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Grand Narratives Blossom Still

Character database and political narratives in the Muv Luv franchise

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1. 初めに

この論文では、東浩紀（２００７、２００９）が論じた概念の「データベース消費」とその「キャラクターをめぐる情動が物語を枝葉末節した」という命題を扱う。まず、データベース消費を中心する「萌え」とキャラクターを組み上げる「萌え要素」は、東浩紀にとって、背景と世界観を無関係にした。その無関係にした理由は、「萌え要素」で組み上げるキャラクターは無限に新たな世界と背景を移動する可能性があるためである。しかし、「萌え要素」を完成するため、背景の物語が必要で、したがってその背景の物語はキャラクターの各「萌え要素」に影響する。このことをもとにして、この論文は四つの章に分かれる。

一章では、「萌え要素」で取り上げるキャラクター、すなわち美少女キャラクターが、「萌え要素」で取り上げるキャラクターがあるメディア（アニメ、漫画、ゲームソフトエロゲーム、特にノベルゲーム、）で、「どのような役割を演じるのか」観察をする。まず、美少女キャラクターについて、物語の背景と世界観を理解する装置として論じる。すなわち、メディアの背景とその物語と世界観を理解するため、オタクには美少女キャラクターが必要であり、「萌え要素」を通して、背景の物語をファンにもたらす。美少女キャラクターは、背景を作る実体である。これを理解させるプロセスは Martin Heidegger が示した「*Erschlossenheit*」（*Kompridis 1994*）のようなプロセスである。

二章では、ノベルゲームとノベルゲームを歴史的に検討する。80 年代の早期のエロゲーム、（エロチックゲーム）から現在のノベルゲームまで、ゲームの美少女キャラクターの歴史をたどり、ロリコンと早期エロゲームの発展を観察する。その上で、ゲームで美少女キャラクターの消費について、対話型が少なくなる理由を調べる。

三章では、論文のケーズスタディとしている「マブラブ」と「マブラブオルタネイティヴ」のエロゲームを観察する。この二つのエロゲームは、強大な背景、また世界観を用いている、さらに、ゲームの物語においては、政治的なメッセージが美少女キャラクターの取り上げる「萌え要素」を通じてファンにメッセージを伝える。「萌え要素」で伝えたメッセージを調査するために、ケーズスタディとして「マブラブ」と「マブラブオルタナティブ」というノベルゲームを観察する。まず、「マブラブ」と「マブラブオルタナティブ」のキャラクターの「萌え要素」で伝えられる政治的なメッセージを論じて、また「萌え要素」で取り上げている美少女キャラクターを通して、どのような政治的なメッセージを伝えようとしているか説明する。

四章では、美少女キャラクターが取り上げている「萌え要素」を調査する。

「萌え要素」を通じて伝えられる政治的なメッセージは、キャラクターを物語と背景から取り除いても、政治的なメッセージはまだある。「マブラブ」と「マブラブオルタナティブ」の美少女キャラクターの「萌え要素」を観察し、どのような移動後のキャラクターのアイデンティティを通して、政治的なメッセージがファンに伝えられるかを論じる。

結論は「オタクメディアには、物語は沈んでいない、キャラクターにはまだ物語が必要だ。」ということである。

Contents

Introduction: Imaginary girls, imaginary love, real feelings, real messages

To gaze upon the girl of one's dreams is to first and foremost, imagine situations, how she might react to us, what kind of happiness she could bring, how we would be happy with her, and many many more. Each word she speaks to us acquires multiple meanings, while the tension we experience as lovers hoping to win over her affection. We imagine long walks, smiling and laughing with her as she reciprocates our feelings. We attribute meaning to each of her gestures, the clothes she wears, the jewelry she wears, the style in which she has done her hair. We are the director of our own love story, in which we find solace and happiness.

What happens when the girl of our dreams is not a real person, but instead an imaginary character over which we can feel affection and a deep bond while at the same time put her into countless other stories?

That affection, coupled with the possibility of re-setting the story in countless other ways, is what has been described as *moe* by a variety of commentators (Kōdansha 2003, Okada 2008, Galbraith 2009). Not only this affection is spread over the characteristics of the characters, ranging from demeanors and clothes to certain accessories calling back to more articulated meanings, such as glasses calling back to the character archetype of a sweet but stern and hardworking girl. This and many more, are but examples of how the feeling of *moe* animates characters and how their influence has become more and more prevalent within Japanese pop culture.

Furthermore, the recent debate about the centrality of *moe* characters within Japanese pop culture media, starting from the grand discussions by Azuma (2007, 2009), and was followed by commentary and further approaches by Itō (2001, 2008), Galbraith (2009, 1011), Nozawa (2013) and Kacsuk (2016).

Azuma's now famous assumption stated that narrative is no longer relevant in the age of postmodernity, where identity is based no longer in the grand narrative of the past, but rather in the objects of consumption and leisure present into one's life, making the idea of narrative irrelevant, superseded by individual elements employed in the

construction of female characters which can be iterated and developed upon in boundless, countless ways (Azuma 2009).

As these characters can be endlessly subjected to re-contextualization and thus placed in context different from the character's original situation without the character loosing value, the need for articulated narratives is, according to Azuma (2009) less and less relevant, as it's the idea of the death of character. As these characters belonged chiefly within video games, which entitle the possibility of resetting and save/loading one's playthrough, it is possible to argue, according to Azuma, that character death no longer has any substantial meaning, as the infinite possibility for recontextualization allows to effectively skirt character death.

But alas, this would not adequately describe the rise of a particular typology of video game, the *visual novel*, and certain character dynamics present therein. Visual novel games present players with an environment where they can freely exercise their imagination on girl characters while also navigating various narrative contexts. Each character has her own storyline for the player to explore and become enthralled with, developing feelings and bonds as the plot proceeds and plot points are resolved.

The player is thus given a narrative space in which he can interact with the object of their affection, and by doing so, it has been argued (Galbraith 2011), escape from a tedious existence in a sanctuary made of one's own hobbies.

However, this does not adequately describe the huge success of media franchises such as *Muv Luv* (âge 2003, 2006) or games like *Sokō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2009), which feature highly developed settings and even continuous references to grand narratives such as the relationship between Japan and the United States and what it means to be a Japanese person in the face of imported uses and traditions from outside.

If grand narratives are no longer relevant, why is so that these games keep circulating? Why visual novels have not ended up being a long succession of pornographic short stories and instead titles like the aforementioned two and others such as *Gunjō no Sora wo Koete* (Light 2008) which discusses international relations and power relationships between Japan, Korea and China, exist and have thrived? It means that

the imaginary girl, although being effectively the focus of the audience's attention, this attention can be shifted to other themes, and as these games can show, the insertion of political themes is accomplished through the expansion and iteration of character characteristics as to purvey political statements. As the player bonds with a character, and thus develop and iterate feelings with her, the bond also develops over the political statements iterated through the character. As she is a dream girl, there is no disagreement between the player and the character, and thus political statements can flow freely without resistance.

The *Muv Luv* franchise is a keen example of this tendency, of how the player is conveyed a series of political statements through *moe* characters and how the franchise developed setting, by interacting with *moe* characters, brings grand narratives and even character death back into relevancy.

This exploration, however, will not simply consider the *Muv Luv* franchise in isolation. First there will be a discussion of the pivotal focus of these game, the *moe* girl character, the imaginary girl, and how it's her presence that gives context and opens up the player for the reception of information. Subsequently, it will discuss how the game genre of the visual novel developed in the course of twenty years of Japanese video game history and finally it will discuss the *Muv Luv* franchise in both its setting and characters.

Because to gaze upon the girl of your dreams, it is also to invite her in within you. You might not be same afterwards.

Chapter 1: Visual novels and imaginary girls

Japan's cute girl characters, so called *bishōjo*, can be found across the entirety of the Japanese mediascape. They are featured as prominent characters in animation and manga, they serve as store mascots, they are employed to make products appealing, they can advise and instruct people and their aesthetics are utilized in a wide variety of establishments such as maid cafés, game stores, comic book shops etc.

Thomas Lamarre (2009), by way of a Lacanian approach, argues that this computerized cute girl, which he links to the wider discourse around *shōjo*, belongs to the imaginary, as 'woman' is just a symptom of being a man, and by extension, when the woman is computerized within media, the result is a fictional entity which makes sense only in the eye of the beholder, which in this is case is the audience, which is presumed to belong to the fan segment of Japanese otaku.

To remove this status from the girl is to make the audience lose its status as a subject. In other words, when the audience acknowledges the imaginary girl, they are the subject within a relationship with the imaginary girl. Should the audience reject the imaginary girl, she would cease to exist, and the audience would lose its status of subject. This relationship comes into play a pivotal role within imaginary girl-centric media by making the audience a subject in a wider process of information reception which employs the imaginary girl as its nexus.

Patrick Galbraith (2011), employs this framework in his discussion of Japanese *bishōjo* games. In doing so, however, he conflates Lamarre's imaginary girl (itself drawing upon the concept of *shōjo)* and *bishōjo,* which leads to confusion, as the two are different concepts referencing different cultural developments.

Shōjo draws upon discourses of girlhood, growth, employs a female-centric perspective and generally does not include sexual discourse. On the other hand, *bishōjo,* while apparently drawing upon the same discourses of the *shōjo*, is a construct that is focused on an otaku-centric audience and characterized by seemingly endless possibilities for iteration and development, while also possessing strong sexual characteristics which can (or not) be experimented upon by the audience.

Interestingly, one of the early developments of *bishōjo* discourse lay in Azuma Hideo's early development of the *lolicon* genre, which involved the placing of appealing Tezuka-style cute faces on the sexualized, gekiga-style (hard, gritty-realistic) bodies of pornographic comics of the time (see Sasakawa 2004). So, *bishōjo* are arguably resulting from the de-grounding of sexualized imagery from reality and the resulting combination of endless possibilities with the capability to engender engagement based on sexualized affection. This sexualized affection is however tempered by the cuteness of the Tezuka-derived face, which results in a capacity of engenderment that employs both cuteness (and over-stylized emotion) and sex appeal. So, while the employment of the term 'imaginary girl' by Galbraith is descriptive of the dynamics that revolve around *bishōjo* characters, re-employing the term without proper distinction between *shōjo* and *bishōjo* leads to confusion. For the purposes of this discussion, the term imaginary girl will be used to refer to *bishōjo* within otaku media, and they are distinct from *shōjo.*

Consequently, imaginary girl characters (*bishōjo*) in media directed to an otaku audience distinguish themselves from other typologies of characters because they are able to create emphatic engagement by way of being constructed with pre-existing visual elements (which can be character archetypes, clothes, accessories etc.) already acknowledged and accepted by the audience. To this regard, Japanese visual novel games offer an enormous array of possible case studies to examine the imaginary girl and its role therein.

Visual novel games are text-based adventures which depict emotional interaction with young women by way of prose-delivered multiple-ending narratives. Complementing the prose, 2D illustrations of the characters currently appearing within the scenes and a background giving a general impression of the locale are visualized on the screen, by way of which a base upon which the prose can be imagined upon is fixed.

The extreme concentration of Japanese media producers and distributors within the Tōkyō area, resulting in vast amounts of capital spent in advertising, packaging and image production (Kitada 2002) exerts a strong influence on the Japanese mediascape. Amidst the sea of advertising images, *bishōjo* can be found in a variety of roles.

Examples include Sui Kizakura, the *moe* mascot of the town of Higashiyurimachi, embodying both the town's distinct culture and the Akita prefecture. Another good example can be found in each of the seven sisters of purgatory from the *Umineko no Naku Koro Ni* game series (7th Expansion 2007-2010), each an anthropomorphism of a Christian capital sin (see figure 1).

Visual novels have known an explosive development since the late nineties and, in their current framework, can arguably be considered the media that ushered in the shift towards *bishōjo* imagery within Japanese pop culture. Since the arrival of the first imaginary girl-focused games, their number increased until they conquered a substantial portion of the Japanese PC game market, commanding a share of twenty-five billion yen shared by two hundred game creators (Galbraith 2009a). A visual novel's typical gameplay screen (see figure 2) has the player reading the game's prose on the screen, usually in a semi-opaque box situated in the lower portion of the screen. The box is superimposed on a background 2D image which serves a general visual reference of the locale in which the scene is unfolding. 2D images representing the characters are located between the background image and the text box, and can change as the scene develops, representing a change in a character's mood or the arrival of a new character on the scene. The characters might feature a modicum of animation, usually limited to movement of the lips or other changes of expressions, in order to emphasize the character's emotions. Furthermore, contemporary visual novel characters are usually voiced by professional voice talent, which often can also be veterans of the animation industry performing under a pseudonym.[1]

As the player is simply required to read the text, click in any part of the screen which is not occupied by menu buttons to make the prose advance to the next sentence, playing through a visual novel is usually not a particularly challenging experience. This leaves the player free to enjoy the narrative. Interactivity is generally limited to clicking

[1] One example is Shizuka Itō, which, in addition to having performed in mainstream anime series such as *Psycho-Pass* (Production IG 2012), is also in the voice cast of several visual novels under the pseudonym of Rina Misaki.

and reading until the game presents the player with a multiple-choice decision. He is where the player is called upon to decide which path the narrative will take. Each path is linked to one of the female characters featured by the game, so focusing on a certain character will bring about a particular storyline and vice-versa.

By making these choices, the player is able to choose which girl he wants to interact with and experience her storyline until its conclusion. That being said, interactivity is not a continuous prompt, and choices can be far and few in-between. The player of novel games, unlike players of other kind of games, is overwhelmingly passive. For most of the time, the player simply reads the text and views illustrations (Azuma 2009).

Figure 1.1: The Seven Sisters of Purgatory and Sui Kizakura (7th Expansion 2012, Kizakura Sui Project 2016)

As they progress through the storyline, the player will be presented with fullscreen artwork which depicts special events during the storyline. Within these scenes, the separate 2D images representing the characters are not employed. These full screen illustrations, which include depictions of the characters in erotic situations, once

viewed during the game, will usually be available for viewing in a gallery accessible from the game's starting screen.

The player will continue to read the text and view illustration until the storyline reaches its conclusion.

Figure 1.2: Gameplay screen from *Tōkyō Necro* (Nitroplus 2016).
Note the text box, the 2D image of the imaginary girl and the background.

The resulting ending will be, depending on the player's choices and the game itself, one of many possible outcomes, which can include player's avatar and the cute girl of their choosing live happily ever after, an everlasting relationship is not established, the player's avatar and the girl end up dead at the hands of some antagonist (if present) or some other conclusion ranging in-between. Due to this framework, visual novels have been compared to erotic choose-your-own-adventure books (Taylor 2007).

This is not an exhaustive description of the myriad possibilities which can be encountered by players as each game can feature a different way of presenting information and choice to the player regarding both the game's narrative and the imaginary girls it features. Some titles might feature 'affection meters', assigning each girl a score which can vary during the game in response to the player's choices, posing a condition on whenever certain choices will (or will not) be available to the player, potentially removing (or adding) the possibility of pursuing certain storylines and the

relative *bishōjo*. Other titles might resort to the simpler decision of presenting mutually-exclusive choices which always steer the player on a certain storyline upon selection of the appropriate answer.

There are also cases where affection meters are employed in a subversive way, as in *Sōkō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2009): during the course of the game the player is lead astray by the affection meter, because endearing affection towards a character will result in that particular character's death at the hands of the curse that afflicts the player's character at key points of the narration, forcing the player to do the exact opposite of what they are encouraged to do in an ordinary visual novel, allowing the game's creator to covertly steer the player towards a certain outcome by strategic presenting and withdrawal of information which extend the narrative over multiple playthroughs of the narrative. It is only when the player has completed the game for the first time they learn of how the curse works, allowing them to work around the choices presented into the narrative. And even then, endeavoring to pursue a particular character does not provide the player with complete closure on the world

Even within games which interlope text-based narration with interactive segments, the focus on the imaginary girl is still the most important element. One such case the case is the *Kara no Shōjo* series (Innocent Grey 2008, 2013), which features detective investigations of crime scenes and logic deduction puzzles in addition to character interaction, but the building of a relationship with one of the game's imaginary girl is what advances the game's completion meter. It can thus be said that even in the presence of increased interactivity, the focus of the player's action is always on the girl; further emphasizing this focus are the rewards presented to the player for progressing in a character's storyline with the right choice or by raising that character's affection meter; full-screen illustrations always depict an imaginary girl either in particularly poignant, character-defining moment or as part of an erotic situation.

Patrick Galbraith argues that the character has a tendency to never be completely undressed and that they are not desired for being women: Indeed, the object of desire, even when desire is sexual, is not necessarily “woman.” *Bishōjo* games do not contain

depictions of vaginal penetration. Even in erotic images, female characters tend to be more or less clothed. (Galbraith 2011).

The claim that *bishōjo* games do not contain depiction of vaginal penetration or that characters are somehow still clothed within erotic image is however imprecise. While clothes and other character design elements such as accessories, hair styles, hair ornaments, long socks, glasses etc. can and generally will be preserved in an effort to maintain character consistency, especially when the girls are depicted in various states of undress, up and including sexual intercourse, vaginal penetration is indeed depicted as part of erotic illustrations. (see figure 3).

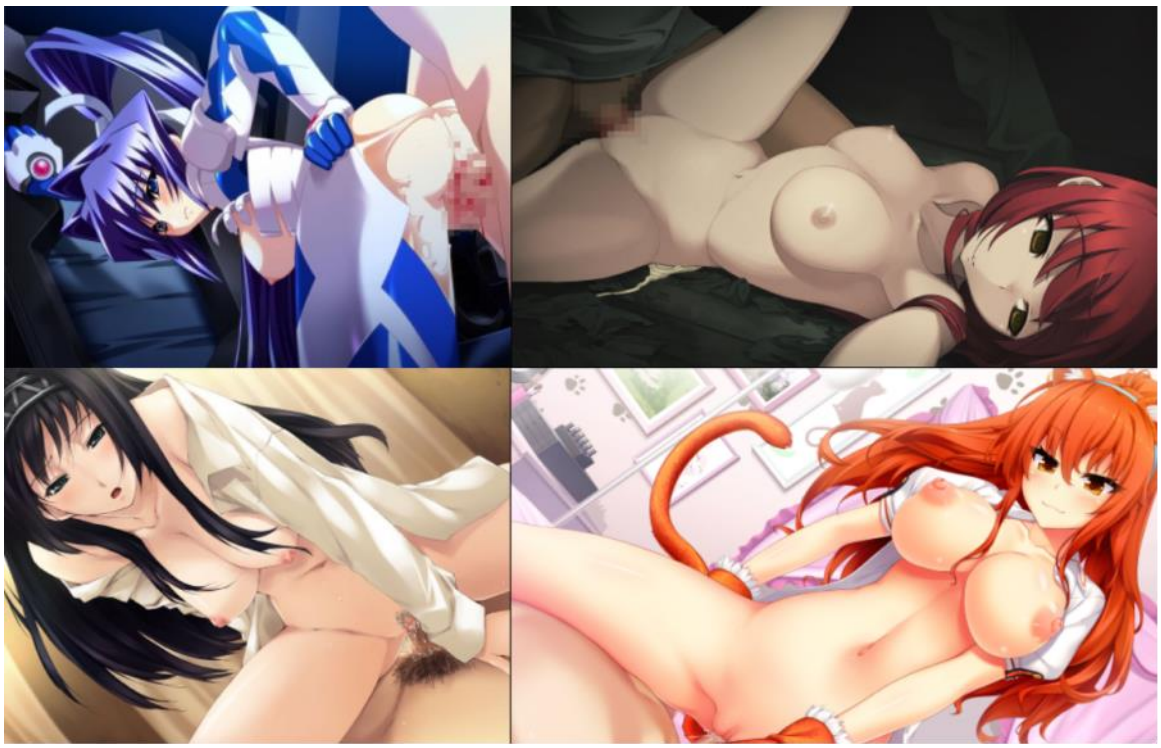

Figure 1.3: Selection of erotic illustrations featuring vaginal penetration from eroge.
(copyright clockwise: age 2003, Nitroplus 2009, Innocent Grey 2007, Harukaze 2015.)
Note the conservation of clothes and the detail on the imaginary girls' faces. The two images in the lower row have had their Japanese law-mandated mosaic censorship removed for international release.

What however distances visual novels erotic images from other forms of pornography is that the focus is not on penetration, but rather on the girl's highly stylized face and overemotional responses to affection and intimacy, which is the result of a long build

up in emotional attachment. Immediate masturbation is not a primary focus (see Galbraith 2011 and Nozawa 2013). In fact, the player is made to empathize not with the main male character, but rather with the imaginary girl (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003). The heightened expressivity of the character faces and the assemblage of their visual design from anime/manga elements detaches the imaginary girl from a realistic depiction of a woman, and further pushes the character away from association with reality.

> *There are constant close-ups on the faces of female characters, which is in stark contrast to the male character, whose face may not be depicted at all. This not only includes depictions of sexual pleasure, but also the excessive (i.e., extreme and prolonged) emotional responses of female characters. This bias in expressivity encourages identification with female characters (see also Nagayama 2003 for a discussion of a similar dynamic in erotic manga for men). (Galbraith 2011)*

The movement away from reality which collocates the character in the realm of fiction moves the character away from a direct, equivalent representation of a human woman. The exaggerated emotional responses and the highly stylized behavior they adopt, in fact, move them away from the notion of woman altogether. This is emphasized by the jokingly distinction between 2D (*nijigen*) imaginary girls and 3D (*sanjigen*) women adopted amongst otaku audiences, which further separates the 2D and 3D worlds. The wide variety of dazzling and unrealistic colors sported by imaginary girl, a pleasant color palette of colors outside of the natural spectrum found within flesh and blood humans is one example.

Other examples include the various *-dere* archetypes of behaviour featured by imaginary girls, fantastic constructions which mandate a certain kind of emotional reaction towards the player. A *tsundere*-type character will engender a hostile on the outside but sweet on the inside reaction towards the player, while a *dandere* will show little to know emotion except for subtle displays of affection. After the *-dere*

archetypes, other elements such as clothes, accessories etc. can also engender affection towards the player. This personalized feeling contributes to the fictionality of the *bishōjo* and her distance from a 'real' woman.

In fact, cultural critic and theorist Eiji Ōtsuka remarked that the feeling of personalized engagement, or *moe*, originated out of otaku wanting to draw what they wanted to see (Galbraith 2014). This implies that this affection was not necessarily directed towards real, tangible women, nor could these images be automatically considered a stand-in for sexual desire directed towards real and tangible subjects.

Bonds of Moe and Database Consumption

Moe is a neologism used to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them. (Galbraith 2009b). The word itself comes from the verb *moeru* (萌える), which can alternatively mean 'to sprout' (from the meaning of the Japanese character) and 'to burn', and has been used to describe the burning passion for female idols and animation characters, but it has not been limited to that (Kitabayashi 2004).

The process by which *moe* engagement is formed, however, argues Azuma (2009), is not directed towards a particular character as an individual personality, but rather at the constitutive elements which are recognized at such by the otaku community at large through repeated iteration. In other words, the otaku audience does not feel moe towards a character because that character is unique, but rather because that character sports certain characteristics in the vein of the previously discussed -*dere* archetypes and visual elements. As an example, the imaginary girl character of Emilia from the *Re:Zero − Starting Life in Another World* (Nagatsuki Tappei, 2014-2017) media mix features a series of elements such as being a *tsundere*-type character, having high socks, long white hair, pointy ears, amongst other things.

The otaku audience engages with Emilia not because she's a unique character, but because she presents a particular arrangement of constitutive elements in her character design which resonate with the consumers. Within visual novels, it is even

more evident, as imaginary girl characters are constantly at the forefront of player interaction and the game's textual narrative.

> *Moe is primarily based on two-dimensional images, but can also include objects that index fantasy or even people reduced to 'moe characters' and approached as fantasy. [iii] Both otaku and fujoshi access moe in what they refer to as 'pure fantasy' (junsui na fantajii), or characters and relationships removed from context, emptied of depth and positioned outside reality. The moe character is a 'body without organs' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and the response to its virtual potentials is affect. In my use of affect I follow Brian Massumi,[iv] who makes the concept distinct from feelings, which are personal, or emotions, the social expression of feelings (Massumi 1987). Massumi argues affect is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential (Massumi 2002). The experience, what he calls an 'intensity,' is outside of logical language and conscious control. Moe provides a word to express affect, or to identify a form that resonates and can trigger an intensity.* (Galbraith 2009b)

The focus on character's constitutive elements, capable of generating *moe* engagement which are shared across the whole of otaku culture has been defined by Hiroki Azuma (2009) as 'database consumption' (*dētabēsu shōhi*). The model of database consumption outlines the relation present between media narratives and consumers, and theorizes the progressive disappearance of narrative in favor of characters constituted by arrangements of so-called database elements. Otaku culture as a whole is akin to a database of individual elements upon which characters draw upon to generate the emphatic engagement known as *moe*. Each element is related or relatable to other elements, to the extent that every element serves as a gateway to otaku culture as a whole. Furthermore, the cultural database shifts over time, adding and removing entries as the culture develops over time.

In constructing the database consumption model, Azuma discusses and develops Eiji's Ōtsuka's (2010) theory regarding the consumption and reproduction of narrative. According to Ōtsuka, each individual work in a media franchise is but a single access point in a single, consistent 'grand narrative' (daimonogatari). Each work, a 'small narrative' (*komonogatari*), provides a perspective into this grand narrative. Each one of these perspectives is a reflection of a consistent narrative framework, or worldview (sekai). Ōtsuka's example of this model at work is the Mobile Suit Gundam (Sunrise 1979-2016) franchise. Within Mobile Suit Gundam, and especially within the Universal Century sub-universe, each series tells its own distinct story, but the grand narrative beyond the single characters, the fictional universe's political entities and 'historical' developments are consistent through the entirety of the franchise.

One such 'historical' development is the 'One Year War' which sits at the lynchpin of the franchise: its development is experienced from a kaleidoscope of perspectives in various media products ranging from animation to video games, but every single narrative reflects the constancy of the One Year War's 'historical' developments. The principality of Zeon will always lose its war for independence and nothing will run contrary to that.

In a similar way, depictions of space battles, giant robots, spaceships etc. will always abide by the rules set up within the universe, such as the case of the fictional Minovsky nuclear reactor, whose byproduct jams disrupts all kinds of radio transmissions, making long-range combat impossible and allowing a 'plausible' reason for the existence of the franchise’s giant robots, the eponymous mobile suits.

Contrasting Ōtsuka, Azuma's model of database consumption posits that, since the death of social grand narratives such as large scale political movements and the subsequent shift to a consumerist postmodern society in the early nineties, otaku no longer seek a grand, internally consistent narrative universe in their patterns of media consumptions in favor of elements capable of generating *moe* engagement. The focus has shifted towards a single, interconnected, albeit not monolithic otaku culture, of which every expression (character archetypes, single visual elements) constitutes an access point of.

One interesting characteristic is the term employed by Azuma to refer to database elements themselves. The term employed is *settei*. *Settei* is a term which is employed within the context of the production of anime/manga media products to refer to character design concept arts, or, as they are known within the western animation industry, model sheets. Character designs are visual documents which allow the standardization of character poses, appearance and key gestures of a given character.

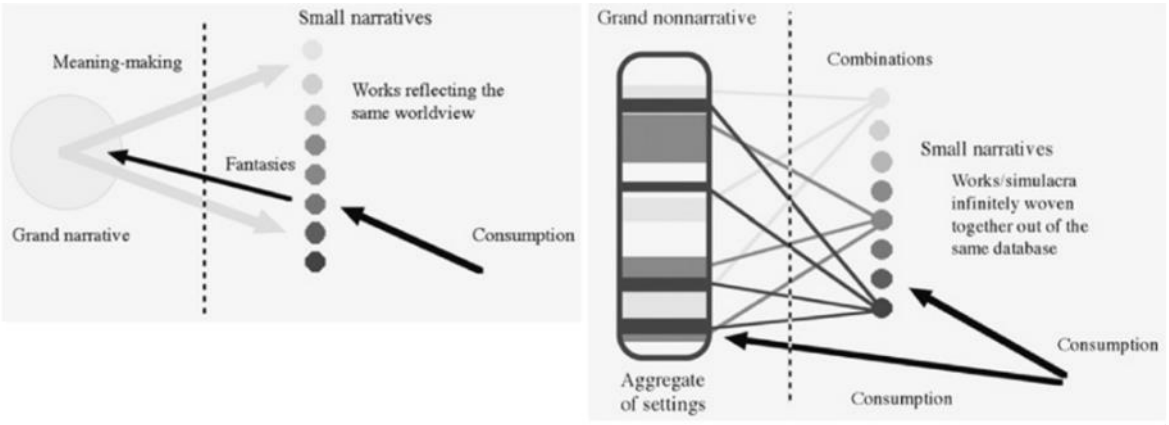

Figure 1.4: Narrative consumption (left) and database consumption (right). (Azuma 2009).

They can range from black and white rough sketches to precise sequences of poses, clothes and poses (see figure 6).

One interesting characteristic of *settei* is that character representations within visual novels are drawn in a very similar fashion: the individual 2D files which are employed to represent characters on the screen (also known as *bust shots*), are character images made in the fashion of *settei*: standardized poses which are the first and foremost representation of that character's emotion or state of being, upon which they will be iterated upon by the animators. In the same way, the players of visual novel games could be said to iterate on the character representations as he reads through the text. This has been highlighted by Azuma in his descriptions of visual novels as meta-narratives (Azuma 2007).

The single elements are access points to a grand narrative of otaku culture, which, by virtue of lacking the internal consistency required by Otsuka's view of grand narrative,

is defined by Azuma as a 'grand non-narrative' (Azuma 2009). This shift in consumption led to the rise of character-centric media.

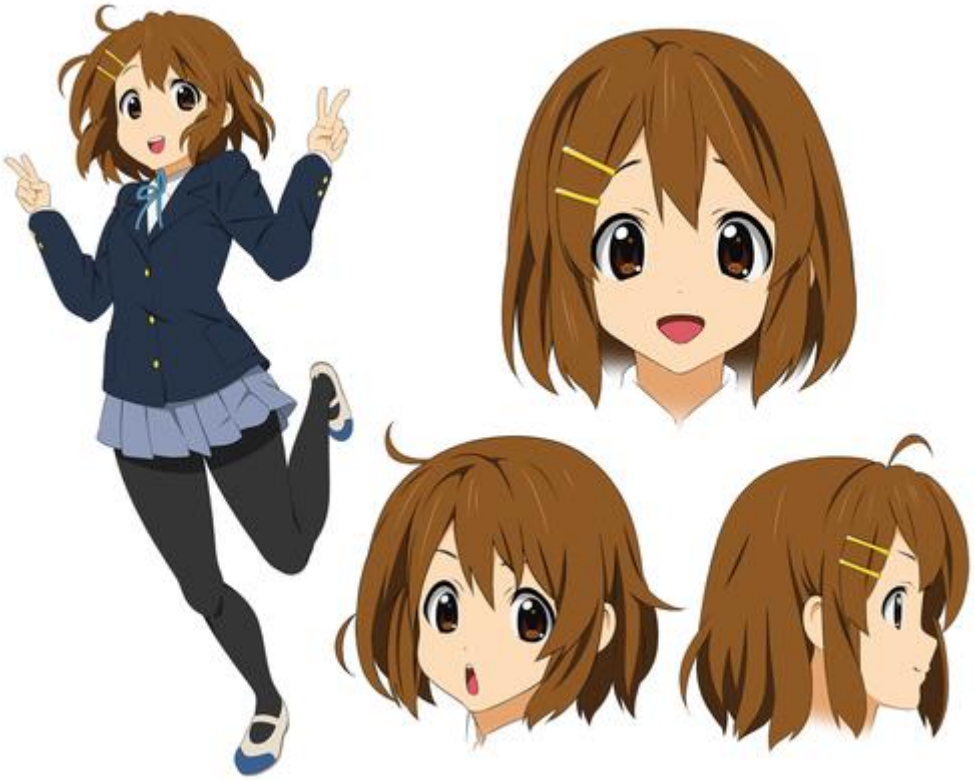

Figure 1.5: Settei for the character of Yui from the *K-ON!* Media mix (Kyōtō Animation 2009).

Figure 1.6: Character bust shots from the Sokō Akki Muramasa Visual Novel game (Nitroplus 2009).

Character-centric media and narrative

The shift, in addition to encouraging the rise of character-focused animated series and manga, resulted in the development of two media formats which proved to be particularly apt in disseminating character-centric narratives: the light novel and the visual novels.

The former, a printed-based media, can be traced to the beginning of the *Dirty Pair* novel series (Hayakawa Bunko 1980-2007), which started publication in the eighties and paired SF writer Haruka Takachikō's prose with character designs by Yasuhiko Yoshikazu. The character-centric narrative, revolving around comedic exploits by the eponymous disaster-causing Dirty Pair of young beauties Kei and Yuri, was paired with an enormously popular illustrator in order to entice prospective readers into buying. The series then blossomed into a franchise which included TV animation, full-length feature films, OAVs, manga and even an american spin-off comic book.

The latter format can too be traced to the eighties, and more specifically to early erotic games such a *Night Life* (Koei 1982) and *Danchi tsuma no Yūwaku* (Tempting the Housewifes, Koei 1982). Notably, the former title featured no narrative content whatsoever, and was advertised as an aid for couple who wished to improve their sex lives. The player could input the date of the woman's period, which could serve as an impromptu rhythm method calculator, which sex positions to adopt and how much time to spend executing each one. The resulting intercourse would then be displayed on the screen as white outlines, with no explicit genitalia shown. The player would then be given the option of registering (saving) their own performances for reviewing at a later date in a sex diary.

Danchi tsuma no Yūwaku was instead structured in the guise of a puzzle game, with the player character possessing several parameters which needed to be raised and maintained in a limited time frame in order to woo the eponymous housewives, each success or failure based on the possession (or lack of) the required score in one or more abilities.

Engagement with the cast of characters was not sought nor provided for, each housewife requiring the correct ability scores to be seduced. This general framework

of ability building and resource management continued to be developed until the latter half of the nineties, featuring increasingly articulated settings and locales while the girls' depictions evolved into a graphic style closer to anime/manga with titles such as *Tokimeki Memorial* (Konami 1994) and *True Love ~ Jun'ai Monogatari* (CDBros 1995). Other games, such as *Sakura no Kisetsu* (JAST 1996), followed the wake of western adventure games, employing limited text parsing to direct the player's actions, each successful decision rewarding the player with further interaction with the character.

With the increasing in importance of database elements and database consumption, interaction within eroge gradually diminished, leading to titles such as *Shizuku* (Leaf 1996), *Kizuato* (Leaf 1996) and *To Heart* (Leaf 1997), which compose the Leaf Visual Novel trilogy, which later came to define the entire genre. Functionally, the three games represent the crystallization of the visual novel framework, with the player required to simply read the storyline and make a decision at certain points of the game. The first two games revolved around a murder mystery which took center stage in the narrative, with players drawn into the narrative by the need to solve the mystery, with one of three girls at their side. A similar approach is found in *Kizuato*. It is within the third game, To Heart, that it is possible to see the crystallization of visual novel themes, especially regarding the *bishojō*'s relationship with the wide narration.

Contrasting Shizuku and Kizuato and their murder-focused narratives, To Heart set out to explore a romantic theme, its focus firmly on the characters, whose narratives where all written after the girls' designs were finalized (Enterbrain 2000). In fact, each storyline was written to explore and expand on each of the game's ten *bishojō* characters and consisted of merely expanding each character's own attributes (Tinamix 2000). Lead writer Tatsuya Takahashi also declared that he wrote each storyline wanted to illustrate and expand upon each character's background, not because he wished to write a particular story. (Ibid.)

There is an apparently similar case within light novels. There is the presence of one or more visually-defined imaginary girls, said characters are kept consistent by way of their visual design and thus generate *moe* reactions thanks to their constitutive

database elements, echoing a wider a shift from story development and character growth to the iterative potential of those character's constitutive database elements. While this development is the result of wider shifts within otaku culture, and while the presence of visually-defined character and engendered bonds of empathy makes visual novels and light novels on an apparently similar footing, there is one key difference between the relationship that runs between the reader and the imaginary girls within visual novels and light novels. Within the construction of stories, this aspect is known as narrative distance, which narratologist Gerald Prince defined as:

> *The (metaphorical) space between narrator, characters, situations and events narrated, and narratee. The distance can be temporal (I narrate events that happened two hours or two years ago; it can be intellectual (The narrator of The Sound and the Fury is far more intelligent than Benjy), moral (Sade's Justine is certain more virtuous than the characters in her story) emotional (the narrator of a simple heart is not as moved by Virginie's death as Felicité is) and so on. Furthermore, a given distance can vary in the course of a narrative: at the end of Tom Jones the narrator and the narratee are emotionally closer than at the beginning.* (Prince 2003)

The standard setup of a light novel still implies a degree of separation between the audience and characters. By maintaining this distance between reader/narratee and narrator, and subsequently characters and situations, the reader remains subjected to a level of separation between themselves and the narrative universe contained within the light novel. The characters, in general, do not address the reader. They can and usually do address the point of view character, which might also be designed as to allow as much identification as possible, but still engenders separation. The same could be said for character-centric animation products: the audience is engaged towards the imaginary girl, but is most certainly not compelled towards direct interaction. A person can be a fan of an imaginary girl character in a light novel series, but there is no direct interaction. Imaginary girls in light novels remain separated from

the reader, making the relationship between reader and character still on the same ground as non-character centric narratives. While certainly empathic in nature, the relationship that runs between the audience and the imaginary girl within light novels is not a personalized, one-on-one rapport, all due to the degree of separation that persists between the narrative world and the audience.

The reader, while obviously engaging with the characters as he consumes the narrative, remains barred from directly interacting with them. They are not superimposed with the protagonist or the point-of-view character. The characters are not addressing to the reader, but instead interact with each other. Even interaction by imaginary girls with a male protagonist whom the reader is supposed to identify with still removes the reader from direct interaction with the female characters.

In the case of visual novels, however, the characters are not located in a separate space from the audience. The narrator, by way of the interactive framework found within visual novels, is, by all intent and purposes, the same as the narratee. The narration is presented in first person as it happens to the player's avatar, making temporal distance null. There is no intellectual distance as, for all intent and purposes, the player character possesses the same intellectual capability as the player and so on.

This is not to say that there is no possibility for dissonance: it is possible that a player might have a different set of morals when compared to a sexually lecherous protagonist, or might not be moved in the same way when the death of a beloved imaginary girl strikes. However, as the player proceeds to the narrative and identifies with their avatar, he is faced with the very same choices poised to his avatar, and arguably, vice-versa. The player and their avatar gradually conflate their capabilities, morality and emotion. Dissonance instead contributes to the lack of enjoyment of the game (and the *bishōjo* character it presents), and with it, a potential breakdown of engagement with the imaginary girl.

This is the key difference in fruition that runs between light novels and visual novels. Light novels are one step removed from their audience, engaged by the imaginary girls but not in direct contact with them. Visual novels, thanks to the player/player character identification, allow direct, one-on-one mutual interaction with the

imaginary girl characters. There is no barrier between the audience and the characters, and by way of this process, the audience finds themselves in a position from which they can directly interact with the narrative context in which the imaginary girls reside.

Imaginary girls, receptivity and world disclosure

The player, by way of identification and subsequent relationship with the imaginary girl characters, is placed in a state in which they are most apt to receive new information and with it, explore new ways of exploring the imaginary girl and the context she is operating in. This enabling of complete fruition of character is what German philosopher Martin Heidegger defined as positioning oneself in a state of receptivity[2] (Heidegger 2001), the a-priori state in which one is disposed to the disclosure of the world, the process by which the world is made comprehensible. This a-priori state of being disposed towards the disclosure of the world enables one to develop (disclose) completely new meanings or discover meanings that were previously hidden from one's own comprehension. This process is known as world disclosure.[3] Philosopher Nikolas Kompridis (1994) explicated the process in the following way:

> *World disclosure refers, with deliberate ambiguity, to a process which actually occurs at two different levels. At one level, it refers to the disclosure of an already interpreted, symbolically structured world; the world, that is, within which we always already find ourselves. At another level, it refers as much to the disclosure of new horizons of meaning as to the disclosure of previously hidden or unthematized dimensions of meaning. I shall call the process which occurs at the first level, first-order disclosure and the process which occurs at the second level, second-order disclosure. At this second level, world disclosure describes a meaning-creative process*

[2] *Befindlichkeit* in the original German

[3] *Erschlossenheit* in the original German.

> *capable of making, unmaking and remaking worlds. But because of the deliberate ambiguity of world disclosure, it is not possible to draw a sharp boundary between second-order disclosures which introduce apparently novel horizons of meaning and those which introduce apparently hidden dimensions of meaning. Nonetheless, I think it both useful and important to recognize that the semantic power of second-order disclosures can be distinguished according to the different effects they produce. Second-order disclosures can produce either decentring or unifying-repairing effects. A novel disclosure of the world can introduce meanings, perspectives, interpretive and evaluative vocabularies, modes of perception, and action possibilities which stand in a strikingly dissonant relation to already available meanings, to already existing ways of speaking, hearing, seeing, interpreting, and acting* (Kompridis 1994).

The state of receptivity induced in the player by the direct relationship with the imaginary girl allows the player to experience the girl herself, and in addition, the player experiences the (already symbolically interpreted and structured by virtue of being designed) narrative world due to the collocation of imaginary girl within it. As the element which is at the forefront of perception, the imaginary girl is the nexus upon which, by virtue of her being within the narrative world, the player is subjected to world disclosure.

This process was explored by Heidegger (2002) in On the Origin of the Work of Art. Therein Heidegger analyzes the effect produced by a work of Art within its viewer and how this makes it possible for the viewer to access what is beyond the simple visual representation.

He makes the example of A Pair of Shoes by Vincent Van Gogh. The shoes, as insignificant as they might be, and in fact, the viewer is unable to even tell where the shoes are located, through their representation of being worn out, battered and abandoned in what appears to be a field, open up a new world for the viewer, already in a state of receptivity as he watches the painter to experience the world of the

peasant woman who whore the shoes. The spectator, by way of how the shoes are represented, can make sense of the woman's toil, her hardships, her life.
Such a world of toil and hardship is revealed and made comprehensible by such a work of art. Arguably the same process happens as Imaginary girls are put within a narrative world. Heidegger makes another example by bringing forth the case of a Greek temple: just by standing there, being a delimited space by virtue of its special, holy status, the building makes what is around them visible and thus intelligible to one's senses:

> *By standing there, the building holds its place against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and luster of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work stands out against the surge of the tide and, in its own repose, brings out the raging of the surf. Tree, grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter their distinctive shapes and thus come to appearance as what they are.* (Heidegger 2002)

For Thomas Lamarre (2009), the imaginary girl is akin to a new god which grounds and gives consistency to a new and free relation with technology, allowing for a new understanding of technology in a feminized way. The establishment of a 'free relation with technology' is Heidegger's answer to the increasingly technology-dominated life experienced by contemporary human beings, whereupon technology is no longer a mean, but becomes an end in itself, and Man becomes its subject. Presuming that *no single man, no group of men, no commission of prominent statesmen, scientists, and technicians, no conference of leaders of commerce and industry, can brake or direct the progress of history in the atomic age* (Heidegger 1966), Heidegger posits that the understanding of the contemporary technologized viewing of the world for what it is, a view that is the byproduct of the times, allows human beings to comprehend their roles as receivers of such a view and therefore be able to be free of both the

compulsions that technology entails; human beings are not coerced into a never-ending technological advancement, nor they are forced into constant opposition to it.

In approaching the works of Hayao Miyazaki, Lamarre (2009) writes that the image of the girl allows to experience technology without technology overtaking Man. The imaginary girl allows man to make it so that our mode of being in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it (Dreyfus 2002).

This approach has been re-purposed by Patrick Galbraith (2011) as the basis for the establishing of a new relation with technology in what he defines as techno-intimacy, using a term developed by Anne Alison (2006).

Techno intimacy is described as the correction from mecha-tronics, the national policy and fantasy to rebuild Japan as a techno super nation, the conversion of the industrial master plan in the new millennium, employing virtual companionship to provide relief from the alienation and stresses of corporatist capitalism (Allison 2006).

Galbraith (2011) argues that by way of providing this free relation to technology, otaku, as they relate with imaginary girls, can make sense of a world subjected to the enormous stresses of Japan's techno-capitalist society by exploring the relationships between them, the girl in the game, which is highlighted in its machine aspects, and the world. In this regard, by contrasting the imaginary girl with the outside world, it is possible to reveal it and makes sense of it. The girl is thus an agent that triggers the process of world disclosure by being the intermediate layer in the relationship between the audience and the narrative world of presented within visual novels.

Can the user become a character?

Another interesting approach to characters and their relation with audiences in general was undertaken by Shunsuke Nozawa (2013) in his conceptualization of the process of characterization, the turning of something into a character (or 'becoming-character'), sees the audience of a character (which might be a *moe* character but also a character found in a Japanese street sign) siting themselves, together with the

character, in an in-between space between the 3D (*sanjigen*), real world, and the world of characters, or 2D (*nijigen*).

> *In many cases these characters warn, apologize, explain, testify, and announce; they welcome you, assure you,* ***instruct you, and point you to something****. We might call them specialized speech-actants – specialized for producing performative effects whether through conventional verbal signs or through non-verbal signs such as hand gestures. They constitute an interface of objects and spaces that relays signs between other semiotic actants – between pedestrians and a construction site, between smokers and the city, between commuters and the subway station.* (Nozawa 2013, bold emphasis by the author)

Nozawa's approach (2013) is not limited to mascots and characters generally found within street signs. His approach includes imaginary girls, discussing two bishōjo-focused titles: *Lucky Star* (Kyōtō Animation 2007) *and Jinrui wa Suitai Shimashita* (Humanity has Declined, Shōgakukan 2007-2014). Due to both the character and the audience recipient of the signs becoming part of an intermediate space during a character encounter, the characters themselves are creatures of in-betweenness, occupying a liminal area between 2D and 3D worlds, existing as not completely virtual yet not actually real entities in a so-called 2.5D world. When the audience interacts with these liminal entities, they are too located within this space.

Nozawa brings the example of the phenomenon of anime holy pilgrimages, the fruition of certain real sites employed in the production of animation products. A holy pilgrimage is the process that involves fan traveling to places which are featured in anime. These can vary from being famous landmarks to simple overpass in a single shot from a locale that is featured through the whole production, such as the city of Kamogawa in *Rinne no Lagrange* (Production I.G. 2012). Within this framework, the process in which a holy place is discovered and made a destination for holy pilgrimages (*seichi junrei*) is arguably a process of world disclosure whose trigger lies in the

animated product's characters interacting within that real-life location-derived background. Interestingly, this process came to be chiefly with *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (Kyōtō Animation 2006) animated series and related media mix, which featured imaginary girls and other characters interacting within these backgrounds. A clearer example can be found within the Lucky Star franchise where two imaginary girls of the cast are employed as shrine maidens in the really existing Washinomiya shrine in Kuki city, Saitama prefecture. The resulting disclosure of the shrine caused an influx of visitors to the temple, which was made intelligible by the placement of the two imaginary girls within the context of the Washinomiya shrine.

Nozawa (2013) subsequently furthers his analysis with a discussion of dating simulation games,[4] and in particular by looking at the Nintendo DS bestseller title *LovePlus* (Konami 2009). *LovePlus* is a *bishōjo* game with an ability score management aspect, requiring the player to build up certain scores in order to gain access to character events and build up their relationship with one of the game's three heroines. Differing from standard visual novels, the game becomes an open-ended gameplay experience after the bond with one of the heroines is established, allowing the player to interact with an imaginary girl in a way not dissimilar to the Tamagochi device of the late nineties and have an enduring relationship with a virtual character. This allows players to travel everywhere with their virtual companion, giving them the capability of turning every place into a 2.5D space, anchoring the virtual to the real.

Building from the approach highlighted within *LovePlus*, it can be argued that imaginary girl characters within visual novels are an interface between the audience and the narrative universe in which the imaginary girl resides. As part of a complex arrangement of prose, image and music, the imaginary girl serves as the nexus of the composition. She gathers and makes sense of the entirety of the arrangement, complements the prose narrative and gives sense to the background images while

[4] 'Dating simulation game' is one of the labels employed within the English-speaking world to refer to *bishōjo* games. It does not overlap with visual novel, which is a specific subset of *bishōjo* games.

being accompanied by a suitable soundtrack. When the arrangement refers to a particularly complex world, one that requires introduction to the player before its peculiarities can be understood by the player, the role of the imaginary girl as the nexus becomes even more prominent.

Within the fantasy world of occult-themed visual novel *Dies Irae ~ Also sprach Zarathustra* (Light 2007), the plot revolves around a secret cabal of mad sorcerers known as the Longinus Dreizehn Orden, whose employment of black magic is a nod towards Nazi Germany-era occult practices as performed by *völkisch* organizations such as the Thule Society and the Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe. Said concepts, as they are employed by the Longinus Dreizehn Orden during their murderous confrontation with the protagonist (and by extension the player), need to be relayed to the player so that they can make sense of what is taking place within the narrative. Furthermore, these concepts are only used as yet another gateway to discuss and operate a deconstruction of the interactive relationship that lies between human beings and fiction at large, with heavy influences coming from Goethe's Faust and Nieztchian philosophy.

All of this information is relayed by and through the imaginary girls within the game, especially Maria. In fact, Maria's role in the story, regardless of which heroine the player chooses to pursue, is to be protagonist Ren Fujii's emphatic weapon, an actual tool with which he can interact with the world.

Maria's visual design, which communicates innocence and purity, engenders emphatic engagement in the player as he fights through the game's narrative against the Longinus Dreizehn Orden, whose ranks also include a multitude of imaginary girl characters capable of engendering moe.

During the course of the narrative of a lovecraft-inspired visual novel series *Demonbane* (Nitroplus 2003, 2006), the lynchpin of the Cthulhu Mythos, the necronomicon grimoire (also known by the name of Kitab Al-Azif) is anthropomorphed into the imaginary girl Al. She not only serves as a romanceable character, but also as source of information that allows the player to make sense of certain concepts proper to mythos as they are presented and employed during the course of the game. By

virtue of Al being both a lovecraftian item (the necronomicon) and a *moe* bond-establishing imaginary girl at the same time, the player is able to make sense of the setting as a whole.

In both *Demonbane* and *Dies Irae*, the player becomes a character (their avatar) and establishes a relationship with one or more imaginary girls which allow and help the player to make sense of the narrative thanks to their constant presence on the screen. As the player reads the prose, he connects the scenes with the 2D Image of the imaginary girl situated between the text box and the background. The imaginary girl herself, through her actions as a character, her voiced lines and her visual design, continuously relies information which develop the emphatic engagement with the player. The building of engagement puts the player in the state of receptivity required to make sense of the world.

This is even more evident when a narrative that goes beyond the romancing of a character is present, as the imaginary girl, suffers with the player, develops empathy with them and lends them their support while also serving as a reference and as a way for the player to make sense of world; the imaginary girl's action keeps the player emphatically engages, and thus in a state of receptivity, as they play through the game's story.

Nozawa's (2013) concept of ‘characterization’ can also argued to be a state of receptivity; the audience is placed on the same level (2.5D) as the imaginary girl character, allowing for the transmission of signs between what lies behind the character and the audience.

Within visual novels, the player is immediately enraptured by the 2D images of the girls, which take centerpiece on the screen, before they can lower their sight to read the prose. Contact with the imaginary girl and her constitutive elements is instantaneous, and with it, the girl's constitutive elements themselves engage with the player, initiating a sense-making operation in which the aforementioned constitutive elements play a pivotal role.

Elements, Realism and Intelligibility

Within non-interactive media such as animation and manga, the presence of an imaginary girl as the focus of the audience's attention generates a series of specific elements which turns them into what Hiroki Azuma (2007) defined as character-based narratives (*kyarakutā shōsetsu*)[5]. Azuma outlines that the rise of this character-based media resulted into the development of a narrative that revolves and is dependent around imaginary girls.

He further develops his position into the idea that characters are in fact the condition of communication of postmodern Japanese media. He bases himself on sociologist Shinichirō Inaba's (2006) concept of commonality (*kyōtsūsei)* as the condition upon which a good communication between two parties can take place. In the case of otaku media, the two parties engage in communication are the otaku audience on one side and the media producers on the other.

Azuma examines the concept of realism, how reality is depicted, as a form of commonality existing between media producers and audiences. Reader expected reality to be depicted in a certain way when approaching media and narratives; one would read a novel expecting the rules of reality within the story to be consistent with a certain set of rules. He makes the comparison between two typologies of realism employed in Japanese literature, naturalist realism (*shizenshūgitekina riarizumu*) and character-based realism (*kyarakutātekina riarizumu*). Azuma contends that the most common way of depicting reality within Japanese literature until the rise of character-based media based itself on the realism employed by Japanese naturalist literature, in order to reflect the real world within fiction. Novelists subscribed to this particular set of rules, which mandated a representation of reality that would be consistent with common, tangible perceptions of reality.

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[5] Azuma employs the term 'character' (*kyarakutā*) to refer to characters capable of engendering *moè* thanks to database consumption. Azuma's use of the term 'character' is in reference to *moe* database-derived female characters.

With the rise of character-based media and database consumption, the patterns of consumption changed, and audiences started to look more towards narratives that reflected the media products they were immersed in, wishing to experience narratives subscribing to the rules of reality employed by fiction.

From the perspective of visual novels, it is emblematic that, while there were examples of successful text-driven games employing photorealistic character depictions such as *Machi* (The City, Chunsoft 1998) and *428: Fūsasareta Shibuya de* (428: in a blockaded Shibuya, Chunsoft 2008), the majority of text-based games embraced anime/manga-styled characters, character-based realism and by extension, database consumption. The most visible consequence of this shift would have been the progressive disappearance of complex narratives in favor of pure interaction between imaginary girls, the audience's simply wishing to continue the iteration of their favorite database elements and yet works featuring articulate world-building, often requiring explaining and expanding upon continued to appear and thrive. Genres such as world-oriented (*sekai-kei*), survival (*sabaibu-kei*) and slice-of-life (*nichijō-kei*) appeared and thrived (Tanaka 2014).

Of these two genres, the first two are important because, even though there is an initial fading of the external world (world-oriented), within the survival genre we have a strengthening of the world that needs explaining and context creation, and within both genres, imaginary girls are the agent which allow to make sense of the world.

The imaginary girl is thus a liminal element which enables the world around her (and the audience) to be intelligible. It is necessary to discuss more in detail how this process is linked with the imaginary girl herself, and in particular, the visual database elements that constitute her visual design. This is especially evident in the case of narrative-intensive imaginary girl-focused narratives such as *Saya no Uta* (Nitroplus 1999), *Girls und Panzer* (Actas 2012) and *Strike Witches* (Gonzo 2008), all of which possess incredibly developed narrative universes that need to be understood for the narrative to make sense.

Saya no Uta sees the player transported to a distorted perception of our world where everything becomes constituted of bloated flesh, sinew and bile which only starts to

make sense as the game's sole imaginary girl, the eponymous Saya, appears to guide the player through his horrifying journey as the world is literally disclosed before his eyes.

During the long and drawn out battles taking place within Girls und Panzer the eponymous girls are depicted as being perfectly competent in operating a world war two battle tank. By being depicted in such a fashion, imaginary girls illustrate the finer points of tank warfare, to the point where it can be assumed that, past a certain point in the narrative, the audience is intimately familiar with each tank presented in the series and their inner workings. Furthering their role as information providers, the girls will sometimes dress up in uniforms consistent with world war two tanker uniforms, while also remaining consistent with their visual design elements.

Figure 1.7: Imaginary girls in *Girls un Panzer,* wearing historical/historically inspired uniforms (Actas 2015). Note how the basic shape of a girl wearing a sailor uniform remains unchanged.

Strike Witches takes place in an alternative universe resembling Europe in the ninety-forties where mankind fights a mysterious alien race by sending teams of magically-powered girls to fight. The girl's equipment consists in magical leg armor ('strike units') which resembles world war two aircraft (see figure 6). The position of the strike unit is of great importance, as it's placed in the same space as database elements attributed

to legs such as long socks and associated 'absolute territory.'[6] The world war two aircraft are conflated in the imaginary girl's leg armor, contributing to her general visual design and conveying information about world war two aircraft to the spectator as part of the engendering of *moe* bonds. Non-*moe* inducing elements such as the tanks of *Girls und Panzer*, the world war two aircraft elements of *Strike Witches* get conflated with moe database elements and thus inherit the moe inducing capability of the database element itself.

By conflating non-*moe* visuals with with moe database elements, the attention exerted by the moe elements extends into the non-*moe*, historically-grounded elements. This process makes the non-*moe* element intelligible to the audience, allowing them the possibility of meaningful interaction. Without conflation with moe elements, what remains outside of the wider database cannot be meaningfully decoded, and thus becomes (or remains) transparent and thus non-intelligible to the spectator. It can thus be argued that communicating information that belongs outside the database is impossible unless it is conveyed through a moe element.

Azuma (2007) makes the argument that character-based narratives employ character-based naturalism because it's the most effective way to communicate concepts amongst the audience. Just like naturalism as employed by naturalist fiction, which was the most common shared element within consumers of narratives, character-based realism is the most effective method of communicating fiction, and this is what makes characters a condition for good communication. This process influences genres to the point that Azuma argues that genres such as SF, mystery, fantasy, porn etc., when intersected with a certain kind of realism, are transformed into 'parallel' genres. When naturalist realism is employed within 'baseline' genres such as 'pure' SF, 'pure' mystery, 'pure' fantasy, 'pure' porn, the result are genres such as naturalist mystery, naturalist SF and so on. The use of character-based realism results in character-based SF, character-based mystery and so on.

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[6] 'Absolute territory' (*zettai ryōki*) is a term that designates the portion of uncovered skin between the skirt and the socks in a character design.

However, examination of the process which conflates non-*moe* elements with database *moe* elements arguably reveals that a character-based setup is not so much a condition for good communication, the mere conveying of concepts, but rather is a condition for those concepts to be intelligible in the first place.

If the imaginary girls, characters constituted by database elements are removed from the equation, the semiotic interface that allows the transmission of signs falls apart at the seams. Without the possibility of drawing connections, the whole narrative construction made of characters, prose and visual elements becomes transparent to the sight and thus non-intelligible, making world disclosure of the narrative world impossible.

Figure 1.8: fanwork explicating the relationship between character Erica Hartmann and the world war two aircraft after which her strike unit is modeled, a German Messerschmitt BF109 fighter aircraft.

If we take the girls out of Girls und Panzer, besides the obvious result of having nobody to operate the panzers, what is left are meaningless ultra-detailed depictions of world war two tank whose operation is can be represented in the most minute detail, but is effectively impossible to comprehend because there is no interface to provide the necessary context.

Another compelling case is constituted by *Saya no Uta* (The Song of Saya, Nitroplus 2003). *Saya no Uta* is a science fiction/lovecraftian horror visual novel which sees the player put into the shoes of Fuminori Sakisaka, who is left orphaned and comatose after a car accident.

As he wakes up in the hospital from drug-induced coma, he learns that he has been subjected to an experimental nanomachine-based treatment to repair neurological damage in his brain. The treatment leaves him (and the player) with a warped sense of reality: he perceives the world around him as masses of bloated and distorted fleshy organs: buildings become pulsating masses of organs, sinew, and bile, while people appear to him as bloated, fleshy tentacled monstrosities.

Just as Fuminori is about to fall into insanity, he meets Saya, a young girl whose body and voice are not affected by the change. It is by her hand that the world starts to make sense again. What is not immediately apparent is how the world was designed around Saya as an imaginary girl. The fleshy world which serves as the backdrop for Fuminori's tragedy cannot make sense without the intervention of Saya.

The extremely bizarre and grotesque world, while possessing its own consistency by virtue of being a warped representation of the real world, it is designed so it can only be subjected to fruition via the intervention of the imaginary girl. The world becomes 'safe' for perception by Fuminori (and the player with him) only after Saya has shown how to turn them back into familiar, normal-looking locales and items.

The world's hidden elements, the otherworldly creatures implied to exist beyond our reality and Saya's own real appearance, everything is made so that it has to pass through Saya to be meaningful. In fact, the game's own protagonist becomes receptive to the altered world he is living in only thanks to Saya.

Furthermore, by being a warm, lovingly presence that generates empathy, Saya implicitly allows Fuminori (and the player) to distinguish between the monstrous and what appears human and to create spaces which he can call safe in a world which is constructed to be repugnant and horrifying, while Saya's constitutive elements are assembled as to engender images of purity, defenselessness, acceptance and tenderness.

If we remove Saya from the monstrous world of flesh and bile of *Saya no Uta*, both Fuminori and the player will be thrown into a world of meaningless representations of distorted locales made of flesh and populated by wiry tentacled monsters who are repellent to human eyes, with no possibility of creating meaningful context which would allow them to make sense of the new world. The new world in itself, as it's described within *Saya no Uta*'s prose, does not present significant 'entry points' for the reader to make sense of it. In fact, the sole entry point is constituted by Saya herself.

Figure 1.9: Saya amidst the altered, horrifying world of *Saya no Uta (*Nitroplus 2003)

The same process happens in *Dies Irae ~ Also sprach Zarathustra*: it is the game's main heroine and imaginary girl, Maria, which grounds and allows the protagonist and the player to make sense of what is happening and how the fictional world works.

It is only because the imaginary girl is literary entrusted to the main character that the process of making sense of the occult world of the game can take place. The imaginary girl is the focal point through which the world's information are made to flow that the player can make sense of the whole narrative framework of character-based media and even more so in the case of visual novels, which employ imaginary girls as agent for enabling world disclosure within the narrative.

The imaginary girl as narrative interpreter

It can thus be concluded that, if a visual novel is composed by prose, image and sound, the imaginary girl stands as the element that interprets and translates the singular sections into a coherent whole. The way she operates such connection is by bringing the player into a state of receptivity via the establishment of a *moe* bond thanks to her database elements. This process is instinctive and instantaneous, and preludes the interpretation of the prose, the narrative which is conveyed by it designed to be conveyed through the imaginary girl and complemented by the background image representing the locales. The whole process places the action of the imaginary girl as a prerequisite for comprehending the narrative.

The framework by which the narrative is transmitted to the audience is similar in working to Ōtsuka's model of narrative consumption and subsequent iteration by Azuma into his model of database consumption. What takes place in fact reintroduces narrative within the framework of database consumption by placing narrative behind the database. The narrative is conflated within database elements which are then conveyed to the audience which then consumes it. By fruition of these conflation of non-*moe* narratives with *moe* elements, the audience consumes narrative and makes sense of it.

Narrative can thus still be present within character-centric works, and in fact, employs the imaginary girl as an interpreter which translates the narratives into something

intelligible by the audience, the language of database elements, allowing them to make a new sense of the world and by this, becoming the focus upon which a process of world disclosure is ushered in on the audience. It is by this process of world disclosure that new information is made part of the imaginary girl character's identity, making the narrative an intrinsic part of the imaginary girl/*bishōjo* character.

As the narrative flows through the character and ultimately to the player, which has assumed a receptive state, this makes narrative matter once more, and in fact, although Azuma (2007, 2009), assumes the contrary, it might have never ceased to matter, and visual novels are proof of that. You can't Kana from Kana ~ Imōto without her grueling story. You can refer to Saya from *Saya no Uta* without thinking about the gruesome world she reveals, you can't look at Sumika Kagami from *Muv Luv* without thinking about her love beyond time and space with the game's main character of Takeru Shirogane and so on. Thus, what can be argued here is that narrative is what gives consistency to characters. Database elements require an implementation to be brought to life, and it is by this implementation of database elements that characters are born. Implementation, in turn, influences and is influenced by the setting. Subsequently, this locks the characters in their host setting, and as the background narrative becomes more and more developed, so the importance of narrative in a character grows, even in the age of database consumption.

Chapter 2 – Intersections between games and Imaginary girls: a short history

To better comprehend the factors that most influenced the rise of the visual novels and the relative consumption of imaginary girls as an element capable of providing emphatic engagement, it is necessary to examine the historical development of visual novels and imaginary girls and how they evolved over the decades, from their beginnings in the ninety-seventies and eighties to the present day.

Particular attention will be paid in how video games and imaginary girls intersected and how the intermingling of video game production and other pop culture elements related to animation and graphical narratives worked to shape present day visual novels. However, before this examination can take place, it is necessary to trace a path from early erotic video games and present-day titles, to better understand the conditions which generated the changes which can be observed by comparing early and contemporary *erogē*.

If an early erotic video game in the vein of *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* and an archetypal contemporary erotic game title such as *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula* are compared, it is hard to draw any parallels besides the featuring of sexual acts. Not only the art style is fundamentally different, with *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* necessarily going for bare-bone, essential graphical representations, but the way of playing the game is fundamentally different; the possibility for meaningful interaction is much more developed in *Danchi Tsuma* than in *Dies Irae*. The player is offered a much more developed framework in which they can enact their influence on the world in a meaningful manner.

On the other hand, *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula* does not offer a similar array of possibilities. In fact, within *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula*, the player is called upon leaving its influence on the game's story only at the game's pre-set forks in the storyline, while within *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku*, the player is a whole world is offered to explore: they can move up and down the floors of the apartment and interact with the various housewives at their leisure (see figure 2.1).

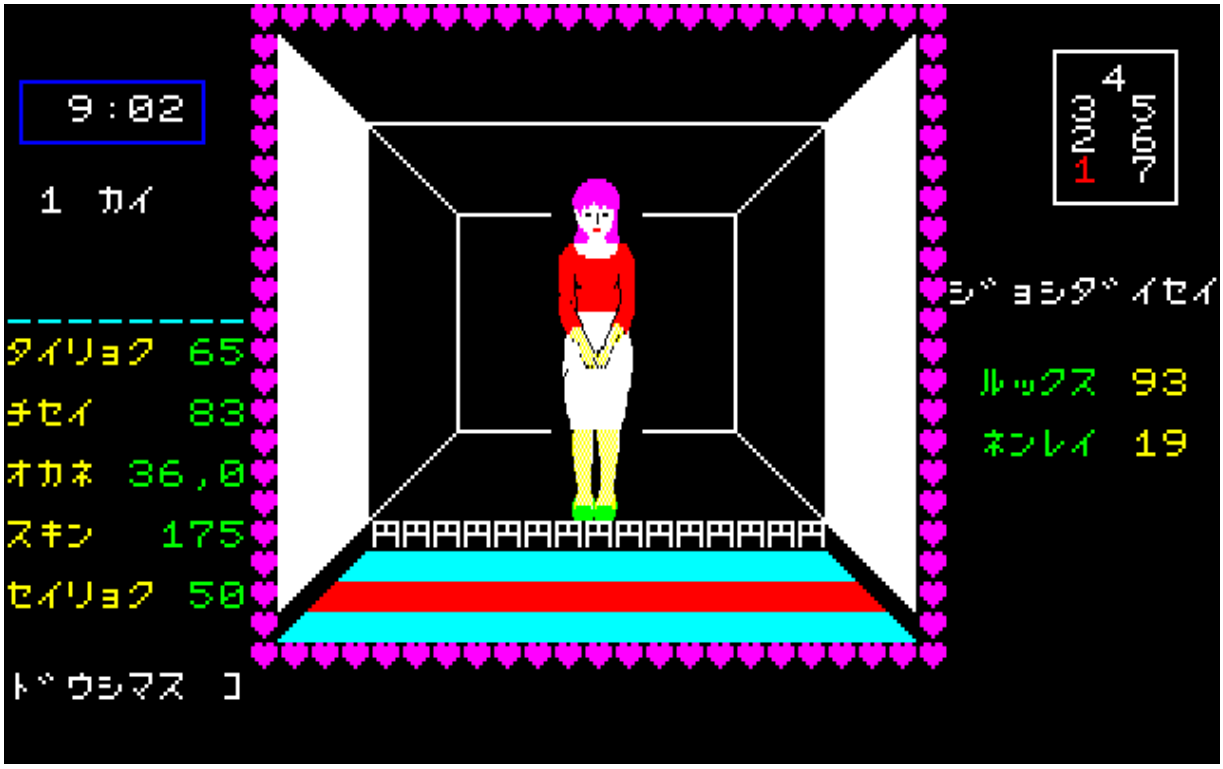

Figure 2.1: *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku gameplay screen*. The player interacts by entering commands into a text parser. Note the various values they have to manage on the left column.

Figure 2.2: *Dies Irae* gameplay screen. The player clicks and reads the text.

Within *Danchi Tsuma,* interactivity is much more prominent, and the game presents a much more open-ended framework. There is no set of fixed events that must happen before the player is given the possibility of making any decision and the apartment complex' layout is randomly generated at each playthrough.

In *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula*, all the player is called to do is to click on the screen in order to advance the text and read the next sentence. In fact, the very presence of a game world, understood as the area where interaction between user and software for the purposes of play can take place, is arguably extremely limited.

The question of interactivity is interesting, because, while media (and video games more than any other) have become progressively more interactive and have moved away from linearity (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, 2016). What can instead by observed within the development of erotic games is an initial re-purposing of existing game systems (as it's the case with *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku*) which then progressively shifted towards ever-decreasing interaction until it crystallized into the preponderant form of erotic games, visual novels.

Content gradually became more important than making engaging interactive games which required the player to posses certain skills in puzzle solving, hand-eye coordination, spatial intelligence, etc.

Let's take a look at the two games we have presented once more: within *Danchi Tsuma*, interaction for the purposes of play takes place in every area of the condominium in which the player is tasked with seducing the titular housewives. Every command the player might input generates an appropriate response from the software, while the game itself compels the player to manage a series of elements such as their initial money and how much stamina the player character has left as his every move results in this value decreasing. Should the player exhaust it, the game will end in a failure state.

All of these possibilities for interacting with the game world are not present within *Dies Irae*, which, as already stated before, tasks the player with the simple task of traversing a text whose portions sporting meaningful interaction are situated only at points in the story where the player is tasked with choosing where to direct the story.

And even then, the possibility of a failure state is not present in all visual novel games, which are more focused on providing content rather than a challenge. This is even more compounded by how visual novels are categorized by genre: they are not classified on the basis of what type of challenge they provide or by what type of skills they require to play, but rather on the emotional response they elicit.

For example, *nakigē* elicit deep emotional responses with the intent to make the player cry, leaving a lasting impact well after the player has finished reading due to the emotion felt by the player towards the female characters (Todome 2004), while *utsugē* elicit a depressing emotional response, which often stems from the heroine dying in the end. The shift from games which offered primarily a challenge to games which offered primarily (emotional) content depended on a series of historical factors which greatly influenced game development in Japan. The first factor was the peculiarity of the computer video game industry of the time and the closeness enjoyed by amateur programmers and software houses, which lead to a very fertile ground for unfettered video game development.

The early years of erotic game development

The peculiarities of Japan's fledgling video game industries during the early ninety-eighties exerted a series of influences over the development of the first video games featuring erotic content. Martin Picard highlights that the development of the Japanese video game industry at large can be found within a series of foundational events such as the development of influential industries within the marketplace:

> *The economic development of Japan after the war, which has led to the arrival and the success of the Japanese video game industry, is large and complex. However, we can highlight some foundational events, as some key industries were developed that have had, at one time or another, significant influences on the arrival and the development of the video game industry, such as the successful household electrical appliances industry (Yoshimi, 1999) and the computer industry (Nakayama & Yoshioka, 2006).*

> *We can add to this the sociocultural consequences of the introduction of television and home entertainment, the leisure boom (rejâ bûmu) (Linhart, 2009), and the outbreak of mass consumption, tied to aggressive government campaigns for the consumption of 'Made in Japan' products, which have allowed technology to grow rapidly (Yoshimi, 1999). All these factors contributed to build a solid infrastructure to ensure the success of an industry such as the video game* (Picard 2013).

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, visual novels can trace their origins to video game titles such as Night Life and Danchi tsuma no Yūwaku. Both these games represent very early forays in erotic game-making, which was a largely minor blip when compared to the explosion of video game production caused by the release of the Nintendo Family Computer (Famicom), which was released onto North-American and European markets as the Nintendo Entertainment system (NES).

Nintendo's ownership of distribution channels for Famicom game cartridges prevented any large-scale attempt at erotic game-making on the Famicom, with a few unlicensed erotic titles such as *Super Maruo* (1986) enjoying limited distribution through bootleg channels in spite of continued efforts to limit their circulation. On the other hand, the home computer market offered a different environment where software circulation was not under the stranglehold of a single producer in control of all aspects of distribution from cartridge making to final sales to hobby shops.

Following the American boom in home computers such as the Apple II, Japanese industries such as Matsushita, Sony, Canon, Hitachi and Mitsubishi, which were already manufacturing a sizeable portion of the components employed in the manufacture of western computer models, developed their own models of computer, also in part due to the necessity of developing specific machines, operating systems and software to display Japanese characters (Picard 2013).

The resulting 'my computer' (*maicomu*) boom at the end of the ninety-seventies also gave way to the diffusion of programming languages for *maicomu* use and computer programming dedicated publications such as *Tekunoporisu* (Tokuma Shoten 1982),

which, in addition to offering computer-related news, also brought to attention to programs submitted by readers (Miyamoto et al 2013).

> *The success of the PC-8001, PC-8801, PC-9801 and the MSX standard brought many Japanese video game developers to produce exclusive titles for these platforms. Series such as Dragon Slayer (PC-8801; Nihon Falcom, 1984), Thexder (PC-8001; Game Arts, 1985), Ys (PC-8801, Nihon Falcom, 1987), Metal Gear (MSX2, Konami, 1987), Snatcher (PC-8801, Konami, 1988) and RPG Tsukūru (PC-8801, 1988, RPG Maker) made their debut on these platforms. Companies such as ASCII (founded in 1977), HAL Laboratory (1980), Nihon Falcom (1981), Micro Cabin (1982), Enix (1982) and Square (1983) all began their video game production in the personal computer software industry. The PC-9801 remained popular until the end of the 1990s with thousands of games developed for it, as it stayed until Windows' takeover the platform of choice for indie game development (doujinsoft) and niche genres, such as dating sims and RPGs* (Picard 2013).

The *maicomu* boom allowed an independent developing scene to flourish in the same way as it was happening in the United States and Europe. Said scene persisted even when the success of the Famicom shifted the majority of the big developers to the Nintendo home console and leaving a scene open to independent developers (ibid).

The release of the first two erotic games, the aforementioned *Night Life* and *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* by Koei, took place within this environment, and the independent scene led to the formation of "circles" dedicated to creating and selling *dōjin gēmu* helped to popularize genres such as *ren'ai gēmu* (pure love games or dating sims), *galgē* (games featuring girls) and visual novels (Ibid), with independent games starting to be sold at conventions such as the Comic Market (Lam 2010), intersecting game development with other pop culture products such animation and comic books.

As it was already said, the first Japanese video game maker which brought erotic content to the Japanese home computer video game market was Koei. In fact, after

the development and publication of Night Life, Koei's two subsequent titles of *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* and *Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka* (Do Sex Dolls Dream of Electric Eels?, Koei 1984) formed what the producer would later call its 'strawberry porno' series.

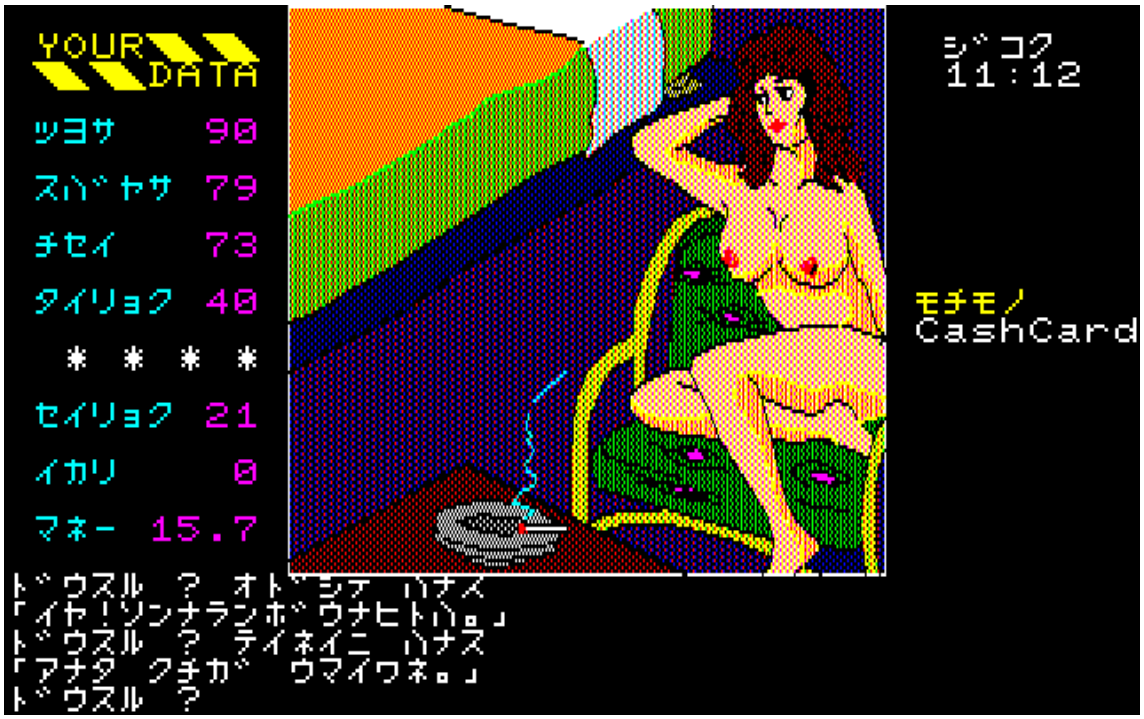

Figure 2.3: *erotic interaction scene within Oranda Tsuma. Again, note the various roleplaying game characteristics on the left side of the screen (strength, agility, wits etc.)*

Set in the (in)famous Tōkyō red light district of Kabukicho, *Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka* (see figure 2.3 and figure 2.4) improved on the characteristics-scores system of *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku*, and added a living game world populated by randomly generated characters and many options for interactivity. The player was no longer thrust in a role which served only as a tool to seduce women as it happened in *Danchi tsuma no Yūwaku*, and they were instead put into the shoes of a private investigator sent to retrieve a number of special kind sex doll gynoids which had gained sentience and where masquerading as real women through the city. While the plot served as an obvious tool to present the player with erotic imagery, the player could interact with the world in a variety of ways divorced from seduction and

sexual interaction: the player could pick a fight with yakuza and suffer damage and death in a fighting sequence, or even end up arrested by the police if they killed an innocent person.

Figure 2.4: *Danchi Tsuma's open ended exploration mode*

Furthermore, the title, a reference to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), contributed to set the atmosphere of the title. Mindless seduction was replaced by a context which framed seduction and erotic imagery as part of a wider plot, and apprehending each of the gynoid required extended interaction which could not be reduced to a simple employment of one's characteristics to unlock each of the housewives as it was the case with *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku*.

Still, showing erotic images to the player was one of the main aims of the game, and continued to constitute the main aim of erotic games in the early portion of the ninety-eighties. Still, seeing erotic images was one of the main aims of the game, and continued to constitute the main aim of erotic games in the early portion of the ninety-eighties. However, an evolution from the mere providing of sexual images without context to a contextualized presentation of sex, as it can be seen in *Marichan Kiki*

Ippatsu (Little Mari's in a pinch, Enix 1983). The game, an digital version of rock-paper-scissors, saw the player pitted against a series of stalkers aiming at taking the life of titular Mari in increasingly ingenuous ways, ranging from electrocution to drowning.

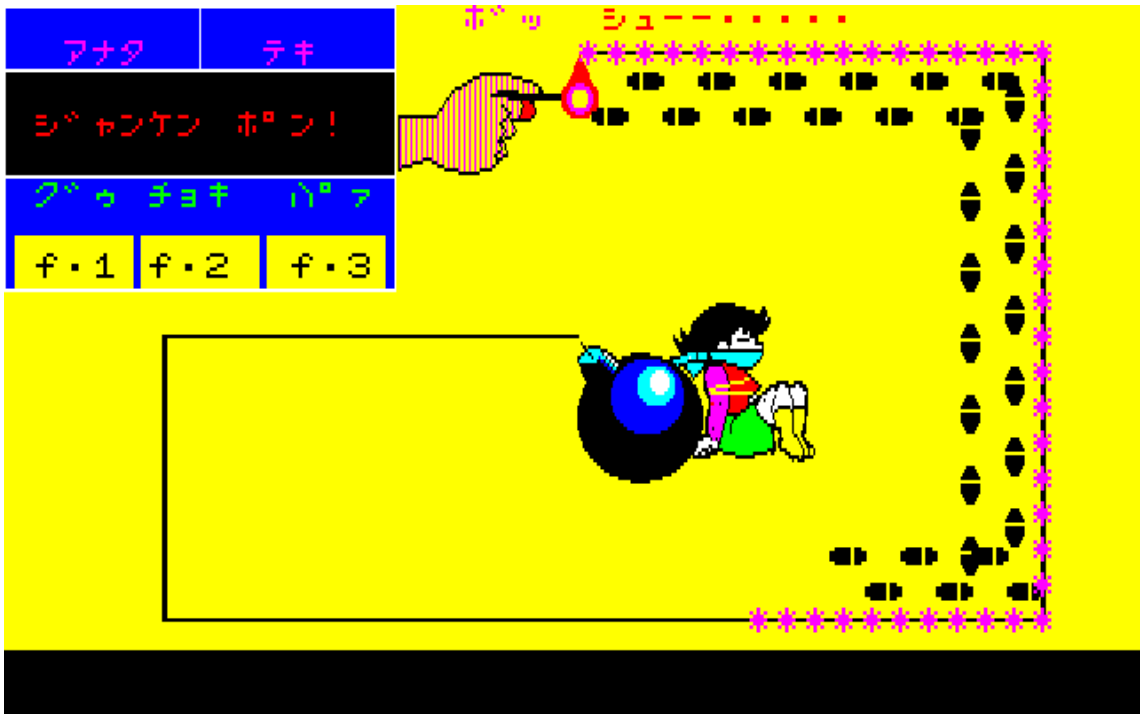

Figure 2.5: *Marichan Kiki Ippatsu gameplay image.*

The player was tasked with saving Mari by winning a series of real time rock-paper-scissors matches. Each conquered level would grant the player an increasingly stripped Mari, and completion of the game would reward final victory with a full nude picture of the girl as a reward. These pictures were known as *gohōbi-e* (reward images) and would go on to define erotic game production (Miyamoto et al 2013).

Losing would mean the death of the girl, complete with funerary picture displayed at the game over/continue screen.

Marichan Kiki Ippatsu is worthy of note because, by putting the player in the shoes of a would-be savior, can be said to have planted the first seeds of games involving a bond with a character. In fact, the player is shouldered with the responsibility of saving Mari's life.

Figure 2.6: *Marichan Kiki Ippatsu reward image.*

A similar title, which also pitted the player as a would-be savior of a group of girls in distress, is *Lolita Syndrome* (Enix 1983), where a group of girls represented as per *lolicon*[7] aesthetics must escape from death in a house filled with torture devices ready to take their lives. Interestingly, death is depicted in the most gruesome ways, with the girls being rendered apart, exploding, being sliced or struck in the head with a knife.

The double power which is entrusted to the player is either to save the girls or to kill them by failing, and the vividly depicted reaction on the girl's faces, which was an improvement over the depiction of Mari in *Marichan Kiki Ippatsu*, are able to create a

[7] Portmanteau of lolita and complex, refers to an aesthetic which focuses its attention on young/pre-pubescent girl characters, with an emphasis on playfulness and innocence. Lolicon's influences on erotic games will be discussed further through this chapter. It is however extremely important to immediately state that the term lolicon does not refer to the situation of an older man feeling pedophiliac attraction towards a real pre-pubescent girl, but rather it is the attraction towards fictional characters which display the aforementioned aesthetic elements of youth, innocence and playfulness (Galbraith 2014).

feeling of engagement focused solely on the girl. Even though the presence of other, nefarious parties is implied both in *Marichan Kiki Ippatsu* and *Lolita Syndrome*, the only character present on the screen that can be the target of the player's empathy is either Mari or one of the girls being held prisoner in the house of tortures. It can thus be argued that the player is brought to empathize with the captive girl.

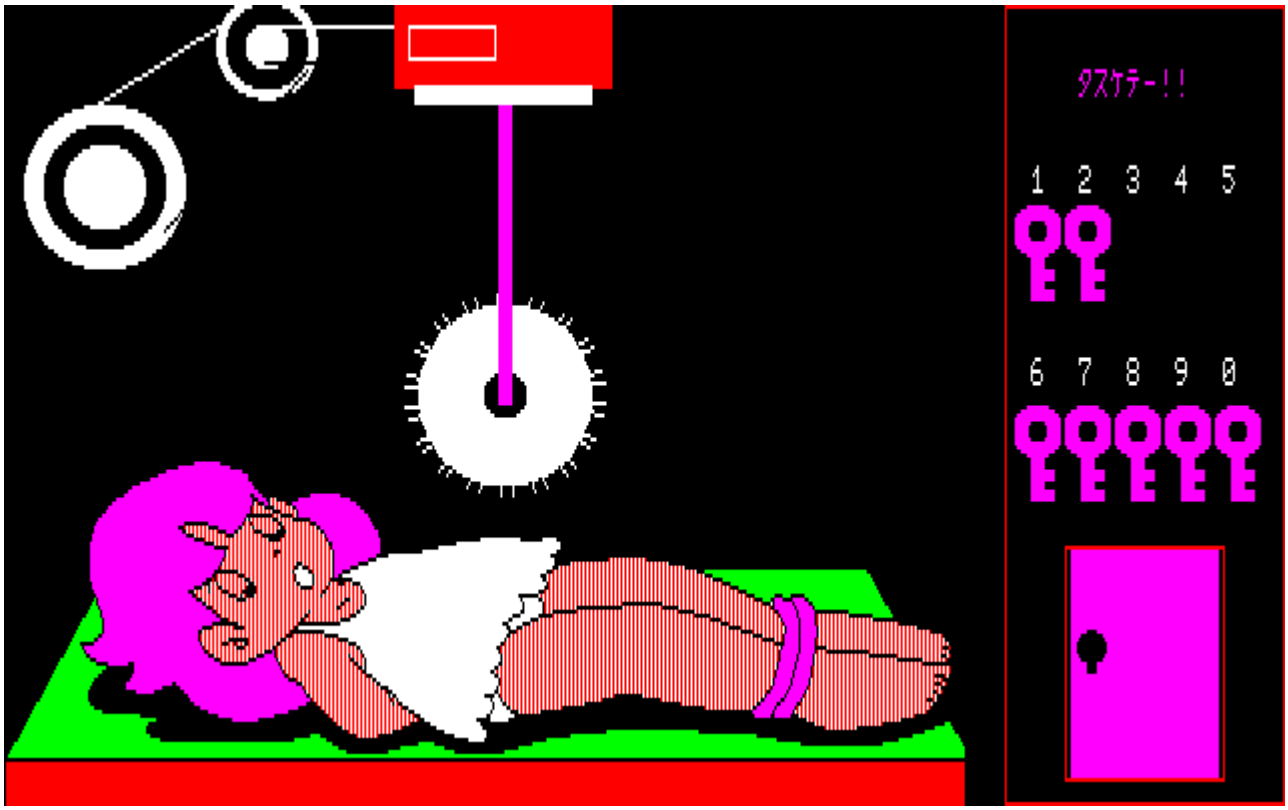

Figure 2.7: *Lolita Syndrome gameplay screen*

One further element in support of the presence of a bond of engagement within these two games is that both games where in fact fan-made software, each the winner of Enix's Game Hobby Program Contest, a recurring programming competition devised by the company in order to gather potential new programmers. The prizes of the competition all included the publication of the software and various sums of money, with one million yen awarded to the first place (Miyamoto et al 2013). The contest, while initially not very successful, gathered up steam after a massive advertising campaign on TV, stores, clubs, computer and manga magazines, with thirteen titles selected for publication by February 1983 (Fujii 2006).

It should also be noted that the designers deliberately chose to create pornographic games and that it was not a requirement of the contest (Wysocki and Lauteria 2015).
Another interesting example, albeit of the non-erotic kind, is the Square co. production *Suishō no Doragon* (The Crystal Dragon, Square co. 1986), which was released on the Famicon and featured a cursor-driven point and click system in which the player had to move the cursor on the screen to examine elements and interact with them.

Figure 2.8: *screenshot from Suishō no Doragon's fan translation.*

A key difference from computer games was the addition of animated scenes (commissioned to animation powerhouse Sunrise co.) and the great care employed in drawing the various imaginary girl characters and the fact that it was not possible to get to a failure state. The player was free to enjoy the content without the pressure resulting from having to perform in a skills-based setting.
With the start of a decline in the importance of raw skill in favor of pure enjoyment of content, it is pertinent to look at the underlying system which get the player from the game's main menu to its conclusion, be it the game's conclusion or a game over screen.

All games, not just video games, base their operation on a set of rules, and this is even more true in the case of any computer-based media as the computer itself is based on the rigid rules of the CPU's own machine code.

Within early erotic games, the rules of each game were not particularly different from other, non-erotic game offerings: the player had to solve the problem posed by the game, such as deducing the correct sequence of commands to input for each housewife in *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* or the rock-paper-scissors guessing needed to free Mari from her plight in *Marichan Kiki Ippatsu.* The capability of following these rules in a way not dissimilar from a procedure has been defined as the procedural aspect of computer games.

Game scholar Ian Bogost (2007) has theorized that the simple analysis of content, such as moving images, pictures, writing, spoken words etc., cannot resolve a full and fair picture. Games must be analyzed as computational artifacts and how players find meaning in them (Bogost 2007). In other words, it is necessary to understand what we can do within games before it is possible to render a full image of the role of video games. This echoes the position of Rutter and Bryce (2006), which highlights that *games are cultural artefacts which are given value, position and meaning through their production and use*.

This is even more interesting when the progressively decreasing interactivity in erotic games is taken into account. The rules to achieve a victorious state, which in the beginning placed the erotic content behind substantial challenges to the player's skills, the progressive decrease from the guessing needed in *Danchi Tsuma no Yūwaku* or the investigative and time management skills needed to find the gynoids o*f Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka,* were gradually lessened and turned into a framework where the player could easily access and enjoy content. The turning point of this shift began in 1983.

Content over challenge

Amongst the various winners of the Hobby Program contest there was one Yujii Horii, a freelance writer for *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* magazine which won the June 1983 Hobby

Program Contest with a very peculiar game going by the title of *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* (The Portopia Serial Murders Case, Enix 1983), a murder mystery adventure game featuring non-linear gameplay. Within *Portopia*, the player is not tasked with challenges involving hand-eye coordination or burdened by time limits. The player is instead pitted against a mysterious killer, which could be identified amongst the varied cast of characters. The killer could be any of the game's many characters and multiple conclusions could be reached from the starting point, although success is only reached if the real culprit is identified by the player at the storyline's climax. The game employed minimal graphics and interaction was achieved by way of a text parser.

Figure 2.9: *Portopia gameplay screen.*

In order to achieve their ultimate objective of catching the culprit, the player had to investigate a variety of crime scenes and interrogate a number of people, which, in the best tradition of mystery fiction, all had their ulterior motives and personal histories which could either ease or hinder the player's investigation. As the player interrogates the various suspects, he uncovers a seedy mystery about bankruptcies, frauds and a twin suicide, with each character slowly revealing their backstories during the course of one-on-one interrogations and crime scene investigations.

Due to the limits of the various computer systems of the time, the game features essential graphics, which were not capable of (and in fact did not attempt) any realistic representation of human beings, opting for more stylized shapes.

In fact, these representations superficially resembled cartoon characters not unlike those found within manga/anime, especially in the case of the characters of high schooler Yukiko and delinquent drug dealer Toshiyuki.

Figure 2.10: *Portopia gameplay screen.*

What is most important in *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* is that the player, although tasked with resolving a crime, is not expected to derive satisfaction from the mere recovering of clues or proceeding through the game, but rather from progressively uncovering information about the murder so that the narrative can advance. The game is not so much about cracking the puzzle as it is about experiencing the story.

Horii would later continue with this focus on the plot in two later titles, *Hokkaidō Rensa Satsujin Ohōtsuku ni Yuki* (Enix 1984) and *Karuizawa Yūkai Annai* (Enix 1985).

Figure 2.11: *Hokkaidō Rensa Satsujin Ohōtsuku ni Yuki.*

Figure 2.12: *Karuizawa Yūkai Annai*

The latter is the most noteworthy, because it put the player within the context of an amorous relationship with one of the characters, and tasked them to find the character's missing sister. *Karuizawa*'s plot was no longer completely about solving a murder but also about the player's relationship with his girlfriend, and how this could affect the plot at large. Emotional engagement could be established with one of the characters and on top of that, it was this very character, the player's girlfriend, which gave contest to the whole game world, as she was the element which brought the player into the game's world and put the whole narrative in motion.

The focus on emotional engagement, which was further accentuated in Horii's mainstream smash series Dragon Quest, was confirmed by Horii himself many years later in an interview, where he outlined the reasons of emotional focus he employed within games: *At the time I first made Dragon Quest, computer and video game RPGs were still very much in the realm of hardcore fans and not very accessible to other players. So I decided to create a system that was easy to understand and emotionally involving, and then placed my story within that framework* (Horii 2007).

The root of this framework, which can be found already in Portopia, are said to have exerted a defining influence on textual adventure games and by extension, games which fit into the visual novel label (Szczepaniak 2014). In fact, later erotic game would later employ the framework of the adventure game. Notable examples include titles such as *Tenshi-tachi no Gogo* (The Angels' Afternoon, JAST 1986).

The series employed a framework similar to the one found in *Portopia*, but instead of solving a murder, it tasked the player with conquering the affections of the school's tennis idol, which would require social interaction with her friends in an effort to gradually get close to her.

The game's main objective of seducing the tennis idol did not prevent the player from pursuing romances with the various characters in the school, which would led to the player discovering their backstories, which would be necessary for the player to have enough information to finally get intimate with the girl. The process of discovery would gradually trigger special events in which the character would get the developed, and this was valid for all the game's heroines.

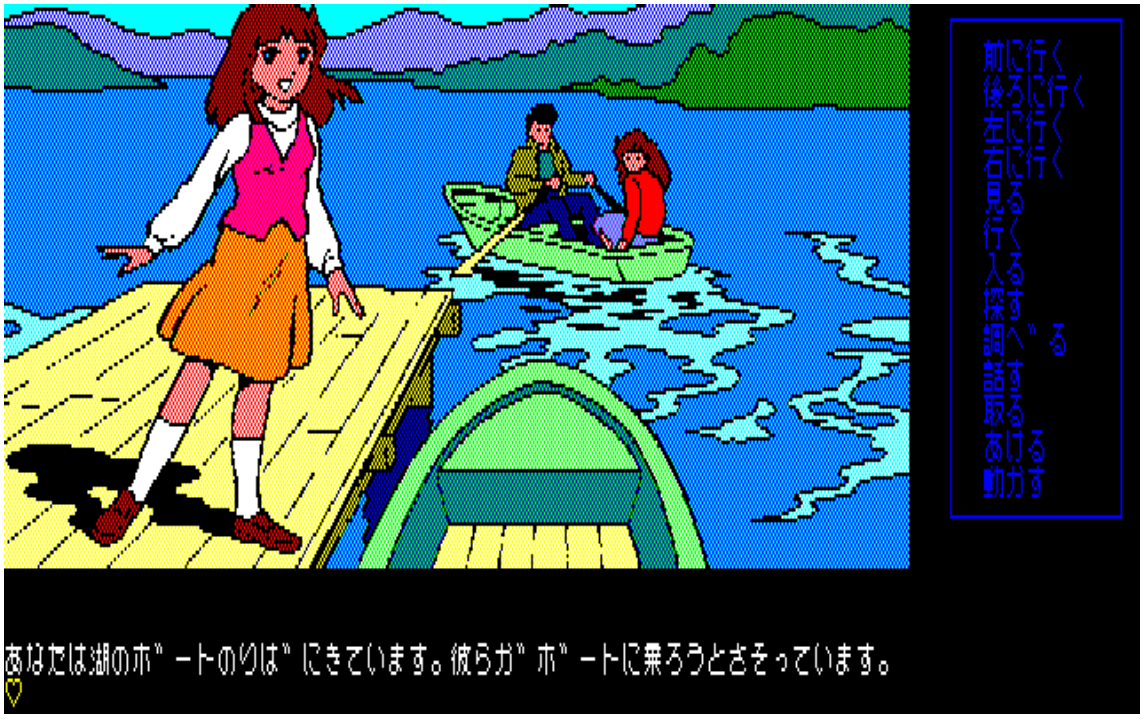

Figure 2.13: *Tenshi-tachi no Gogo*

Figure 2.14: *Tenshi-tachi no Gogo*

Miyamoto (2013) notes that while the general framework of choosing the right answer to conquer the girl was already been approached in the earlier *Tōkyō Nampa Street* (Enix 1985), this was the first game in which the idea of setting story triggers to advance the plot and the relationship with the girl was developed. Rewards for successful interaction were not limited to *gohobi-e* anymore, but were rather expanded to include a story element, which would allow a deepening of the player's sense of empathy with the character.

Another element which is extremely worthy of attention is the deliberate employment of *bishōjo* aesthetics within the game, even at a time of limited graphics. *Tenshi-tachi no Gogo* marks a deliberate intersection of *bishōjo* aesthetics with a focus on getting content, rather than challenge, delivered to the player. The game would become a success and span a long series of sequels.

Trailing this development was the increase in power experience by home computer machines, which allowed a gradual shift to 16 bit machines from the previous 8bit dominance, allowing for increased image resolution and ampler color palettes. This allowed PC Games to feature smoother lines and increased shading, allowing images which could be closer in detail to animation and manga, and this would led to an ever-increasing featuring of anime/manga styled images within PC Games, and by extension, erotic games.

Development of the *bishōjo* aesthetic

Sasakibara Gō (2004) highlights that the works of Hideo Azuma, Hayao Miyazaki and Rumiko Takahashi are the so called 'big three' which influenced the development of the bishōjo, both as an aesthetic and as a type of character.

Hideo Azuma emerged as an author who combined girl's manga styled expressivity to Osamu Tezuka styled characters in the late ninety-seventies during his contributions to a fanzine known as Cybele. Finding the result to be erotic and uninterested in the nude photographs and realistically styled gekiga erotic manga circulating at the time (Azuma Hideo and Yamada 2011), Hideo Azuma accomplished a stylish simplicity in which cuteness was the predominant mode of affection, rather than sexual attraction, and

placed those characters in sexual situations (Galbraith 2014). In fact, by inserting sexuality in the extremely manga-like and cute Tezuka-styled characters as part of his activities at Cybele, he produced what Sasakibara Gō (2004) deems a shift in values through the Japanese manga fanbase, which he also highlights as the beginning of the appearance of a fanbase interested in female characters.

> *The striking success of Cybele is a symbolic coming out of shōjo manga and anime fans, whose numbers had been quietly growing in the 1970s. Though often ignored, the phenomenon of desire for fictional characters is as old as otaku culture itself. It is well known that complex anime narratives (which required regular viewing) such as Space Battleship Yamato (1974-75) inspired a surge in adult fandom, but what is less commented on is that many men were watching anime made for girls, as well as watching anime for its girl characters (Takatsuki 2010: 97). In fact, in 1974, many anime fans watched Heidi, Girl of the Alps (1974) instead of Yamato (Yoshimoto 2009: 106). Even when Yamato did become popular in reruns, fans rallied around the female characters* (Galbraith 2014).

The second of the big three names is Hayao Miyazaki, and in particular, the youthful characters he designed for several series he authored such as Lana in *Mirai Shōnen Conan* (Nippon Animation 1979) and the pivotal character in the Lupin the 3rd movie, the Castle of Cagliostro (1979), Clarisse (Galbraith 2014). These characters all displayed the characteristics of innocence and playfulness, together with a very young age. They do not entice the main characters of the plot, and take center stage in scenes which enhance the sense of innocent purity the viewer perceives around them.

Another important element highlighted by Gō Sasakibara(2004) is the shift in role by the girl, which was no longer a character whose sole aim is to generate fan service by exposing their panties. In fact, this development signaled that the audience was looking for female characters which could be empathized with. The increase in sexualization of these fictional characters, which had progressively gotten further and

further from realistic representations, where noted by Taimatsu Yoshimoto (2009) to be, for the purposes of desire, real, even though they were completely fictional entities which did not concern themselves with the representation of real persons.

The case of Rumiko Takahashi's smash hit manga series, Urusei Yatsura, followed a slightly different. Within the series' pivotal character of Lum Invader, which was arguably another of the *moe* character prototypes that emerged around this era. As a character, Lum sported a series of elements which would later become commonplace within imaginary girl characters. The first and most striking element of the character is Lum's sex appeal: she is constantly almost naked, sporting only her signature tiger-striped bikini swimsuit. She is drawn with features what accentuates her beauty as being exotic (one example is the heavy makeup drawn around her eyes). Last but not least comes the real-life inspiration for Lum's character, Chinese-Hawaiian gravure model Agnes Lum, which was so popular she used to be referred to as 'Lum-chan' by the Japanese public.

Beyond the visual elements, there is another important element which predated a category of elements employed within character design. The element is Lum's particular way of speech, which combines a series of linguistic elements which, although could be related to the real world, in fact combine themselves to refer to the character of Lum. Shunsuke Nozawa highlights how her modes of speech turns her into a character rather than linking her to the real world:

> *Consider the designing of character language. Some anime and manga characters (as well as 'working characters') are known for their peculiar speech patterns which, or whose aesthetic effects at least, are not reducible to the actual-world distribution of variations. Take the character Lum from Takahashi Rumiko's vastly popular manga Urusei Yatsura (1978-1987), for example. Her speech so frequently features forms such as the first person singular uchi, the interrogative ke, and the clause-final copulative daccha, that these forms have come to constitute a set of verbal emblems that distinctly point to her and, as far as I can see, no other character. (A*

character or a person using these forms would most likely be interpreted as enacting a citation – parody, mimicry, etc – of Lum.) (Nozawa 2013)

The construction of this distinct identity, although has made Lum Invader popular and memorable both in Japan and Abroad, would later found iterations in the creation of *moe* characters. As Nozawa highlights, the creation of Lum was arguably the blueprint by which new characters could be created. The success of these characters led to the compounding of visual elements which would be iterated within erotic games. Moreover, the visual elements would be combined with a set of speech patterns and a certain way of voicing the character, usually featuring a certain combination of pitches and tones posed to evoke endearing sentiment in the audience and generate a sense of desire towards the character, and with it, emphatic engagement.

The advent of increased storage capacity mediums and more powerful hardware, which allowed increased graphical fidelity and the implementation of a soundtrack. Furthermore, the commercialization of home computer machines capable of supporting the much more powerful MIDI music format allowed articulate soundtracks and higher fidelity sound within software development in a way that did not require exorbitant amount of storage space. The inclusion of more powerful means of reproducing sound on home computer machines would later be employed to add voiceovers to characters, as it was the case with games developed for the PC-Engine, which started to feature professional voiceovers.

The increase in available storage space brought by the introduction of more capable storage mediums allowed both an increase in graphical fidelity and the inclusion of a more articulate soundtrack, mirroring what was taking place within the mainstream video game market. One such game, which has been argued to be the archetype for modern bishōjo games, is *Dōkyūsei* (Classmates, ELF Corporation 1992).

Figure 2.15: Lum Invader (Takashi Rumiko/Shōgakukan 1978-1987)

This game, which pitted the player in the role of a recently transferred male student with nothing but wooing beautiful girls on his mind, featured a top-down map representing the various game locations, together with a division of each day in a number of time segments, in an effort to meet the game's various characters, in a setup reminiscent of *Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka*.

The setup, however, was not randomized at the start of each game, and the player had to find and follow a specific character in order to win her over, experiencing her storyline in the process (ELF Corporation 1992).

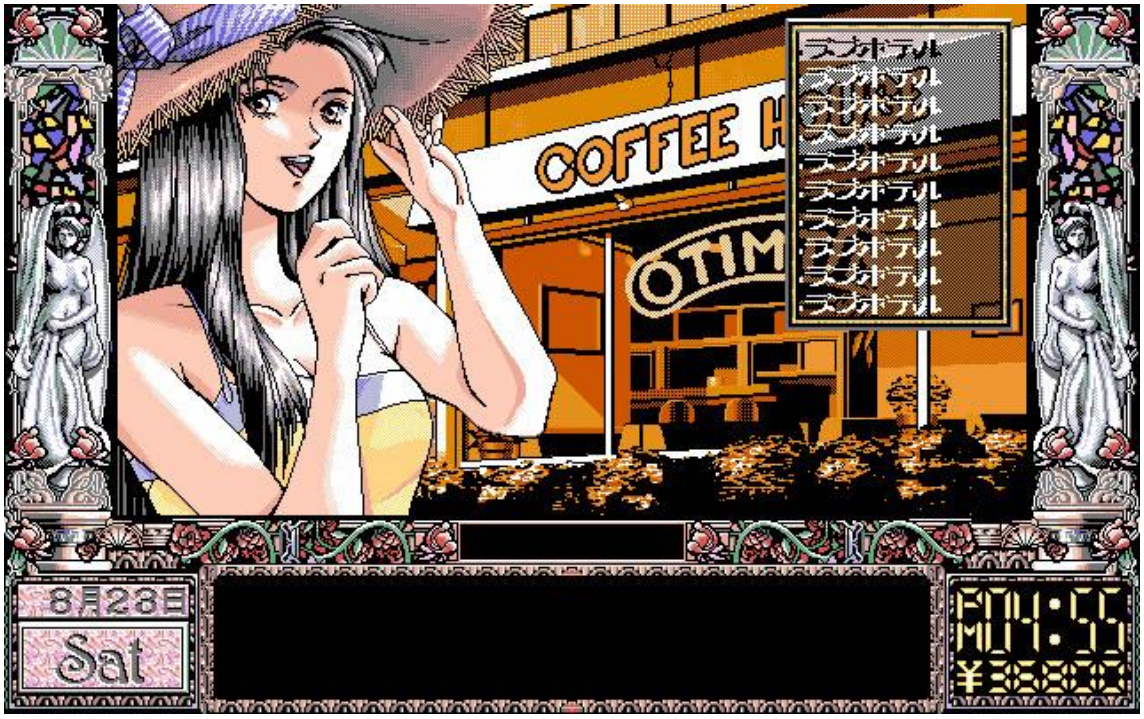

Figure 2.16: *Dōkyūsei character interaction screen. Note the character's aesthetics.*

Figure 2.17: *Dōkyūsei free roam screen.*

The game included advanced graphics which now allowed enough fidelity to mimic animation. Another major step in the game's structure is the employment of a

background representing a particular scene's locale and 2D images representing the characters within the scene, in a simplified setup which would become the archetypal setup by which every visual novel would be known.

Characters too were extensively developed and followed character design tropes found in manga and anime, with a heavy emphasis on the special events the player needed to experience in order to advance the storyline. The game's main heroine (and mascot for the whole software), Mai Sakuragi is a good example of this process at work. A pink-haired member of the school's swimming club and with good academic achievements, she is of amiable disposition towards the player, but her storyline of conflict with her rich family and her will to go against the fate her family has set for her makes the player empathize with her and focuses the player's gaze on her, with little to no regard for the player's hapless avatar, who is a completely blank slate for the player to interpret and shape according to their actions during the game.

Mai's story is not original at all. It has been featured in a plethora of other manga and animated productions. The same can be said for the other heroines of the game. Originality was not what was sought during the development of the game.

To this regard, a few words need to be spent regarding the makers of *Dōkyūsei,* ELF corporation. This corporation was formed on April 27th, 1989 in Tokyo by Masato Hiruta, Atsushi Kanao, and Toshihiro Abiru, a group of game designers that split off FairyTale, which in turn was a breakthrough company from JAST, the makers of *Tenshi-tachi no gogo*.

This group of designers and scenario writers,[8] in the founding of Elf corporation, produced a shift from the products developed by Fairy Tale. While Fairy Tale kept developing titles which focused on traditional erotic game products, Elf responded to the public's desire for fantasy characters as part of the western European fantasy

[8] The term scenario writer is a term that indicates, roughly, what is referred to as the game writer in western game development. It's a role that not only writes the story proper, but also assists in the building of the world that is not directly referenced within the game's narrative. Within visual novels, the role of scenario writer also extends to crafting the 'rules' by which the narrative will abide to.

boom that was sweeping through Japan at the time, which led to another important title that would influence the development of *Dōkyūsei, Dragon Knight* (ELF Corporation 1989).

The game put the player into the shoes of a lone warrior by the historically epic name of Yamato Takeru, which set out to rescue a series of beautiful women held captive in a tower. The player had to climb the various floors of the tower, fighting monsters through turn based fights, gaining experience and levelling up in a Role-Playing Game framework. The game's graphics during dungeon crawler and the various events that unfold on the screen are clearly different, with the full color event serving as a clear

The setting, the fantasy-styled kingdom of Strawberry Fields, which is populated solely by beautiful women, is styled after the boom of European fantasy anime and manga whose aforementioned boom was exerting great influence through Japan. In fact, character designs of the various characters in the game are reminiscent of the animated adaptation of animated fantasy classic, *Rodossu Senki* (Record of Lodoss War, Kadokawa Shoten 1983-1993) which originated from a series of pen and paper roleplaying sessions published on the computer video game magazine Comptiq (Kadokawa Shoten 1983-present day) from 1986 to 1988 and then rewritten and published in novel form.

In a sense, the Dragon Knight series can be said to respond to an urge for consuming characters. In fact, the fascination which was exerted by the character Deedlit from *Rodossu Senki*, an Elf mage which was played by science fiction novelist Hiroshi Yamamoto during the *Rodossu* roleplaying sections and other characters in a fantasy setting, was iterated across the *Dragon Knight* series and in other titles such as *Rance* (Alicesoft 1989). The case of Deedlit is very interesting, because it echoes once more the process of world disclosure as described within the first chapter of this thesis (cf. Kompridis 1994). What made the fantasy world 'readable', if one wants to employ a computer-based metaphor, was the presence of Deedlit. And in turn, Deedlit communicates *Rodossu*'s rich fantasy world: her poses, her clothes, her sharp, pointy ears signifying her being an elf.

The meeting of consumer desire for 'more of the same' extended character fascination to the universes they inhabited and in turn linked them to their host universes, making the imaginary girl character the filter by her host narrative universe was conveyed to the player, and which played a part in generating engagement towards the character by presenting interesting locales and emotionally charged situations in which the player could further develop their bond with the character. A parallel development to the tendency to follow characters was the rise of a narrative-intensive game genre, the sound novel, which further eschewed interaction in favor of content.

Sound Novels, Leaf's Visual Novel Series and Utsugē: characters and content first

Sound Novel is a term which was employed (and trademarked) by game company Chunsoft, and referred to a series of video games which involved the player reading through a story and then coming up on decision point until they reached a conclusion, which could have been more or less positive, with either the culprit caught or the player's character and/or their companions dead.

The first game published by Chunsoft was *Otogirisō* (Saint John's Wort, Chunsoft 1992). The player was put into the shoes of Kohei, a young man stranded inside a seemingly haunted mansion in the company of his girlfriend Nami. The narrative, written in the first person, was characterized by a high degree of suspense and a focus on the soundtrack as a provider of atmosphere (hence the name 'sound novel'). Graphics were extremely limited, with no characters on the screen and only a simple background image representing the scene's locale on the screen.

This simple framework, combined with the thrill to discover the mystery hidden in the mansion, was a simple but potent drive for the player to continue reading. Within sound novels, there were no gameplay elements driving the player forward. The writing itself was responsible to keep the player on track. The writing, done in the first person comparable to a mystery novel, riveted the audience, which, once captivated, would then follow the (mis)adventures of the protagonists until the very end. Every choice mattered, as it could lead to an untimely demise and an end to the story. The balance of life and death choices would exert a deep influence

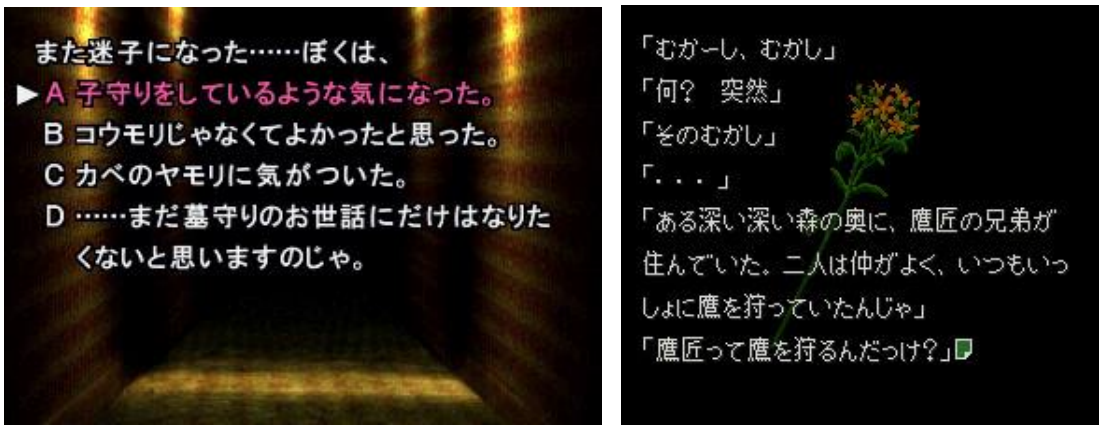

Figure 2.18: *two gameplay screens from Otogirisō: note the multiple choices in the left screenshot.*

This framework would be iterated by Chunsoft in other two titles, *Kamaitachi no Yoru* (Banshee's Last Cry, Chunsoft 1994) and *Machi (*The City*, Chunsoft 1998),* which introduced separate stories and switched the player's point of view between multiple characters. *Kamaitachi no Yoru* built upon *Otogirisō*'s framework, and placed the player in a similar horror premise, with main character and player avatar Tōru and his girlfriend Mari drawn into a murder mystery while on vacation at a ski lodge. This time, there were multiple possible conclusions to the story, and side narratives connected with the main plot could be unlocked once certain endings had been viewed by the player while also providing an incentive to replaying the game multiple times in an effort to unlock every ending and acquire all information on the story.

Machi took this even further and made the player face multiple choices which could influence other characters.

Interestingly, in both *Otogirisō* and *Kaimaitachi no Yoru* the player is put in the shoes of a main character which is currently in a relationship, which is then put in danger. This narrative setup, to work, must establish an emphatic relationship between the player and the girl, and harkens back to *Karuizawa Yūkai Annai,* which first employed it in a game segment.

What is different from *Karuizawa* in *Otogirisō* and *Kaimaitachi no Yoru* is that the player in a sound novel is never put in a position where they actively need to hunt for clues or actively interact to get to the next section. Within *Karuizawa Yūkai Annai* and

subsequent iterations of the murder mystery adventure game, the player had to actively look for the way to proceed to the next step, while the player is not able to do so in *Otogirisō* and *Kaimaitachi no Yoru.*

The popularity of the sound novel series, together with the string of imitators that it generated, together with the contained costs and skills required for developing one of these titles, set the stage for the employment of imaginary girl characters within an all-textual framework. The most prominent examples of this tendency are Leaf's *Shizuku* (Drip, Leaf 1996) and Elf's *Kono yo no hate de koi o utau Shōjo YU-NO* (YU-NO: A Girl Who Chants Love at the Bound of this World, ELF Corporation 1996).

Shizuku was peculiar because it spliced elements from previously released *bishōjo* games such as the *Dōkyūsei* series with the murder mysteries and atmosphere of Chunsoft's Sound Novels. In fact, the addition of a strong visual elements would lead to *Shizuku* being the first title in a series of games, the aptly titled Leaf Visual Novel Series, leading to the first official use of the term 'Visual Novel'.

Within *Shizuku*, the player was tasked with solving a mystery about a series of murders in a high school and would have to choose one character amongst three, leading to alterations in how the narration would play out. The substantial structure of the mystery would remain unaltered, but the relationships running between the player's character and the imaginary girl would change on the basis of the differences in character designs, making the incentives for replaying the game focused on establishing a new relationship with another imaginary girl character.

The latter of the two titles, *YU-NO,* which was written and directed by famed game writer Hiroyuki Kanno[9], employs what has been deemed by Hiroki Azuma (2009) as an

[9] (May 8th 1968 – Decembre 19th 2011) Born in Tōkyō, he authored various text-based erotic adventure games which were notable due for their employment of multiple perspectives into the narrative and multiple storylines presented as parallel universes. Another important aspect which influenced Japanese visual novel gaming as a whole (Azuma 2009) was the use of additional perspectives derived from alternate storylines to provide additional (and often vital) information for the understanding of the narrative world as a whole.

emphasis on the multilayered nature of narrative, or in other words, makes the two layered structure of database consumption evident.

The game featured a branching storyline with five characters whose affection the player could win over, but also sent the player across the various storyline with a dimensional travel device in order to retrieve a series of items in an effort to find a

Figure 2.19: *Shizuku. Note the combination of bishōjo aesthetics and the framework of sound novels.*

missing father figure, forming an overarching storyline to the various character-centric narratives, and introducing a duality to the main character (Azuma 2009).

> *It is extremely significant that a game with this structure exists. In out "animal age," the desire for small narratives at the level of simulacra and the desire for a grand non-narrative at the level of database coexist, dissociated from each other but without contradiction. As a result, in the otaku culture of the 1990s, on the one hand otaku have pursued without reserve narratives that can efficiently move emotions and characters by*

> *which they can efficiently empathize, and on the other hand have steadily categorized batches of moe-elements into database that can sustain such efficiency.* (Ibid.)

Azuma's employment of *Yu-No* as the case study for database consumption is interesting in the light of how characters and story-based games were reaching the shape of contemporary visual novels. However, the final step towards the shape of contemporary visual novels originated not within Yu-No, but rather in Leaf's continuing software production after *Shizuku*. Leaf iterated on the 'mystery sound novel with imaginary girl characters' framework they first developed with *Shizuku*, developing it further in a a second mystery text adventure by the title of *Kizuato* (Scar, Leaf 1996). The game once again pits the player at the center of a murder mystery, which compels him to action. Once again, he can be supported by one of a series of imaginary girl characters. This time, however, the story's structure was heavily influenced by Yu-No, with various routes delving deeply in a single character's story and motivation and adding information to the player's repository of clues towards the nature of the mystery.

The forcing of a certain order of play to the routes created an overarching plotline, which made the various routes chapters which continuously add information to the player's knowledge while also providing new content for the player to explore. Furthermore, the game's interactive segments to a limited series of extremely meaningful choices which could stir the game in a precise direction, which could include the main character's death or the death of one of the heroines.

Every decision could mean the abrupt end of the relationship established with the imaginary girl, enhancing the player's sense of empathy towards the girl and making the suspense in the story linked not solely to a simple case of discovering 'whudunnit'

as the story's own detective[10], but also in what fate will ultimately befall on the player's object of affection.

Moving away from the dark narrations of *Shizuku* and *Kizuato*, Leaf's chief scenario writer Tatsuya Takahashi wanted to explore more light-hearted themes, setting on a romance story to which he subsequently added a comical side (Tinami 2000). The result was a text-based game featuring school romance themes and characters, a clear departure from the blood-soaked murder mysteries of the previous two games in the Visual Novel Series. As it was already briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, what can be defined as the final step into the modern form of visual novel games. To Heart's development, in which the imaginary girls where sketched before any kind of story was devised, and in fact each character's storyline was a development of their design, and thus their constitutive elements, outlines what is the final intersection between imaginary girl character and games, with the game's own narration existing in function of the characters. Visual novel games would thus start to be categorized by what kind of imaginary girls present within the game, engaging database consumption in its purest form. Games meaningful interaction and advancement through the game's narration became irremediably intertwined with the imaginary girl, rather than the solving of the problem posed by the game itself.

To Heart spawned a plethora of games based on a similar framework, both on the market and within amateur circles. Important examples include Alicesoft's *Atlach-Nacha* (Atlach-Nacha, Alicesoft 1997), *One, Kagayaku Kisetsu He* (One: towards a season of brilliance, Key 1998) and TYPE-MOON's *Tsukihime* (The Lunar Princess, TYPE-MOON 2000). *Atlach-Nacha*, whose title refers the spidery deity belonging to the

[10] An interesting, if tangential, observation is that the player, while indeed in charge of making the decisions which will lead to the mystery's solution (or to one or more character's untimely deaths), is also a passive reader which slowly uncovers the text until he is called upon to make a new decision.

Figure 2.20: *Atlach Nacha gameplay screen*

wider universe of the Cthulhu Mythos, places the player in control of a female spider-Oni by the name of Hatsune in the aftermath of having suffered grievous wounds in the fight against a monk intent on sealing her away.

In need of more magic energy, she nests within a high school. The game tasks the player as Hatsune on the possibly gruesome task of feeding themselves by either seducing or mind-controlling a series of characters, with could either result in Hatsune building an army of mind-controlled slaves or a covenant of devoted and willing servants.

Beyond the fetishistic themes (lesbian sex, grotesqueries and sexual violence, among others) offered by the game's plot setup, the employment of this setup was yet another sign of the shift to a character-dominated framework in the development of text-based games. In fact, the player-controlled avatar conflated elements of monster

and *bishōjo* without contrast and was part of a larger trends which included monster girls across a variety of media (Miyamoto et Al 2013).

Satoshi Todome (2004) reported that *One, Kagayaku Kisetsu He*, was awaited with hype and went on to send major shockwaves through the entire industry. Similarly, *Tsukihime*, released at the 2000 Winter Comiket by then unknown *dōjin* circle Type-Moon, would lay the basis for a media franchise that is thriving to this day by mixing *bishōjo* characters and urban fantasy themes.

Similarly, the first generation of what would be referred to as *utsugē*[11] were released in this time frame, with titles such as *Kana ~Imōto~* (Kana Little Sister, Digital Object 1999), *D.C. ~Da Capo~* (Circus 2002), *Snow* (Studio Mebius 2003) amongst others, released at the turn of the millennium.

Figure 2.21: *D.C. ~Da Capo~ gameplay screen*

[11] Portmanteau of *Utsu* (Impress, strike) and *Gēmu*, literarly an impressing/striking game.

Utsugē relied even more on the relationship between the player and the character to drive the game forward to its conclusion, by centering characters befallen by deep tragedies such as illnesses or loss of family as the focus of the narration, generating emotion and empathy in the player as a result and leaving a lasting impression through a generally not positive conclusion for the characters involved.

Other genres of visual novels developed, all based on the type of emotion they could engender in the audience. *Nukigē*[12], for games which relied on sex-appeal alone. *Nakigē,* for games which would elicit sadness and melancholy through the character's storyline, only to end on an upbeat note.

Other games would offer horror, fantasy and sci-fi themes, coupled with characters which would engender empathic engagement along with scenes which would play on the player's sense of *moe*. Interaction further diminished to a set of choices whose meaning was however maximized, and led to the current state of visual novels, whose focus is completely set on providing emotion and interacting with said emotion. Games featuring *bishōjo* characters thus became focused on the characters to such a degree that no meaningful interaction could be made in a visual novel without involving the characters themselves.

A *bishōjo* character is always the focus of a route. Moving away from a character will inevitably result in a negative ending, which offers not solace or, in the case of tragic stories, a resolution to each character's database elements and the relative plot points, but rather the feeling of having the experience cut short. With the *bishōjo* character made the focal point of the game's narration and interaction, inevitably all other themes must transit through the *bishōjo* character and its relative aesthetic before being expressed, and this none more evident than in the case of this thesis' case studies: *Muv Luv* and *Muv Luv Alternative* (âge 2003, 2006).

[12] Portmanteau of *Nuku* (Strip) and *Gēmu*

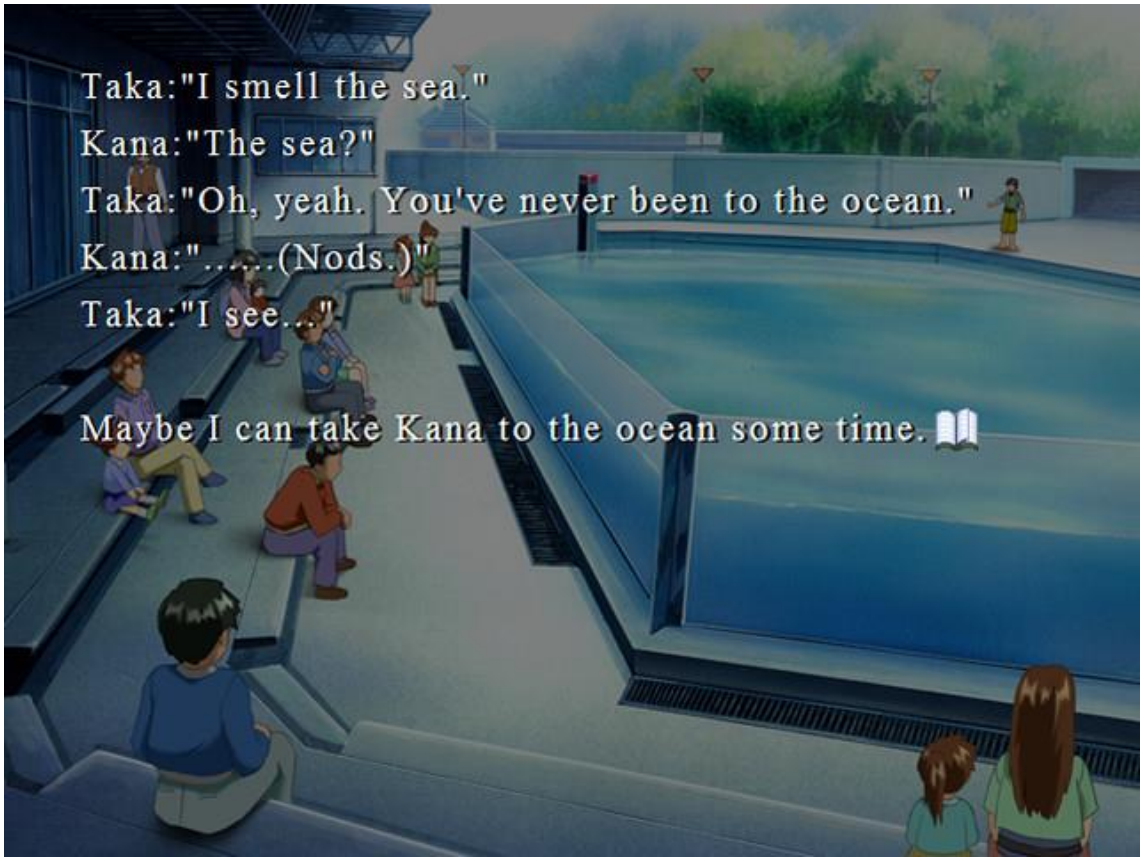

Figure 2.22: *Kana ~ Imōto ~ gameplay screen (English commercial release by JAST USA)*

Chapter 3 – Case Study part 1: The Muv Luv Franchise

Muv Luv and Game-like realism

This thesis' case studies will consist of the first two video game titles of the Muv Luv franchise, the eponymously named *Muv Luv* (âge 2003) and its direct sequel, *Muv Luv Alternative* (âge 2006). The reason for which these two titles have been selected to serve as the thesis' case studies is that these games present database-constituted bishōjo characters as the interface by which context and meaning is introduced to the player, therefore engendering the process of world disclosure/*Erschlossenheit* introduced in the first chapter of this thesis.

Within the franchise, the aforementioned diptych of titles are linked chrono-logically and thematically, presenting the same main character, High school student Takeru Shirogane, and the same cast of characters, which undergoes a process of re-contextualization as the game's setting shifts dramatically as the player progresses into the story. The game's wider narration spans three macro-segments, two of them composing *Muv Luv* and the latter being composed by the entirety of the second game, *Muv Luv Alternative*.

This trilogy of narrative segments starts with placing the player in a high school setting, in a way not dissimilar from other visual novels, introducing the game's cast of *bishōjo* characters by employing their constitutive database elements. The player's experience is thus not dissimilar to other visual novels. As the player traverses the game and completes the storylines of the game's two main characters (childhood friend Sumika Kagami and aristocratic rich girl Meiya Mitsurugi), they gain access to another storyline, *Muv Luv Unlimited*, which is chronologically set after the completion of Sumika Kagami's storyline and acts as a sort of game-within-the-game.

The setting shifts to a warn-torn world where earth suffered an alien invasion during an alternate cold war in which Japan was less subject to cultural westernization than in our timeline. The tone is bleak, the private academy which was the setting of the previous storylines is now a United Nations military base with armed guards at the gate.

Takeru's acquaintances and possible love interests are all cadets training to become soldiers in a war where the average survival timespan of a recruit in combat is eight minutes. No one knows Takeru, and by all intents and purposes, he does not exist. Not only that, Kagami Sumika apparently does exist.

Takeru is captured and questioned as a possible enemy spy, before he is released thanks to the auspices of the alternate version of the school nurse, which seeks him for his experiments. Takeru (and the player with him) is inducted in the United Nations armed forces. From this onwards, the player can romance the characters within this different setting, learning about the world's history, political entities, and in general, engage in a process of world disclosure.

It is by viewing each character's storyline and experiencing their constitutive database elements that the player can learn how this brave new world functions, and take in what is necessary to fully understand an articulate setting whose backstory reaches back to the Meiji restauration. This is extremely evident in Meiya Mitsurugi's storyline, where her constitutive database elements of aristocratic rich girl is re-contextualized by turning Meiya into the daughter of one of the regent households that form the basis of Japan's government within *Muv Luv Unlimited*.

Through this, the player is given a window into the functioning of the game's universe at large, while also drawing comparison with Takeru's previous world, which is used to discuss the meaning of Japanese identity. This makes database elements more akin to Eiji Ōtsuka's framework of narrative consumption (*monogatari shōhi*).

Ōtsuka argues that, when one consumes a media which is the reflection of a wider, overarching narrative (as so called 'small narrative) such as any media product in the Mobile Suit Gundam franchise, he is given a window into a wider, 'grand narrative' that encompasses the functioning of how the fictional world works: how people perceive themselves, which relationships exist between fictional nations, how the physics in that world work and so on (Ōtsuka 2010).

Not only the character is employed as a window to the background narrative which articulates the world, but the storyline ends on a bleak note, as humanity is left fighting to the last bullet while a handful of survivors escape from the planet in colony

ships. This conditions the player, as the final choice in each character's route is decide whenever to persuade the player's character of choice to leave (and survive) or to stay behind and die together fighting the aliens, with the former choice depicted in a more positive light.

All of the endings are very similar and all provide the basis on which the next segment of the franchise's narration, Muv Luv Alternative, is founded upon. Alternative begins with Takeru waking up and experiencing *Unlimited*'s storyline all over, with his memories intact. He has, in fact, lived all possible storylines all over again as a series of time loops. The horror which he witnessed over and over again gives him the resolve to prevent the events that led to humanity being doomed to leave earth.

By living the storyline in all its possible incarnation over and over again, he is aware that he can turn events to a more positive outcome and how to do it, so that so much death and bloodshed can be avoided.

The depiction of death and loss within *Muv Luv Unlimited* and *Muv Luv Alternative* are extremely interesting, especially in light of Azuma's (2007) framework of Game-like realism. It is character death that motivates Takeru (and with him the player) to act at the beginning of Alternative. What is interesting is that Takeru has undergone what Azuma defines as a reset which nullifies death (Ibid.) and yet death still carries meaning within his journey. The fact that each character cannot escape death contrast with Azuma's (2007) belief that, from a narrative standpoint, death does not carry meaning anymore due to the possibility of resets, alternative endings and character re-contextualization.

Depictions of time loops and how to break from them have been recurring through Japanese pop culture products during the first decade of the of the twenty-first century, which Azuma highlighted in his case study of media products such as *All you need his Kill* (Hiroshi Sakurazaka, 2007), the *Higurashi no Naku koro ni* series (When they cry, 7th Expansion 2002-2014), *Ever17: The Out of Infinity* (KID 2002) and *ONE: Kagayaku Kisetsu he* (ONE: to a Radiant Season, Tactics 1998), all of which feature time loops and characters being endlessly iterated, with the prevention of death being the ultimate task accomplished through metafictional experiences which allow the player

to employ information gained by experiencing character death to prevent it in a subsequent playthrough, unlocking a final storyline in which all the characters are saved and the source of evil is vanquished.

Figure 3.1: (gruesome) *character death in the animated adaptation of Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni. By repeating the loop of events with additional information, the main character (and the player with him) can prevent this bad ending, and thus saving the character.*

Within *Muv Luv*, this does not happen, as characters die both in *Unlimited* and *Alternative*, with a long portion of the game employed into making the main character of Shirogane Takeru, and the player with him, understand the meaning of death, even while employing themes which are proper to Azuma's game-like realism. A very interesting comparison can be drawn if we compare *Muv Luv* with one of Azuma's case studies, *Higurashi no Naku koro Ni*.

Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni is a long series of visual novels (called sound novels by the author) in which the player character, Ken'ichi Maebara, is struck at the epicenter of a series of murders which result in the death or insanity of various characters. Each game in the series deals with the same set of events while presenting new clues and new character deaths. The timeline loops across the games until Ken'ichi is

supernaturally able to remember his past incarnations, making him (and the player) able to solve the mystery and prevent the plot's gruesome conclusion, with no character dying and a happy ending ushered in.

Muv Luv, instead, tasks the player to send characters to die. Within *Unlimited*, the player is not called upon choosing one character amongst many, starting a relationship while the others still remain in touch and alive, but rather has Shirogane (and the player with him) forsaking a previous love interest (Sumika Kagami), establishing a new relationship with another character, and then choosing whenever to convince her to leave for the safety of space or opting to stay behind with her to die in the onslaught soon to come.

Muv Luv Alternative, while apparently offering the player the chance to reach a conclusion where character death is prevented, instead sets Takeru on a path where he un-forsakes the original love interest, is presented with a seemingly re-contextualized version of Sumika Kagami, which however is directly acknowledged not to be in any way an alternate universe version but rather an emulation of her original persona developed from her remains (a brain stem) which is killed in the process of creating this new character, which goes by the name of 00 Unit (see figure).

The 00 Unit is, by all intents and purposes, a re-contextualized Sumika Kagami, and yet is clearly stated that she is not in any way Sumika Kagami. Takeru engenders feelings of affection in her as the plot progresses and a bond is established, but there is no way Takeru (and the player) can bring back the 'true' Sumika Kagami within *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative*'s world during the course of the game.

The player is teased by such a possibility at the beginning of *Alternative*, but in the end, there is no way any of the characters can be saved, as Takeru is left being the sole survivor of his unit during the attack on the alien primary hive which turns the tide of the war in humanity's favor. And while he survives, he is sent back to his world, returning to his original timeline.

When compared to other games, especially the case studies presented by Azuma, in which the plot sees the main character/player travelling across substantially similar

timelines so that alterations can be produced thanks to the metafictional nature of the plot, what *Muv Luv* does is employing the metafictional nature of visual novel plots

Figure 3.2: *the first appearance of the 00 Unit. The lack of apparent database elements establishes a sense of distance in the player.*

and characters (and the expectations engendered by the framework of consumption) to substantially negate the possibility of character re-contextualization and multiple lives and deaths.

In other words, in the age of database consumption, *Muv Luv* makes character death matters once more. No matter what the player does, they will never be able to save the characters of *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative*. Either they will be able to make one escape into space while their avatar and the rest of the characters die and all humanity left on earth eventually die at the hands of the alien invaders in Unlimited or they can opt to save humanity from the alien invaders at the cost of the lives of all characters as the story concludes in *Alternative*.

No character within *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative* can ultimately be saved so that a relationship with the player can take place, nor a reset can effectively resurrect them, as the setting of *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative* is so strongly developed that any re-articulation of the re-contextualized characters in their constitutive database elements will inevitably carry over traces of their gruesome host setting, where they inevitably die. If we compare a character from *Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni* and one of the re-contextualized characters from *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative* (see figure), we can see that the characters in *ONE* can be traced back to pure database elements, while within *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative*, this is no longer the case.

Visual assemblages can still be traced back to single database elements which however end up carrying additional meaning due to their employment as narrative devices to establish and maintain character identity. In turn, character identity, which is composed by character database elements and the additional information placed upon them by the setting, needs to be conveyed in unaltered form to the player for consistency purposes, and thus allow re-contextualization (see Nozawa 2013).

In *ONE*, characters can be freely experienced by the player with no meaning carrying over onto the character's identity. In fact, this is not unlike the distinction between *Kyara* and *Kyarakutā* made by Gō Itō (2005). Itō makes this distinction to separate bodies possessing a personality (*Kyarakutā*) and more abstract and iconic drawings which can potentially become independent of the character's host text.

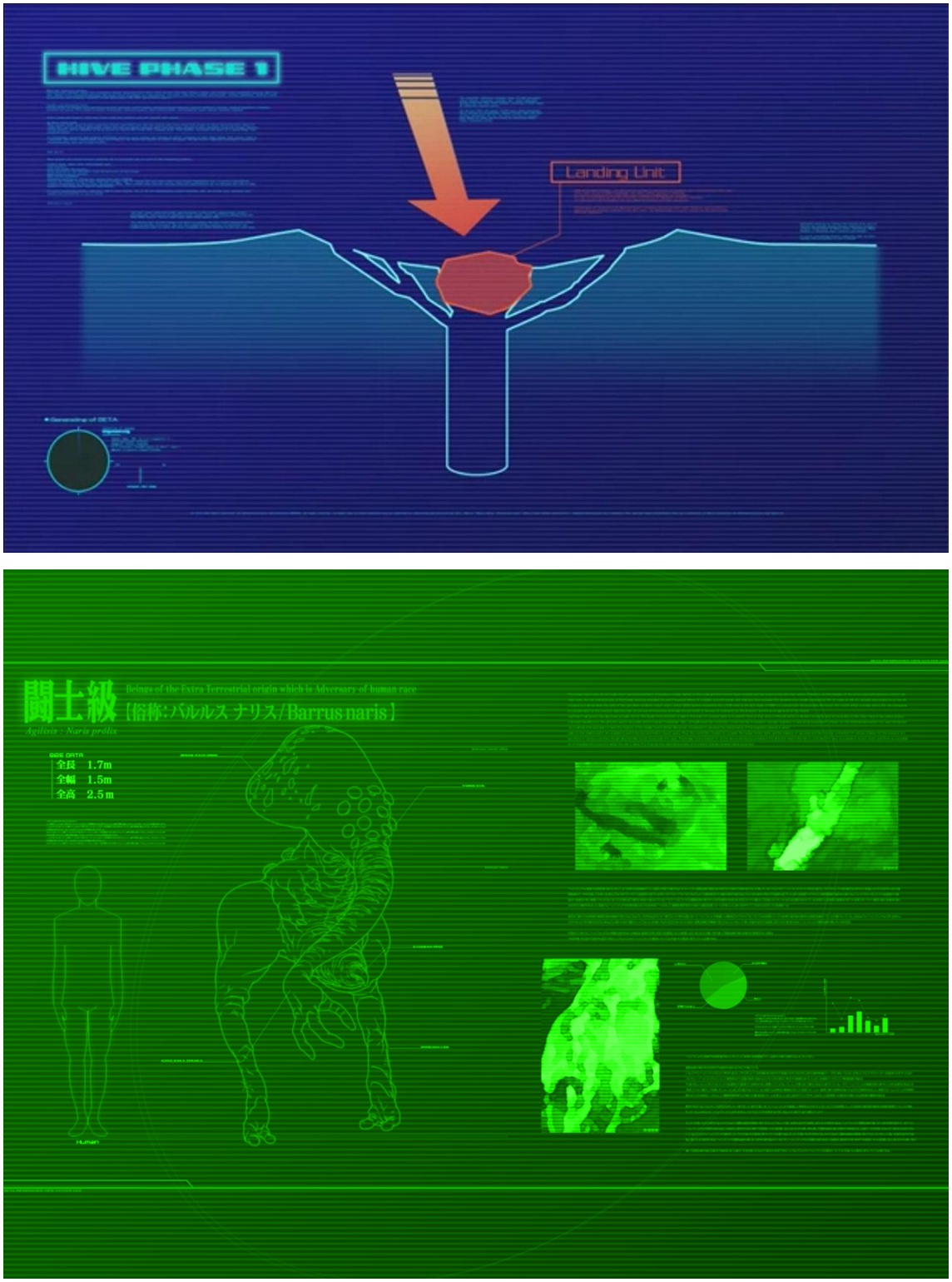

Figure 3.3 and 3.4: *illustrations detailing the workings of the alien invaders during the game. A non-insignificant portion of Muv Luv Unlimited is spent in detailing the world in which the narration takes place.*

This distinction, although Azuma (2007, 2009) argues otherwise, can still be applied in the era of database consumption, and in fact, even in the presence of the character database, narrative has not in fact disappear, but merely re-articulated through database elements, which is what happens within *Muv Luv*'s characters.

The more the setting is made complex, the more it needs to be articulated within each character's constitutive database element, which in turn need to convey the character's host setting to preserve character identity during the process of re-contextualization. This, inevitably, limits the possibilities of re-articulating characters in an unlimited fashion.

Within *Muv Luv* this is especially evident in light of death being definite and not a mere possibility amongst many. With no undoing of death possible, the re-articulation of characters is subjected to heavy limitations in order to preserve character consistency. Even the in-universe re-contextualization of characters which takes place as the setting shift from high school comedy to military science fiction results in a series of characters which, while able to be clearly linked to their high school comedy counterparts due to commonality of constitutive elements, are not equivalent, and possess a clear and distinct personality which, if re-contextualized, must be conveyed to maintain character consistency.

What's more, each of these re-contextualized characters dies at the conclusion of the game during the assault on the alien's primary hive. The player cannot save these characters and the universe's timeline is depicted as progressing in spite of character death, while Takeru is finally sent back to his original universe. By placing database-constituted characters in a setting so articulate that it possesses a clear alternate timeline dating back to the Meiji restoration with subsequent allo-historical changes, meaning is attached to the single database elements, resulting in a character with a distinct personality which, inevitably cannot be independent of their host text.

In light of the usage of database consumption within Muv Luv, database elements, which serve as the focus of the player's attention, are not merely items which composes characters, but in fact can serve as a language by which narrative can be expressed. The greater the amount of information that needs to be conveyed through

database elements, the smaller the possibility of re-contextualization with preservation of character identity (cf. Nozawa 2013) becomes.

This characteristic is what allows the game to make effective political statements, which are scattered through Unlimited and Alternative's storylines. First and foremost, the Meiji restoration is depicted as ending with an uprising of anti-Shogunal forces against the pro-western government, with the result of the enthronement of a new Shogun and the establishment a government system with the Emperor as the spiritual head of state and symbol of the nation and the shogunate ruling with the assistance of five so called 'regent houses'.

Japan maintains a nobility system, which is however not based in the historical *Kazoku*, but rather on Heian-era court ranks (see ixtl 2012). World War two is depicted as beginning with a Japanese declaration of war before the first attack is launched (differing from the historical surprise attack at Pearl Harbor) and ending with an honorable surrender by Japan in 1944 and atom bombs being dropped on Berlin (Ibid).

The difference between present day westernized Japan, depicted in Extra, and Japan within Unlimited/Alternative, is showcased at multiple points in the plot (one example is Tanabata being celebrated in place of Christmas). A more pronounced, less westernized Japanese identity is thus present and showcased through the narration, ranging from the absence of video games leading Takeru to muse on the heightened sense of community amongst the Japanese people, especially the youth, which are represented by the game's cast of characters. Duty, honor and responsibility are presented as ideal qualities, which are contrasted with a perceived laziness and lack of awareness of one's own identity in contemporary Japanese young people. This has been explicitly stated during interviews, both within official material (ixtl 2012) and during the announcement of the official English translation (Muv-Luv 2015).

Muv Luv, Database Elements and interactivity

The trilogy of narrative segments which composes the core franchise of *Muv Luv* is arguably a process by which a nightmarish science fictional universe is introduced, and within this universe, an attempt to debate a series of themes such as what it means to

be Japanese and Japan's relation with the world is discussed. This process is long-winded and starts with the standard high-school romance setting of *Muv Luv Extra*, in which the player is introduced to the game's cast of characters, to which an initial attachment can be formed.

As first and foremost a video game, *Muv Luv* offers an experience which is different from watching video media or reading printed matter. Consequently, the experience of the game requires a different approach. As of now, the paper has analyzed *Muv Luv*'s characters in the context of game-like realism, and now will analyze the game's experience in a more holistic way, in order to include all of the game's element within our discussion.

As argued by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006), within a video game, it is vital to analyze what contributes to the experience of the game overall. Their approach takes into consideration that video games make players gather items, interact with objects, all while assisted by a user interface, which also must be taken into consideration as part of the game's experience.

This approach has been echoed by Steven Malliet (2007), which divides video game content analysis into two categories: elements of representation and elements of simulation. Representation concerns content analysis, including audio-visual elements and narration, while simulation concerns all of the elements which contribute to the rules of the game, how the player achieves a state of victory, and more in general, how they are rewarded or punished for their actions on the basis of the game's interactive framework. Elements of simulation include complexity of controls, game goals, how the player interacts with the world through their character, how much the player is forced to follow pre-set rules and which properties the game world possesses.

Espen Aarseth (2012) suggested a more comprehensive model for analysis of narrative within video games, proposing four dimensions of analysis which are common to every game and every story: world, objects, agents and events, which we will use to analyze Muv Luv's three narrative segment in light of the possibilities (or lack thereof) for interaction offered to the player.

The world dimension comprises of the space traversed by the player, the path which the player takes from the beginning of the game to its conclusion, and can be linear (game's path always goes from A to B), multicursal (multiple paths towards one or more fixed endings) or open (no fixed path). Finally, a game's world is not merely composed of the arena where gameplay takes place, but also includes extra-ludic elements;

> *A game can contain two types of space, the ludic and the extra-ludic; the arena of gameplay, and the surrounding non-playable space. In certain games most of the space is extra-ludic, and the ludic space consists of narrow trajectories or corridors surrounded by static scenery. In other games, such as chess, the ludic space takes up the entire world. In others yet again, the players expand the ludic space by constructing more of it as part of the gameplay.* (Aarseth 2012).

Objects, what the player interacts with, can be static (their position in the game world is fixed), user-created (objects are created by the player, bonded to them and used to accomplish interaction) or dynamic (their position in the game's world can be changed). Furthermore, each object can contribute to the game's open-ended interactive processes or to the game's narrative. Agents, non-player characters range from being rich, round characters with a personality, and contributing to the game's narrative, to being scripted entities with no personality, which tend to contribute to the game's interactive processes.

The game's narrative events can be plotted (following a fixed sequence), selectable (the player can decide the order in which events will take place) or be open (no distinction between events and other game segments).

Aarseth (2012) employs the narratological concept of nuclei (events that define the story's identity) and satellites (supplementary events) and their relation to interactivity to classify video games into roughly four types:

1. The linear game (Half-Life): fixed kernels, flexible satellites.

2. The hypertext-like game (Myst, Dragon's Lair): Choice between kernels, fixed satellites.

3. The "creamy middle" quest game (KOTOR, Oblivion): Choice between kernels, flexible satellites.

4. The non-narrative game (Chess, The Sims): No Kernels, flexible discourse: just a game. (Aarseth 2012)

After the typology of game has been identified, the game can be analyzed in the four dimensions outlined above, and this is where *Muv Luv*, and to an extent all visual novels, demonstrate their peculiarities.

The way narrative is structure would place *Muv Luv* firmly into the category of hypertext-like games: the player chooses which event (which defines database constituted characters) and then proceeds to experience fixed narrative segments, or kernels. A more trickier part comes when approaching objects as, apparently, there are no objects with which the player interacts or even collects, unless character fullscreen art, as it's collected to form a collection of items accessible from an gallery screen, is considered as an inventory of items collected by the player through the course of the game. This would place objects in the static category, with no interaction possible but contributing to the game's narrative.

Database-constituted characters offer even more peculiarity in light of interactivity's relationship with database elements. On a cursory examination, a database-constituted character is a round character with a personality, and contributes to the game's narrative. The peculiarity of database-constituted characters lies however in their employment of the character database framework, by which characters are sequences of elements which engender attachment in the player. While the database elements come from a shared database, the way the player generates attachment suggest a deeper frame of interaction, as the player generates meaning by 'connecting the dots' between each of the database elements that constitute the characters.

This is interesting in light of a series of comments about the phenomenon of character engagement/moe: Studio GAINAX director Kazuya Tsurumaki (Kōdansha 2003) remarked that moe is the act of bridging missing information on a character's background. This process of bridging missing information, while starting from the fixed foundation of the character's own sequence of database elements, is inherently interactive and ludic in its capability to generate a personalized version of the character's in the form of one's own way of bridging the gap between the elements.

Critic Okada Toshio (2008), although refraining from claiming total understanding of the phenomenon, remarked that *moe* is not limited to the engendering of feelings of affection; it also includes the awareness of falling into such an emotional state. One thus does not simply fall into a state of engagement with a character, but they are also aware that they are falling in such a state.

Both the process of connecting the dots and being aware of connecting the dots offer a new perspective on interactivity within visual novel games, as characters within visual novels become a focus of personalized interactivity. As the player expand upon the character's constitutive database elements, it is possible to argue that they are expanding the game's ludic space to include previously non-interactive elements.

Defining this expansion of ludic space is problematic, as the interaction with characters (which are in turn strings of database elements) takes place both within and without the game: database elements are realized within the narration, but at the same time the process of connecting the dots, which personalizes the character and ultimately engenders empathy, takes place in the player's own mind, drawing upon their imagination. To expand the ludic space to include the player's own mind would make even conventional media such as books akin to games, when they are clearly not.

However, this makes database elements, and the portions of the narrative which are influenced by them, potential ludic space, where the player can creatively interact with the player. The result is a personalized experience which, while having enough in common to be shared amongst multiple players, just like two players can share a common experience in having tackled an obstacle course in a platform game and having undergone similar but not identical experiences, the nature of database

elements makes it so that the engendering of engagement is part of the game, and the statements by Tsurumaki (Kōdansha 2003) and Okada (2008) are all the more proof of this, as feeling *moe* is both connecting the dots and being aware that one is falling into such a state.

To being aware of it, one must know how such a state its triggered, which implies at least some knowledge of the rules that regulate the triggering and development of such a state. The reliance of rules to create possibly open-ended results bestows a procedural quality to the generation of meaning through database elements.

Procedural generation is the creation of data on the basis of an algorithm, a set of actions that need to be performed. In this light, the construction and resolution of narrative according to database elements, with each database element requiring a certain action to be performed within the narrative for it to be properly implemented. In turn, the player, as he develops the engagement with characters on the basis of database elements, by being aware of the rules of database consumption, effectively turns the entire process of fruition into a game. A game is a procedural form capable of generating new kinds of expressions (Egenfeldt-Nielesen, Heide-Smith and Pajares Tosca 2016) and the process of engendering engagement towards characters possesses a procedural aspect which ties the cultural form of moe to video gaming at large. A more in-depth discussion of character consumption as a ludic process is outside of the scope of this thesis, but it is arguable that the generation of personalized meaning through database elements as a ludic process, which in turn form rich, round characters possessing a distinct identity, combines with a strong and developed narrative to form a personalized experience in the player.

Furthermore, the gam employs the characteristics of database consumption to further advance its message, which is accomplished by using database elements-constituted *bishōjo* characters. The *bishōjo* character, in the case of *Muv Luv*, acts as the agent by which a new perception of the world is, quite literally, revealed to the player. The procedural engendering of affection through database elements is developed to enhance the player's emotional experience through the grim storyline of the game.

Procedural Empathy and fixed narrative

The player, when booting the game, is first treated to a very soothing opening sequence which showcases the game's characters (âge 2003). A keen observer might notice that Sumika Kagami, which serves as the game's foremost character, is given much more screentime that every other character, a potential contrast with other games which feature the totality of the cast in a more balanced fashion.

As we have amply outlined before, characters are constituted by moe elements, which serve as the dots which can be connected by the player and thus generate a personalized character fruition experience.

Let's go back to Sumika Kagami, which is the first character presented to the player, and is arguably the main focus of the opening movie.

As a character, Sumika Kagami is a string of database elements arranged in a certain sequence. She is a childhood friend of the protagonist (a notable database element, see Enterbrain 2003, 2006). She possess an animated hair strand or *ahegao* (emotionally animated hair-strand, another database element - see Enterbrain 2003, 2006), which reacts to her emotional states, temperament-wise the girl is a bit of a clumsy airhead, which allows for a very friendly demeanor towards everybody (a third database element - see Enterbrain 2003, 2006) and she always ties her hair with a big yellow ribbon (a fourth database element in the form of distinctive paraphernalia – see Enterbrain 2003, 2006).

The game's second 'main' heroine, Meiya Mitsurugi, is also another string of database elements: she is a sheltered daughter of an extremely rich family, which can rely and is followed by a plethora of servants which assist her in every aspect of her life (the first database element - see Enterbrain 2003, 2006), sometimes without her consent; she has made a promise during childhood to a boy to marry him, whose face she doesn't remember and identifies with Takeru (the second database element - see Enterbrain 2003, 2006). She sees herself as predestined to be with the main character (the third database element – see Enterbrain 2003, 2006) while also being extremely naïve in how she should deal with the outside world (the fourth database element – see

Enterbrain 2003, 2006). She is also good with a sword and carries a traditional Japanese demeanor (the fifth database element – see Enterbrain 2003, 2006)

The aforementioned database elements are not exhaustive and are only meant as a general indication of how the characters are composed. The two characters are then immediately introduced to the player in the first minutes of play, when they enter the narrative world by respectively waking up next to Takeru (Meiya) and coming to pick up Takeru to go to school together (Sumika).

The player has thus an instant opportunity to be engendered by the two characters which are most pivotal to the game's narration. The two characters are placed into immediate conflict as they fight for Takeru's affection, while the player has to both decide which girl amongst the two they will choose and play peacemaker, until they are introduced to additional characters, facing a widening of their possible choices, which progressively bring the total number of pursuable characters to six: all of these characters are strings of database elements, and include class 'mascot' and archery champion Miki Tamase, antisocial *yakisoba* bread enthusiast Kei Ayamine, class representative and girl with glasses Chizuru Sakaki and ambiguously gendered classmate Mikoto Yoroi.[13]

The various character, when experienced within the *Extra* segment of *Muv Luv*, as already mentioned above, do not offer any particular innovation regarding their individual backstories, and are in fact not particularly dissimilar from an ordinary high school comedy (Miyamoto et al 2013), with each storyline being an expansion and a resolution of each character's individual *moe* database elements in a way not dissimilar to what had been developed during the creation of *To Heart* (cf. Tinami 2000).

Sumika's storyline is a resolution of the setup which is mandated by her possessing the 'childhood friend' database element, in which the strong friendship bond which is

[13] Within *Muv Luv Extra* this character does not have a storyline per se, although they possess their own moe-engedering scenes, they are turned into a fully pursuable female character in *Muv Luv Unlimited*.

already present between her and Takeru/the player is resolved and advanced into an amorous relationship. Meiya's storyline has her coming to terms with her upbringing and resolving the conflict the presence of such an overbearing entity within her life to then run away with Takeru/the player.

Miki Tamase, with the help of bond generated between her and Takeru/the player, resolves the issues caused by her 'crippling insecurity' database element. Kei's personality and anti-sociality database elements and the relative narrative setup it entails, are resolved by the intervention of Takeru/the player, causing her conflict with her antagonist to come to a positive conclusion. Chizuru's conflict with her mother stemming from her troubled childhood and pressure to perform (yet another database element) are thawed by the relationship with Takeru/the player.

Yoroi Mikoto, although being present in extra only as the ending which the player will get in the event that he did not focus enough on a single character, also sees a series of narrative strands set up by their constitutive database elements resolved thanks to the intervention of Takeru/the player.

As the player switches over to Unlimited, each character undergoes a process of re-contextualization to the new universe of Unlimited, to which the player is transported and relies on the game's placing the completion of both Sumika and Meiya's storylines for proper understanding. The setup of the game places Takeru in a similar situation of waking himself to a new day, although this time the world he wakes up to is a post-apocalyptic world in which tragedy and war abounds. Furthermore, the game's main heroine, Sumika, is nowhere to be found, and the world literary starts to make sense to him only when he encounters this new world's version of Meiya, which is, however, a completely different person.

She is, initially, an apparent re-contextualization of the character, and in fact mobilizes all database elements familiar to the player, ranging from her appearance (hairstyle, demeanor, etc.) to her personality. As Takeru gets to known her once more, however the difference in how her constitutive database elements are made more and more evident while still maintaining a sort of character consistency. She still possesses her initial string of elements such as being from a noble and rich family and having made a

childhood promise. However, she not only rejects the player, but she makes it clear that she is a different person, producing a clear sense of estrangement in the player. The same situation is repeated with every character until Takeru is introduced to this world's version of professor Yūko, a side character in Extra, which allows him to partially integrate with his new predicament.

While the narration veers into standard visual novel/animesque tropes, with Takeru coming to appreciate and subsequently love each of the character's alternate versions, experiencing each storyline in a way consistent with other visual novels thanks to a plot device involving quantum science technobabble: Takeru is a so-called 'causality conductor' (*Inga Dōtai* 因果導体), a living pipeline between alternate universes, which allows the transfer of quantum information (memories, events etc.) between different universes (age 2003, 2006). This allows information from infinite parallel universes to flow into Takeru.

Such a description would place the *Muv Luv* franchise right amongst the likes of *Ever17* and *Higurashi no Naku koro ni.* However, there is one clear difference from the two aforementioned titles and *Muv Luv*: as the player transitions to the Unlimited/Alternative universe, Takeru's own character identity, events and relationships are depicted to be completely unique: the transfer of information does not leave an exact copy in the original position.

Characters from which information is transferred to not preserve their relationship to the main character. In fact, they are depicted as not remembering who Takeru (and thus the player is). The lack of conservation destroys the modes of fruition game-like realism and brings back the unicity of grand narratives, and does this with by employing the language of database consumption and game-like realism to transition the player back into a unified narrative, unique narrative.

The various alternate versions of Takeru are, by all intent and purposed, merged into only one character-entity, which echoes other games, but in this case, there is an explicit statement that the other characters the player meets and grows affectionate to are not instances of characters within the game's universe. In fact, each instance is a

unique character in itself, composed of the same database elements, which however are articulated differently enough to produce dissonance.

Even when they are stated to be influenced in some way by the relationships established by Takeru (and the player) within *Muv Luv Extra*, this does not translate into a recreation of the situation which was present within the Extra portion of the narrative, and the alternate versions of the characters are still different people possessing an alternate, and sometimes very different culture.

Meiya Mitsurugi in *Muv Luv Alternative/Unlimited,* while possessing roughly the same mannerisms in speech/demeanor and every database element of her *Extra* counterpart, is by all intent and purposes, a different character whose database elements, with which the player is already familiar with, are used to convey *Unlimited/Alternative*'s setting to the player and by this, showcase how entities beyond the cast of main characters are acting within the world, one example of which lies once again in the character of Meiya Mitsurugi, whose '*ojōsama*/daughter of nobility' constitutive background element is used to show the player that actors beyond the player's reach (the Japanese Imperial court) are in play and exert their influence on the story. Inevitably, this leads to a character identity which is tied to its host setting, and thus prevents the unlimited re-articulation that Azuma posited within his works (see Azuma 2007, 2009).

In fact, as explained by *Muv Luv* scenario writer Hirohiko Yoshida (personal communication, 2017), the characters were needed to sweeten the access to such a cruel story whose themes where not felt as being palatable anymore, serving as a mean to guide the player through their journey into the story, *like a Valkyrie* (Yoshida 2017). The employment of the character as a guide echoes what has been discussed in the first chapter: it is only by virtue of the girl character being within Unlimited/Alternative's cruel universe that the universe becomes unveiled to the player.

The new world is literarily disclosed to the player via the character, in a process that can only be described as world disclosure (Kompridis 1994), and the player's familiarity with the characters, a carry-over from the accumulated attachment which is still felt by

the player over the course of Extra, is employed to both ground and detach the player: it grounds the player in the new reality, but at the same time it detaches them and create a sense of estrangement, and it is this sense of estrangement that allows the player to discover new horizons and to be introduced to new horizons of meaning. By virtue of this process, the player is subjected to that very *meaning-creative process capable of making, unmaking and remaking worlds* (Ibid.).

The game world is remade into the war-torn hell of *Alternative/Unlimited* and by that process the player is conveyed the articulate universe in which the player must now reside and navigate and which they literally learn of through dissonant iterations with characters they once knew. The existence of characters as sequences of database items allows an easy cataloguing of how meaning is produced, made, unmade and remade. And thanks to this process, the game's storyline is able to effectively make and iterate political statements.

Chapter 4: Database elements list and character tables

The following pages contain a series of tables outlining each of the game's main characters in their constitutive database elements, along with the shift made within the passage from *Muv Luv Extra* to *Muv Luv Unlimited/Alternative* and how the database elements are employed to convey the game's narrative setting and tie the re-contextualized character to its new universe.

The database items themselves are listed according to the game's official material (Ixtl 2010, 2012), due to time constraints which do not allow more in-depth data gathering regarding the database items that constitutive each character.

The purpose of these schematic listings of each character's constitutive database element is to provide a quick visual reference to each character together with pointers to each database element within a graphical representation used inside both games. Furthermore, each table is followed by a short comment which addresses how the database elements come into being in describing the new world to the player and how this is pertinent to the game wider narrative's scheme involving character decontextualization and recontextualization in the face of a structure narrative.

These tables, however, cannot, at the moment, be an exhaustive and definitive list of each character's database elements to the differences existing between databases, other commercial sources and the fans themselves. The purpose of these tables however is not to provide the most accurate description of each character's sequence of database elements, but rather to describe how the process of re-contextualization of characters takes place between the two universes and how the string of database elements is kept constant.

Figure 4.1: game sprites depicting Sumika Kagami(left) and the 00-Unit (right).

Sumika Kagami /00-Unit

Character description (Extra - Sumika)	Takeru's childhood friend and classmate. They've been together for so long that he can't imagine what life would be like without her. She has a long-standing crush on Takeru which he is oblivious to. She wakes him up at mornings, and since her room's window is only a few meters away from Takeru's, they can talk before going to sleep too. Her being a bit of an airhead leads Takeru to tease her often, to which she retaliates by hitting him due to her very short temper (Ixtl 2010)
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative 00-Unit)	The 00 Unit, humanity's trump card in the battle against the BETA, is the Kagami Sumika of the world of Alternative. Initially reduced to a brain by the BETA's experiments, her mind was later transferred into a silicon-based body to facilitate communication with the BETA. She possesses vast psychic powers. (Ixtl 2012)
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Ahoge, Red color, Very Long. **Eyes:** *Tareme*. **Body:** Average Height, Pale skin, Scar. **Clothes:** Ribbon Hair Tie,
Personality database elements	Airhead, Deredere, Friendly, Possessive, Short-tempered
Narration-related database elements:	Childhood Friend, Neighbor.

Comment: the game's first focal female character, Sumika is an eroge's archetypical character: the sweet childhood friend, with whom the player character possesses a strong bond already. Both she and Meiya are featured on the game's cover and within the game's introductory movie in pivotal roles. The 00-Unit, Sumika's re-contextualization, iterates Sumika's constitutive database elements, as the bond with Takeru is preserved due to her being an emulation of Sumika's personality. However, the articulation of database elements in the context of *Unlimited/Alternative*'s universe leads to a character that is different on an essential level, and separates Sumika in *Extra* from the 00-Unit, although the maintaining of character coherency creates a sense of dissonance within the player and within the bond they have with her.

Figure 4.2: game sprites depicting Meiya Mitsurugi in Extra(left) and Unlimited/Alternative (right)

Meiya Mitsurugi

Character description (Extra)	Meiya is the sole heiress of Mitsurugi group, one of the biggest and richest corporations on Earth. One day Takeru wakes up to find her in his bed and she declares that they are meant to be together. She is a firm believer of the Bushido code and her being grown up in a sheltered environment puts her into difficult situations from time to time. She has access to unlimited resources and overprotective attendants who try to help her win over Takeru.
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative)	Meiya is one of the cadets in unit 207. Like all the cadets in the academy she tries her best to graduate as fast as possible to join the fight, but there is also a deeper motivation that is pushing her forward, something that she doesn't want to talk about.
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Blue, Intake hairdo, Ponytail, Straight. **Eyes:** Blue, *Tsurime*. **Body:** E+ Cup, Pale, Slim, **Clothes:** Hair accessory
Personality database elements	Honorable, Reserved
Narration-related database elements:	Daughter of nobility, wealthy, forced heiress.

Comment: The second of the game's mascot characters, which is featured heavily on the game's cover and whose storyline completion is required for accessing the *Unlimited* portion of *Muv Luv*. By virtue of being a 'daughter of nobility' (*ojōsama*), the player is already familiar with her being the heiress to a huge economic conglomerate. This is iterated into her serving as the possible body double for the *shōgun* of Japan, putting the player in a state of receptivity to absorb how Japan as a nation functions in the alternate universe and also how the culture of Japanese people differs from the culture of the Japanese people within tangible reality (which is represented within *Muv Luv Extra*). By effectively being the guide to the world of Unlimited/Alternative, it is also through she as a character that the majority of the game's political statements are made.

Figure 4.3: game sprites depicting Chizuru Sakaki in Extra (Left) and Unlimited Alternative (right).

Chizuru Sakaki

Character description (Extra)	Takeru's class representative. Constantly arguing with Kei Ayamine. Former captain of the Lacrosse club.
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative)	A cadet in unit 207, later a pilot in Squad A-1. Constantly argues with Kei Ayamine.
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Ahoge, Red color, Very Long. Twintail **Eyes:** Green, Tareme. **Body:** Average Height, Pale, Scar, Slim, Teen. **Clothes:** Glasses
Personality database elements	*Tsundere* (old type), Strict, Possessive, Short-tempered, Reserved, Hardworking.
Narration-related database elements:	Class Representative. Conflict with parents, belittled by classmates

Comment: Chizuru is one of the non-essential characters in *Muv Luv Extra*, whose storyline's completion is not required to unlock the Unlimited portion of the game. She serves as Takeru's class representative, and this role is repurposed as unit sub-leader within Unlimited/Alternative. She is also depicted as being in conflict with her over-achieving mother, in addition to being belittled by the rest of the class. Within Unlimited she is turned into the daughter of the prime minister of Japan, possessing a similar conflict regarding her enlisting in the UN army. She keeps the strict overachieving tendencies. Through her storyline the civilian side of Japan's government is shown to the player.

Figure 4.4: game sprites depicting Miki Tamase in Extra (left) and Unlimited/Alternative (right).

Miki Tamase

Character description (Extra)	Tiny, energic girl and class mascot. Member of the archery club.
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative)	A cadet in unit 207, later a pilot in squad A-01. Squad Sharpshooter
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Intake Hairdo, Spiky bangs, Twintail. **Eyes:** **Green** *Tareme*. **Body:** Lolicon. *Pettanko* Pale. **Clothes:** Hair ribbons, cat bell
Personality database elements	Airhead, Carefree, Clumsy, Energetic, Low Self-esteem
Narration-related database elements:	Anxiety Overcoming

Comment: The character of Miki Tamase is depicted as a stock lolicon-esque character with a suave and carefree disposition towards Takeru. She is enrolled in the archery club during extra, and becomes the squad's sharpshooter in *Unlimited/Alternative*. While in *Extra* she is depicted as being the daughter of a famous archery dojo master, in *Unlimited/Alternative* her father becomes a United Nations undersecretary, and through the existing relation existing between the player and the character, the player is introduced to a part of the setting which involves international organizations and power relations between countries in the *Unlimited/Alternative* universe.

Figure 4.5: game sprites depicting Kei Ayamine in Extra(left) and Unlimited/Alternative (right).

Ayamine Kei

Character description (Extra)	One of Takeru's classmates. Strange. Argues constantly with class representative Chizuru Sakaki
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative)	A cadet in unit 207, later a pilot in Squad A-1. Constantly argues with Chizuru Sakaki
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Black, front tails. **Eyes:** violet, *tsurime*. **Body:** E+ Cup, Pale skin. **Clothes:** Collar
Personality database elements	Carefree, Lazy , Selfish, Stoic, Strange
Narration-related database elements:	Marriage proposal.

Comment: Kei Ayamine is an oddball character, whose constitutive database elements are used to articulate her weirdness and fondness for wordplay. She is at odds with Chizuru, and her rivalry leads to several confrontations. Furthermore, she is tied to Naoya Sagiri, another character, which serves as the antagonist of her storyline in Extra. Takeru helps her reconcile with Naoya and throw away her bitterness. This existing relationship is ported over within Unlimited/Alternative, where Naoya is re-contextualized as a radical leader who unleashes an anti-american military coup d'etat in Japan against the perceived weakness of the government regarding the Japanese-American relationship. Her conflictual relationship with Chizuru is ported over in Unlimited and turned into a conflict of personal honor due to Kei being the daughter of a dishonored commander, whose incompetence she sees once more in Chizuru Sakaki.

Figure 4.6: game sprites depicting Mikoto Yoroi in Extra(left) and Unlimited/Alternative (right).

Mikoto Yoroi

Character description (Extra)	One of Takeru's classmates, who plays Valgern-On with him quite often. He has a father with survival sports obsession, so he often disappears for trips to various wilderness parts of the world.
Character description (Unlimited/Alternative)	A cadet in unit 207. Daughter of a UN Under-secretary
Visual database elements	**Hair:** Antenna, Blue, Short, Straight. **Eyes:** Tareme. **Body:** Average Height, Pale Skin, Scar,. **Clothes:** Ribbon Hair Tie,
Personality database elements	Airhead, Deredere, Friendly, Possessive, Short-tempered
Narration-related database elements:	Ambiguously gender/sex

Comment: Mikoto Yoroi is Takeru's best friend in Muv Luv Extra, and although he uses boku, hints are dropped around the various storylines that Mikoto could be a girl. While Mikoto is not romanceable in Extra (His 'ending' is the result of the player not having enough triggers to embark on any other character's storyline), he is turned into a girl and a romanceable character in Unlimited/Alternative. The humorous element of him being kidnapped by his father to go on dangerous trips around the world is repurposed within Unlimited/Alternative into Mikoto being an expert into military survival techniques, while her father becomes a spy for the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs, a source of information for Takeru(and the player) about the government's more shady aspects.

Conclusion: tying up the character and the (grand) narrative

The most significant element that emerged from our journey through imaginary girls and visual novels is that, more than anything else, imaginary girls are characters which still need a story to fully realize their potential as entities which are consumed as part of media.

While the singular database elements are easily defined as purveyors of infinite potential, what can be garnered from their recombination and constitution into characters is that these database elements are all, in their smallest and independent definition, small, essential stories themselves which can be employed to construct bigger stories, both at the character level and at a wider, narrative level, and this none more evident than within *Muv Luv*, as we have highlighted in the previous chapters.

Let's take the 'girl with glasses' database element. At a first glance, it is obviously a fetish-derived visual element, and yet, given its association with sternness and being a hard worker, it requires that these two qualities are given substance by creating a suitable background. Why this girl is a hard-working person, why is she stern so?

While the mind's eye of the audience is perfectly capable of filling in the blanks and either just assuming or creating their own personalized character backstory in case her background story is not stated by the authors, the whole structure of the database elements provides an intuitive and quick way to introduce portions of the story to the audience.

As this analysis has shown, database elements, and by extension the database character constituted by them, are a window to something in the background, and while Hiroki Azuma (2007, 2009) repeatedly stated that they are a window into otaku culture due to the extensive context-dependent meaning they convey, they can in fact, serve into the window of a wider narrative in a way consistent with Eiji Ōtsuka's (2010) framework of narrative consumption, the very same that Azuma took as a model of his database consumption.

While Azuma described perfectly the kind of aggregative dynamics found within new media, and as the second chapter has aptly shown, the most important developments

of the focus on imaginary girls developed as part of video game developments by hobbyst computer programmers which slowly made their way into the industry. As imaginary girl characters became more and more prominent within the Japanese PC game market, and as the audience grew, so did the way of identifying what the audience liked, which is somewhat similar to genre fiction: the audience reads what it wants to read, and database elements are both a way to identify and classify what to consume by cataloguing which kind of characters and situations can be found within a certain media product.

Given the extreme amount of media released every year, and in particular within the erotic video game market since the early nineties, ways to quickly identify which kind of product was placed before the audience's eyes was a complete necessity, especially since what the audience looked for was content instead of interaction.

However, this extreme tendency to catalogue and slot products into categories does not mean that narratives disappear or that characters are simple strings of elements which can be re-collocated at whim. As Shunsuke Nozawa (2013) noted, character identity and its preservation is of paramount importance for the process of re-contextualization, and character identity is intimately tied to its host narrative.

If a character is set within an articulated and developed background setting, her re-contextualization will need to take into account that setting, which will need to be referenced as the character gets re-contextualized. The setting itself is expressed through the small story blueprints as mandated by their constitutive database elements, which provide quick and intuitive channels for the setting to be relayed to the audience and make them discover a new world.

The new world of the narration is disclosed to them via the imaginary girl (as a database element-constituted narrative framework) placed within a context which in turn influences her as a character within that context. It generates a new relation to narrative, rather than severing it (Nozawa 2013).

A narrative, of any kind, is always needed, and to say that it does not matter anymore, as Azuma remarked, is often an excellent statement if one wants to raise a provocation, but not exactly descriptive of the situation at hand.

What the model of database consumption aptly describes is the aggregational tendency present within new media, which is, in turn, a consequence of the overabundance of products on the market. And yet, however, as the case of *Muv Luv* exemplifies, this does not make narrative obsolete and in fact, it's a way to make narrative matters once again, especially in the face of claims by Azuma that character death is now irrelevant, and with it, narrative.

In fact, the examination of Muv Luv as a case study reveals that even when one thinks about Azuma's framework of game-like realism, which was developed after the concept of database consumption. According to this framework, characters exist independently of their host setting/work, and thanks to the game-like nature of a series of media products which were styled after roleplaying games[14], the inevitability of death is avoided, as characters could technically be re-employed in other playthrough, go through alternative endings to their stories etc.

However, avoiding the inevitability of death is only possible if the character's identity allows for such a thing. While characters such as Rei Ayanami from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (GAINAX 1994), one of the characters which are held by Azuma (2009) to be symbolical of database consumption might be brought as proof against this claim, the case of Rei Ayanami and her various recontextualizations operated in the myriad media works revolving around *Neon Genesis Evangelion*[15] are only recognized as genuine because character consistency is indeed preserved and the franchise was split into a myriad of sub-universes, allowing thus the framework of game-like realism to take root. But database elements do not necessarily imply that the inevitability of death is avoided.

In fact, within the Muv Luv franchise we have the employment of database elements, something that has been deemed by Azuma (2009) to be a part of the inherently metafictional nature of characters and that which allows them to exist in media works,

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[14] *Rodosu Senki*, which we have briefly discussed in this analysis, is one such novel.

[15] Derivative works include video games, pachinko machines, manga, etc.

outside media works and in-between media works, to make character death matter once more. In fact, *Muv Luv*'s consistent and articulated narrative, which resembles grand narratives as espoused by Ōtsuka (2010), calls for constant character death and separates characters identities inhabiting different alternative universes as different persons. In particular, the character identities within *Muv Luv Alternative* all die and there is no way to save them.

Even the various alternate timelines (such as the ones presented within Unlimited) are re-framed into a sequence which ends with character death no matter what. This makes character death, when discussing and iterating the cruel, bloodstained universe in which the BETA invaders have landed on earth, becomes once again something that must be taken into account, as the removal of agency from the player effectively means that the presumption that lies at the basis of the framework of game-like realism: no matter what the player does, no matter how many times they reload the game, they will always encounter character death, making character death an integral part of character identity in the world of *Unlimited/Alternative*.

In addition to making death matter once more, the continuous direct and indirect references to history in the form alternative history and the presence of an organic timeline allows the (re)introduction of grand narratives into the game. By being conveyed via the imaginary girl character's own constitutive database elements, they influence character identity so much that they tie it to its host setting, limiting re-contextualization (cf. Nozawa 2013).

Thus, the conclusion of this long-winded analysis is that the possibility for re-contextualization does not imply an automatic divorce from narratives. In fact, database elements serve as a new way of producing narratives in a way that is aggregational, and the possibility of engaging in game-like realism is not implicit. It is only a possibility, which depends on what degree of re-contextualization can be exercised on the character's identity before breaking it.

While database consumption is capable (and has done so) of creating characters which can exist in, in-between and outside stories, the author, in a sense, is still implicitly in control. This control is exercised indirectly by how much the author is capable of

defining the iteration of a character's constitutive database elements. As the definition in character identity increases, freedom of re-contextualization decreases, and vice versa. The more a setting is articulated through a character's constitutive database elements, the less a character can be freely re-contextualized, which is what âge's team, in his intention to tell a Japanese story for a Japanese audience (âge 2014), has accomplished.

What has made this analysis difficult and can be said to constitute the main unfinished problem stemming from this research is the lack of a properly vetted and stable repository of database elements and other similar meanings. As fan-created meanings which are constantly updated on a variety of sites which may or may be not taken down at a moment's notice, vetting which database element is significant and how it relates to other is difficult, and the slow speed at which books are released only compound the problems.

Future avenues of research will have to take this into consideration, and maybe collection of information from fan-curated databases will have to be taken into account. One possible solution would be the creation of an aggregate database capable of gathering meanings and definitions from fan-curated databases and make it available to researchers, especially in light of the astounding speed at which fan databases are derived and updated in the contemporary internet environment, whose speed will only continue to increase and if academics want to tackle the challenge of analyzing pop culture, they will be inevitably need a stable and vetted repository for fan-created descriptions and meanings, especially in light of the ever-increasing interaction and closeness between content creators and consumers, which is becoming closer and closer.

With such a repository, citation and discussion of these elements will not only be simpler, but also firmly grounded into the fan's own perception of the object of research, thus potentially bridging the gap between scholars and fans in the perception of meaning within Japanese pop culture, and especially the portions of Japanese pop culture which are based on database elements.

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