

THE PLAYFUL FUNCTION OF PARATEXT IN VISUAL NOVELS: THE CASE OF DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB!

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although the notion of paratext is mainly known, in the field of game studies, in the wake of Mia Consalvo's work¹, it was originally defined by Gérard Genette as the set of ancillary texts produced by an author (or, at least, an "authority") to accompany and support another text (i.e., in the case of a book: the title, the preface, the back cover, etc.). The paratext is therefore a "threshold" between text and off-text which constitutes "a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public [...]"². In other words, the paratext is one of the places where the "reading contract" is defined with the audience – or, in the present case, where the "playing contract" is formalized: all the liminal discursive elements framing a game contribute to shaping the player's horizon of expectation³.

In this paper, the central role of this concept in the definition of game and play will be shown through a case study of the visual novel Doki Doki Literature Club!. By analyzing this ambiguous game device and its paratext, we will address a rather difficult issue: the definition of the playing activity in the constraining genre of visual novel. This study does not claim to be able to provide a definitive answer to this long-standing problem, but its purpose is to open some lines of thought regarding the relationship between the act of "play" and the game's structure.

2. DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB!: PRESENTATION OF THE GAME

Doki Doki Literature Club!⁴ (subsequently abbreviated in "DDLC") is an independent game developed by Dan Salvato in September 2017. Although being conceived by an American game designer, the title is presented as a visual novel using all the conventions of the Japanese dating sim: the story portrays – at first – a cute romance which seems to take place in a generic Japanese high school, as it stages a literature club composed of four archetypes of moe characters with which the player can try to build a relationship.

¹ Where she uses the term in a rather broaden sense. See: Mia Consalvo, Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 8-9. For an overview and a detailed discussion of the use of the concept in game studies, see: Švelch Jan, Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts: Paratextuality in Video Game Culture (PhD Dissertation, Charles University, 2017), <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/177386/?lang=en> (accessed August 14, 2018).

² Gérard Genette, Seuils (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 8; translated by Jane E. Lewin as Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

³ Dominic Arsenault and Maude Bonenfant, "Poiesis and Imagination in the Aesthetic Experience: The Moment of Grace in Computer Game Play", Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on the Philosophy of Computer Games: The Nature of Player Experience (Madrid, 2012), 4, http://gamephilosophy.org/download/philosophy_of_computer_games_2012/Arsenault%202012%20-Poiesis-and-Imagination-in-the-Aesthetic-Experience-The-Moment-of-Grace-in-Computer-Game-Play.pdf (accessed August 14, 2018).

⁴ Team Salvato, Doki Doki Literature Club!, 2017.

On the download website⁵ or in the first part of the game, multiple paratextual signs refer to a *kawaii* aesthetic (dominance of rose, presence of hearts or circles patterns, cheerful trailer and musical introduction, naive slogans⁶, thumbnails of characters in super-deformed version, etc.) and build the reading pact of a classic romantic visual novel. The only incongruous element in this paratextual device is a strange warning that is discordant when compared to the other texts framing the game. It states that: “This game is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed”.



Figure 1 – *DDLC's* title screen

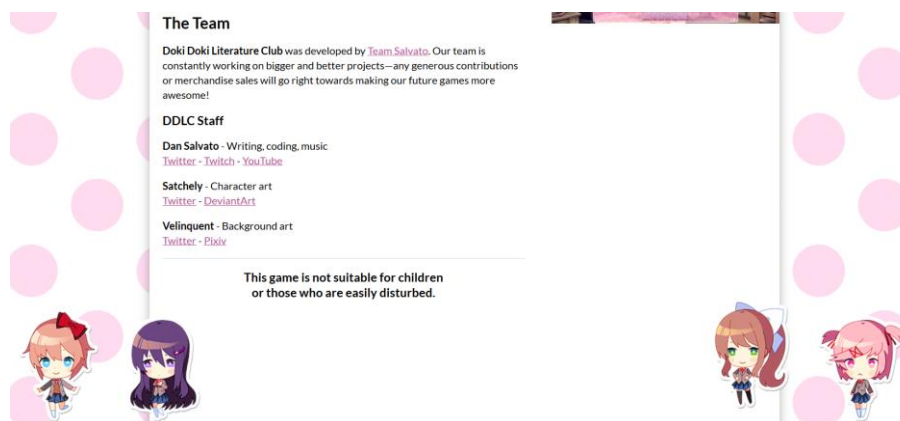


Figure 2 - Screenshot of *DDLC's* website, ending with the message “This game is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed”

The game is actually divided into two parts: the first one truly conforms to the dating sim genre, both in terms of gameplay and narrative. The player controls (from a first-person perspective) a high school student who enters a literature club composed of four female archetypes: Sayori, the childhood friend of the protagonist, is cheerful, enthusiastic and caring about others, but a little childish, naive and clumsy; Natsuki (who corresponds to the trope of the *tsundere*) has a stronger temperament and seems to reject the protagonist at first, but conceals the feelings she undeniably has for him; Yuri (who is close to the *dandere* trope) is shy, reserved and mature, but has trouble

⁵ Doki Doki Literature Club!. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://ddlc.moe/>.

⁶ Such as the subtitle: “Will you write the way into her heart?”.

expressing her feelings; finally, Monika, the president of the club, is the school's most popular girl, at once beautiful, athletic and intelligent, so that the protagonist thinks at first that she is unapproachable.

During this first act, the game relies on two gameplay mechanics: the possibility of making dialogue choices (which allow the player to get to know the characters and, sometimes, to directly take sides with one of the girls) and a poetry-writing mini-game. At the end of each day, indeed, the player must choose some words in a list in order to write a poem for the club: three of the four girls (Sayori, Natsuki and Yuri) have word preferences and will react if the player picks a word they like. Eventually, each poem unlocks a scene of intimacy with the character who liked the poem the most.

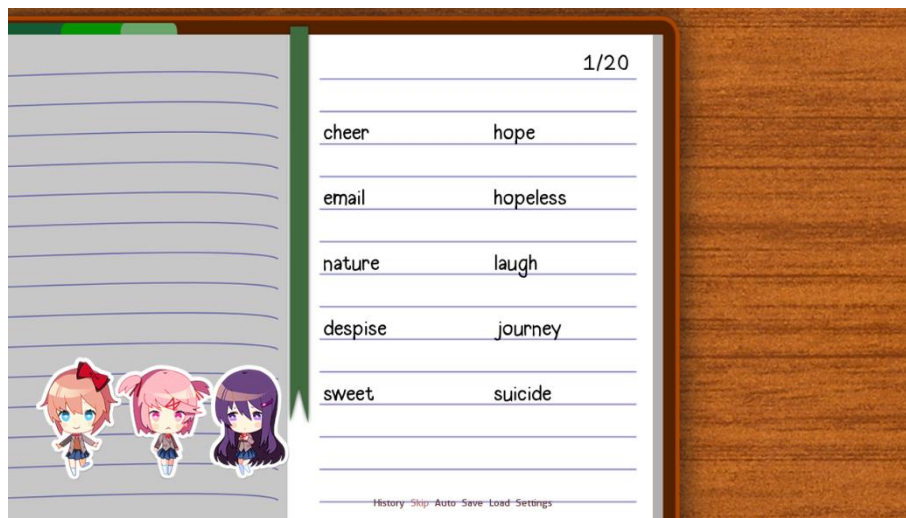


Figure 3 - Screenshot of the poem writing mini-game

At this point, however, the player can already notice that the game does not allow to seduce Monika, even though she occasionally asks to spend time with the protagonist during the day. A few other elements are slightly discordant from the joyful and colorful atmosphere of the game: the implicit dramatic tone of some dialogues⁷ and of the poems written by the girls⁸, as well as the darkness of several words in the writing mini-game (such as: "Suicide", "Death", "Defeat", "Depression", "Sadness", "Scars", "Tragedy", etc.).

⁷ For illustration, the following exchange takes place in a scene of intimacy shared by Natsuki and the protagonist:

"Natsuki sobs again [...].

Main Character: '...Is there anything you want to talk about?'

Natsuki shakes her head.

Natsuki: 'Just...

Every day...

...is...so hard.

I just want to...

...come to the club and...

...'

Natsuki falls silent again".

⁸ To access the poems, see the website: DDLC Wiki. "Category:Poems". Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://ddlcwiki.ga/wiki/Category:Poems>.

After about two to three hours of play under these conditions, a plot twist radically turns the game into another genre – passing from the high school romance to the psychological horror. Regardless of the choices made by the player (and even if he devotes the entirety of his time to her), Sayori's mood will gradually deteriorate. After confessing to the protagonist that she has always been seriously depressed, Sayori will miss the activities of the club and leave a very disturbing poem⁹, which will alert the avatar. He thus rushes to her house, but arrives too late and discovers that she has committed suicide by hanging herself. The screen then begins to distort heavily and the game starts to reveal graphical glitches and error messages. After a brief display of the text “End” on a black screen, the game reboots, but Sayori disappeared from the title screen and is replaced by graphic glitches formed from the other three characters' sprites. The player no longer has access to his old saves (they have been deleted) and, if he restarts the game, the story will proceed without Sayori, as well as with some notable differences.



Figure 4 - Title screen after Sayori's death

In this “rebooted” version of the story, not only the sweet dialogues of Yuri and Natsuki are sometimes replaced by extremely aggressive and violent sentences¹⁰, but Yuri also reveals herself to be obsessive with the protagonist and self-destructive (she appears to be cutting herself with knives). Furthermore, the normal course of events is regularly disrupted by the appearance of graphic glitches deforming characters' faces and bodies to make them monstrous. Although brief and scattered, these deformations radically change the tone of the game, implying that, behind the outer layer of kawaii romance (which still is dominating in the dialogues) hides an underlying horror that the player can only perceive jerkily, but which is always menacing.

⁹ The poem tirelessly repeats, with some variations, the sentence “Get out of my head”. See: DDLC Wiki. “%”. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://ddlcwiki.ga/wiki/%25>.

¹⁰ For example, they come to insults when they argue:

“Yuri: ‘You really act as young as you look, Natsuki.’

Natsuki: ‘Me? Look who’s talking, you wannabe edgy bitch!’”

See the following video between 02:47:58 and 02:48:59 for the entire dispute: YouTube. “DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB - NATSUKI FULL PLAYTHROUGH”. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t86OQk48VSs>.

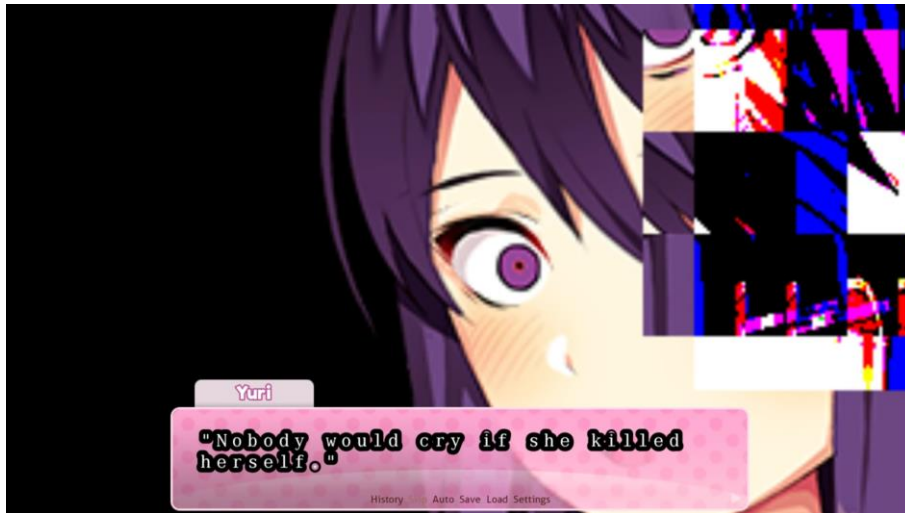


Figure 5 – Screenshot of Yuri during the appearance of a glitch

Likewise, some lines suggest that Yuri and Natsuki fear Monika and that the president is actually aware, on a meta level, of the game's functioning. Gradually, Monika's presence will become more and more invasive: she starts to stand before the game's interface, she tries to force the player to select her by replacing all the choices by her name, her sprite appears transparently on top of the other characters, etc. Finally, the events lead to the suicide of Yuri (who stabs herself to death either by over-excitement or by despair, depending on the player's answer to her feelings), following which Monika decides to simply delete Yuri and Natsuki's character-files from the game folder and to restart the game again in order to finally be alone with the protagonist.



Figure 6 - Screenshots of Monika letting no choice to the player and deleting the other characters

The player then ends up alone with her, face to face, in a fixed screen, where she addresses him in a completely metaleptic speech. A metalepsis, indeed, is defined by Gérard Genette as “any kind of transgression, whether supernatural or playful, of a given level of narrative or dramatic fiction, as when an author pretends to introduce himself into his own creation, or to extract one of

his characters from it”¹¹. In this scene, among others, Monika admits being aware that she is a game character and calls the player by his computer’s username; she also mentions having written the text of the game’s download page (where she asks the player to spend the most time with her¹²) and, if the player is recording the game with a screen capture software, she will detect it and try to jumpscare her audience as revenge for being watched, etc. At this point, the player is trapped with her while she only emits random lines of dialogue at regular intervals¹³. In order to get out of this situation and access the game ending, the only option left to the player is to open the game folder and delete Monika’s character-file.



Figure 7 - Game screen when the player is trapped with "Just Monika"

After her elimination, the game restarts one last time: Monika is understandably missing and Sayori, being the new president of the club, is now the character being self-aware. Two endings are then possible: if the player has saved and loaded several times the game to spend time with all the girls before Sayori’s suicide, the latter will thank him for his dedication and the credits will start (giving the “best ending”); if he just went through the game normally, Sayori will manifest the same obsessive personality as Monika, but the former president will reappear and delete the game from the inside (triggering the “bad ending”). In both cases, the ending makes the game unusable: in order to play again from the beginning, the player is asked to re-download the software.

However, in DDLC, the playing activity does not stop at the strict limits of the device. Through the several metalepsis produced by Monika, the game invites the player to fetch information outside its own frame. DDLC explicitly floods the paratext (thus extending the horror outside of the setting

¹¹ Gérard Genette, Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 527; translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky as Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 469.

¹² “**Hi, Monika here!** Welcome to the Literature Club! It’s always been a dream of mine to make something special out of the things I love. Now that you’re a club member, you can help me make that dream come true in this cute game! [...] I’m super excited for you to make friends with everyone and help the Literature Club become a more intimate place for all my members. But I can tell already that you’re a sweetheart—will you promise to spend the most time with me? ♥” (see: Doki Doki Literature Club!. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://ddlc.moe/>).

¹³ This page draws up an inventory of the lines in question: Doki Doki Literature Club!. “Monika’s Talk”. Accessed August 14, 2018. http://doki-doki-literature-club.wikia.com/wiki/Monika%27s_Talk.

supposed to contain it) and, in doing so, it encourages the player to search for meaning out of the device, to continue to play out of the game, to seek in this peripheral space some room for action that the title does not provide.

3. CONFLICTING MESSAGES: “THIS IS A GAME” VS “THERE IS NO PLAY”

DDLC builds for its audience a rather ambiguous playing contract: although regularly asserting its video game status, the title actually consists in unfolding a linear story, and it continuously denies its own interactivity by preventing the player from making meaningful choices. Consequently, it raises the question of what is “playing” in a rigid structure (such as visual novels).

3.1. “This is a Game”

On the one hand – as announced above –, DDLC continuously presents itself as a game and affirms its playful status through different media: through its paratext, its aesthetics, its narrative, and its gameplay.

Firstly, DDLC’s paratext serves as a “pragmatic marker of playability”¹⁴ conveying a “shared meaning of play”¹⁵. The software can indeed be downloaded on Steam or on itch.io – two video game distribution platforms which therefore label the title as a game and invite users to consider it as such. On both download pages, moreover, the device is described as a game in the texts provided by the developer: in the warning message (“This game is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed”) as well as in the metaleptic presentation written by Monika, mentioned earlier (“Welcome to the Literature Club! It’s always been a dream of mine to make something special out of the things I love. Now that you’re a club member, you can help me make that dream come true in this cute game!”)¹⁶.

Secondly, DDLC is also displayed as a video game through its aesthetics: the recurrent use of graphic glitches (to introduce horrific motifs) and of visible lines of code on the screen (when Monika removes the other girls, for instance) are markers referring to the video game culture, which thus participate in incorporating the title within this culture.

¹⁴ Sébastien Genvo, « Caractériser l’expérience du jeu à son ère numérique : pour une étude du “play design” », Paper presented at ACFAS 2008, Les jeux vidéo : expériences et pratiques sociales multidimensionnelles (Québec, 2008), 4, http://www.ludologique.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/play_design.pdf (accessed August 14, 2018).

¹⁵ Sébastien Genvo, « La théorie de la ludicisation : une approche anti-essentialiste des phénomènes ludiques », Paper presented at the conference Jeu et jouabilité à l’ère numérique (Paris, 2012), 7, <http://www.ludologique.com/publis/LudicisationDec12.pdf> (accessed August 14, 2018).

¹⁶ The underlining in both quotes is our own.



Figure 8 - Graphic glitches and lines of code used in *DDLC*'s aesthetics

Thirdly, the identification of the device as a game is supported by the narrative, since Monika's metalectic and reflexive dialogues explicitly acknowledge being part of a video game. For illustration, even before Sayori's suicide, the president of the club gives the player the following advice: "Sometimes you'll find yourself facing a difficult decision... When that happens, don't forget to save your game! You never know when you might change your mind... ..or when something unexpected may happen! Wait...is this tip even about writing? What am I even talking about? Ahaha! ...". The deep irony of these lines is palpable, given that all the player's saves will be deleted after Sayori's death – therefore removing any possibility of going back or taking control of the game events. It is already apparent here that the game builds a contrast between a promise of playful possibilities (the promise that the player will be able to reload the game and do several experiments) and the fact that the user is actually powerless.

Finally, one last attribute serves as a pragmatic marker of playability: the presence of gameplay. The possibility of making dialogue choices and the existence of the daily poem-writing mini-game invite the player to recognize in them the typical gameplay mechanics of puzzle games or dating sims. When the player chooses a word in the mini-game or a line of dialogue, there is a contingency, an uncertainty implying that this action will have some impact on the fictional universe (will he succeed in seducing the girl he likes and in unlocking the road that he wants to see?). In other words, these gameplay mechanics insinuate that the player will be able to exercise his freedom of choice in the game, to take risks and to unlock various outcomes.

3.2. "There Is No Play" (in the Mechanism)

However, the device suggests the existence of room for choices only to remove more brutally this opportunity later. For instance, regardless of the choices made in the first part of the game, Sayori's death, Yuri's death, and Monika's takeover are inevitable. While the gameplay makes the player believe in the existence of several routes (as it would be the case in most dating sim) and promises some replayability, the sequence of events is actually ineluctable and always leads more or less to the same ending (the main difference lies in Sayori's speech during the epilogue, which is more or less happy or psychotic, before the game's self-destruction).

The player's powerlessness is also underlined by the fact that, although Monika explicitly asks him to choose her on the download page (and several times during the game), this choice is actually impossible, since the player cannot write a poem for her or even make dialogue choices in her favor: the only time a dialogue box allows to select Monika's name, Yuri and Natsuki will prevent the choice to be effective (if the player tries to select it) by asserting that Monika does not need the protagonist's help.



Figure 9 - The only dialogue box allowing to select Monika's name is actually a fake choice, since only Yuri and Natsuki are really available

Similarly, even if the player's choices can unlock various scenes with the character who appreciates his poems the most, this meager choice is denied in the course of the second act: not only Monika is still not eligible (and Sayori is gone), but, if the player tries to seduce Natsuki by choosing her words in the poetry-writing mini-game, the following scenes will still mostly feature Yuri, since she monopolizes the protagonist because of the pathological obsession she developed for him.

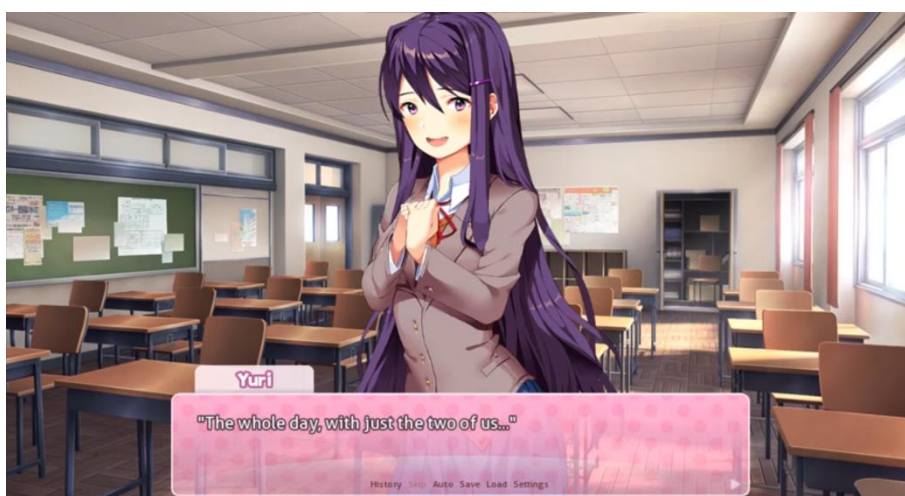


Figure 10 - In the second act, Yuri develops an obsession for the main character

Finally, once the story is over, the player may have the idea to reinstall the game and directly delete Monika's character file. However, such an attempt has the consequence of immediately triggering a madness crisis in Sayori, resulting in the crash of the game. DDLC therefore performs a gradual closure of the possibilities of action, which actually questions the very definition of the playing activity in this kind of device.

4. WHAT ROOM FOR PLAY?

The question this paper is trying to raise is not whether DDLC is a game or not (intrinsically, as an object) because, in the line with the philosopher Henriot's theories¹⁷ and with the "play studies" defined by Triclot¹⁸, we consider that the very source of the emergence of a game is foremost the player's "playful attitude" regarding an object or a situation. In other words: a game cannot be defined in absolute terms by invariable structural properties, because a game can be more or less anything as long as we play with it. The issue here is thus rather to determine what is playing in a device that offers the player such a minimal freedom of action.

In the theories of play, indeed, the existence of some room for experimentation is regularly used as an indispensable criterion in the definition of the playing activity: play is by nature a free, uncertain action. According to Henriot, thereby, "playing is always deciding in the uncertain"¹⁹. Similarly, Salen and Zimmerman assert that: "playing a game means making choices and taking actions"²⁰. Malaby, on the other hand, defines games as "arenas in which one or more sources of unpredictability (or [his] preferred term, contingency) are carefully calibrated (by design or cultural practices) to generate contingent outcomes"²¹. Without this contingency, this opening of the possibilities, the movement of play is blocked. As summarized by Bonenfant: "no game is fully defined, since it would be the very negation of play. The player can appropriate this virtual part and create infinite and new meanings"²². We find the same idea, among others, in Genvo's theories: "playing is also making a decision and 'doing the exercise of possibilities'. If the game only consists in the succession of unique decisions, then the player has no 'latitude' in his choices [...]"²³.

If – following the ideas developed by these theoreticians – we define playful actions as marked by contingency, by the possibility of choice-making, by uncertainty and risk-taking, DDLC's game

¹⁷ Jacques Henriot, Le jeu (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969).

¹⁸ Mathieu Triclot, Philosophie des jeux vidéo (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

¹⁹ Our translation of: « Jouer c'est toujours *décider* dans *l'incertain* ». See: Jacques Henriot, Sous couleur de jouer. La métaphore ludique (Paris: José Corti, 1989), 239.

²⁰ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 33.

²¹ Thomas M. Malaby, "Beyond Play. A new approach to games", Games and culture, vol. 2, n° 2 (2007): 106.

²² Our translation of: « aucun jeu n'est entièrement défini, puisque ce serait la négation même du jeu. Le joueur peut s'approprier cette part virtuelle et créer des sens infinis et nouveaux ». See: Maude Bonenfant, « La conception de la "distance" de Jacques Henriot : un espace virtuel de jeu », Sciences du jeu, n° 1 (2013), DOI: 10.4000/sdj.235 (accessed August 14, 2018).

²³ Sébastien Genvo, « Penser les phénomènes de "ludicisation" du numérique : pour une théorie de la jouabilité », Revue des sciences sociales, n° 45 (2011): 72, URL: http://www.ludologique.com/publis/Ludicisation_Genvo_S.pdf (accessed August 14, 2018). Our translation of: « [...] jouer c'est aussi prendre une décision et "faire l'exercice du possible". Si le jeu ne consiste que dans la succession de décisions uniques, alors le joueur n'a aucune "latitude" dans ses choix ; il se contente d'actualiser une proposition tenue pour vraie, qui ne dépend pas de son jeu particulier ».

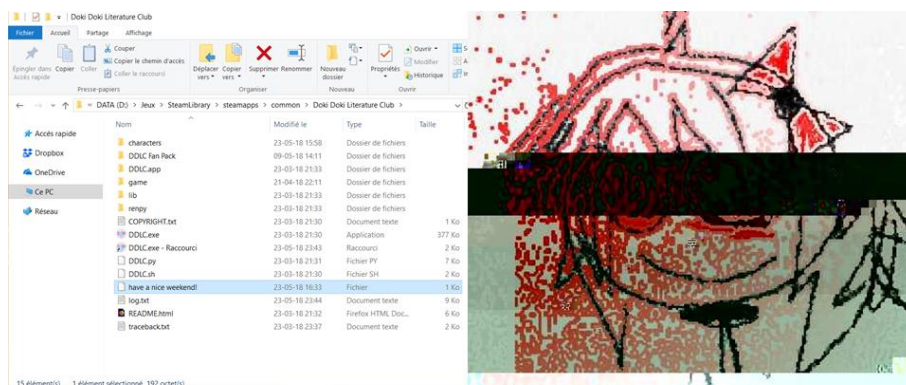
device – in the strict sense of the term – seems to leave less and less room for the playing activity, since the possibilities of choices and actions are gradually reduced.

5. PLAYING THE PARATEXT

However, if we take into account in the analysis, not only the game-object, but also its context and its margins, we can argue that DDLC's interpretative possibilities are actually progressively opening up, but that the contingency is moved out of the strict game device's framework and located in its paratext.

In the second part, indeed, DDLC repeatedly invites its player to dig into the paratext in order to solve several narrative puzzles. The most visible and inevitable "exit" out of the device is the main ending, when the player is forced to pause the game in order to open the game folder and delete Monika's character file. This manipulation definitely brings to the player's attention that his playground does not stop at the game-screen's borders and, in doing so, it invites him to experiment other similar actions (for instance: to delete another character from the beginning, to save Sayori's character file, etc.).

Furthermore, if he continues to monitor the game directory, the player will also notice that some files appear and disappear as the game progresses. Some of them simply contain texts or images providing additional depth to the characters' backgrounds or states of mind (for instance, a poem entitled ii.txt and apparently written by Monika manifests her distress of being a prisoner of the game system), but others represent puzzles to solve.



I hate this.

I CAN'T DO ANYTHING. NOTHING.
No matter how many times you play. It's all the same.
It would be really, really easy to kill myself right now. But that would mean I don't get to talk to you anymore.
All I want is for you to hate them. Why is that so hard?

Figure 11 - As the player progresses, various documents appear and disappear in the game folder: they can be pictures (like Sayori's portrait at the top right), texts (like the file ii.txt, below) or puzzles

Several texts, as well as the four characters' files²⁴, indeed contain hidden information that the players' community had to decrypt in several ways. For example, the method of the "Vigenère cipher" (which encode alphabetic text by substituting the letters with others according to a particular keyword) is used to dissimulate some content (like in the file have a nice weekend!, which can be decoded with the keyword "Libitina"). The coding Base64 (which allows to encode binary data into a text) is also used in some cases: Yuri's character file (yuri.chr), for instance, once decoded, gives access to a creepypasta story written by the game developer²⁵.

Monika's character file (monika.chr), on the other hand, reveals itself to be a renamed PNG image file (see figure 12). The block of black and white pixels situated in its center corresponds to a string of binary (where black pixels equate to a 0 and white pixels to a 1). This binary can be converted into alphanumeric text, yielding a Base64 string, which finally unseals a mysterious text referring to a "Third Eye"²⁶.

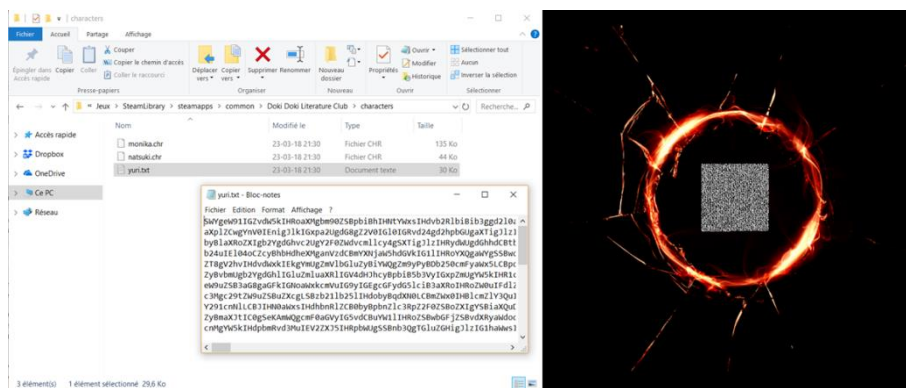


Figure 12 - yuri.chr (to the left) and monika.chr (to the right)

Natsuki's file (natsuki.chr), subsequently, contains a distorted image that, once restored with a graphics editor, reveals an unknown female character (see figure 13). Sayori's file (sayori.chr), lastly, is an incomprehensible audio file which, scanned with a spectrogram, reveals a QR code leading to the website "projectlibitina.com"²⁷. This website contains a short test log reporting the results of various tests conducted on a human subject, a girl nicknamed Libitina, and which seem to have been operated by a religious cult. The text also refers to a "Third Eye" – an element that appears in other hidden contents of the game.

²⁴ To find more information about the hidden files, see the Wiki dedicated to the game: DDLC Wiki. "Category:Game files". Accessed August 14, 2018. https://ddlcwiki.ga/wiki/Category:Game_files.

²⁵ The story can be read on the following page: Thought Catalog. "I Found A Box Containing The Story Of A 19-Year-Old Girl Who Killed A Random Person For No Reason". Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://thoughtcatalog.com/anonymous/2015/06/i-found-a-box-containing-the-story-of-a-19-year-old-girl-who-killed-a-random-person-for-no-reason/>.

²⁶ See: DDLC Wiki. "monika.chr". Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://ddlcwiki.ga/wiki/Monika.chr>.

²⁷ %%%%. Accessed August 14, 2018. <http://projectlibitina.com/>.



Figure 13 - natsuki.chr before and after transformation

This type of hidden puzzles pushed players to dissect the game folder and allowed them to discover more and more clues about this mysterious parallel story. Besides, all of these clues (evoking the cult, the Project Libitina and the Third Eye) have been interpreted by players as part of a vast “alternate reality game” announcing the next title developed by Team Salvato (although there is no confirmation of this interpretation yet). These elements therefore intertwine narrative functions (the puzzles’ contents are intradiegetic, although paratextual), gameplay functions (since they formed the framework of an investigation game) and possibly advertising functions (thus giving information about the developer’s empirical world).

Let us note, in addition, that the “ARG” puzzle is not limited to the study of the game folder: players are also encouraged to look for clues on other paratextual elements. For example, a reference to the Third Eye can be found on DDLC’s merchandise store²⁸, on a poster entitled “Yuri Unhinged”, which thus suggests that Yuri could be connected to the Project Libitina (see figure 14).

²⁸ Team Salvato Store. “Exclusive Poster – Yuri Unhinged (11×17)”. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://store.teamsalvato.com/product/exclusive-poster-yuri-unhinged-11x17/>.



Figure 14 - A poster of Yuri sold on DDLC's merchandise store and referring to the Third Eye

Similarly, if the player remains listening to Monika in the last part of the game, she will eventually reveal that she has a Twitter account. Yet this account has been operating since February 2017, i.e. several months before the game release (in September 2017), and is still active currently (it periodically publishes “tweets” that are in agreement with Monika’s personality). This page can be considered as part of DDLC's expanded playground, since it has not only been used to deliver clues about the Project Libitina, but it has also triggered some kind of widespread role-play, as DDLC players regularly try to interact with Monika on Twitter as if she were real. Moreover, several fans have continued the trend by creating accounts for the other characters (including for the Protagonist) and play their role on the social media, either by trying to catch Monika’s attention or by interacting with each other.

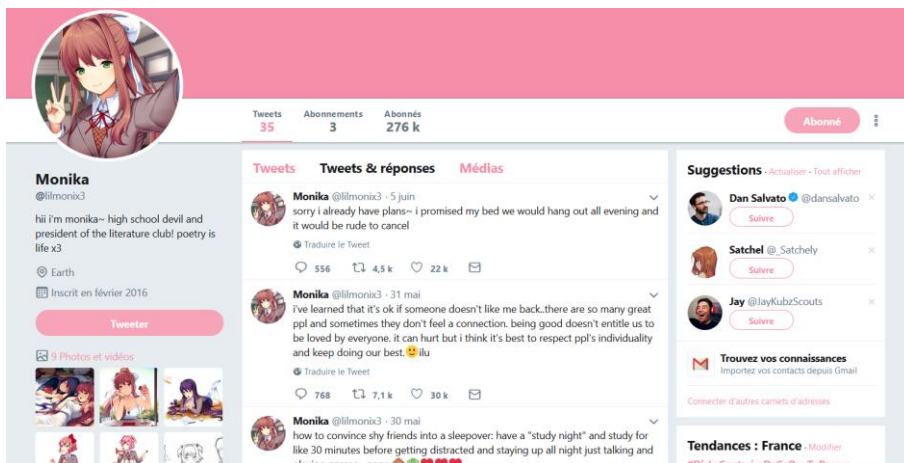


Figure 15 - Screenshot of Monika’s official Twitter account



Figure 16 - An interaction between two fan-made accounts (for the Protagonist and Sayori)

In summary – using Salen and Zimmerman’s terms²⁹: if DDLC may lack “Explicit interactivity” (i.e. “‘interaction’ in the obvious sense of the word: overt participation [...]”³⁰), the device is nevertheless a fertile support for “Beyond-the-object-interactivity; or participation within the culture of the object”³¹. From investigation to roleplay, several alternative modes of engagement with the game have been developed by players (many of which find their germs in the device).

6. CONCLUSION

In DDLC, the paratext has therefore an eminently playful function: the relationship between the paratextual elements and the game elements is generating conflicts, ambiguity, uncertainty which opens very widely the play space and offers some grips for the player’s playful attitude. In other words, DDLC is a device which leaves little room for play (understood as an uncertain action or decision) inside its own structure, but which is a good trigger for different forms of paratextual play: for a puzzle-solving and investigation play (whose results allow to reinterpret differently the game’s meaning), for a roleplay on Twitter, and even for a social play (with the creation of many “memes” and community jokes based on the game’s event).

²⁹ Salen and Zimmerman, Rules of Play, 60.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

when somebody asks where all the other girls
went



Figure 17 - An example of meme derived from DDLC

Hence, in DDLC as in many other works, it is actually “impossible to distinguish [the paratext] and the text”³². Both are supports for the playful attitude, and the passage from one medium to another does not necessarily mark a rupture in the play experience. As Harvie³³ (adapting Jones³⁴) pointed out, our gaming experience is in truth predominantly paratextual: this is why it is even more essential for game studies to consider paratext, not as a peripheral element detached from the gaming experience, but as a key component in our playing activities.

In short, the case of DDLC shows in a particularly eloquent way the importance of extending the study of play outside the borders of the game devices³⁵, to get out of the determinism of objects, and to rather study play where it is not necessarily obvious. If we examine play in all its variety and across all supports (even those that are not necessarily labeled as “games”), and only on this condition, we will be able to better consider and describe the playing activity and its specificities compared to other reading practices.

³² Peter Lunenfeld, ed., The Digital Dialectic: Essays on New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 19.

³³ Steven Harvie, “The Paratext of Videogames”, First Person Scholar (2017), URL: www.firstpersonscholar.com/the-paratext-of-video-games/ (accessed August 14, 2018).

³⁴ Steven E. Jones, The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Studies (New York: Routledge, 2008), 43.

³⁵ A shift of perspective already defended in the paper: Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja, “The Word Game: The ontology of an indefinable object”, Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015) (Pacific Grove, 2015), http://www.fdg2015.org/papers/fdg2015_paper_51.pdf (accessed August 14, 2018).

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