit of power reveals hidden and assumed power structures. This is especially true where NPCs experience or are subject to trauma. The player consumes vulnerability like a voyeur, seemingly without offering anything. The recursiveness of the

gamic gaze complicates this. Hazel Monforton proposes a generative voyeurism in her essay on *Outlast*,[7] "Entering the play-space as a voyeur, the player becomes, through bodily trauma experienced through the avatar, a witness to the events of the game narrative. There is no single way to observe what is happening in the game…" (Monforton 2016, 66). Crucial to note here, the player does not begin the game as a witness. The transformation of the power circulation that accompanies the gaze changes *through* the performance of play.

In games like *Outlast* and *DDLC,* where NPCs experience violence both seen and implied, players occupy a unique position where they also witness the experience of the other characters in the game. Witnessing acknowledges the limited agency that players have in virtual spaces, while acknowledging the potential for meaningful or at the very least impactful knowledge transfer to occur. The player's lack of ability to change the outcome for the characters in survival horror games often leaves players with two prominent options: witnessing or quitting. Within the scenario framework for understanding games and the position of NPCs as crucial co-performers in this story, witnessing shrinks the emotional distance between the player and NPCs. They are data given virtual flesh, and these virtual bodies engage with the player through screen and controller to create multisensory engagement and investment. In games that are either highly scripted or linear like visual novels, their importance to the performance heightens because they represent the means of progressing through the story.

Witnessing nuances the gamic gaze through an acknowledgement of the discoveries of play (to borrow a term from acting). It requires vulnerability from the player. Horror games, with their sudden visual, sonic, and haptic scares, foster the heightened focus and constant unsettling needed for the voyeur to become the witness. The recursive quality of the gamic gaze works within the complex aesthetic qualities that heighten the weirdness of this game.

In the case of *DDLC,* witnessing provides an alternative means of achieving immersion. The horror stems from the girls' lack of agency—similar to the lack of agency that a player has when navigating the visual novel. The player's position as witness crystalizes in the final act when the game unifies player and avatar by identifying the player's real name. In

addition to this relationship, *DDLC*'s scenario weirds all its characters. The girls, as the central focus of the gamic gaze, occupy a critical role in any attempt to understand the weird argument the game authors. For my purposes, I understand weirdness as a subversion of expectations and a conjoining of things that *seem* not to belong, but upon further scrutiny do.[8] Through a weird aesthetic pairing *DDLC* works affectively on the player.

The Kawaii and the Macabre

From the description on its website to its overall design and name, *Doki Doki Literature Club* wears a costume of Japanese-ness. But this is nothing more than a front. Despite the abundant allusions to Japanese culture and media, almost every player that I have interviewed said they could feel immediately that they felt weird in its lack of authenticity.[9] Most of the players I spoke with boast a passion for Japanese games, anime, and other exports. "Feel" was the most common word to describe the cultural disconnect that players experienced. Much work has been done by scholars like Koichi Iwabuchi, Susan Napier, and Maria Consalvo to explain what makes media feel Japanese to non-Japanese audiences despite the changes that occur during its exportation.

Most Japanese media undergoes significant localization so that non-Japanese audiences can readily consume it. Sometimes seemingly insignificant things are changed, like referring to onigiri as donuts in the American version of the Pokémon anime. Other times, as with *Sailor Moon,* another anime, character backgrounds are radically changed to fit American norms.[10] In spite of these revisions, there are still remaining elements that feel Japanese to international consumers. The irrevocable sense of Japanese-ness remaining in certain localized media is best understood as an instance of what Media Studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi calls "cultural odor." Iwabuchi offers the term cultural odor to describe "the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (Iwabuchi 2002, 27).[11] Their analysis in *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* focuses on exported Japanese cultural objects, from karaoke machines to cartoons. Across media, cultural odor

seems to be something more often detected on the part of the consumer rather than deliberately left or placed on the part of the maker.

Yet in the case of *DDLC,* the lack of cultural odor becomes most apparent at the point where players engage the false aesthetic most directly: the girls. Each member of the club boasts traits often associated with pan-Asiatic femininity. Anne Cheng describes this practice in her work "Ornamentalism." She argues that across performance and media, "The yellow woman is persistently sexualized yet barred from sexuality, simultaneously made and unmade by the aesthetic project. She denotes a person but connotes a style, a naming that promises but supplants skin and flesh. Simultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object" (Cheng 2018, 415).

The dehumanizing process that Cheng describes has clear, real-world implications, as seen in the tragic 2021 Atlanta Spa shootings, where six of the eight women killed were either Asian or Asian American, in addition to the rise in hate crimes against Asians and Asian-Americans during the pandemic. While it is plausible and rational to describe the girls in the game as literal aesthetic objects, sprites in a game, the player's participation in the performance and scenario that the game performs troubles this clean distinction, especially when coupled with current events.[12] So do the girls. Across the game, the clear, identifiable stereotypes that players use to initially navigate the game fall away and reveal personalities and characteristics that are very human. Moreover, the Bishōjo conventions thrust the consecration and desecration into full view.

Translated as "beautiful girl," Bishōjo games feature middle and high school aged girls; the main action of these games is dating. In the United States, these games are referred to as dating simulators because this is the most common plot of these games. The main action of *DDLC* remains the same as its Bishōjo predecessors, with the player choosing with which of the girls in the club to spend their time. The more time spent with each, the more the player learns about them: their fears, their wants, their interests, and especially their trauma.

But *DDLC* is not a Bishōjo nor is it an entirely faithful adaptation of one. It plucks from the genre a series of ingredients, places them in a new context and uses them to new ends. It offers just enough to feel common at first for those with prior relationships to anime, manga, or other forms of Japanese popular culture. However, the contents of the game stray far from the expected in a way that directly calls attention to and subverts the assumed familiarity.

Considering the location of the game—both literally as installed on the player's computer and narratively in the classroom, the bedroom, and the journal page—memes and memetic theory offer insights into how this practice works in a virtual context. The impulse, at least for me, is to view the game as appropriating Japanese style. This designation will often prevent someone from enjoying their interaction with an art object. However, memes open up a way of understanding *DDLC* as an object that (a) comes from internet culture where the diffusion has already taken place and (b) critiques the dangers of "Ornamentalism."

Memes, as sociocultural phenomena, predate the internet, but the visuality and virality of the internet meme are critical to understanding the balance between appropriation and adaptation at work in *DDLC*. In her book *Memes and Digital Culture,* Limor Shifman proposes a definition of internet memes that shows them as a tool for carrying meaning through voluminous communication: "I define an Internet meme as: (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman 2013, 41). I contend that each of the three aspects are at work not only in the girls of *DDLC* but in its larger performance as a Bishōjo. In fact, the dangerous diffusion at work in the practice of "Ornamentalism" is, itself, mimetic. In this section, I will inspect the first two characteristics of a meme, namely imitation and awareness within a larger media mix. The circulation and transformation will be touched on in more depth along with discussions of virality in the section following this one. The content and form imitation is clear, but the stance is complicated both through play and through the girls themselves. The game uses its awareness of Bishōjo expectations to entice players to join the club.

On a practical and interactive level, the game draws inspiration from the dating simulator genre. In "Bishōjo games: 'Techno Intimacy' and the Virtually Human in Japan," Patrick W. Galbraith writes about the low level of agency that a player has in Bishōjo games: "Passivity is encouraged by the mechanics of the game system, which may include settings to make the text scroll at a set rate and proceed automatically. The player is unable to drastically impact or change the narrative reality. The player is also unable to choose an avatar…" In most cases the player takes on the role of a nondescript male character through which they "see the world full of young women" (Galbraith 2011, 78). From the download page, where Monika invites players to the game, to the poses of the girls and even the URL, which uses a .moe domain,[13] the game alludes to some of the most sexualizing aspects of the genre.

Once *DDLC* begins, the scenario in the opening scenes does little to dissuade the impressions from the game's website. The player joins the literature club in hopes of getting to know the girls in it better. According to the time tracker on my steam account, it took me approximately six hours to make it through *DDLC*, and per howlongtobeat.com the average length of all playthroughs and play styles is around five and a half hours. During those six hours, I spent time "getting to know" the other four members of the eponymous club: Sayori, my avatar's childhood best friend; Natsuki, a fiery first-year with a "Small figure"; Yuri, the "Smartest in the club"; and Monika, club president and the "Most popular girl in class" (*Doki Doki Literature Club* 2017). As opposed to harem games, a popular subgenre where the premise is to see how many love interests that one can maintain, *DDLC* encourages players to choose one girl to be the focus of their pursuits.

Most players made their decisions on with whom to spend their time on the ornamental construction. As M., a game writer from Canada, told me, "I'll usually pick a character and I'm just like, 'you're the one that I'm going for 100%.' Usually based on the visual or what their archetype is and just go for them and play through at least once, and get that ending," before adding, "Then I'll usually go back and explore what other characters have to offer" (M. 2020). Even players who were not as familiar as M. with archetypes from manga and anime, still concurred that aesthetic qualities motivated their initial choices.

To spend time with one of the girls, players prepare poems to present at the literature club. The poem writing takes place in a notebook. On the left page are the faces of Yuri, Natsuki, and Sayori in sticker form—with Monika, the club president notably missing—and on the right are two columns of words that players select to write. (Fig. 1)
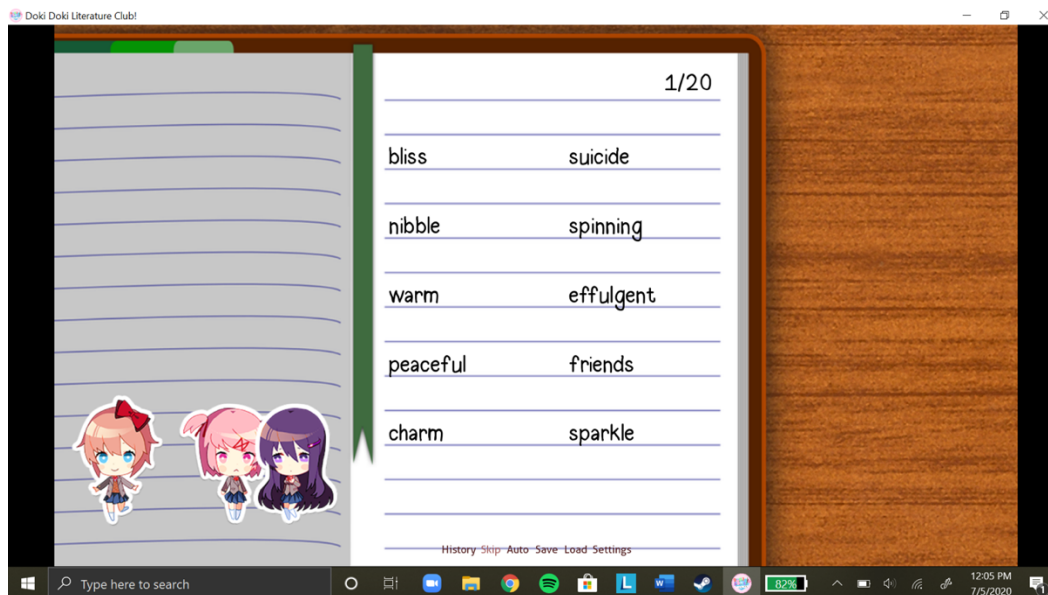

Figure 1 – The poem writing in the game contains a variety of girls. The stickers dance when you choose a word that corresponds to a specific girl in the club.

The words reflect the interests of the girls. Words referencing self-harm and violence appear alongside words like "Doki Doki" and "Milk." These out-of-place words are not the only thing belying the apparent premise of the game. The game hints early on at its subversion of what the creator identifies as the anime trope of "Cute girls doing cute things" (Jackson 2017).

The download screen warns that the game should not be played by "children or those who are easily disturbed," so players are aware that at the very least, they should remain cautious. Progressing through the game, players realize that each of the girls in the club deals with serious trauma, from abuse at home to self-harm and severe depression. Before players witness any of this trauma, there are signs that this is no ordinary dating sim. In an early conversation with Yuri, the oldest girl in the club, she admits a love for the affective

potential of horror: "Surreal horror is often very successful at changing the way you look at the world, if only for a brief moment" (*Doki Doki Literature Club* 2017). When the girls break type, the ornamental construct breaks, and in those moments the lack of stereotyped Japanese-ness becomes noticeable. Players noted this tension between expectations and what was beneath the surface.

Yuri was by far the most popular girl in the club with the players that I spoke to for this project. M stated that they chose Yuri because that was with whom they identified the most (M. 2020). When describing why they also chose her, Matt, Jordan, and Rose evoked similar terminology that emphasized the mystery in her archetype: "gloomy" (Navey 2020), "quiet" (Edwards 2020), and "goth" (Steptoe 2020). Players chose to spend time with her because of who Yuri appeared to be: a mysterious bookworm. Yet, as players progressed, the "reality" of her situation outside of the narrative arc complicated their understanding. Jordan, one of the players who knew about the hidden premise before playing told me, "She seemed like the one that was gonna go off the rails the most, at some point. So, I was like, let's do the things she would like and see what happens" (Edwards 2020). As players progress, they learn from her poems and from Monika that Yuri has a fascination with knives and is prone to self-harm. Jordan's description of the gameplay suggests that the dating mechanics—both poem writing and conversations—encourages the players to manipulate the girls through text and action. At first, it does so innocently: manipulating them so that they like the player's character. However, as the game progresses repeating the tactic leads directly to the girls' harm.

Choosing to spend time with Yuri in the second act of the game causes players to witness more instances of self-harm (although they will witness violence regardless of the girl they choose). Matt described his experience seeing her transform: "So it's like, you'd like see the character and then under the real version of them or something. It was just a very disturbed person" (Navey 2020). The language that he uses here, switching from character to person hints that when the stereotype fades, something else appears. Rose, on the other hand, when pressed about witnessing violence inflicted upon Yuri said, "I felt pretty merciless honestly. I don't know what that says about me, but I was just like 'it's just a game'" (Steptoe 2020). Although her response seems to be the opposite of Matt's, that

Rose needed to remind herself that the stakes were low shows how the visceral horror that Yuri endured landed on the players who chose to spend time with her. The violently cracking façade also cracks the barrier between the game and the player.

The same slow cracking ornamentation can be seen with the other girls. Natsuki, with whom Rashad chose to spend time, is the youngest and smallest of the girls. He admittedly chose her because as "a large guy. Six-four, 250 plus pounds… it's a stark contrast of who I am as a person." As one of the players most familiar with anime that I interviewed, Rashad also shared that he was interested in her tsundere[14] character-type and outlined his expectations:

> She has closeted feelings for you. She has closeted feelings for people in her life— right?—people that are important to her, potentially (a) love interest, but she has a hard time displaying that affection… but there are events throughout the game (where it becomes clear) she cherishes you as a friend and would potentially like to see more of you (Thacker 2020).

The visual type that drew Rashad in—her size—also serves as the only visual sign of her troubled home life. It is implied that she has an abusive father, who often refuses to feed her. Unlike the other girls, the violence shown against Natsuki is sometimes missed because players must write for her in Act Two to trigger that sequence. Yet, again, *DDLC* places a painful reality beneath an archetypical mask.

With both Yuri and Natsuki, the aesthetic ornamentation that attracts players—the motivation for their choices and performances—grows from embodied violence, and the more time spent with them increases the violence that their bodies endure. In both cases, the players' relationship to that violence is significant. Players are attracted to the evidence, ramifications, and results of violence that pass as ornamental. Their engagement with these girls leads to more violence—inflicted externally— and also gives some players a sense of responsibility for their fate. The powerlessness of the player leaves them with two choices: quit or continue. The weight of this decision is magnified at the end of Act One, with the fate of the only other "datable" girl in the club, Sayori.

Sayori first appears as the bubbly girl-next-door and childhood best friend of the player's avatar. Her poems and words hint that she lives with depression. While the choices presented throughout the game may reveal secret poems or special cut scenes, nothing can change the conclusion of Act One, which culminates in Sayori's worsening depression and ultimate suicide the day before the big school fair.

Throughout the week, her poems make vacillating allusions to darkness and light. The signs of her depression are easily identifiable. She describes her fluctuating mood, as well as her struggles with leaving bed and taking care of herself. The hints dropped throughout the dialogue instill a sense of dread during her last exchange with players in Act One. The last time players see her alive, they are forced to choose whether to tell Sayori that they love her or that they would rather be her friend. The choice does not change the outcome for her. Many, myself included, feared that it might. I looked it up on a guide, hoping there was a right thing to say. Others shut off the game before the suicide sequence, allowing them to reload a save prior to the decision and select the other option. Players sought agency in this moment outside of the conventional means of playing. The inability to affect the outcome through the equipment calls attention to the way that *DDLC* troubles this very relationship.

Sometime before the player's character finds Sayori, the screen is black with just a pink textbox. As the color palette of the game is strikingly cute and bright, the long exposure to black intensifies the feeling of dread. Waiting outside her door, the player's character opines on the appropriateness of being in her house. I know what is about to happen, but my avatar clearly does not. He says, "I gently open the door," and then a cacophonic sound plays. The sound of a cymbal being pressed and dragged with a stick creates a squeal. The animation creates a focus pull. Sayori's room, full of stuffed animals and yellow bedding, remain static as her body hangs from the top of the screen, a noose around her neck. Her collarbone is exposed. Her eyes are still open. The screen zooms on her face. The background dissolves and runs through other images, from the loading screen to credits, before only Sayori's face remains, on a white background. A typed error message appears: "An exception has occurred." The game restarts and both the player's save file and Sayori's character file are erased. It starts over, the image of Sayori is covered on the title screen,

and the new game bears no mention of her role in the story. (Fig. 2) Her death dissolves any illusion that this game is a Bishōjo, and the restarting of the game is the first time that the setting on the player's computer becomes apparent.

Figure 2 – The title screen after Sayori's death. Her figure is completely covered by pieces of the other girls.

As the girls reveal their interior lives, the more disfigured and weird the ornamental Japanese-ness becomes. The odorless aesthetic masks something larger, more nefarious, and much more ambiguous. The casual harm committed and the violence witnessed certainly evoke behavior that many see online in the comments sections of everything from social media posts to recipes. The behavioral patterns are part of a larger network of patterns. The content, form, and stance of these interactions have roots in the simultaneously disembodied yet haptic interactions with others through technology.

Unlike with online interactions, in the game players face the consequences for these decisions. Even though on a plot level they are complicit in the violence rather than responsible for it, the weirdness of *DDLC* masks the fact that the violence, the "glitches," and the surprising outcomes are all scripted. The weird union of horror and cuteness in *DDLC* disrupts the usual agentic paradigm at work in games. Sianne Ngai argues in *Our*

Aesthetic Categories that commodity fetishism and lack of agency are central to an object's cuteness. While cuteness is an aesthetic quality, she lists some of the material and emotional expectations of cute objects: "smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness, or pliancy... helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" (Ngai 2012, 64-65).

Just as the violence at the center of this game owes to the casual violence committed online, internet behaviors reflect the game's circulation. Every player that I spoke to for this project found out about it from a friend or saw a post online recommending it. The proliferation of this unsettling game mimics the practice of sharing "haunted" images and stories known as creepypasta. Some creepypastas have meme-like qualities, whereas others are what are known as virals, denoted as such because they are singular rather than a collection like memes (Shifman 2013, 55). All creepypastas maintain a sense of virality, and Limor Shifman offers three attributes that make something viral, "(1) a person-to-person mode of diffusion; (2) great speed, which is enhanced by social media platforms; and (3) broad reach, which is achieved by bridging multiple networks" (Shifman 2013, 56). What separates creepypastas from other viral media online are their unsettling implications. In the next section, I explore how the game utilizes horror and technological manipulation to make the cute weird and to further critique the relationship between people and technology.

Creepypasta, Circulation, and "Glitches"

The term creepypasta is a portmanteau of "creepy and copy-paste," evoking the chat room habit of copying and pasting urban legends and sharing experiences with cursed media online. Crucially, creepypastas traffic under a guise of truth. As Line Henriksen writes, "Creepypastas tend to be preoccupied with questions of authenticity, often presenting themselves as true stories that reveal some sinister truth about the world" (Henriksen 2018, 267). They spread like rumors through conversation online and in person.

The number of creepypastas related to games is vast, and many involve glitches and seemingly self-aware NPCs, such as the notable "Ben Drowned" story about a man who bought a copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* from a yard sale, only to find out

the original owner was a young boy who had drowned, and who now haunts the cartridge.[15] In this story, the man deletes Ben's save file when he gets the game, and glitches like modified music, broken animations, and rewritten text begin to occur.[16] *DDLC* features many of the in-game ingredients described in the "Ben Drowned" story, and they are—at a plot level—attributed to the one girl that players cannot spend time with until she deletes the other girls from the games file directory. That girl is the club president, Monika. Like the other girls, Monika shows a side of herself that makes her feel more "real" in a different way.

Aside from the visceral reactions that creepypastas elicit, they also have a human element. Many stress the virtual/actual divide—as much as it exists in the first place. In the case of Ben Drowned, a dead boy haunts a virtual space. Cursed chain emails and message board posts threaten real-world, physical harm if virtual action is not taken. The same tension defines Monika's existence. She is both of technology and desperate to escape it. Her jealousy, her dreaming, her compassionate about-face at the end of the game feels human. While at first the temptation to categorize her as a yandere[17] appears right, her technological status troubles the traditional mental illnesses used to explain their pairing of sweetness and violence. Monika threatens to occupy a cyborg space, but one moving from the technological to the human. Unlike the other girls, her poems immediately belie her archetypical mask. She tells the player she has had an epiphany influencing her work. Her first poem, "Hole in the Wall," is short and describes the moment:

> It couldn't have been me.
> See, the direction the spackle protrudes.
> A noisy neighbor? An angry boyfriend? I'll never know. I wasn't home.
> I peer inside for a clue.
> No! I can't see. I reel, blind, like a film left out in the sun.
> But it's too late. My retinas.
> Already scorched with a permanent copy of the meaningless image.
> It's just a little hole. It wasn't too bright.
> It was too deep.
> Stretching forever into everything.
> A hole of infinite choices.
> I realize now that I wasn't looking in.

I was looking out.
And he, on the other side, was looking in. (*Doki Doki Literature Club 2017)*

Presumably, the hole that lets in light and allows her to peer out is the camera on the player's computer. With this poem, Monika calls attention to the agency players forsake when they click "Agree" to the terms on the download screen.

Monika's power makes her something to fear—at least within the context of the scenario. She gains this power as she attempts to move away from being wholly machine and resembles something more living: a cyborg. For Donna Haraway, the Cyborg rejection of the status quo, and the power politics that accompany it, opens possibilities and seizes power for the future, but in the present also. While race figures in Haraway's book, the notion of the cyborg grows and adapts to other feminist inquiries. To understand Monika's cyborg identity, I want to return to Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of "Ornamentalism," where she suggests that Asiatic femininity, as one of, if not the "original cyborg(s)" (Cheng 2018, 433), always occupies this complicated space describing "a human figure that emerges as and through ornament. Neither mere flesh nor mere thing, she/it applies tremendous pressures on politically treasured notions such as agency, feminist "enfleshment," and human ontology" (Cheng 2018, 419). Cheng's language here and analysis later produce a model of cyborg that goes from organic to thing *and* from thing to organic. Monika inhabits this space, and I argue so do other viral creepypastas. Creepypastas threaten to cross from the virtual and to pull things back in with them. The pressures that Cheng describes emerge clearly in moments where Monika becomes and creates "glitches."

On a narrative level, Monika's self-awareness as a "glitch" disrupts the immersion that props up her ornamental construct. What I refer to as "glitches" in *DDLC* are not true glitches, but rather they are either scripted events that appear as glitches or events that are triggered by random number generation, so that some players see them but not all do. Not all the glitches are graphically violent. At times, Monika alters what the other girls will say—the font and color of text changes—and she causes them to reveal more about their home lives to dissuade players from spending time with them. (Fig. 3)

Figure 3 – An example of "Monika Text" overwriting what the other girl is trying to say. Note that it escapes the confines of the textbox.

In these moments, the girls are often warning the player that something is wrong and asking for help. Of course, lack of agency is its own kind of violence. Other times, Monika will appear in front of the text box, breaking the fourth wall. But most often, her "glitches" rely on violence or utilize violent memories.

One RNG "glitch" I encountered occurred in the classroom during Act Two. During a conversation early in the week, a poster in the back of the room was suddenly replaced with the image of Sayori's suicide. The banter of the club remained unchanged. The girls, including Monika, played their parts as if nothing were different. All the while, I clicked through the dialogue, hoping the poster would disappear. There is only a one-in-six chance that players see this. However, even scripted "glitches" ask players to endure and bear witness to the violence inflicted upon these girls.

Yuri's steady decline in stability and numerous RNG glitches are claimed to be a result of Monika tinkering with her code. Regardless of what players do, like Sayori, she will take her own life, but she does so before the act ends on Friday of Act Two. This disrupts the weekend date that is supposed to be the climax of the playthrough. Instead, players must stare at Yuri's decaying corpse from Friday to Monday morning. (Fig. 4)

Figure 4 – During the weekend with Yuri, her blood will darken. She also continues to "speak" to the player.

Players are aware that time is passing because of the cycling of light and dark and the discoloration of her body as time passes. Her blood goes from a striking highlighter red to a warm, purplish black. The entire time, a dialogue box appears from Yuri, but the text is gibberish. Opening the dialogue history feature in the menu reveals text from the game's website, inviting players to the club. Soon it repeats the phrase: "will you promise to spend the most time with me?" as players try different tactics to proceed through this arduous weekend. (Fig. 5) I continued to click through the dialogue for nearly twenty minutes. The more time passed, the more nervous I grew. Eager to find a solution to the seemingly endless dialogue, I opted for the "skip" button to accelerate my way through the weekend after realizing that time was passing in game. Other players tried exiting and restarting the game, only to return to the weekend with Yuri.

Figure 5 – During the weekend with Yuri, checking the text log in the pause menu shows text from the game's website.

One steam user, Xae-chan, criticizes players like me on the game's community forum: "You clickthroughers are pig-ignorant and prove you do not understand this VN. Why do you think the dev spent the time to have 9 sets of CG done to show the passage of time incrementally (sic)? All part of the experience. I wonder how much else you missed ..." (Xae-chan 2020). They are right, of course, that the extreme duration matters. As the final act of visceral violence witnessed by the player, Yuri's death and decay is meant to provoke. Even if players select "skip," the exchange stands out among the longest sequences in the game, second only to the final date with Monika. The duration of this scene makes it among the most impactful glitches that all players get the opportunity to experience.

While the violence and trauma of the NPCs is visceral, what if anything is it doing if players cannot stop it? Returning to Hazel Monforton's work on survival horror and witnessing, she argues that witnessing serves a crucial pedagogical function in horror games. A powerless avatar allows players to "witness and testify to the abuses of power rather than perpetuate the abuse" (Monforton 2016, 55). For her, the point is not titillation, but a recognition of parallel systems in the real world. In *DDLC*, Monika exploits existing

trauma in the lives of NPCs to remove them from the game. The player's position complicates her culpability. As the agents of progression, players are ultimately complicit in the violence. This realization lands when one of the game's most meta moments plays out properly.

In the penultimate scene, after Monika has deleted every other character in the game, she then uses information on the player's PC to find their real name. For players like me, she uses the information shared via a Steam account, which I agreed to when I downloaded the game. She confronts the player about their identity and then presents the player's name as it exists in their computer.[18] **The game gazes back at the player.** This weird conversation with Monika can go on for hours. (Fig. 6) She cycles through numerous conversations on different topics. For some, the game stops here. As opposed to traditional games that can be beaten through in-game action, *DDLC* cannot.

Figure 6 – Monika incorrectly guessing my name after she's deleted everyone and everything else in the game.

Players must access the game's local files themselves and remove Monika's .chr file. These .chr files are not part of the application, but rather files installed locally on the player's computer when the application is installed. These files are different types. Some are text, some images, one is a sound file. Their secondary function as actual files is to become

Easter eggs[19] that fan communities have used to build lore around the game. However, their primary function seems to be that they are checked for by the application, and if it senses that they are missing before the right time, the application is rendered useless.[20] Because the application deletes many of these files on its own, the game cannot be played again without redownloading. It effectively dismantles itself.

Left with a desktop icon and a series of folders that contain spare pieces of code and files that do not work, *DDLC* calls attention again to the play space: the computer. I argue this game uses horror to reveal how people fail to consider the bodies that exist on the other side of internet exchanges. Online communities in gaming culture are notoriously hostile places, where sexism, racism, and bullying persist. *DDLC*'s Internet aesthetic, visceral violence, and ability to gaze back at players allow it to function as an effective critique for violence committed online. In *DDLC*, the overlapping selves and lives of the player—virtual and actual—are shown back to them through engagement with the scenario. The uncanny moment of seeing a hybrid version of themself that is both "machine and organism, a creature of social reality and as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 2016, 5), generates potential, and passes the onus onto the player whether something should be done with that critique.

Endnotes

[1] Visual Novel- Low interaction games that mimic the principles behind Choose Your Own Adventure novels. In terms of gameplay, players typically select from a small array of pre-scripted dialogue options to progress the story. This is the most common format for Dating Sims, although many other types of stories borrow this format.

[2] Creepypasta- A portmanteau of creepy and copy+paste, referring to widely circulated stories featuring the occult online, often in forum-like spaces such as 4-Chan and Reddit. These stories typically contain elements of horror, science fiction, and the supernatural. Some examples include Ben Drowned, Slenderman, and Lavender Town.

[3] Wikia- Like Wikipedia, Video Game Wikia-sites are public encyclopedias that often focus on one video game or video game series. The entries are often linked to each other. The entries are written and maintained by the fan community and contain vital information about lore, gameplay techniques, and art.

[4] Steam Forum- Each game for sale on Steam, a popular platform for buying and playing computer games, has a community forum linked on its main page. Here players share reviews, exchange ideas on play and story elements, and often complain.

[5] See: Lindsay Brandon Hunter, Nicola Shaughnessy, Philip Auslander, Peggy Phelan, Diana Taylor, and Matthew Wilson Smith.

[6] The other two collections are *Second Person* and *Third Person*.

[7] *Outlast* is a first-person survival horror game in which players control a journalist investigating a psychiatric hospital.

[8] This is in contrast to theorizations on Weirdness in Mark Fischer's work, which I do not have the space to dig into in this specific article.

[9] Rose Steptoe could not say if it felt Japanese or not, and Matt Navey said it did feel Japanese. Others like Rashad hedged, saying that it did, but that something was off.

[10] Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune are queer in the manga and in the original anime but were changed to cousins in the American localization. This anime was localized before gay marriage was legalized in the US.

[11] Emphasis is Iwabuchi's.

[12] The game was actually re-released in Fall 2021 as *DDLC+*. This new version is not free to play but made the original even more popular.

[13] A term in anime and manga to describe innocent and youthful femininity.

[14] Tsunderes are typically confrontational or at their kindest initially quite cold emotionally. However, over time they reveal themselves to be tender and kind.

[15] Videos of the gameplay and story can be found on the Jadusable's (Alexander Hall's) YouTube page. He was the creator of the story. https://www.youtube.com/c/Jadusable/featured

[16] See also Lavender Town in Pokémon Red and Blue for Gameboy

[17] In anime and manga, a yandere is superficially loving and affectionate, but underneath that façade is violent and mentally unstable.

[18] She guessed my name as being "Spear or something." Wrong but still unsettling.

[19] For instance, Sayori's .chr file is an audio file that, when scanned with spectrograph links players to a website called project libitina which contains a medical report. The other .chr files link to images of a girl that may also be Libitina. Many fans believe this is a teaser for a game that will tie into *DDLC* universe.

[20] Attempts to delete Monika's file before the playthrough leads to the other characters becoming aware of your manipulation and ultimately a game over. The same can be said for deleting Monika prior to her complete erasure of everything else in the game's script.

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