

Across time, space and discourse: The elusive nature of visual novels

by

Srdan Renovica

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## **Abstract**

In software publishing as well as in recent academic scholarship, visual novels have come to be viewed as a type of story-driven video game originating in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, conveying their stories through the mixture of text and audio-visual component, while being characterized by a number of formal elements (e.g. anime-inspired art, nonlinearity and eroticism). Although most academic conversations center on works produced during the 1990s and later, the period of 1980s – whose software I argue to be equally important in the context of how this perception of visual novel came to be – is largely omitted from discussion. This thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of the variety of sources connected to visual novels (e.g. game software, periodicals, visual novel databases, informal scholarship, online blogs, academic writing), reexamining the genre's current conceptualizations and classification criteria, highlighting the overarching trends and implications present in the 1980s visual novel precursors and employing the aforementioned findings in order to bridge the temporal, interregional and discursive gaps presently existing in the scholarly conversation, with the ultimate aim of discovering a more globalized lens for exploring the visual novel and its history in the academic setting. Illustrating its points through the means of various canonical as well as outlying game software, this thesis argues in favor of recognizing the menu-based mechanical paradigm and the perceived cultural point of origin as two underappreciated criteria that have so far been used to delineate the visual novel from other video game genres, and points to potential next steps in driving the global studies of this genre towards terminological unity.

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## Prologue: On Sources, Goals and Methodological Constraints

This thesis will focus on the visual novel, a distinct form of entertainment/storytelling that is commonly considered to have originated in Japan during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Azuma, 2001), unique in that it simultaneously relies on visual, textual and interactive/ludic elements in order to tell its stories. Despite being a staple of the otaku<sup>1</sup> culture consumption in Japan since the 1990s (Azuma, 2001) and despite the subsequent growth of its popularity outside its perceived land of origin, the visual novel has remained an under-researched – as well as a somewhat misunderstood – topic in the global academia.

One of the reasons might lie in its elusive and hard-to-define nature; the very term “visual novel” – used primarily in the context of software publishing, game journalism and academia in North America and Europe<sup>2</sup> – is just one among the multitude of possible ways to refer to this phenomenon in different parts of the world and within different discourses. It is therefore important to briefly describe the existing discussion surrounding visual novels, before stating my research goals and outlining my methodology.

While still in their infancy (compared to the studies of games and literature), the academic works on this broader topic have nevertheless been plentiful and varied. Many of these texts focus on the applicative potential of visual novels in education, more specifically on empowering non-technical professionals in creating their own educational software and outlining the optimal practices for its design (see: Camingue, Carstensdottir & Melcer, 2020; Chen, Fujikawa, Koike &

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<sup>1</sup> Azuma denotes “otaku” as a group of people invested in niche subcultures, such as those dealing with anime, computers or figurine collecting (Azuma, 2001). In the later portions of the text, I will use the word “otaku” to label both the aforementioned audiences, as well as their modes of consumption and the entertainment products primarily marketed towards them.

<sup>2</sup> From this point on, I will use the term “West” to refer to this geographical region, as well as to the English language discourse produced in it.

Suzuki, 2019). Other popular topics are society, gender, sexuality and transhumanism, with the researchers trying to understand the impact this type of software has on a larger societal scale, particularly in the way it can change the users' perspective on societal roles, interpersonal relationships and media consumption (see: Azuma, 2001; Galbraith, 2011; Patterson, 2022; Taylor, 2007; Tompowsky, 2014). Furthermore, there are studies that deal with various forms of media that the visual novel tangentially connects to, for instance anime, music and theater (see: Cavallaro, 2010; Mireault, 2013; Rice, 2019). Finally, ludology is another branch of science to which visual novels naturally lend themselves (Dumoulin & Lescouët, 2023), even though Aarseth, one of the more prominent game theorists, does not even consider visual novels to belong to the realm of games (Aarseth, 2012).

There are two immediate conclusions to be derived from this seemingly disconnected list of texts and frameworks. Firstly, there is little conversation between individual texts, authors and approaches: most authors do not cite other works about visual novels at all, staying instead within the boundaries of their respective fields and the relevant works within<sup>3</sup>. In other words, it seems that much of the writing concerning visual novels today deals primarily with their application in order to offer better outcomes and/or gain better insight into other fields.

Despite this, there seems to be a very firmly established notion of what the visual novel is, what it consists of and how it should be perceived in virtually all of these pieces of writing. They point to the visual novel's Japanese origins, its unique blend of text and anime-style character art/backgrounds, its prominent audio component, nonlinearity and choice making, as well as the importance of the erotic content and the stories revolving around romancing "beautiful girls". It is true that these authors do not place equal emphasis on each given aspect of this conceptualization (depending primarily on their research topics and goals); some of them do not even use the term

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<sup>3</sup> The main exception to this pattern is *The History and Allure of Interactive Visual Novels*, which was published last year and presents probably the first book dedicated primarily to the evolution of this video game genre and its unique properties (Kretzschmar & Raffel, 2023).

“visual novel”, opting instead for the terms more commonly used in Japan such as “novel game”, “gal game” or “*bishōjo*<sup>4</sup> game” (see: Azuma, 2001, Galbraith, 2011). Despite that, the common implicit understanding of the visual novel and its formal characteristics (according to the aforementioned conceptualization) seems to be the thread that binds all of these seemingly disparate academic works together.

A recently published piece seemingly confirms this line of reasoning: a group of researchers decided to analyze a large sample of Western produced/translated visual novels, as well as the English language academic works about them (Camingue, Carstensdottir & Melcer, 2021). The result they synthesized points to many of the same formal characteristics I described already, hinting that the dominant conceptualization of the visual novel in the Western academia might primarily be based on the formal characteristics commonly associated with this genre of video games.

Finally, another (and slightly less obvious) trait that binds all of these works together is their lack of discussion about the 1980s PC adventure games in Japan. It is, of course, true that none of the aforementioned works focuses on this era of Japanese video games as their primary topic, and therefore there is no apparent need for them to cover it. While some authors do acknowledge the 1980s titles in their capacity as visual novel precursors, even they tend to do so merely in passing, without reflecting on the mechanical and formal connections between the two, nor showing any concrete insights about the era that preceded the mid-1990s Japanese visual novel boom (see: Azuma, 2001; Sousa, 2014). I would ultimately assume that this gap in scholarship is impeding the field from reaching the full range of possibilities in all the areas of its potential application; answering the question of how the visual novel’s formal characteristics came to be

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<sup>4</sup> For the duration of this thesis, I will employ the modified Hepburn method of romanizing Japanese text. The only exception to this rule will be the terms, names and titles that are already commonly referred to under different romanization formats in English language texts/discourse (for example, Famicom, Hokkaido or the US-produced visual novel title *Katana Shoujo*, neither of which follow the modified Hepburn romanization rules in their entirety).

(and more importantly, how they came to be conceptualized as such) would yield invaluable insights into what those formal characteristics actually entail in regards to how visual novels are perceived today.

Here I deem it necessary to briefly mention the informal or otherwise non-academic Western researchers who are presently dealing with the issues of visual novels and the “retro” Japanese adventure games<sup>5</sup> (see: Maher, 2012; Mandelin, 2019; Redon, as cited in Fenlon, 2019; Szczepaniak, 2014). In many ways their work exemplifies exactly the opposite traits when compared with the existing academic writing: these informal scholars often allude to each other (if not through direct citations, then by mentioning the same events or phenomena already described by other authors); they oftentimes exhibit extensive knowledge about the content, distribution practices and legacy of the early Japanese adventure games<sup>6</sup>; finally, their frameworks and terminology regarding the visual novel seem to be more varied (not only in terms of vocabulary used, but also in the connections they draw between the different eras of its existence). While I did consult many of these texts and do deem them authoritative, I would like to note that they oftentimes deal heavily with anecdotal evidence and poorly documented technology, with their aims rarely going beyond antiquarianism and journalism. Therefore, they should be approached somewhat cautiously in an academic setting.

This brings me to the public intellectual scene in Japan, where the topic of otaku culture went through extensive scrutiny since the late 1980s (Azuma, 2001). One of the more curious aspects of Japan’s public intellectual discussions is their more seamless integration within the domestic public discourse when compared to the West (Abel & Kono, 2009). Most of these books have

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<sup>5</sup> As I will explain in more detail at a later point, this term is somewhat analogous with the term “visual novel” as commonly used in the West; the two can generally be used interchangeably (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> They often draw this knowledge not only from the software itself, but also from its packaging, Japanese primary sources and the interviews with the important actors from the 1980s PC game community.

never been translated into English; those that have usually tend to be published as academic volumes.

In Japan, however, they tend to be aimed at a more general readership, while at the same time contributing to the broader intellectual discourse. This was the case with Hiroki Azuma, whose work *The Animalization of the Postmodern: Japanese Society Through the Otaku Lens*<sup>7</sup> is the most widely cited academic book examining visual novels<sup>8</sup> according to Google Scholar. Fukuyama's work on the history of Japanese adventure games and Miyamoto's work on the history of *erogē*<sup>9</sup> both occupy a similar position, existing between scholarly rigor and a somewhat casual delivery, imbued with a strong fan (even otaku-like) sentiment throughout. Feeling that sources like this possess the best traits of both the academic and informal modes of research, I have decided to consult them significantly over the course of my thesis, most prominently as sources of historical information on the 1980s Japanese PC adventure games.

Finally, it is important to note the key role that the game journalism, publishers' marketing strategies and online discourse played in shaping the present-day understanding of visual novels (together with all the other video game genres and assorted phenomena). In the main body of this thesis, I will place particular focus on the visual novel databases as one of the most illustrative lens in tracing this conceptualization.

Having roughly traced the shape of the discussion surrounding visual novels and the variety of environments in which it takes place, I want to briefly reflect on this conversation's actual significance. According to Joseph Redon, one of the leading figures in the preservation of

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<sup>7</sup> This book saw its English release in 2009, under the title *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.

<sup>8</sup> While not the main focal point of Azuma's book, he uses a variety of visual novels to illustrate his views on the otaku consumption in the postmodern Japanese society (Azuma, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will use this term to denote the visual novels that feature erotic content, irrespective of how much space this erotic content occupies vis-à-vis the unity of the entire work (Fitsko, 2014). As with many of the terms covered in this thesis, there is a difference in usage and perception between the cultures: in the West, *erogē* is oftentimes used to denote primarily pornographic Japanese visual novels (see: Taylor, 2007; Patterson, 2022), while in Japan it encompasses all games that feature erotic content and use it for the purposes of marketing (Miyamoto, 2013).

Japanese game software (Szczepaniak, 2014), approximately 20% of the 35,000 to 40,000 Japanese PC games produced before 2014 appeared to have already been lost by that point (Redon, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014); doubtless today the number of unsalvageable games is even higher. While these early computer games are often difficult to acquire and preserve (physically as well as digitally), their obscurity ultimately owes much to their lack of visibility within the broader video game discourse (in Japan as well as abroad). These gaps in knowledge and the overall lack of understanding regarding the significance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the visual novel's history have seeped into the public understanding of the visual novel as a whole, informing the usage of this genre marker in labeling a variety of quite disparate works and phenomena in the video game industry.

It is with all this in mind that I begin my examination, aiming to take a step beyond the shaky contemporary conceptualizations of visual novel, and potentially offer a more systematized and globally coherent lens of discussing them as a video game genre within the academic environment. I will organize my argument according to the three-chapter structure, with all the chapters outlined in the following passages.

Chapter 1, titled “Common Route: Contemporary Understanding of the Visual Novel between Time, Space and Discourse”, will aim to provide the reader with intuitive understanding of visual novels, by introducing their commonly perceived formal characteristics, briefly explaining their origins in the 1980s and important historical developments in relation to other contemporary video game genres, as well as by outlining the different sub-genres commonly associated with the visual novel proper. This chapter will therefore serve a threefold purpose:

1. Explain how the visual novels are commonly defined and perceived today, as well as how those conceptualizations came to be;

2. Familiarize the uninitiated reader with visual novels in the most basic of terms;
3. Serve as a companion piece to this thesis' introductory section, by presenting the issues of the visual novel's history and terminology in more concrete light to the prospective reader.

Chapter 2, titled “The Adventure Begins: The Origins of the Contemporary Visual Novel in the 1980s Japanese Adventure Games”, will contain the analysis of the most notable Japanese adventure games<sup>10</sup> published in the 1980s, namely *Mystery House* (a stand-alone game developed by Micro Cabin), *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* (known as *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* in Japan), *SNATCHER* and *Rance: Quest for Hikari*. It will track the general trends present in these titles, contrasting their tropes and mechanics with those of the Western adventure games, Japanese role playing games (RPGs) and the present-day visual novels. It will ultimately point out the conceptual (in the West) and mechanical (in Japan) similarities between the adventure games and RPGs, while highlighting the menu-based navigation and the lack of representational depictions of traversal as the potential main links between the 1980s Japanese adventures and contemporary visual novels. Through these examinations, I will try to illustrate how 1980s Japanese adventure video games and their properties came to inform the formal characteristics and the general understanding of the visual novel today.

Chapter 3, titled “TRUE END: Revisiting the Contemporary Understanding of the Visual Novel” will be the final section within the main body of this thesis. Its main purpose will be to expose the potential problems lying within the existing terminology and classification criteria of visual novels. In doing so, it will put a particular emphasis on the Western perspective and the idea of “Japaneseness” commonly connected with these games in Western discourse. It will

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<sup>10</sup> The games listed were picked according to their perceived influence, as well as the prominence within the English language visual novel discourse. I will provide further rationale for choosing these particular visual novels in Chapter 2 itself.

illustrate some of the aforementioned shortcomings further by pointing to games (primarily *A Dark Room* by Yōsuke Karabe) that are commonly viewed as visual novels but fall outside of the established criteria. Additionally, this section will introduce the problem of lineage (i.e. games being classified as visual novels according to their perceived cultural point of origin) as one of the most commonly overlooked criteria of classification. The main question Chapter 3 will try to tackle is in what way the general understanding of the visual novel (as outlined in Chapter 1) is challenged by these new insights; the answer to this question will hopefully present a step towards an increased conceptual clarity and a more systematized academic discussion of visual novels on a global scale.

There are three distinct angles I want to employ in this attempt to uncover a more globalized lens for exploring the visual novel and the concept thereof. The first is the angle of academic research, with visual novel still representing an under-researched phenomenon in the realm of video game and Japanese studies. The second angle, on its part, deals with one of the most under-researched facets of the visual novel, namely the sphere of the 1980s Japanese adventure games, which oftentimes share the same mechanics, tropes and even personnel with the more contemporary visual novels produced during the 1990s and onwards. Finally, the third angle is to be found in my focus on the Japanese language sources, given that most Western observers so far have tended to base their understanding of this genre through the prism of English language sources and English translated software<sup>11</sup>.

My approach has therefore required me to consult both primary and secondary sources pertinent to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese PC video games, as well as both the contemporary and the present-day written sources on the visual novel itself, spanning across all four types of

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<sup>11</sup> The most recurring object of the academic studies I listed at the beginning of this thesis was *Doki Doki Literature Club*, a US-produced visual novel released in 2017 (see: Rice, 2019; Dumolin & Lescouët, 2023; Patterson, 2022). Although this can potentially be dismissed as a trivial piece of information, I believe that it might point to a wider trend of Western users slowly reshaping their understanding of the visual novel through the filter of recent works produced in the West.

discourse I have previously mentioned. In more concrete terms, the sources compiled range from the academic works, developer interviews, game magazines and other forms of game journalism, advertisements, online blogs, online visual novel databases (e.g. VNDB and ErogameScape), official statements made by game publishers, and so forth. Keeping with the spirit of the *Platform Studies* series of scholarly volumes – whose structure and style informed much of my approach on this thesis – I decided to make the analysis of video game software a major part of my work and feature the software itself prominently on my list of sources (see: Altice, 2015; Therrien, 2019).

In this sense, my ambition is to make a serious treatise on visual novels, analyzing their early development, reexamining the present academic consensus and relying primarily on the Japanese language sources. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been a single work aiming to unite all three points of view; I hope that this will not remain a case for long, and that this academic project will be just one among many such works to come.

Of course, the contribution I can hope to achieve with this treatise will most likely be but a very modest one. The spatial affordances of a Master's Thesis are simply not adequate for the exploration of this topic in all of its breadth and complexity. Ideally speaking, there is a plethora of fields one should try to become familiar with when researching visual novels, ranging from the study of games and literature, all the way to the computer science and linguistics<sup>12</sup>. I should therefore try to briefly address some of the important methodological decisions that went on to shape the course of my research.

Throughout this introduction, I have on multiple occasions quite bluntly invoked the cultural divide between Japan and the West. While this is not considered the best practice within the field of Pacific and Asian Studies, I believe there is merit to its usage in this context, with the Japanese

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<sup>12</sup> These two fields are of particular importance when discussing the expressive possibilities and stylistic choices of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese adventure games.

PC game market existing quite separately from its overseas counterparts for much of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century's last two decades. While I will go over those circumstances in greater detail in Chapter 1, presently I just want to make clear my intention to minimize any forays into critical theory, sociology, linguistics, studies of literature or genre studies (all of which are valid directions in which to take a research of visual novels).

Put differently, I will first and foremost try to concentrate my efforts on the visual novel's historical developments, present-day discourse and underlying mechanics. While this approach might render my project modest in scope and potentially unattractive to my peers in humanities, I believe that the best possible way to advance the study of visual novels is to address its most superficial aspects first, before moving onto the less readily apparent topics. I hope that some of my prospective readers will be able to find some of the beauty and genuine insight that is to be discovered in the mechanics and the developments I will be describing throughout the rest of this work.

## **Common Route: Contemporary Understanding of the Visual Novel between Time, Space and Discourse**

I have spent much of the previous section describing the discursive and methodological issues relevant to the research of visual novels. There is, however, one crucial facet of this genre that I have yet to address – the actual definition of the visual novel, or at minimum a succinct explanation of the genre aimed for all the readers who might not be familiar with it and its commonly perceived properties. In other words, this chapter moves the conversation towards the more concrete questions of the visual novels' evolution, formal elements and perception.

The visual novel's peculiar amalgam of text, visuals, audio and human-to-machine interaction positions them in the sphere of narrative games, whose stories commonly unravel according to player's on-click prompts and menu-based commands (Camingue, Carstensdottir & Melcer, 2021). They commonly display a number of stylistic elements such as anime-like art, multiple graphical layers containing background art, character art and text, nonlinear stories branching into multiple different directions, erotic/pornographic content, etc. (see: Camingue, Carstensdottir & Melcer, 2021; Kretschmar & Raffel, 2023). Figure 1 shows a number of phenomena commonly associated with visual novels, including many of the above-listed.



Figure 1: Screenshots from four different visual novels exemplifying some of the traits commonly associated with this video game genre (anime inspired art, 2D character models superimposed upon 2D backgrounds, elaborate pieces of digital artwork integrating the said characters with the backgrounds, text printed out within the textboxes of varying size and spatial organization, dramatic dialogue, etc.). Clockwise from upper-left corner: *STEINS;GATE* (MAGES & NITRO PLUS, 2010), *Kaigen Seito* (NITRO PLUS, 2006), *Rance X: Showdown* (Alice Soft, 2018), *Full Metal Daemon Muramasa* (NITRO PLUS, 2009). Source: VNDB.

The provisional illustration thus far made might at first glance appear very straightforward and reasonable; the difficulties emerge when trying to apply this conceptualization on the entire legacy of Japanese text-driven games<sup>13</sup>, with many of the Western commentators and journalists instinctively assigning the “visual novel” label to the 1980s text-heavy Japanese game software (see: Fenlon, 2019; Maher, 2012). In Japan, on the other hand, the terminology surrounding the visual novel can get even more complex and difficult to navigate: the term “visual novel” is

<sup>13</sup> The first attempts at creating story-driven text-based games in Japan date back to the early 1980s (see: Maher, 2012; Tane, 2013); the decades-worth of game software that came after has introduced such a plethora of conceptual and stylistic innovations, that unifying all such games according to purely formal and stylistic lines does not appear to be feasible.

commonly not employed in the context of games released before the 1990s, while the “adventure game”, the term sometimes used to describe the aforementioned 1980s games, simultaneously acts as an umbrella term for much of the text-driven video games developed for Japanese audiences<sup>14</sup> (see: Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019; Tane, 2013).

In order to be able to explore these complexities in a coherent manner, I will first aim to illustrate the historical and material circumstances which lead to the establishment of the visual novel as a separate category in video game publishing and discourse, as well as to briefly document and explain a variety of ways in which the software commonly perceived to fall under the umbrella of visual novel has been described, referred to and marketed throughout the last four decades. The starting point of the analysis is the early 1980s, the point in time when the personal computers were only starting to reach wider audiences in Japan (Hidaka, as cited in Szyzepaniak, 2014), as well as the first point of contact between the Japanese software developments with the computer games produced in the West (Tane, 2013).

### **The meaning between the circuits and the language: The dawn of the Japanese adventure games**

These early years of Japanese home computers represented a time of great technological development, fierce competition and markedly different market circumstances in regard to the software production and dissemination. For many of the curious consumers, owning a computer and its assorted equipment<sup>15</sup> was prohibitively expensive (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014; Miyamoto, 2013; Tane, 2013). Operating a computer device, on the other hand, required the user to be able to set up and configure all the equipment; a certain amount of programming ability was

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>15</sup> At that time, the computer hardware, input and output devices, storage peripherals, read-only memory circuits, etc. were all sold separately (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

also necessary in order to successfully boot software (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). This simultaneously meant that the individual computer users were much more likely to be competent at producing software of their own. Indeed, the Japanese video game market of this era shared many of its dynamics with the indie game development of today, with many of the commercially produced games being the work of a single developer<sup>16</sup>.

As for the computer hardware itself, the market in the early 1980s was dominated by the companies NEC, Fujitsu and Sharp – the so-called “big three of the 8-bit era” (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014; Miyamoto, 2013). Each of their lines of products at the time<sup>17</sup> used a different central processing unit, meaning that the individual pieces of game software were incompatible across multiple systems (or rather, that the developers needed to perform a from-the-ground-up conversion of their software for each additional computer system they aimed to sell it on).

These mutual incompatibilities, however, seem relatively insignificant when compared to the circumstances that initially stood between the Japanese video game market and the Western-produced interactive fiction software<sup>18</sup>:

1. During the early 1980s, Japanese consumers predominantly used computers made in Japan, whose hardware was incompatible with their overseas counterparts (Szczepaniak, 2014);
2. Almost none of the Western produced adventure games that made it into Japan ended up localized for the Japanese market, meaning that the knowledge of English (alongside the proper computer hardware) was a prerequisite for playing them (Tane, 2013);

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<sup>16</sup> This was, for instance, the case with *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, a game I will analyze in Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> The lines of products referred to here are NEC PC-8000 and PC-8801, Fujitsu FM-7 and FM-8, and Sharp X1.

<sup>18</sup> At that time, interactive fiction games were known as “adventure games” in both Japan and the West; nowadays, they are popularly referred to as “text adventures” in the West (Tane, 2013).

3. Many of the games covered in the Japanese computer magazines did not even physically make it into Japan, their coverage based primarily on the word-of-mouth or the computer magazines imported from overseas (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019);
4. Most importantly, the unique properties of the Japanese language made the adaption of the dominant adventure game tropes into the Japanese language and the contemporary hardware virtually impossible – some of the earliest Japanese-produced adventure games were actually written in English (Maher, 2012).

This last point calls for some further elaboration. In the initial attempts to adapt the formulae of the Western interactive fiction to the Japanese market, the first and the most readily apparent obstacle was that of the orthography; in concrete terms, it was impossible to express the intricacies of Japanese written language – which commonly employs no less than 2000 unique characters across the writing systems such as hiragana, katakana, kanji, Latin alphabet and Arabic numerals – by relying on the contemporary computer hardware which could on average not handle much more than 100 unique characters in total (Mandelin, 2019). This would very soon lead the developers towards adopting a third variable – visuals – within the existing mix of interactivity and text<sup>19</sup> (Tane, 2013). While the 1980s video game market in the West continued to welcome text-only adventure games even after the first successes of the graphic adventure games (Tanaka, 2013b), then-Japanese developers were dependent on the NEC PC-8801's and PC-9801<sup>20</sup>'s superior rendering of images (Redon, as cited in Fenlon, 2019) – usually coupled with katakana-only writing (see: Szczepaniak, 2014; Mandelin, 2019) – throughout this entire decade of adventure game production. This orientation towards the visual aspect soon rendered

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<sup>19</sup> Micro Cabin's *Mystery House*, published in 1982 and covered more substantially in Chapter 2, was one of the early examples of this.

<sup>20</sup> PC-8801 first came out in 1981, while PC-9801 first came out in 1982 (Szczepaniak, 2014); these two lines of computers would eventually go on to achieve dominance in the Japanese home computer market share (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). The former was initially more popular with the hobbyist consumers; the latter was mainly marketed towards business and corporate users, but later during the decade turned into the preferred platform for hobbyists (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

the Japanese computers as the platform of choice for all the players expecting highly detailed graphics<sup>21</sup>.

In addition to the problem above, the grammatical peculiarities of the Japanese language did not lend themselves well to application within the interactive fiction/adventure game framework, with the English language following a different order between the verb and the object of a sentence, and therefore a different logic of issuing commands<sup>22</sup> (Maher, 2012). At the initial stages of this adoption process, game developers settled for using English language commands, which would later get replaced by menu-based interactions through which the player would make the choices impacting the further course of the story. This menu-based manipulation was not unique to Japanese adventure games – Japanese role-playing games or JRPGs (known simply as “role-playing games” or “RPGs” in Japan<sup>23</sup>) also relied heavily on the menus. Furthermore, arguably the two most influential games in the Japanese adventure game and the role-playing game context (*The Portopia Serial Murder Case* and *Dragon Quest*, respectively) were designed by the same person, Yūji Horii.

Therefore, while researchers and marketers often talk about the visual novel as an endemic Japanese development, the fact is that this software has stood in relation with the Western gaming culture from its very beginnings, with both the Japanese adventure games and the Japanese role-playing games drawing their influences heavily from the Western computer and tabletop role-playing games as well as interactive fiction (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019).

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<sup>21</sup> It might have simultaneously served as the catalyst for the proliferation of pornographic content within this type of games towards the end of the 1980s (see: Maher, 2012; Miyamoto, 2013; Redon, as cited in Fenlon, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> This setback is of critical importance, given that the issuance of verb-based commands is traditionally the main mode of interaction between the player and the computer in this type of games.

<sup>23</sup> Same thing applies to the “Japanese adventure games” – in the land of their origin, they are referred to simply as “adventure games” or “AVG” (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019). I should also note that the term “AVG” is sometimes also employed as an alternative name for the “ADV”, a method of displaying text in visual novels where the textbox consistently occupies a part of the screen rather than its entirety.



Figure 2: Some of the 1980s Japanese video games that placed great emphasis on the written text and menu navigation. Left-hand side presents the highly influential games directed by Yūji Horii in the early 1980s: *Dragon Quest* (top) and *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* (bottom). The right-hand side presents the two games that each ended up significantly influencing the expression of the visual novel (in its broader sense, as perceived in the West): *Rance: Quest for Hikari*<sup>24</sup> (top) and *SNATCHER* (bottom). Source: MobyGames.

Being branded according to a set of criteria already established in the West, these two genres existed as separate ever since their inception in Japan; they continue to exist and be perceived separately today, although the lines between them can sometimes get blurred due to the frequent intermixing of each other's formal elements (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019). In any case, with hardware advancements (and with developers getting increasingly well-acquainted with said hardware), the expressive power of both these genres continued to grow, the inclusion of kanji became feasible and therefore the stories became more elaborate (Mandelin, 2019). In the case of

<sup>24</sup> Notice the presence of the traditional RPG mechanics on the screenshot, e.g. health (体力), level (レベル) and the experience points (経験値).

adventure games, this led to a proliferation of unique market strategies that will follow this genre throughout the subsequent decade, ultimately leading to the formation of the “visual novel” as a separate concept.

### **Branching paths, nonlinear frameworks: The issue of terminology**

The first usage of the word “novel” as an adventure game publishers’ marketing tool can be traced back to *Novel Ware* – a series of games published in the late 1980s by System Sacom – which targeted comparatively older audiences and aimed to conjure the atmosphere of reading a novel in a digital form (Tane, 2013). Chunsoft’s *St. John’s Wort*<sup>25</sup>, released in 1992 for the Nintendo’s Super Famicom (known as SNES in the West), was the first title in this company’s line of “sound novels”, games in which reading was put to the forefront of the player’s experience, with images and sounds given strictly background role<sup>26</sup> (Tane, 2013). Finally, the term “visual novel” was coined in order to market the mid-1990s trilogy of visual novels (*Shizuku*, *Kizurato* and *To Heart*) developed by Leaf (see: Azuma, 2001; Tane, 2013). These games introduced the mixing and remixing of 2D character models with 2D backgrounds, which reduced the production costs by allowing developers to create elaborate scenes by employing an extremely small number of basic building blocks (Tane, 2013). These building blocks form a part of what Azuma subsequently came to refer to as “database elements<sup>27</sup>” (Azuma, 2001), the interplay between which is illustrated in the Figure 4.

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<sup>25</sup> In English language discourse, this title is commonly referred to as *Otogirisou* or *Otogirisō*; through the remainder of this thesis, I will employ the latter in order to refer to this title.

<sup>26</sup> This eventually led to the “NVL” method of displaying text, in which the textbox covers the entirety of the screen and therefore assumes the central importance in the game’s visual organization; this is an alternative method of text organization as compared to the more widely used “ADV”.

<sup>27</sup> Azuma’s database consumption theory posits that the otaku do not take interest in consuming grand narratives or individual stories, shifting instead their narrative consumption towards the individual parts that make up larger stories. In such a way, certain character traits, aesthetic choices or standardized plot points – the so-called “database elements” – become the main object of attention, as well as the object of further discussion, classification and reevaluation by the otaku (Azuma, 2001). Throughout the rest of this thesis I will continue to employ database elements as a useful term for discussing the visual novel’s evolution, mechanics and tropes.



Figure 3: Examples of the early games that formed the basis behind the discussion of the visual novel/adventure game genres as defined in Japanese sources. Clockwise from upper-left corner: *Otogirisō*<sup>28</sup> (sound novel), Leaf’s 1996 *Shizuku* (visual novel), elf’s 1995 *Dōkyūsei 2* (dating simulation), Key’s 1999 *Kanon* (contemporary novel game). Source: VNDB.

At any rate, this framework – which at the time accounted for only a small number of video game software in Japan – subsequently made its way to the West, where it came to be commonly used not only in reference to this particular set of practices, but also more broadly, to retroactively include the entire spectrum of Japanese adventure games, which is how the two very different concepts of the visual novel and the Japanese adventure game ended up turning virtually interchangeable. While the adventure game still is the preferred umbrella term in Japan (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019), the games that place primary emphasis on reading (especially those that follow the “visual novel” framework outlined above) are now for the most part referred to as “novel games” (see: Azuma, 2001, Fitsko, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> This image illustrates the choice-making mechanic commonly employed in visual novels.

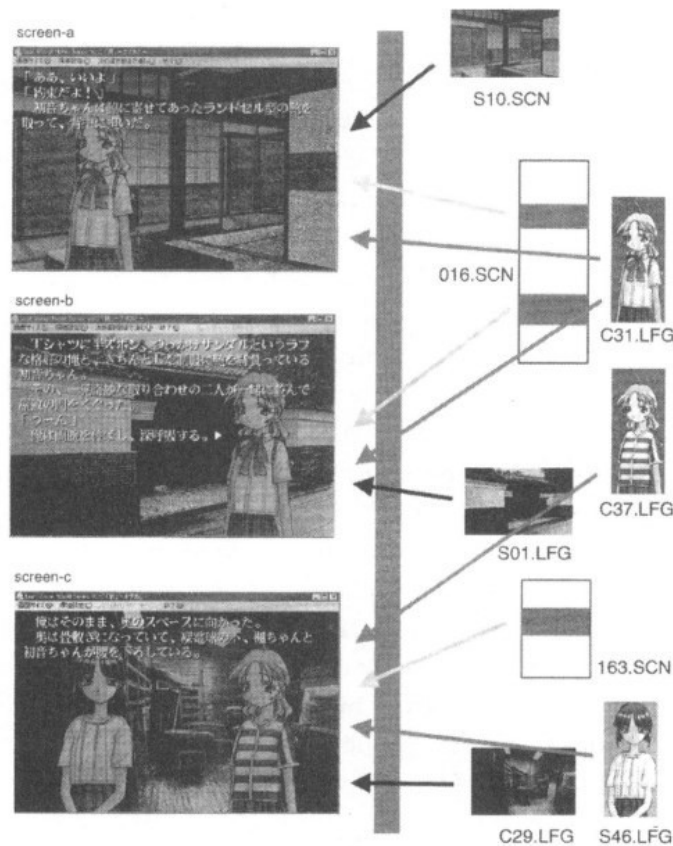


Figure 4: Azuma's illustration of database elements and the multitude of their possible combinations within a single visual novel. The database elements he used belong to *Kizuato* (1996), the second title in the Leaf's *Visual Novel* series. Source: (Azuma, 2007).

The divisions presented so far may seem somewhat arbitrary and difficult to navigate; the larger trouble, however, lies in the fact that they account for just one out of many possible conceptualizations of this genre. Beside the spatial, linguistic and terminological divide between the Japan and the West that I decided to focus on throughout this section, there are many other levels of discourse to discriminate between: one can analyze visual novels according to their formal characteristics (text, art, sound, navigation, as well as how all of them manifest themselves individually and in relation to each other), publishers' marketing strategies, the primary audience they target/the experience they are meant to convey (e.g. dating simulations,

“erotic games”, “crying games”), the perceived erotic nature of this genre<sup>29</sup>, or even within the broader discourse of video games and interactivity, where Aarseth’s criteria implicitly positions them in the category of hypertext rather than games (Aarseth, 2012).

The sources of these competing conceptualizations are numerous; I have already touched upon several, for instance when showing how the publishers’ marketing strategies and branding choices ended up influencing the visual novel discourse decades after serving their initial commercial purpose, or when outlining the broader role of journalism in the adoption of the “adventure game” and the “role-playing game” labels in the early 1980s Japan (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019). Of course, the grassroots-level dynamics are equally important: Comiket (the biggest otaku fair in the world) serves as the main site of the existing database elements’ fan remixes (Azuma, 2001), while the message boards such as 5ch.net serve the purpose of developing and spreading the visual novel-related online discourse. As it often seems to be the case in the rapidly evolving environment of interactive entertainment, video game genres and their establishment usually only get to receive academic coverage long after they initially emerge<sup>30</sup>; their informal establishment, on the other hand, very often has to do with their formal characteristics, similarities to the existing pieces of software or the innovative mechanics introduced therein.

Of course, all of these mechanisms are most readily observable in the way information about the genre is disseminated. It is in circulation, reinterpretations and interplay between the

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<sup>29</sup> I would like to point out this “perceived erotic nature” (as a criteria for conceptualizing the visual novel) in the euphemistic use of the term “visual novel” to denote pornographic games, or conversely, in the use of the term “*erogē*” to metonymically refer to the visual novels that feature no sexual content. Both of these usages have the tendency to appear in the visual novel discourse, with the former appearing primarily in the West, while the latter is more common in the Japanese context.

<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon seems to be applicable not only to the individual developments within the video game sphere, but to the very term “video game” as well. For example, in his historical treatise on early Japanese video games, Martin Picard uses the term “*geemu*” to refer to the broader ecosystem of the Japanese video game industry (Picard, 2013). While the word “*gēmu*” has for the last several decades been a preferred way of designating video games in Japan, the initially accepted name throughout the early years of Japanese video game adoption was in fact “*denshi yūgi*” – “electronic game(s)” (Matsubara, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

aforementioned terms such as “visual novel”, “sound novel”, “novel game”, “adventure game”, “Japanese adventure game”, “*erogē*”, “*nukigē*” (predominantly pornographic games), “*nakigē*” (emotional/sentimental games), “*gyarugē*” (“girl games” or “gal games”, as in prominently featuring female character models and dating; generally with erotic content), “*bishōjogē*” (“beautiful girl games”; generally with erotic content), “dating simulation”, “hypertext”, and so forth, that the perception of the genre and the way it will be marketed changes.

Online databases (such as the English language VNDB and the Japanese oriented ErogameScape) play a very curious role in this process: their creators and curators took it upon themselves to compile and organize the entire corpus of knowledge and history behind the visual novel, but each of these massive projects uses a different set of criteria and caters to different audiences, which ultimately ends up influencing the way the anonymous users end up perceiving the visual novel according to their location on the worldwide web<sup>31</sup>.

The distinction is readily apparent when looking at the words which form each of the databases’ names: visual novel database and *erogē*-scape, respectively. Furthermore, VNDB openly acknowledges that not all of the software it lists falls under the sphere of visual novels, which is clearly stated in the “Grandfather Clause” section of its inclusion criteria. Conversely, a substantial percentage of the ErogameScape’s catalogue does not contain erotic content at all, while some of the early 1980s erotic games therein listed are actually not a part of the broader Japanese adventure game sphere, belonging instead to the domain of *erogē* as defined by Naoki Miyamoto<sup>32</sup> (Miyamoto, 2013). That way, for instance, VNDB lists Hideo Kojima’s work *SNATCHER* – which lacks any representation on the ErogameScape – as a proper visual novel, while *Night Life*, one of the very first Japanese games to feature erotic content (Miyamoto, 2013), remains represented solely on ErogameScape. Figure 5 illustrates the wide palette of unorthodox

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<sup>31</sup> This entire process, in turn, represents one of the most easily observable examples of database consumption, as it was outlined in footnote 27.

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 9.

expressive elements that challenge the commonly perceived conceptual unity of visual novels/Japanese adventure games described so far in this chapter; each of these four examples appear listed in both of the aforementioned databases.



Figure 5: Visual novels exemplifying elements not commonly associated with visual novels. Clockwise from upper-left corner: Chunsoft’s 2008 *428: Shibuya Scramble* (photographic character models and backgrounds), *A Dark Room* (predominance of text over artwork), Littlewitch’s 2004 *Quartett!* (graphic novel-like presentation), Leaf’s 2002 *Utawarerumono* (inclusion of gameplay commonly associated with tactical RPGs). Source: VNDB.

### Tackling the elusive nature of visual novels: Preparatory notes

Throughout this chapter I have briefly presented the history of the Japanese adventure game/early visual novel and explored the pertinent terminology in the most basic of terms. While initially focused on the commonly perceived notions of the visual novel in the West, later portions of this analysis aimed to illustrate the sheer variety of this genre’s different frameworks and conceptualizations, culminating with the introduction of the “outlier” visual novels which do

not readily conform to any given conceptual framework – and yet remain identified by each of them, in part through the mechanisms of database consumption. I argue that these examples can serve as illuminating artifacts, challenging the presently dominant yet unclearly defined views regarding the visual novel. I will revisit this topic in Chapter 3, part of which I will spend on illustrating the shortcomings of the existing frameworks using the examples from the game *A Dark Room*.

As I have already mentioned in the introductory section, the 1980s Japanese PC adventure games are yet another outlying presence in the sphere of visual novels, as well as another potential lens for reexamining their unspoken conceptual unity<sup>33</sup>. The following chapter will provide additional context about the 1980s PC video game ecosystem, together with the analysis of some of the decade’s most significant Japanese-produced PC titles, in order to uncover their connections to the visual novels of today, as well as their less apparent connections to the Japanese RPGs and the broader Western adventure game tradition.

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<sup>33</sup> Here I refer to both the conceptual unity in Japan as well as in the West; while the Japanese term “adventure game” does include visual novels of the 1990s and onwards, the Japanese consumers still tend to perceive these games as separate from the Japanese adventure games released during the 1980s (Uchikoshi, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

## **The Adventure Begins: The Origins of the Contemporary Visual Novel in the 1980s Japanese Adventure Games**

Before delving into the analysis of the seminal 1980s Japanese adventure games and their relations to contemporary visual novels, Western adventure games and Japanese RPGs, I would like to offer some additional exposition on the highly dynamic nature of this decade within the Japanese PC video game history. Characterized by rapid technological advancements, a passionate otaku fanbase and lucrative financial prospects for the would-be developers as well as the publishers, this decade has not only provided a diverse output of game software, but has introduced many of the tropes that will remain the hallmark of the Japanese adventure game/visual novel to this day. These tropes stand in direct connection with the material circumstances of the era; while the previous chapter did feature a brief illustration of the commonly used hardware and its constraints in relation to the adoption of adventure game software in the Japanese language, it failed to mention many of the other incentives and challenges faced by the developers/consumers<sup>34</sup> themselves. The following short outline of this era's modes of publishing, nature of competition and technological modularity will help the readers to temporarily disregard their preconceived notions about the present-day video game industry, while simultaneously enabling them to frame the significant developments of the past along temporal lines.

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<sup>34</sup> In concurrence with the previous chapter's remarks about the stereotypical early 1980s Japanese computer user's technical savvy, I will deliberately proceed to keep the lines between the consumers and the (potential) creators somewhat blurry throughout this chapter.

## **Of chaos, commerce and creativity: Additional notes about the Japanese adventure game's primordial era**

Before the mainstream adoption of video game consoles in the later part of the 1980s, arcade cabinets and home computers represented the dominant video game platforms on the Japanese market (Szczepaniak, 2014). Likewise, before the spread of Internet into the Japanese households and offices, the majority of information related to these platforms circulated through the word-of-mouth and – more pertinent to this analysis – a plethora of specialized video game magazines. Within their pages, consumers and creators alike could discover the upcoming games' announcements, hardware and software reviews, bundled-in pieces of software, existing games' level outlines and walkthroughs, news about the transoceanic innovations and trends, as well as information about the highest scoring local arcade cabinets and players (see: Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019; Kitamura, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014; Matsubara, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

Periodicals detailing a number of then-active video game programming contents represent yet another point of curiosity (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014); in order to explain these competitions' significance, I should first elaborate more on the nature of publishing in this epoch of Japanese video games. While the majority of the most prominent Japanese video game corporations of today were active in game publishing during the 1980s, most of them had a long (oftentimes decades-long) history before branching out into the video game market<sup>35</sup>. It is for this reason that these companies often outsourced game development duties to third party

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<sup>35</sup> For instance, the information available on the English language version of the “Nintendo History” section of Nintendo's official site states that the company got established in 1933 as a manufacturer of playing cards; there is, however, also a possibility that the company supplied its cards to gambling ventures, as well as operated its own love hotel during the 1960s (Ashcraft, 2011). Many others prominent publishers – for instance Enix and Koei (Miyamoto, 2013) – took part in the production of *erogē*, and all of them have (allegedly) had ties with yakuza (Ozaki, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). The reluctance many of these companies show in acknowledging some of their past work and history presents one of the largest obstacles in the field of game antiquarianism in Japan (Szczepaniak, 2015).

developers<sup>36</sup> – Enix<sup>37</sup>, for instance, did not even have an in-house development team of its own during the observed era (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

It is under these circumstances that the game competitions thrived – the corporations who lacked their own software developer teams would promise to publish the winning software and pay royalties to the most skilled of programmers, while the up-and-coming game developers would submit their games in the hopes of securing the wide-scale distribution of their work and generous financial compensation therefrom (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). The popularity of the home computer devices such as PC-8801 among the hobbyist users, very short game production cycles<sup>38</sup>, as well as the discrepancy of technical skill between the individual programmers/developer teams<sup>39</sup>, all contributed to the rise of the aforementioned lucrative prospects that united the interests of manufacturers and distributors; the sudden rise of the home console-centered paradigm of video game consumption after 1985 would, however, see much of the technical talent migrate towards the console sphere (Miyamoto, 2013).

Programming savvy is just one example of the broader lack of standardization prevalent in this early period of Japanese computer adventuring. While Chapter 1 mentioned the incompatibilities of Japanese computer hardware between the individual lines of products, I should note that there was also plenty of variety between the different models within a single line. For instance, while nowadays it is common to mention the PC-8801 or PC-9801 as monolithic platforms comprising a 10 and 15 (respectively) year-long legacy of software titles, a lesser-known fact is that both of

<sup>36</sup> This was, for instance, the case with the 1981 arcade classic *Donkey Kong*; Nintendo, a Kyoto-based company, delegated the programming duties for this title to Ikegami Tsushinki, a company located in Tokyo (Szczepaniak, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> While most well-known for publishing the *Dragon Quest* series throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this corporation occupies a very important place in the history of Japanese adventure games and *erogē*, and will therefore feature prominently throughout this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Early 1980s adventure games would often take no more than three months to produce in their entirety (Tane, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> In other words, the techniques and the general know-how necessary to produce games had not yet become a standardized sphere of technical knowledge, and would only come to consolidate as the time went on (Kukino, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). While this phenomenon of non-standardization continued throughout most of the observed decade, the first formal attempts at creating a school for game programmers originated relatively early, in 1985 (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

these lines of products consisted of dozens of different models<sup>40</sup>. In this way, the models and hardware introduced at different points during the product line's life cycle would offer markedly different performance and would oftentimes be incompatible with each other. It is for these reasons that the games released in the early part of the decade feature little to no kanji characters, only for them to become a commonplace from mid-1980s and onwards<sup>41</sup>, providing a much wider expressive palettes to the prospective game scenario writers (Mandelin, 2019).

Finally, I should note that the game software itself was somewhat modular in much of the same way as the lines of computers described above. In short, all of the games I decided to focus on in this chapter have a number of different releases, with variations in graphical resolution and details, amount of censorship or even control mechanics – yet all of these releases<sup>42</sup> were branded under the same respective title, implicitly suggesting a unified player experience. This variety of editions and implied lack of definite auteurial statements is something that very much remained a feature of visual novels to the present day (Todome, n.d.).

Conversely, most of the other traits commonly associated with visual novels have resulted from more than a decade of technical, creative and business-related experimentation, only starting to reach definite standardization towards the mid-1990s. While momentarily digressing from the main topic of this chapter, I hope that this preface section is nonetheless helpful in introducing the circumstances that turned the 1980s PC adventure game into one of the most

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<sup>40</sup> These models and individual pieces of hardware are represented in the emulators such as ePC8801MA Kai SE, M88 and Neko Project II, whereupon each of the emulators requires specific BIOS file in order to simulate particular hardware components, as well as offers choices as to which graphical modes (specific to different computer models) to use when running each individual piece of software.

<sup>41</sup> Summing up the initial adaptation of Japanese characters to a computer environment and their subsequent incorporation within the global encoding standards is far beyond the scope of this thesis. I would, however, like to note that the PC-8801 required a kanji font read-only memory card in order to be able to display Japanese characters, which is (as per footnote 40) evident when setting up the emulation environment for this line of computers. Another point of interest is that the NEC's engineers allocated a fixed area of pixels for each individual character, meaning that the characters were not scalable, and therefore difficult to read when zoomed up during the first half of the PC-9801's life cycle (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> This statement might be slightly misleading in the case of *Mystery House*, to whose analysis I will dedicate the next subsection of this thesis; for more specific reasons as to why this game is different, please consult the next subsection's note about intellectual property found in footnote 49.

dynamic and simultaneously most complicated facets of the Japanese video game history. The following four game/subgenre analyses will trace the observed period in a more tangible manner, illustrating this preface's main points while simultaneously underscoring the gradual standardization of trends that would eventually form the basis of the contemporary visual novel's expressive elements.

### **Enter the *Mystery House*: Emergence of the “visual” in the Japanese adventure game**

While there is little in the way of academic discussion or consensus concerning the early Japanese adventure games, there is little doubt as to what the very first Japanese adventure game was. Bundled in with the April's edition of *Gekkan ASCII* magazine and meant to supplement the issue's introductory exposition of the then-unknown genre of adventure games (see: Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019; Tane, 2013), *Omoteland Adventure* served as the first practical point of entry to this genre for the broader Japanese audiences. In the spirit of Western text adventures its creators sought to emulate, this game's writing and command-giving mechanics were executed entirely in English. By 1983, many more games that featured a text-parser as the main tool of interaction entered the market (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019); what differentiated them from the pioneering *Omoteland* was their incorporation of the Japanese language, as well as their experiments with the graphical plane.

The initial Western attempts at introducing the visual aspect to interactive fiction predate the Japanese by two full years, with the release of On-Line Systems<sup>43</sup>'s *Mystery House* in May 1980. While Sierra's version was never officially released on the Japanese market, *Mystery House* has nonetheless managed to achieve a large presence in the formative days of Japanese adventure –

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<sup>43</sup> This company would soon come to be known as Sierra On-Line, and later as Sierra Entertainment.

the earliest attempt at adapting this software to Japanese market came in June 1982, mere months after the Japan's first recorded foray into interactive fiction.

This early adaptation by Micro Cabin featured very rudimentary graphics with a total of eight different colors<sup>44</sup>; while the original game did feature character models<sup>45</sup>, they are entirely missing from the 1982 version, moving the plot away from the genre of murder mystery and more towards treasure hunt. In other words, while the two games share the basic premise of exploring a mysterious house storing hidden material goods, the Micro Cabin's story is significantly altered. This is evident in the text itself; while the original's English text was not very detailed and mostly served to provide feedback and describe the environments players find themselves in, the Micro Cabin's (katakana-only) Japanese narration is virtually non-existent, and only ever employed upon the successful completion of tasks such as item retrieval or securing access to hidden locations<sup>46</sup>.

The number of items and actions that the player can perform in the 1982 version is also very limited: the game features a total of six directional commands<sup>47</sup>, six action verbs and 14 items; in order to successfully progress through the game, the player needs to type all of their names in English. As shown in Figure 6, all of these commands and items are listed alongside their translations into Japanese at the game's very beginning, which serves the role of standardizing that particular set of commands for the purposes of this particular game software. It should be noted that this approach is not an anomaly in the broader sphere of Japanese adventure games, and that it exists as a feature in other text-based adventures that use English commands, such as for instance the late 1983 *Dezeni Land*. A somewhat similar approach exists in the PC release of

<sup>44</sup> The player is prompted with choosing between the color and monochrome presentation before starting the game, probably due to the slow loading times present in the color mode.

<sup>45</sup> Contrary to present-day visual novels, none of the characters in this game had been given a single line of dialogue.

<sup>46</sup> Although this game does feature negative feedback, it is reduced to a simple "NO!" message, which effectively prevents the occurrence of nonlinearity in terms of plot development.

<sup>47</sup> As opposed to the games which simulate direct control of the protagonist via button presses or motion controls, the character/perspective navigation in interactive fiction results from the player specifying which direction (commonly abbreviated to N, S, E and W) or location the perspective should shift to.

*Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom* (1984), in which the English translations of items and character names are given in the parentheses whenever each of them appears for the first time in the game's Japanese narration<sup>48</sup>.



Figure 6: One of the two instructional screens present in the Micro Cabin's version of *Mystery House*, its purpose to introduce players to all the possible commands that can be used in the game together with their meaning in Japanese. Note the limited number of these elements and standardization effect that this chart appears to be performing in the context of this particular game software. Source: Youtube screen capture.

On the topic of *Mystery House*'s history in Japan, I should not fail to mention a more straightforward adaptation that the company called Starcraft released in 1983<sup>49</sup>; this adaptation faithfully recreates the story beats of the original, while including some additional expositional

<sup>48</sup> Contrary to the games mentioned so far, verbs and directional commands are not given an in-game explanation. In this game, the latter set of commands is realized using the letters F, B, R and L; the aforementioned *Dezeni Land* and its sequel *Dezeni World* employ the same convention.

<sup>49</sup> Concerning the legality of these Japanese adaptations, I should note that the legislation regarding intellectual rights and property in the realm of software had differed greatly when compared to the present day: until the late-1980s, bootlegging was a very common and overt practice in Japan, with software sellers and rental companies oftentimes simultaneously providing services of tape and cartridge overwriting (Miyamoto, 2013); another notable example is the company TAKERU, famous for installing vending machines that allowed game software bootlegging in more than 300 game and electronics stores across the country (Miyamoto, 2013).

sentences and employing a slightly different art style<sup>50</sup>. Although different in its overall tone, use of color and handling of the source material from the Micro Cabin's version, it should be noted that both Japanese adaptations employ a text-based command system as the main mode of interaction; another unifying point is the complete lack of anime-like elements that will become one of the most prominent distinctive features of visual novels today.



Figure 7: Screenshots from different – official as well as unofficial – versions of *Mystery House*. The left-hand side contrasts the 1980 original (top) and the 1983 Japanese version (bottom). The right-hand side contrasts the two different visual modes available in the 1982 Micro Cabin's version. Note that – in spite of the marked variety in language and presentation style – player prompts and text-parser paradigm remain a consistent feature throughout all the images. Source: VNDB.

<sup>50</sup> Compared to the present day practices, the early adaptations of the Western adventure games in Japan did not rely on the source code modification; developers would instead resort to reverse engineering, recreating the original games from scratch based on the observations while playing them (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019). Therefore, it is possible that the art style modification was not strictly a creative choice on the part of the developers, but rather merely an approximation of their experiences with the original software.

Put differently, these early examples of Japanese graphic adventure games still operated within the same mechanical and expressive register when compared to their Western progenitors; the visual aspect that they decided to place their focus on will, however, go on to represent the terrain on which the identity of the Japanese adventure game would continue to reinvent itself.

### **The curious case of *Portopia*: Investigating the menu-based paradigm**

While the year 1982 marks the start of the adventure game in Japan, the number of releases belonging to this genre had only started to significantly rise in 1983 (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019). In June 1983 – about two months after Starcraft’s reimagining of Sierra’s *Mystery House* – Japan saw the release of its most influential game to feature text-parsing mechanics, as well as the one of the first to prominently feature a Japanese setting as opposed to one inspired by Western adventure games. In *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, the player assumes the role of a police detective tasked with solving the murder of a consumer financing firm president in Kobe, Japan; the game’s events unfold from a first-person perspective, an expressive device commonly employed throughout the visual novel’s history in order to enhance player’s immersion in the role of the protagonist. Although the player has much freedom in how to approach the investigation, which locations to visit or which characters to summon for an interrogation, all play-styles and choices will ultimately lead towards a single ending<sup>51</sup>.

In order to continue this analysis any further, I must first mention the plethora of this game’s official versions that appeared over the two-year period following its initial release for NEC PC-6001<sup>52</sup>, which came as a result of its creator Yūji Horii’s placement in one of the Enix game

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<sup>51</sup> While there is a possibility that the player will accuse the wrong person of murder, this does not technically result in a “bad end”, a dead-end position among the series of branching paths and a common occurrence in the present-day visual novels. Instead, most of the game’s versions simply give feedback to the players and loop them back into their investigation, meaning that – similarly to Micro Cabin’s *Mystery House* – this game did not technically feature a losing scenario. Even so, the scenario described above can be viewed as a one of the proto examples of the “bad end” trope.

<sup>52</sup> This is yet another line of products NEC offered throughout the observed decade. Initially released in November 1981 – the month of the PC-8801’s release – its legacy in the sphere of Japanese video games is much less pronounced and therefore I chose not to focus on its output.

competitions. Ports to several other lines of Japanese computers appeared that same year; while there are differences in terms of their visual identity<sup>53</sup> and text formatting, these versions are consistent in terms of their scene structure and gameplay mechanics.

As was the case with games that appeared in the previous subsection, the player would move the story forward by giving direct orders to the program through means of text input; in *Portopia*, however, the entire dialogue between the computer and the user is realized using the Japanese language. Another curious detail is that *Portopia* required the player to use the Japanese imperative verb form for executing commands, while most of the other Japanese language text-based titles would use the unmodified form of the verb by convention<sup>54</sup>. Regarding the textual commands available in this game, they are very few in number, barely exceeding the quantity of commands found in the 1982 version of *Mystery House*. This is further illustrated by the fact that the PC-8801 version of this game<sup>55</sup> allowed the players to use functional keys in order to utilize the 10 most common orders found in the game, as in f1 = go, f2 = call (for an interrogation), f3 = investigate, etc.

More than a mere example of the early 1980s Japanese video game trivia, this detail offers a key to understanding the mechanical innovations, interactive streamlining, as well as the subsequent influence that the console release of *Portopia* will go on to play within the broader Japanese adventure game terrain. Released in 1985 for Famicom<sup>56</sup>, the original home computer formula had to go through several substantial modifications in order to be viable on a gamepad-

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<sup>53</sup> PC-6001 version is the most canonical one in this department – that is, it features many distinctive visual elements emulated in other PC ports, as opposed to PC-8801 and console versions whose visual design solutions do not reoccur elsewhere.

<sup>54</sup> This is the case with the previously discussed 1983 remake of *Mystery House*, as well as with the text adventures I will mention near the end of this subsection.

<sup>55</sup> This version also offered an option to display fewer colors, in much of a same way as 1982 *Mystery House* did before it. *Portopia*, however, explicitly informs the player that the choice exists primarily because of the slow loading times in case the full color display method is chosen.

<sup>56</sup> Nintendo's Famicom (or Family Computer), is the Japanese equivalent of the Nintendo Entertainment System (or NES) sold in the West. While this definition is not entirely true due to the fact that the two consoles displayed some differences in hardware (Altice, 2015), equating the two consoles would not be detrimental for the purposes of this thesis.

centered device. Taking cues from the late 1984 Horii-penned *Hokkaido Serial Murder: Disappearance in Ohotsk* (Tane, 2013) – in which the player presses the keyboard’s numeric keys in order to choose between different numbered options that appear on the screen – this version features a menu-based system of scrolling up and down through a list of options using the controller’s directional pad.



Figure 8: Screen captures from different examples of Yūji Horii’s work from 1983 to 1985, showing the gradual standardization of the order-placing mechanics. Clockwise from upper-left corner: PC-6001 version of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, PC-8801 version of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*<sup>57</sup>, PC-8801 version of *Hokkaido Serial Murder: Disappearance in Ohotsk*, Famicom version of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*<sup>58</sup>. Source: Youtube screen captures.

<sup>57</sup> Note the command list at the bottom of the image – the layout of these commands corresponds to the relative position of the functional keys used to invoke them.

<sup>58</sup> Note the list of the available commands listed out in the menu on the upper-right corner of the image.

Famicom version endured some additional modifications in the realms of gameplay and scene structure, namely the inclusion of a dungeon maze and a (directional pad-navigated) point-and-click investigative sections. The procedural aspect of this version of the game, therefore, differs vastly from that of its predecessors; the overall story structure, on the other hand, remains the same. While I will return to this release's menu-based navigation and its overall legacy within the history of Japanese adventure games later in this subsection, I would first like to put more emphasis on *Portopia*'s visual identity, as perceived in the multiplicity of its releases and their relationship with the broader otaku-sphere and its dominant anime-like aesthetics.

Given that this thesis deals foremost with the study of visual novels – a video game genre whose works commonly employ anime-like art, which subsequently came to be conceptualized as one of the genre's defining traits – pinpointing the position of one of the most influential games in the sphere of Japanese interactive fiction vis-à-vis the overall aesthetic positioning of the visual novel genre was one of the important problems that I had to come to terms with.

Given the somewhat rudimentary nature of *Portopia*'s art, it is perhaps more helpful to start this part of the analysis in the domains that fall outside of the game's content, focusing instead on its conception, authorship and marketing. It is known that, during his undergraduate career at Waseda University, Yūji Horii participated in a group of enthusiasts dedicated to the study of manga (see: Miyamoto, 2013); furthermore, Figure 9 illustrates the differences between the packaging of versions sold for NEC's devices and the version sold for Famicom, exemplifying a very different approach at portraying the game's content to prospective audiences across the two platforms.

With this in mind, I will proceed to the analysis of the game's visual direction, focusing again on the PC-6001 and Famicom versions as the most canonical. Given that the representation of the game world's architecture, items and other objects is fairly consistent across all versions, I will

put the emphasis on the design of individual characters and the database elements employed therein.



Figure 9: Cover art for different versions of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*. The left-hand side displays the PC-6001 cover art<sup>59</sup>, while the right-hand side displays an advert for the game's Famicom version which employs the said version's cover art illustration. Notice the shift from a slightly more realistic art style akin to the 1980s movie posters, towards the art style resembling the same decade's manga and anime. Source: Giant Bomb.

As observable in Figure 10, Famicom version's characters have less pronounced mouths, while the female characters have more pronounced eyes compared to the PC-6001 release<sup>60</sup>—coupled with a more elongated (almost ellipsoid) face shapes, this propels the former significantly towards the sphere of anime and manga-inspired art.

<sup>59</sup> The illustration used for this version is the same as the one used for the PC-8801 release.

<sup>60</sup> This is consistent across most of the other home computer versions' character designs, especially when factoring in the PC-8801 version of the game and its character art.

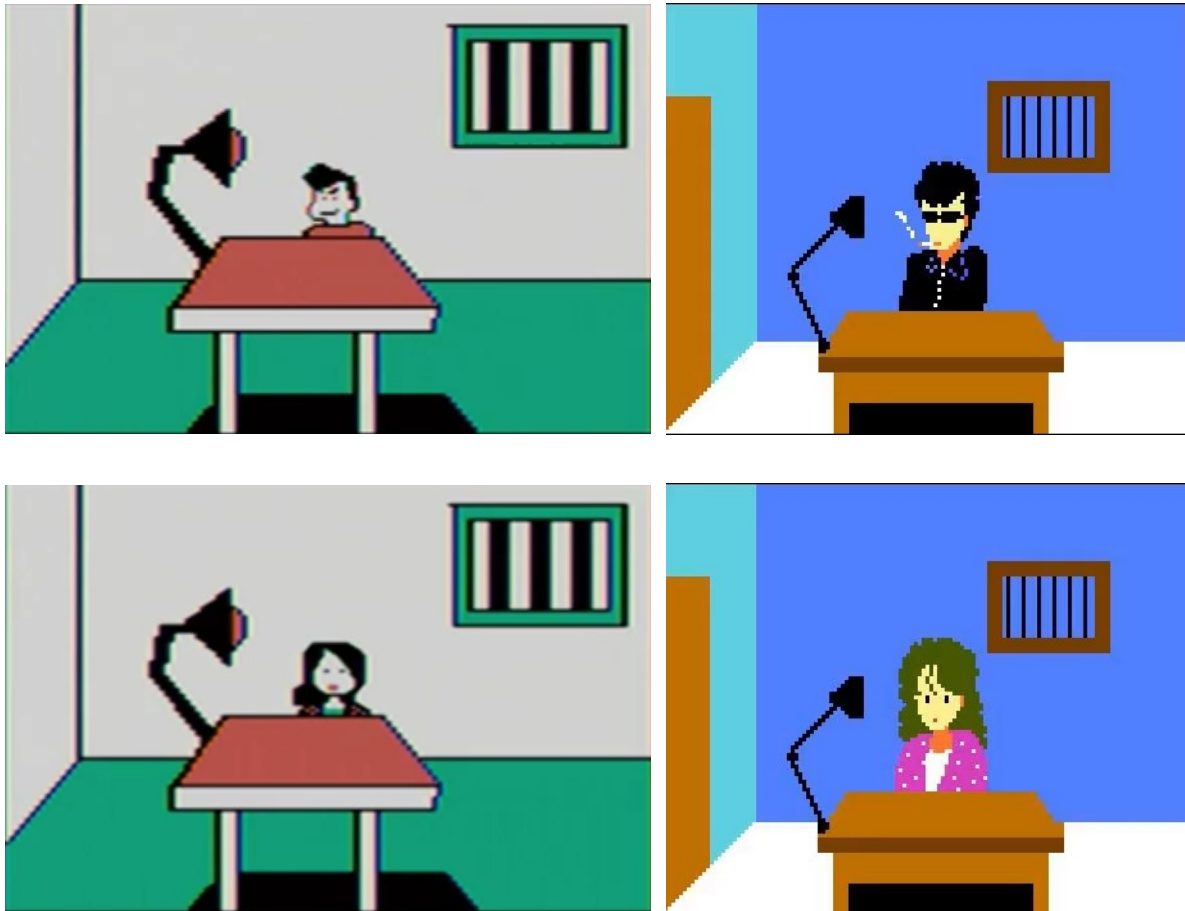


Figure 10: Screen captures from different versions of *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, showing the differences in character art design between them. The left-hand side displays the 1983 PC-6001 versions of the characters Toshiyuki (top) and Okoi (bottom). The right-hand side's top and bottom images display the 1985 Famicom versions of the same characters, respectively. Source: Youtube screen captures.

The amount of detail in the characters' hair and sartorial style is also considerably more pronounced in the Famicom version; furthermore, many of these changes reflect some of the tropes commonly used in the expressive mode of anime. For example, while the original version sees the delinquent character Toshiyuki wearing a “regent” hairstyle – oftentimes associated with petty thugs in anime and manga – the Famicom version presents a somewhat cartoony image of a delinquent attitude as observed in his appearance and body language.

In a much of the same way, the database elements of a school girls' “sailor uniform” and “see-

through bangs”, or an elderly resident’s kimono as seen in the Famicom version all help create images of greater iconic quality that lend themselves better towards a manga or anime-like reading, as opposed to the more neutral faces of the original game, which give that version an air of a 1980s procedural drama movie<sup>61</sup>.

Finally, comparing this work to the other two games belonging to the *Horii’s Mystery Trilogy*<sup>62</sup>, leads the observer towards assuming that the art style of the 1980s manga is in fact the visual style that Horii strove to pursue in his adventure game opus. In any case, the success and the subsequent legacy of this game’s console port goes on to show the often overlooked importance of console releases in the dominantly PC-based sphere of visual novels and Japanese adventure games<sup>63</sup>, in terms of mechanics as well as of the visual identity.

In the opening paragraphs I named *Portopia* the most influential Japanese game to have (at least in its initial releases) featured the mechanic of text-parsing. While the mere number of games whose title included the term “*satsujin jiken*”<sup>64</sup> (“murder case” in English) is somewhat indicative of *Portopia*’s success, this chapter’s Figure 11 offers additional demonstration as to how widely disseminated the Famicom version’s menu-based framework would soon go on to become.

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<sup>61</sup> Of course, many of the same database elements I described above did appear in contemporary movies and dramas; the main difference is the iconic potential and the “cartoony” nature that is more pronounced in anime as well as in the console release of the game.

<sup>62</sup> This trilogy of games comprises *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* (1983), *Hokkaido Serial Murder: Disappearance in Ohotsk* (1984) and *The Karuizawa Kidnapping Guide* (1985) (Miyamoto, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Chunsoft’s *Otogorisō*, the title I mentioned in Chapter 1 as the first example of the “sound novel” – and denoted by some visual novel creators as the very first “visual novel” (Ryūkishi07, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014) – was for instance exclusive to Famicom’s successor, the Super Famicom system.

<sup>64</sup> VNDB lists 15 such releases appearing between the release of the first version of *Portopia* and the end of the decade.

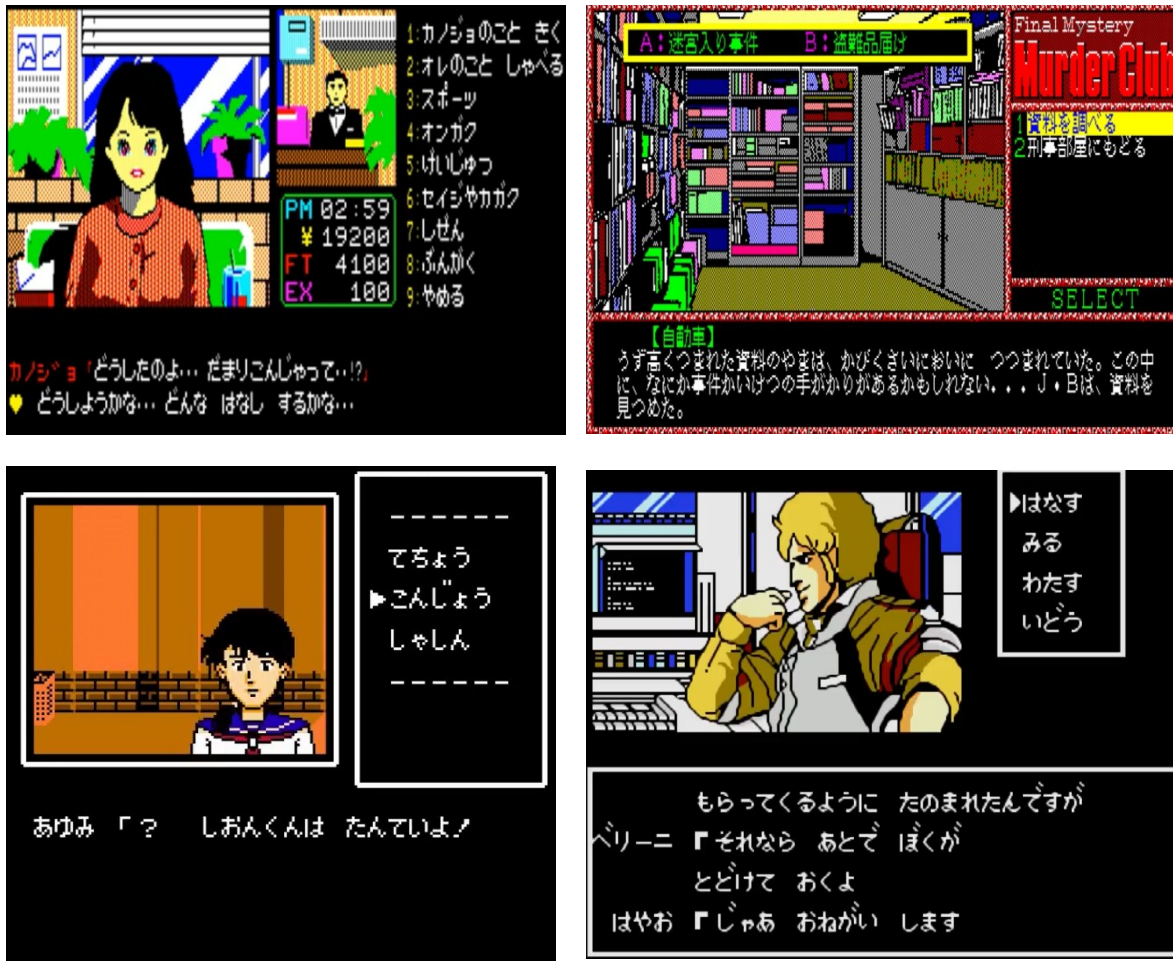


Figure 11: Screen captures from four different Japanese adventure games across a variety of subgenres that employ menu navigation as their primary means of interaction. Clockwise from upper-left corner: PC-8801 version of *Tokyo Nanpa Street* (Enix, 1985), PC-8801 version of *J.B. Harold's Case File: Final Mystery - Murder Club* (Hudson Soft, 1986), Famicom version of *Jesus* (developed by Chunsoft and published by Enix, 1989), Famicom version of *Famicom Detective Club Part II: The Missing Heir* (Nintendo, 1989). Note the uniform nature of the menus' display style and usage across all the screen captures<sup>65</sup>. Source: Youtube screen captures.

This, however, does not mean that the menu-dominated approach was the only mode of interaction in Japanese adventure games following *Portopia* – according to VNDB, text

adventures<sup>66</sup> continued to appear well into 1987<sup>67</sup>. I should therefore briefly cover the main traits

<sup>65</sup> While there were menu-driven games such as *380 000 kilometers of empty space* (System Sacom, 1989) that used a slightly different menu layout, those titles nonetheless functioned the same on a mechanical level as the works listed in Figure 11.

<sup>66</sup> Some of those adventures still continued to employ English language commands; there are even cases of Japanese language menu-based games that used English language command menus, as is the case with Arrow Soft's *Legend of Heroes Saga* (1984).

<sup>67</sup> Most of these late releases are works of erotic nature by publishers such as PSK and Champion Soft; the latter represents the parent company of Alice Soft, which is most notable as the developer of the *Rance* series (Miyamoto, 2013).

and trends observable in these text adventures in the context of my previous examination of *Portopia*.

Looking, for instance, at the 1984 early text adventure releases such as Falcom's *Demons Ring*, one can note that there is not much deviation from the formula employed in Micro Cabin's *Mystery House*. More elaborate writing, graphical upgrades and Japanese language command system aside, *Demons Ring* still follows a similar treasure hunt setup that formed the crux of the early Western adventure games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* or *Zork*; the very first screen in *Demons Ring* actually mirrors the description found in the opening passage of the latter<sup>68</sup>. Square's *The Death Trap*, released later that year, employs an ambiguous visual style which would not seem out of place in manga, but uses color in such a way as to invoke the image of Franco-Belgian comics; the game's cover art, on the other hand, calls to mind the pulp novel covers of the Western canon.

Just a year later, *Will: The Death Trap II*—the aforementioned title's sequel—opts for a science fiction anime-inspired style of graphics, leaving no room for interpretation as to which cultural/expressive sphere it derives its visual identity from. Together with software such as 1984 Enix-published *Zarth*, it represents a turn towards subject matter common in the otaku sphere, overt anime-like style of graphics and highly sophisticated Japanese language text command systems.

In the years to come, however, the menu-based approach would come to stand supreme over all the alternatives in the Japanese adventure realm. This standardization of input methods—alongside the gradual establishment of visual identity, expressive vocabulary and database

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<sup>68</sup> Although *Zork* represented one of the most influential games in the adoption of the adventure game in Japan (Tane, 2013), due to linguistic barriers and possibly the project's overall scope, the first successful localization of this title in Japan appeared only in 1996 (Maher, 2012).

elements akin to those in anime and manga (as opposed to those derived primarily from the Western sources) – can ultimately trace its origin to Horii’s mid-1980s opus<sup>69</sup>.

### **Interactive (science) fiction: Expanding the expressive potential of the menu-based paradigm**

As I have already mentioned in the previous subsection, the latter half of the decade saw the Japanese adventure game submerging deeper into otaku subject matter, branching into several reasonably distinct thematic paths, for instance pornography and science fiction. While the evolution of the former will represent the main topic of the next subsection, here I will employ the latter to provide a rough illustration of technological innovations observable in the late 1980s Japanese PC video game sphere.

Before proceeding further, I would like to remind the reader about Azuma’s breakdown of the three generations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century otaku, members of the first generation born around 1960 and growing up to the mid to late-1970s spaceship and mecha-centered anime series (Azuma, 2001). The very members of this generation would form the bulk of the Japanese adventure game creators during the 1980s, especially in the latter part of the decade. Together with the global geopolitical zeitgeist, this could offer some explanation as to why science fiction and post-apocalyptic themes were disproportionately frequent in the prominent Japanese adventure releases of the late 1980s.

Following *Zarth* and *Will: The Death Trap II* as the subgenre’s mid-1980s representatives, some of the important works in this sphere are Enix’s *Jesus* (1987), KONAMI’s *SNATCHER*

(1988), and T&E SOFT’s *Psy-O-Blade* (1988); out of them, *SNATCHER* will assume the primary

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<sup>69</sup>One should keep in mind that determining the extent to which these games influenced the establishment of some of these outcomes is not entirely possible, at least not within the scope of a simple master’s thesis; it is also necessary to add that *Portopia* was not the only contributing factor, nor was it likely the decisive one. The role it played, however, was significant enough to merit the statement this footnote refers to.

status in this analysis, based on its position as one of the early Japanese adventure games to have an official release in the West (through its 1994 Sega CD port) and one of the early directorial efforts of the widely celebrated video game creator Hideo Kojima<sup>70</sup>.

The aforementioned innovations – which rested on the improved models of Japanese home computers and their assorted hardware expansions, as well as on the developers’ improved know-how in handling the data processing, graphical and sound-producing constraints – are primarily observable in the spheres of text display, pixel art and audio design, each of them a crucial aspect in the 1990s visual novels as well.

Games released in 1985<sup>71</sup> and later would start to increasingly incorporate Japanese kanji characters in conjunction with other writing systems commonly employed in producing Japanese language text; this stands in stark contrast with the “kana-only”<sup>72</sup> (or, occasionally, Roman alphabet-only) main body of the text in the software covered thus far. While not without its practical limitations – each kanji was represented using a fixed number of pixels, meaning that some characters could become difficult to decipher (Mandelin, 2019) – the benefits of the increased clarity of communication and more nuanced verbal expression<sup>73</sup> outweighed these (nonetheless very real) points of inconvenience.

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<sup>70</sup> While hailed as a significant release in the Japanese adventure game canon (Tane, 2013), the above-stated properties render this title’s relative significance greater when approached from Western point of view as opposed to Japanese.

<sup>71</sup> While *Angels’ Afternoon* (1985) was one of the first adventure games to feature kanji, it was not until 1987 that this system of writing came to be used in the majority of titles across the Japanese adventure game spectrum.

<sup>72</sup> This distinction is somewhat misleading, given that the games that fall into this category would oftentimes feature Roman alphabet or Arabic numerals alongside hiragana and katakana.

<sup>73</sup> This is especially true in the case of works covered in this subsection – science fiction often employs (frequently made-up) kanji compound words whose meaning can be difficult to get across when employing the kana-only method of displaying text.



Figure 12: Screen captures from *SNATCHER*, demonstrating the somewhat blurry presentation of kanji characters within the in-game text, as well as the usage of limited color palettes to convey a sense of speed, depth and lighting. Source: Youtube screen captures.

Other notable improvements are to be observed in the usage of color and perspective.

Compared, for instance, to the earlier versions of PC-8801 – whose games would not display

more than several different colors at the same time – the late 1980s PC-8801 and PC-9801 allowed for more elaborate (albeit still limited) color palettes: through the careful manipulation and placement of individually colored pixels in relation to others, skilled computer artists would utilize the colors available to them to simulate greater variety of colors, natively unsupported hues or the illusion of depth (see: Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014; Miyamoto, 2013).

Finally, the soundscapes of the Japanese computers would evolve drastically by the end of the decade; here (as in many previous instances), the PC-8801 presents an illustrative example. While NEC's competitors used PSG sound chips<sup>74</sup> that could emulate the chiptune style of music found on Famicom, PC-8801 was only able to produce very rudimentary bleeps and clicks (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014); most of the games I covered thus far would play almost no sound at all throughout their entire duration. The 1985 and later models of PC-8801 would, however, feature the frequency modulation form of sound synthesis as default, which had greatly expanded the expressive register of their sound and which – according to some commentators – might have helped this line of computers win the market share dominance in the Japanese home computer market (Szczepaniak, 2014).

All of the aforementioned phenomena coalesced in providing the necessary circumstances for more ambitious exercises in storytelling, as well as for the emergence of a more cinematic creative direction in the Japanese adventure game sphere. *SNATCHER* – with its opening credits sequence, long non-interactive sections and Hollywood-inspired dialogue and set pieces<sup>75</sup> – would be one of the first such examples to come into mind. Excluding its action sequences – e.g. the blaster shooting mechanic that recalls whack-a-mole – the game proceeds in much of the same way as Horii's *Hokkaido Serial Murder*, with the player exercising freedom in determining the protagonist's course of action by choosing among the set of listed commands, with the aim of

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<sup>74</sup> These chips were akin to those found in the arcade machines of the time (Szczepaniak, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> This game and *Jesus* take (not very subtle) narrative and visual cues from Western cinematic works such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Blade Runner* and *Alien*.

discovering the right combination of commands for progressing through an ultimately linear storyline. The slight difference between the two, however, is that *SNATCHER* gives its players less freedom in terms of exploration and dialogue, generally confining them to one place or area at a time, and rendering the main expository parts of the story non-interactive, imbued with rich sound, colors and animations<sup>76</sup>; this further speaks to a smooth and relatively linear shape of standardization of the Japanese adventure game's expressive elements along the lines already established during the mid-1980s.

Therefore, other than the technological innovations I previously described, an additional aspect I would like to bring up is the lack of real innovation<sup>77</sup> in the overall interactive frameworks and the ludonarrative structures of the Japanese adventure game of this period. As already illustrated in Figure 11, the dominant nature of the menu navigation<sup>78</sup> – when contrasted with other interactive mechanisms – will continue to characterize Japanese adventure games well until the early 1990s and the success of the *Otogirisō*'s experiments in taking most of the control away from the player<sup>79</sup>. This subsection has, therefore, offered less in the way of separate analysis and has instead acted as an appendix of sorts to the previous subsection, centered on the rise of the menu-based approach in the field of Japanese adventure games.

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<sup>76</sup> In this sense, these sections perform the same fundamental role as cutscenes.

<sup>77</sup> I should note that this period of the Japanese PC video game history did in fact introduce some innovation in this regard, through the first successful attempts at using the mouse peripheral in the Japanese adventure context; *Psy-O-Bang* is one such early example. While *SNATCHER*'s spiritual successor *Policenatuts* (directed by Hideo Kojima and published in 1995) did employ this point-and-click method of interaction, its mechanical and structural underpinnings have remained roughly the same as its predecessor's, which goes to support the point I made in the main body of the text.

<sup>78</sup> I am here referring to the style of menu navigation established in the *Horii's Mystery Trilogy*. The reason for making this distinction will become clearer in the later sections of this thesis, where I will discuss the menu in the broader video game context rather than merely in the context of Japanese adventure games and visual novels.

<sup>79</sup> Curiously, this approach would end up providing increased agency to the player in determining the story's outcome, as well as greater nonlinearity exhibited in the trend of numerous branching stories.

## Pixelated philandering of the 1980s *erogē*: Development of the erotic in the first decade of Japanese PC games

Recalling the issues of terminology I brought up in the Introduction and Chapter 1, *erogē* exists as a conceptually independent phenomenon in relation to the broader Japanese adventure game/visual novel sphere (Miyamoto, 2013); there has been, however, a significant historical overlap between the two in terms of video game software produced over the last four decades, to the point of the term *erogē* being used to denote the field of visual novel as a whole. While this subsection will primarily focus on the *Rance* series – particularly its first installment – in terms of game software analyzed, I would first like to briefly outline the early history of *erogē*, exemplified by the significant releases and trends that emerged throughout its first decade.

As was the case with adventure games in Japan, the advent of graphics played an instrumental role in the establishment of *erogē* and the subsequent developments associated therewith; the very first commercially sold *erogē* in Japan appeared in the early 1981<sup>80</sup>, chronologically preceding the first graphical experiments within the Japanese adventure sphere by more than a year. Compared to the dominant menu-based interactive paradigm of the adventure game (as well as to the text-based paradigm that preceded it), it is worth noting that *erogē* software did not follow the same degree of mechanical standardization – while incorporation of some overt erotic content was a clear prerequisite content-wise (see: Miyamoto, 2013; Fitsko, 2014), games belonging to this distinction would otherwise adapt well to a variety of interactive, thematic and platform environments.

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<sup>80</sup> While the title of the first Japanese *erogē* is commonly attributed to Koei's 1982 *Night Life* (Sousa, 2014), that line of reasoning clearly ignores the release of Hudson Soft's *Yakyūken*, a rock-paper-scissors stripping game that came out in 1981 for the obscure Sharp MZ-80K line of computers (Miyamoto, 2013); given that this line of computers did not feature graphics at all, the entire visual component of this *erogē* progenitor was realized using what could be considered as one of the precursors of ASCII art (Miyamoto, 2013)

For example, some of the earliest (as well as consistently popular) subgenres were stripping or sex-based rock-paper-scissors and mahjong simulations<sup>8182</sup> (Miyamoto, 2013); Koei's *Night Life* presented itself more as utility software than a game (see: Miyamoto, 2013; Szczepaniak, 2014), while its *Strawberry Porno* (1982–1983) series made extensive use of RPG character statistics and battle mechanics. *Tokyo Nanpa Street* (1985) employed a Horii-inspired Japanese adventure choice system, while the works of PSK and Champion Soft used text-based commands in both English and Japanese during the latter half of the decade (Miyamoto, 2013). While the PC-8801's infamous rape simulator *177* (1986) – together with a number of unofficial Famicom games – used sexual content in conjunction with action gameplay, by the end of the decade most successful *erogē* developers – such as Fairy Tale, Elf and Alice Soft – ended up adopting the adventure framework covered in the previous subsections (Miyamoto, 2013).

Thematically speaking, many of the early titles existed on the *lolicon* spectrum, featuring the erotic depictions of prepubescent girls, a practice which the Japanese public at the time considered less sensitive than the erotic material featuring adult women (see: Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014; Miyamoto, 2013). By the middle part of the decade, *Tokyo Nanpa Street* laid the blueprint for the dating simulation and *bishōjo* subgenres through its depiction of dating between Japanese adults, while JAST's *Angels' Afternoon* (1985) introduced the statistics-based system of likeability and relationship building that would remain a staple of those same genres to this day (Miyamoto, 2013). The final portion of the decade would see *erogē* branching out in many of the same stylistic and thematic areas as the games I wrote about in this chapter's earlier subsections<sup>83</sup>, oftentimes making it difficult to tell an *erogē* apart from non-erotic games at a first

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<sup>81</sup> These games would employ (admittedly very rudimentary) menu-based systems of interaction well before Yūji Horii's innovations, technically preceding his command streamlining efforts by more than three years.

<sup>82</sup> Typically, the player's goal in these games was to win a game of rock-paper-scissors or mahjong against a female opponent; every round the computer would lose, the player would be rewarded by a lewd image of the opponent removing a piece of clothing or engaging in sexual acts.

<sup>83</sup> While the narrative explorations that genuinely conform to those areas' story structures and tropes were and remain numerous, it is important to add that the lens of parody and subversion – employed prominently in the *Rance* series – represented an integral part in the realm of *erogē* from mid-1980s onwards (Miyamoto, 2013).

glance; conversely, Miyamoto classifies some of the games covered in previous subsections as almost-*erogē*, on the grounds that they feature arousing fan-service content that cannot, however, be described as overtly erotic in its nature (Miyamoto, 2013).



Figure 13: Screen captures from four different Japanese adventure games (two of them *erogē* and two of them not), demonstrating the occasional difficulty in telling the two apart. The left-hand side pictures the “almost-*erogē*” games: *The Karuizawa Kidnapping Guide* (top) and *Jesus* (bottom). The right-hand side pictures software that does feature large quantities of sexually explicit content: *Rance: Quest for Hikari* (top) and *elf’s Dragon Knight* (bottom). Source: Youtube screen captures.

The most common of the 1980s *erogē* conventions was the idea of persuading female characters to take away pieces of their clothing or have sex with the main character, meaning that those actions were to come as a reward for the player who successfully mastered the game’s mechanics. Here, Miyamoto makes a distinction between “erotic as play” and “erotic as a

reward” philosophies of design, with the aforementioned rock-paper-scissors and mahjong simulations falling into the former, given the interwoven identity of erotic and ludic elements over the entire course of the play (Miyamoto, 2013). “Erotic as a reward” – spearheaded by the aforementioned *Tokyo Nanpa Street* – would feature gameplay largely unoccupied with sex, with pornography representing a comparatively minor part of the overall experience attached at the end of a successful playthrough<sup>84</sup>.

*Rance: Quest for Hikari* (1989), a first installment in the longest running<sup>85</sup> and one of the most popular series of visual novels in the genre’s history<sup>86</sup>, stands somewhere between these two paradigms – while the game does abound in sexual content (or rather makes sex a constant feature of its play), the erotic aspect does not ultimately represent the main focus of the ludic nor the narrative experience. Furthermore, while the reward-based erotic scenes occur on a constant basis, they do not carry with themselves a sense of gratification nor achievement as they did in the aforementioned reward-based titles – the very idea of a romantic pursuit or courtship is antithetical to the highly opportunistic and rape-obsessed titular protagonist. Stated differently, *Rance* eschews both paradigms, rendering sex a substantial part of its content, but prioritizing the sense of adventure – a mix of fantasy, narrative, discovery and submission, as expounded in the influential MDA framework of video game genre-making (Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2004).

The game’s developers managed to conjure this sense of adventure by combining multiple trends described in the earlier course of this chapter: a mercenary named Rance takes on a quest to find a missing girl by the name of Hikari, situating the overall story structure in the domain of a detective mystery that is somewhat comparable to Horii’s seminal *Mystery Trilogy*. In order to

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<sup>84</sup> This approach would become a staple of the dating simulation genre; by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relative importance of sex would give its way to the emotional intensity of a budding relationship, which would eventually lead many developers and franchises to minimize or even avoid depictions of sex altogether (Azuma, 2001).

<sup>85</sup> With 13 canonical installments released between 1989 and 2018, the *Rance* series was actively running for almost 30 years.

<sup>86</sup>*Rance X: Showdown* – the series’ final installment – tops the list of the most highly-rated visual novels as voted by ErogameScape users (taking into account the titles with 500 votes or more).

solve his task, Rance has to explore the Castle of Leazas and its surrounding areas/dungeons; while this is performed in a standard JRPG fashion of engaging in random encounters, purchasing equipment from shopkeepers and gathering experience points, the game does not fit neatly into any single genre framework. Besides the dominant fantasy JRPG-based environment (and the simultaneous parody thereof), the game incorporates science fiction-inspired designs and environment in one of its sections; compared to the streamlined science fiction adventure games of the late 1980s Japan, *Rance*, however, offers much freedom in terms of exploration and choice. Conversely, compared to the common JRPG frameworks of guided progression and limited/highly formalized interaction with the non-player characters, Rance's interlocutors exhibit unique visual identities and lines of dialogue, the latter of which occurring as a result of the Japanese adventure style of branching menu-based commands. Furthermore, Rance's inventory and its successful manipulation plays a crucial role in the game's progression along both of the aforementioned genre lines, harkening back to the early trends in Japanese adventure games and its first contacts with the traditionally inventory-heavy Western text adventures, as well as to the dungeon crawling RPGs of the Western tradition.

In the context of its RPG-adjacent mechanics, *Rance's* sense of traversal and spatial navigation warrants brief reflection. Although reminiscent of the early Western-inspired Japanese adventures in its usage of directional menu commands (north, south, east and west), *Rance* is unique in that it updates the map of the city or dungeons after each of the player's commands, showing the relative position of the protagonist; this moves this game further to the JRPG logic of "overworld" navigation.

In one of the preceding passages I named *Rance* a "visual novel series", even though its first installment falls within the timeline of the Japanese adventure game, and the whole series abounds with overt JRPG elements<sup>87</sup>. This franchise is therefore effective not only in illustrating

<sup>87</sup> Later installments go on to introduce strategy game elements (Miyamoto, 2013).

many of the *erogē*-related idiosyncrasies I mentioned in this subsection's first half, but also in providing a practical example of the broader issues of conceptualization and genre delineation that I hinted at in Chapter 1, the very same issues I will be exploring in more detail throughout the remainder of this thesis.

### **Dimensions of adventuring: Aspects of text-centered video game storytelling across genre intersections**

Having covered the development of the Japanese adventure game throughout the 1980s in the most basic of terms, I would now deem it desirable to provide a more global lens to this chapter's analyses, contrasting the Japanese adventure's tropes and mechanics with those of Western adventure games<sup>88</sup>, JRPGs<sup>89</sup> and contemporary visual novels. While I have briefly discussed the latter two genres and their connections to the Japanese adventures in the Introduction and Chapter 1, the Western adventure games warrant some further examination in terms of their mechanical evolution and its parallels to the already presented developments in the realm of the Japanese adventure game's menu-based framework.

The notion of "standardization" featured as a leitmotif throughout most of this chapter; here I find it desirable to note that the Western adventure game has in fact followed many of the same standardization-related beats as its Japanese counterpart. While the graphic adventure is oftentimes perceived as but a mere development on top of the already existing text adventure infrastructure, the inception and the evolution of the two genres had actually been occurring in

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<sup>88</sup> Given the spatial limitations of this thesis, the term "Western adventure game" will encompass conceptualizations of text adventures, graphic adventures and point-and-click adventures produced in the North American and European contexts; I will employ these conceptualizations in a stereotypical sense predominantly focused on Sierra's and LucasArts' games, therefore ignoring many of this genre's historical intricacies, as well as its connections to the genres such as "interactive movie", "walking simulator" or "hidden object game".

<sup>89</sup> Given the spatial limitations of this thesis, the term "JRPG" will encompass a stereotypical conceptualization of the genre based on the mainline single player installments of the *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* series.

parallel, with On-Line Systems releasing the original *Mystery House* six months before Infocom's *Zork* was made available to the general public<sup>90</sup> (Reed, 2023). Although it retained the text-parser interactive mechanism of the Western adventure's early canon, Sierra On-Line's 1984 *King's Quest* would offer a real-time visual display of its protagonist's movement and actions based on the player's inputs, something that would have been impossible with the then-Japanese computer models and their almost non-existent capabilities for animation (Hidaka, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). Adventure titles that employed mouse-based input mechanics – the so-called point-and-click adventure games – have existed as early as 1985<sup>91</sup>, but it was not until 1987 that the LucasArts' (then known as Lucasfilm Games) *Maniac Mansion* introduced its own standardized set of mouse-accessible commands and a separate inventory field, which went on to become this genre's dominant feature in the years to follow<sup>92</sup> (Kalata, 2011).

Throughout the late 1980s and the early 1990s, all of LucasArts' titles would receive their Japanese-localized Famicom ports, which might have potentially played the part in the adoption of point-and-click mechanics in the Famicom games such as *Ripple Island* (1988) or PC-98 titles such as *Psy-O-Bang* (1990). While the latter's menu-based choices would change depending on the context and scene, the former Japanese title used virtually the same command-placing philosophy as its LucasArts-produced counterparts, meaning that the set of available commands stayed immutable throughout the entire duration of the game. In this sense, while the LucasArts' titles did feature a menu of available commands to choose from, what separates them from the menu-based Japanese adventure games is the permanence of a single set of commands; in much of the same way, each text adventure game of the time would feature a finite amount of available

<sup>90</sup> Here it is important to note that, although early interactive fiction existed long before the 1980s in the academic and military contexts, it was not until the late 1970s that the general consumers would start to acquaint themselves with these phenomena (Klimas, 2017).

<sup>91</sup> Besides the Famicom version of *Portopia* with its directional pad-controlled cursor, ICOM's *Déjà Vu* was the first commercially successful piece of software to utilize a cursor-based interface (Kalata, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> While *Maniac Mansion* featured a total of 15 commands, *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1989) would streamline this number to 12; by the time of 1995 *Full Throttle*, LucasArts' titles would go on to introduce a small pop-up menu containing no more than five commands that would appear whenever an interactive point on a screen is clicked on (Kalata, 2011).

commands to choose from (and input into the console directly), meaning that the LucasArts framework was still predominantly command based, apart from their dialogue trees, which were menu-based in a sense that they consisted of a list of options offered through a menu.

After its brief experiments with “tank controls<sup>93</sup>” during the late 1990s, LucasArts would cease to produce adventure games and the genre as a whole would face a period of stagnation and relative obscurity. Starting with the late 2000s, the point-and-click adventure would enjoy a resurgence of popularity through the work of independent studios and creators (Kalata, 2011); an interesting detail to observe in some of these games is the employment of a context dependent mouse-based interface<sup>94</sup> – rather than allowing the player to make a choice of which action to perform on any given object in the game’s world, there is instead a dedicated “interact” command which is to be utilized with all interactive in-game objects. This approach corresponds to the Japanese adventure game the most – without the fixed list of commands to choose from, the player is left to choose between a variety of unique objects, locations and dialogue options offered at each given time, conceptually rendering the playing experience analogous to the stereotypical late 1980s Japanese adventure one.

Before moving onto the relationship between the JRPG and the Japanese adventure game, I should point out to the broader conceptual connections between the realms of RPGs and adventure games. Firstly, it is known that Will Crowther, the author of the seminal *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1975), drew much of the inspiration for this project from *Dungeons & Dragons* (Reed, 2023); in this sense, both early adventure games and the early computer RPGs such as *Wizardry* followed a framework of back-and-forth interaction between the player and the game

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<sup>93</sup> Here I am referring to the control scheme commonly employed in the Playstation’s 3D titles, in which the player would use the directional pad in order to control the protagonist’s movement in a three-dimensional space, whereupon the up and down buttons would move the protagonist forward and backwards, while the left and right buttons would rotate the protagonist.

<sup>94</sup> I should note that this is not by any means a novel development in the world of point-and-click adventure games – some of the LucasArts’ titles released during the 1990s – e.g. *Loom* (1990) and *The Dig* (1995) – would abandon the command-based framework in favor of the context sensitive mouse interaction (Kalata, 2011).

software, mirroring the dynamic between the player and the game master as present in tabletop role-playing games.



Figure 14: Screen captures from four US graphic adventures produced over 27 years, demonstrating the standardization of command-giving mechanics somewhat analogous to that of Japanese adventure games. Clockwise from upper-left corner: Apple II version of *King's Quest*, Commodore Amiga version of *Maniac Mansion*, *Full Throttle*, *Gemini Rue* (Wadjet Eye Games, 2011). Source: MobyGames.

The relationship between these genres' Japanese counterparts would, however, follow a slightly different trajectory. As I already touched upon in Chapter 1, the Japanese adventure shared many of its early influences and mechanical solutions with the Japanese RPG, with Miyamoto claiming that *Ultima* (in the case of 2D overhead perspective) and *Wizardry* (with its 3D first-person perspective) were ultimately the most significant and farther-reaching Western sources of inspiration within the Japanese adventure and *erogē* spheres (Miyamoto, 2013).

Furthermore, the two most epoch-making titles in both spheres (*The Portopia Serial Murder Case* and *Dragon Quest*) shared the same designer in the figure of Yūji Horii, who went as far as to include an RPG-inspired dungeon crawling section in the Famicom version of *Portopia*. More importantly in the context of the present discussion, both titles featured a menu-dominated interactive framework; although there seemingly are other mechanical distinctions that can be used to differentiate between the two, I would argue that these distinctions are functionally perfectly compatible with the broader menu-based paradigm. For example, one can argue that the JRPGs are unique in their mechanic of computing various types of data that determine the characters' health points and martial ability, ultimately governing their encounters with enemies; this argument, however, sounds less convincing when taking into account the stereotypical JRPG enemy encounters' reliance on menu-based commands<sup>95</sup>, or the fact that statistics-governed outcomes represent a major part of Japanese dating simulation and *bishōjo* games such as *Tokimeki Memorial* or *LovePlus* series.

Therefore, the only distinctive mechanical and functional difference between the two genres can be found in the nature of their spatial navigation – for instance, while *Dragon Quest* would simulate the protagonist's movement through the usage of the directional pad, the *Horii's Mystery Trilogy* would skip the illusion of movement altogether and instead transport the player between locations by simply switching between the different scene depictions. While all the four genres whose relationship I set out to explore in this subsection feature text-based storytelling and have as such represented the main source of story-driven video game experiences in their

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<sup>95</sup> In this sense, JRPGs display some similarities with the Western adventure game's simultaneous usage of command-based (interaction with the world) and menu-based (dialogue trees) paradigms of interactions. However, while many of the JRPG menu options – such as battle commands or the interaction with the shop-owner non-player characters – are somewhat standardized, all of them are ultimately context dependent; for instance, while the battle commands will probably be standardized throughout the whole duration of the game, some of the commands will be unavailable in case the player's party does not include the appropriate character or in case the player's inventory does not include the proper item, shifting the nature of menu-interaction away from the standardized and immutable command list of the Western point-and-click adventure games, and more towards the dynamic options present in the mid-to-late 1980s Japanese adventure games.

respective geographical contexts throughout the 1980s, I would argue that the traversal (and the different methods of its simulation) is ultimately what drives the genres apart.

These relationships are illustrated further in Table 1 – Western adventure games have operated under a command dominated paradigm since their inception, with menus starting to play an increasingly important role in the later dialogue-heavy point-and-click titles; Japanese RPGs, on the other hand, realize their interaction through highly standardized, but nonetheless context-dependent menus. In Western adventures, traversal mechanics can vary between textual commands, pointing to a specific destination or direct spatial navigation through the means of button presses; JRPGs tend to let the player control the direction of the protagonists’ movement, either through simulating direct movement within physical environments, or through abstracted “overworld” navigation which skips the representation of the exact moment-to-moment travel.

	Text-based storytelling	Command-based decision making	Menu-based decision making	Menu-based traversal
Western adventure game	X	X	X	
Japanese adventure game	X	X	X	X
Japanese RPG	X		X	
Visual novel	X		X	X

Table 1: A tabular representation of related story-driven video game genres and their conceptual, mechanical and stylistic relations to each other.

Both Japanese adventure games and visual novels eschew all of these representations of movement, reducing traveling to instant transitions between the individual scenes, or by offering hypertextual choices as to which location the player wants to visit. The dichotomy between the commands and the menus is somewhat blurry in the case of these two genres as well – while the

visual novel does not traditionally feature commands and offers all of its choices through sporadically occurring decisions of momentous importance, the Japanese adventure has throughout its evolution existed on a spectrum between the command-centered and menu-centered approaches and levels of standardization. If, however, one chooses to see visual novels as an extension of Japanese adventures – or the Japanese adventure as a precursor to the visual novel – the evolutionary continuity between their mechanical and conceptual properties becomes obvious, making it possible to perceive the command-heavy beginnings in the context of the unifying power of the menu<sup>96</sup>.

### **The adventure continues: The Japanese tradition of menu hypertext**

This chapter presented a short overview of the most significant developments and trends in the realm of the 1980s Japanese adventure, culminating in the analysis of its relationship with its genealogically proximate story-driven genres. In highlighting the menu-based interactive systems and the lack of movement simulation as the main links between the 1980s Japanese adventures and the contemporary visual novels, I have ultimately concluded that the two belong to the same mechanical and functional sphere, effectively putting them in an analogous relation.

Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will therefore use the term “visual novel” to denote both of these computer-based storytelling traditions. While the temporal connection thus made answers this thesis’ titular question of time, it is still necessary to tackle the issues of space and discourse in relation to visual novel’s nature and conceptualization. The following chapter will aim to offer a satisfying conclusion to this end, by examining potentially misleading aspects of the visual

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<sup>96</sup> In acknowledging the continuity between these two aspects of Japanese video game storytelling, one can more easily situate works such as *Beyond the Summer* – a work published in 2022 that features a text-parsing mechanic – along the historical and genre lines.

novel's dominant conceptualization, analyzing one of its more illustrative outliers, and exploring the label of "Japaneseness" commonly associated with the genre.

## **TRUE END: Revisiting the Contemporary Understanding of the Visual Novel**

In “A Brief Introduction to Visual Novels” – an integral expository section appearing in Szczepaniak’s *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers* – guest editor Nathan Treichel points that the visual novel can encompass a great variety of thematic, mechanical and ludic frameworks, observing that this genre’s building blocks managed to find their way into some of the most well-established contemporary video game series (Treichel, 2014). This thesis’ Chapter 2 has already offered some illustration to this statement, providing necessary historical and mechanical background information, displaying some of the early examples of this inter-genre contact and – most importantly – introducing the menu-based slideshow as the primary unifying property of the works that fall under the visual novel umbrella. Equipped with this background knowledge, it is now possible to address in more concrete terms the broader problems of terminology and conceptualization first introduced in Chapter 1.

Stated differently, I will employ the aforementioned findings about the Japanese menu hypertext and its history in order to briefly examine the potential shortcomings found in some of the criteria commonly used to delineate the visual novel from other video game genres, thereby showing how the stereotypical Western perceptions of the genre can fail in the face of its complexity. More specifically, I will cover topics such as nonlinearity, erotic content and presentation, my analysis culminating with the exploration of the supposed qualities of otaku and “Japaneseness” oftentimes associated with this genre in academia (see: Azuma, 2001; Galbraith, 2007; Taylor, 2007).

## **Conceptualization criteria revisited: Examining common conceptual frameworks in the labeling of visual novels**

So far in this text, I have repeatedly described the visual novel as a genre of video games, without offering much rationale to support this seemingly innocuous claim. While Chapter 2 did introduce menu-based manipulation and the lack of representational traversal as the genre's main ludic features, it is these exact properties that help position this predominantly text-centered narrative-driven genre into the realm of hypertext, which in Aarseth's view belongs to the literature proper rather than video games (Aarseth, 1997). In trying to make sense of this apparent paradox, I argue that nonlinear qualities, decision-making mechanics and the focus on immersion that were present in visual novels since their inception offer an illustration of the genre's ludic properties and their evolution vis-à-vis its function as a device of textual storytelling.

The previous chapter observed a streamlining process unraveling throughout the genre's formative decade in Japan, reaching a conclusion of sorts with the release of Chunsoft's *Otogirisō* in 1992. To reiterate, this title laid a blueprint for subsequent visual novel releases by introducing a plurality of branching narrative outcomes, accessible via experimentation with the game's menu-based decision-making system – with each individual narrative path following the structure of a stereotypical menu-navigated title of the late 1980s, but with the number of choices reduced and rendered more impactful, so as to offer a potential for meaningful route bifurcation (Tane, 2013). This innovation, however, did not mean the end of the broader streamlining process in the realm of visual novels' interactivity– the logical endpoint of trying to minimize interaction lies precisely in its complete deletion, or rather the deletion of the choice-making mechanics that traditionally underscore interaction.

It is here that I introduce an important outlying subgenre of the kinetic novel; introduced in the late 1990s<sup>97</sup>, its main feature is the complete lack of choice-making, meaning that the player will inevitably witness the same sequence of images and text during each individual playthrough. If focusing solely on text – in its capacity as the visual novel’s primary narrative device – one might conclude that the kinetic novels’ scripts offer a user experience no different from the one offered by literary genres of the (text-only) novel or stage play. However, when taking into account the other unique properties of the visual novel genre – namely its treatment of background music and the player’s perspective – attempting to confine the kinetic novel exclusively to the realm of literature becomes a less straightforward task.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the incorporation of music in visual novels only became viable in mid-1980s. As opposed to the sonic backgrounds of the more “gameplay-oriented” video game genres, the visual novel music rarely transcends its background role, with the composers opting for more subdued melodic identity and musical progressions. In regard to this, Haruhisa Tanaka observes that the visual novel<sup>98</sup> eschews the “hummable” effect common in shooting games and RPGs in order to be able to simultaneously fulfill the three aims paraphrased below (Tanaka, 2013a):

1. Music should not affect the player’s ability to focus on the game’s textual content, therefore the background music should be composed so as to facilitate focus and allow for the smoothest reading experience;
2. Musical loops in visual novels often end up playing for prolonged periods of time compared to many other genres, therefore the background music should be composed so as to not appear tiring or irritating after repeated playbacks;

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<sup>97</sup> While some of the titles that fall under this description and contain the “kinetic novel” tag on VNDB are as old as 1992, the site lists no more than 20 Japanese-produced games released during the 1990s that fall under this tag; during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, there was an exponential growth of titles belonging to this subgenre.

<sup>98</sup> Throughout the cited text, Tanaka refers to this genre as “adventure game”.

3. Individual scenes in visual novels can encompass a variety of events and emotions, meaning that individual musical themes assigned to them should prove versatile enough in adapting to each given situation or emotional nuance, which effectively dissuades composers from employing dynamic musical developments.

These immersion-building concerns have carried over from the more ludic-oriented visual novels of the mid-1980s to the choiceless kinetic novels of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Employment of the first-person perspective as an immersive device – observable in many of the visual novel’s earliest titles and common in the text adventures of the Western canon – represents yet another expressive peculiarity that arose out of the ludic constraints, but transcended unmodified into the realm of kinetic novels<sup>99</sup>.

While the above statements may appear as a mere attempt at constructing an arbitrary connection between the ludic and the strictly non-ludic branch of visual novels, I would like to point to the said statements’ focus on immersion-building properties and their implications to the kinetic novel’s game-like quality. To phrase it differently, as opposed to the stereotypical usage of the first-person perspective in literary texts, a common aim of using the first-person perspective in visual novels is to provide the player with the illusion of stepping into the protagonist’s role and being able to exert agency in influencing the story’s outcomes.

As I already noted, the means of control in visual novels are menu-centered; thus arises a question of whether it is even possible to control the protagonist in a gameplay framework that lacks not only the illusion of spatial manipulation but the overt presence of menus as well. Here I would like to observe that this thesis’ discussion has so far revolved solely around multiple-choice menus; this ignores, however, the menu variant that forces the end user to accept a single unique option.

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<sup>99</sup> Of course, this does not mean that all kinetic novels narrate their stories in first person, with Gen Urobuchi’s independent release *Emblem of the Sacred Flame* (2002) representing a prominent exception.

Therefore, one can conceptualize each player's click during the regular visual novel gameplay as representing a single menu interaction, whether said interaction serves as a choice between multiple distinct options or as an acknowledgment of the given section's deterministic format; NITRO+'s *YOU and ME and HER: A Love Story* (2013) offered a metatextual commentary on this phenomenon by rendering each line of narration in the game's final section as a choice between a single in-game option.

Incidentally, most non-kinetic visual novels feature the invisible single-choice menus described above as the crux of their interaction, with multiple-choice menus appearing primarily during – or in the anticipation of – key story events; the preceding exposition, coupled with the historical examination of interactive streamlining, thus illustrates the visual novel's (as well as its choiceless subgenre's) complex simultaneous identity that lends itself to interpretations of both ludic and literary nature, made possible by the genre's traditional focus on immersion-building and its overall lack of player agency.

While VNDB does list more than 1500 games under the “kinetic novel” tag, I should clarify that this subgenre accounts for only a minority<sup>100</sup> of works within the broader sphere of visual novels and does represent a relatively late addition to it – therefore, the notion of nonlinearity as a formative property of the visual novel does have a certain basis in the genre's broader historical context. In a similar fashion, eroticism is oftentimes perceived as the visual novel's inherent trait, with the genre occasionally equated with *erogē* in the academic context (see: Azuma, 2001). While the previous chapter did offer a brief exposition on *erogē* as a separate ludic phenomenon in the context of 1980s, I would hereby like to offer a more contemporary illustration of the interplay between the genres and its reflection in scholarship.

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<sup>100</sup>More precisely, VNDB lists approximately 5.5% of all the visual novels produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan as kinetic novels.



Figure 15: Screen captures that show two examples of the choiceless menus; the top image illustrates their practical application in enforcing user agreement updates, while the bottom image displays their metatextual usage in *YOU and ME and HER: A Love Story*. Source: Youtube screen captures.

In his seminal work about otaku culture consumption, Hiroki Azuma claims that the visual novel<sup>101</sup> arose during the mid-1990s, primarily as the result of experimentation upon the 1980s

<sup>101</sup> He uses the term “novel game” to refer to this genre throughout his text, keeping it conceptually separate from the 1980s genres that he claims to have preceded it.

*gyarugē*'s and *bishōjogē*'s openly pornographic legacy and mechanics<sup>102</sup>. Referring to the previous chapter, as well as to the VNDB's list of the Japanese-produced visual novel titles released before 1996, it becomes evident that most of the stylistic and mechanical experimentation had already taken place during the 1980s; more importantly, approximately half of this decade's visual novel releases did not feature sexually explicit content at all. In the decades that followed, however, this trend would undergo a slight shift in favor of the erotic – out of 100 most popular titles on VNDB, around 60 percent have at least one official release that does feature sexually explicit content.

Here I find it beneficial to briefly revert to Chapter 2 and its question of auteurial vision in the multiplicity of a single title's releases. While the practice of releasing separate, non-erotic versions of *erogē* and almost-*erogē* for home consoles was common in the 1980s Japan, this practice reached a zenith of sorts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whereupon the publishers started adding unique narrative arcs to each of the console versions, forcing the most zealous of otaku into buying multiple versions of their favorite games (Todome, n.d.); in this fashion, the ratio of erotic to non-erotic visual novels unique in their content shifts in favor of the titles that do not feature erotic depictions. Finally, echoing Naoki Miyamoto's statements cited in the previous chapter, visual novels that feature any amount of erotic or otherwise risqué content can range anywhere from almost-*erogē* to the predominantly pornographic *nukigē* (Miyamoto, 2013); delineating software as erotic or non-erotic based on whether it contains any amount of erotic content or not therefore introduces a risk of creating a misleading picture of the entire genre and its expressive potential. In short, while I would argue that it is impossible to denote the erotic as one of the

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<sup>102</sup> I should note that many of these fallacies stem from the author's "third-generation otaku" consumer point of view, which he affirms in the main body of his book (Azuma, 2001). This point of view is evident in his lack of focus towards titles released before 1996, as well as in his claim that Windows computers represented the main platform for the *gyarugē* consumption (Azuma, 2001); while the last point does stand true in the context of mid-1990s, it is not applicable to the broader history of this visual novel and *erogē*-related subgenre.

visual novel's formative elements along purely historical or genealogical lines, it is likewise difficult to ignore an almost symbiotic status presently existing between the two genres.

Finally, anime-like presentation is perhaps the most stereotypically perceived of all the stylistic traits commonly appearing in the sphere of visual novels. Such a conceptualization has considerable basis in reality – virtually all the titles that appear on the lists of 100 most popular and most highly-rated visual novels on both VNDB and ErogameScape rely dominantly on the anime-inspired art style, echoing further the previous chapter's conclusions regarding the visual standardization that seems to have occurred in parallel with the streamlining of the genre's interactive elements.

While anime-inspired art style has reached ubiquity as the genre's primary mode of visual expression, this does not imply that all visual novels employ this paradigm. In fact, the genre-redefining *Otogirisō* did not feature a single character sprite (anime-like or otherwise), opting instead to depict its manor setting in a culturally neutral style akin to the one used in the Japanese versions of *Mystery House* – with all the graphical updates that are to be expected when taking into account the 10 year-long temporal gap between the two. The further installments in the Chunsoft's sound novel series followed a similar visual philosophy, albeit with one important difference – they did offer visual depictions of the characters. More specifically, Chunsoft's *Banshee's Last Cry* (1994) and its sequels utilized photographic images to represent the background graphics, while employing silhouettes in order to depict the game's characters.

Following these console-only releases, many Japanese-produced fourth generation console exclusives (exemplified by the Chunsoft's 1998 title *District*) would rely on photographic representation of their setting and characters. This representational trend would notably cross over into the sixth console generation with Chunsoft's *428: Shibuya Scramble*, known for its

status as the ninth ever video game (and the only visual novel) to win the perfect 40/40 review score in Famitsu, the longest-running Japanese video game magazine.

While these highly influential and acclaimed works provide an argument against conceptualizing the visual novel as a genre derived from anime and the broader otaku sphere, the predominance of anime-like presentation in its titles – together with their abundant inclusion of otaku database elements and anime-like realism<sup>103</sup> – illustrates why this genre is seldom perceived and discussed outside of the Japanese pop culture context, in non-academic discourse as well as in academia<sup>104</sup>.

In the Western discourse, therefore, this idea of “Japaneseness” assumes significant place in the broader visual novel discussion even in the texts whose main focal points lie in the Western developments; in the sense that some video game genres lend themselves to the perception of being “more Asiatic than the others”, Patterson for instance names North American visual novels as the most “Asiatic genre” containing “Asiatic modes of expression” (Patterson, 2022, p. 18-22), while Rice’s examination of Brechtian theatre through the lens of the US-produced *Doki Doki Literature Club* nonetheless offers a brief exposition on the shifting nature of romantic love in present-day Japan and the phenomenon of the Japanese shut-ins (Rice, 2019).

Informal scholarship does not differ much in this regard – all of the works cited so far situate visual novels under the “Japanese” domain or otherwise contrast visual novel with the tradition of the “Western adventure game”; this very thesis is guilty of such an approach whenever it reinforces the dichotomy between the “Western” and the “Japanese” adventure games or employs

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<sup>103</sup> Introduced by Hiroki Azuma in *The Animalization of Otaku Culture*, the theory of anime-like (or manga-like) realism posits that the literary works associated with the otaku sphere – exemplified most prominently by the “light novel” genre of teenage-oriented literature – display a sharp break from the tradition of literary modernity, instead offering a depiction of reality as governed by the perceived logic of the database elements common in anime and manga (Azuma, 2001).

<sup>104</sup> The virtual only exception to this rule is the research examining the visual novel’s applicative potential in the field of education.

expressions such as “1980s Japanese PC adventure” instead of terms formed along more mechanical lines.

In any case, I would argue that many of the Western stereotypes and misconceptions discussed over the course of this subsection ultimately stem from the limited availability of the Japanese-produced titles in the West. To phrase it differently, most Japanese-produced visual novels have never been localized for the Western market; additionally, the existing localizations often represent unofficial works by volunteer enthusiasts with varying degrees of interpretative success. In his somewhat infamous post<sup>105</sup>, Moogy – professional visual novel translator, editor and a notable member of the Reddit’s r/visualnovels community – enumerates various points of difficulty that would occur during the hypothetical translations of around 70 prominent visual novel titles, with some of the notable barriers including: kanji-centered puns and/or etymology discussions, textual representations of wuxia or anime-styled fights, frequent usage of archaic or otherwise obsolete words, voluminous discussions about South-East Asian history, as well as the necessity of replicating a variety of unique character voices across “4mb of text” (Moogy, 2012).

In short, it seems possible that the commercial, technical and creative barriers inherent to the localization of some of the epoch-making titles – as well as many of the obscure ones – have ultimately contributed to a more rigid conceptualization of the visual novel’s formal elements, based upon the narrow set of titles that was available to the Western consumers.

In the following passages, I will offer a brief presentation of Yōsuke Karabe’s *A Dark Room* (2010), an English-untranslated title that subverts all of the commonly perceived elements of the visual novel discussed in this chapter so far; over the course of my analysis, I will aim to uncover additional criteria that serve to derail the discussion about the mechanically distinct genre of the visual novel into the realm of “Japaneseness”. In doing so, I hope to be able to delve deeper into

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<sup>105</sup> While the author himself maintains that the post is a joke (Moogy, 2012), my personal experience of reading through many of the titles he wrote about corresponds neatly with his comments.

the underlying mechanisms of said “Japaneseness”, while simultaneously introducing an alternative conceptual viewpoint of the genre.

### **Allegory of the room: A practical examination of the visual novel’s conceptual peculiarities**

*A Dark Room* – an independently released kinetic novel listed on both VNDB and ErogameScape – follows the story of Seitarō Hino, a teenager who had spent most of his childhood in a darkened, book-filled room, without access to daylight or the world outside of his mother’s apartment. His reclusive and studious daily existence is disturbed by his mother’s sudden death, which forces Seitarō to move in with his aunt’s family, reevaluating his knowledge about the world and recontextualizing his memories of the life in his dark room. A title of short textual length and fixed structural composition, it frequently shifts its narrative perspective between Seitarō and his dysfunctional new family’s members, employing first-person narration in each of its six unique perspectives. The level of immersive quality, however, varies between individual character perspectives, with some offering the illusion of inserting into the narrators’ role, while the others follow a more detached, conversational style of confessional literature.

The title’s storyline is predetermined (and therefore strictly linear), but its inclusion of sexual content (or even dating) is somewhat more debatable – although sex and its consequences do represent a recurring topic in the game’s latter half, sexual acts themselves are never explicitly depicted either visually or in writing, which stands in stark contrast with the practices of *erogē* and ultimately renders this game a non-erotic title. In a similar fashion, while the game never displays overt depictions of dating or many of the database elements commonly associated with dating simulations<sup>106</sup>, the emotional bond evolving between Seitarō and his cousin Kiiko lends itself to more than obvious romantic interpretations.

<sup>106</sup> By this I primarily mean the manipulation of statistical data points, declaration of love/romantic intent, depictions of kissing or sex, using the word “date” or inclusion of anime-like “fan service”.

These narrative subtleties are further aided by the game’s visual identity, which emulates *Banshee’s Last Cry’s* style of NVL presentation, with silhouette characters superimposed upon graphically processed photographic backgrounds. As opposed to the anime-dominated representational style, this approach prompts the players to fill in the missing graphical data from their own experience and environment (rather than constructing it from the database of otaku elements), which further facilitates the immersion process.

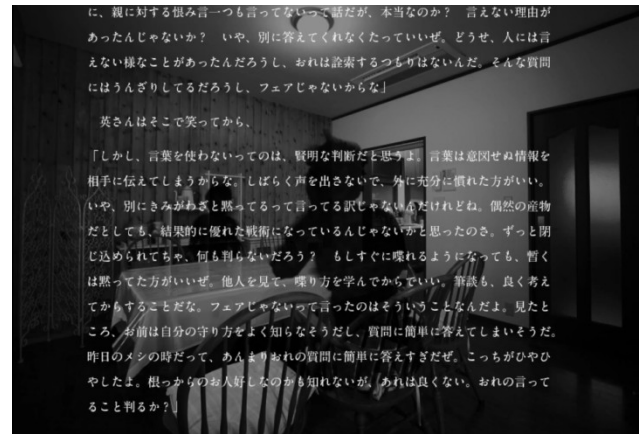
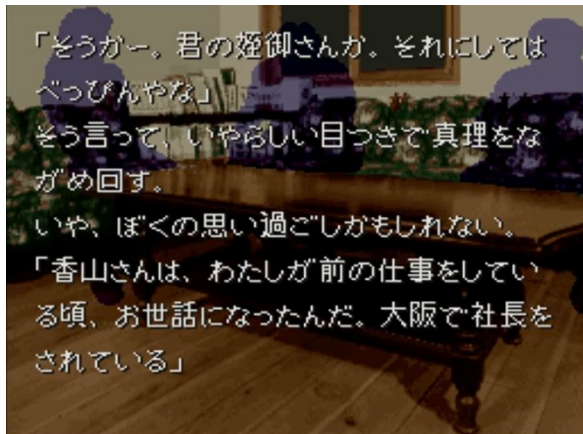


Figure 16: Screen captures illustrating the visual similarities between *Banshee’s Last Cry’s* (left) and *A Dark Room’s* (right) visual identity. Source: VNDB.

This, however, does not mean that *A Dark Room* avoids cartoony representations or anime-like realism entirely – Figure 17 shows two examples of 2D artwork featured in the game, while one of the last chapters includes an over-exaggerated instance of the common database element of *shirimochi* (falling on one’s backside) to illustrate Seitarō’s and Kiiko’s shared sense of amazement during a particular event.



Figure 17: Screen captures illustrating the usage of 2D artwork in *A Dark Room*'s cover artwork and main menu (left), as well as during the gameplay itself (right). Source: Youtube screen captures.

The individual observations offered above are of little value without further contextualization – mere ludic or textual analyses do not suffice in encapsulating this title's inherent peculiarities. To start, Yōsuke Karabe had initially envisioned this work as a printed novel; it was only after his publishing deal with Square Enix Novels collapsed that he decided to publish his story independently in the form of game software (Setoguchi, as cited in Nekoneko, 2010). Supplementing his script with publicly available photographic assets, aforementioned 2D art commissions and visual novel-friendly audio loops obtained from six different sources, the author succeeded in creating an immersive collage that tells the story of Seitarō and his family vicariously, transcending the form of the printed novel while simultaneously remaining rooted in it<sup>107</sup>.

While this title does illustrate the transformative power of the visual novel in adapting literary texts into the digital sphere through their interplay with the visual, sonic and immersive/ludic elements, it simultaneously serves to further problematize the cultural and expressive criteria

<sup>107</sup> This phenomenon is somewhat reminiscent of my previous observations about the frequent lack of definite auteurial statements in visual novels and – even more importantly – the adaptability that this genre offers in the practice of mixing and remixing already existing content.

stereotypically attributed to the genre. One of the main points of interest regarding this work in the broader visual novel fandom is the identity of its author – Yōsuke Karabe is the printed novel-oriented pseudonym used by Ren'ya Setoguchi, a prominent visual novel creator whose opus is well-represented in the top 100 highest-rated visual novels lists on both VNDB and ErogameScape.

In *A Dark Room*, he revisits many of the topics covered in his debut *erogē CARNIVAL* (2005), including the reclusive bookish protagonist, tragic death of a mother, abusive household, extreme bullying, non-consensual sex and incest; while the writing style in both works remains highly naturalistic and novel-like, *CARNIVAL* filters their shared topics through the lens of otaku database elements and their logic, a quality that is for the most part absent in *A Dark Room*. Additionally, *CARNIVAL* clearly exhibits all of the stereotypical traits explored in the previous subsection, while *A Dark Room* manages to successfully circumvent them.

It is therefore possible that the choice of publishing *A Dark Room* under the pseudonym reserved for his printed works partly reflects Setoguchi's perception of the two titles as belonging to distinct creative spheres. The fact remains, however, that the game remains classified as a visual novel in the two biggest visual novel databases – is it thus possible that this particular software ended up mislabeled as a visual novel merely due to its author's prominence in the genre? Does this further delegitimize the visual novel distinction of other such works<sup>108</sup>?

While – guided by the predominantly mechanical conceptualization of the genre I laid out at the end of Chapter 2 – I do gravitate towards a negative answer, this short digression nonetheless points to the role of the perceived cultural and auteurial lineage as yet another significant – and perhaps even key – criteria for recognizing individual game software as visual novels in the

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<sup>108</sup> The already mentioned *Emblem of the Sacred Flame* (a work of fan fiction created by one of the most highly-acclaimed visual novel creators, Gen Urobuchi) is another fitting example; while a less prominent author, Yutaka Fukuzawa's experimental releases under the independent brand LANGuex also warrant attention due to their dissimilarities with his more conventional officially released works.

contemporary discourse thereof. To phrase it differently, the employment of the visual novel label in both Japan and the West seems to proceed mainly from the cultural point of origin associated with each individual work rather than merely from the presence of stereotypically perceived formal elements such as nonlinearity, sexual content or anime-like presentation.

Under such conceptual framework, the auteurial track record of Ren'ya Setoguchi – as well as the otaku cultural sphere in which his sanctioned visual novel opus operates – both assist in positioning the menu-centered *A Dark Room* within the visual novel proper, associating it as an extension of its author's otaku legacy despite its lack of formal overlap with his other work; this issue of lineage will form the basis for this chapter's ultimate subsection and its exploration of the factors that cause the stereotype of “Japaneseness” in the Western visual novel discourse.

### **Joining together of the branching paths: Towards a more global perspective of the visual novel discussion**

Throughout this chapter, I have continuously insisted on equating the 1980s Japanese adventure games with visual novels<sup>109</sup>, based on mechanical, conceptual and stylistic similarities between the two along temporal lines. This menu-oriented gameplay paradigm – with its focus on textual storytelling and its lack of representational traversal mechanics – merges together with the visual novel's perceived otaku point of origin to form the main intuitive criteria for distinguishing visual novels apart from other video games; both the mechanical and the genealogical side of this conceptualization have been largely ignored in their discourse-shaping capacity, in favor of the more tangible and readily definable formal characteristics described in this chapter's first

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<sup>109</sup> To reiterate, the Japanese context does not allow for such an equation – while the term “adventure game” gets used to encompass the entirety of the Japanese menu hypertext and while the Western usage of “visual novel” is oftentimes employed to refer to the entirety of the “Japanese adventure game”, the Japanese audiences do not perceive the term “visual novel” as applicable to the 1980s works such as *Portopia* (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019).

subsection<sup>110</sup>.



Figure 18: Screen captures from six non-Japanese visual novels released over a period of 31 years. The left-hand side includes *The King of Chicago* (top), *Circuit's Edge* (middle) and *Plumbers Don't Wear Ties* (bottom), presenting the relative continuity of the visual novel's mechanical properties across thematically and stylistically highly disparate software of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The right-hand side includes Four Leaf Studios' 2009 *Katawa Shoujo* (top), Russian-produced Erogame Project's 2013 *Everlasting Summer* (middle) and Chinese-developed YAMAYURI GAMES' 2017 *Tricolour Lovestory* (bottom), illustrating the subsequent spread of the otaku database elements. Source: MobyGames.

<sup>110</sup> While it is true that virtually all discussion about visual novels highlights their Japanese origins on a genre-wide scale, the intuitive mechanism of scanning the individual titles' stylistic, thematic and auterial lineage in search of a distinguishable otaku point of origin represents a grossly underexplored phenomenon.

The latter part of this conceptualization – the perceived cultural point of origin – is more pertinent to the present discussion, given its instrumental role in the creation of arbitrary discursive divisions along Japanese-Western geographical lines.

While the visual novel did originate through the emulation of Western interactive fiction titles and their design principles in the early 1980s, its evolution and distribution throughout the subsequent decade occurred in relative isolation from the Western adventure games; the standardization of the menu-centered interactive paradigm and anime-like presentation occurring at the intersection of hardware constraints with the Japanese linguistic peculiarities during the aforementioned period would eventually proceed to add the superfluous layer of the otaku point of origin to the intuitive conceptualization of the genre in both Japan and the West, manifesting itself as the notion of “Japaneseness” in the latter case.

This, of course, ignores the mechanical developments analogous to those of visual novels, occurring in the North American and European regions in 1980s and onwards; Chapter 2 illustrated some of these developments in the context of Western graphic adventures – particularly the use of menu-based dialogue trees that were common in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century story-driven titles in the West. Figure 18 offers some additional Western-produced examples that follow the visual novel’s mechanical logic even more closely – Cinemaware’s *The King of Chicago* (1986), for instance, employed not only the menu-based mechanical model (interwoven with some light business management and shooting mechanics), but also formal elements such as the superimposed layers of text, character sprites and backgrounds, in many ways anticipating the set piece and structural conventions of the mid-1990s Japanese visual novels. Westwood Studio’s 1990 *Circuit’s Edge*, on the other hand, followed an almost identical paradigm employed by the 1980s Japanese adventures. The 1990s full-motion-video boom birthed yet another curious group of titles that can retroactively be included in the visual novel domain; insofar as these late 20<sup>th</sup>

century examples of the Western choose-your-own-fiction strove to (to a varying degree of success) incorporate the visual language of cinema – whose works tend to have a firm textual foundation in the literary practice of screenwriting – it can be argued that these photographic/FMV choose-your-own-adventure slideshows<sup>111</sup> belong to the line of traversal-less menu-based hypertext of the Western tradition.

Following the first commercial contacts between the Western audiences and the Japanese visual novel during the 1990s, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western-produced menu hypertext saw a shift towards the otaku visual and thematic vocabulary, further contributing to the already mentioned perception of “Japaneseness”; similar trends are observable in the context of the Chinese-language visual novel, with Fukuyama mentioning China as the third main market for visual novel besides Japan and the West<sup>112</sup> (Fukuyama, as cited in Kasai, 2019).

The Japanese, North American, European and the Chinese markets have all exhibited unique legal, commercial and discursive circumstances, influencing the way visual novels – and video games at large – are perceived, distributed and perceived. For instance, China maintains a tight regulatory control over the domestic video game production, with entire genres and platforms subject to potentially debilitating government interventions (Kukino, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014). Similar trends can be observed in the rest of the world, with Japan banning gambling-related video games and UK allowing them (Kukino, as cited in Szczepaniak, 2014), Nintendo of America censoring the content deemed offensive when importing Famicom games from Japan (Altice, 2015), as well as when taking into account the traditional divide between family-friendly console games and sexually explicit PC game titles in Japan (Miyamoto, 2013). Finally, similarly to how the term “visual novel” made its way into this genre’s Western discourse and

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<sup>111</sup> Most of these titles simultaneously employed the visual novel and the graphic adventure interactive paradigms; among them, the United Pictures’ 1993 adult-oriented (and universally panned) *Plumbers Don’t Wear Ties* is conceptually the closest to the contemporary visual novel form.

<sup>112</sup> A quick perusal through the most popular VNDB entries shows that many of their Japanese-produced representatives received their Mandarin translations long before being translated to English; likewise, many prominent titles that are yet to receive a proper English translation have already been made available to the Chinese audiences.

subsequently came to encompass the entirety of Japanese-produced adventure games, it should be noted that Steam – one of the biggest online video game distribution services in the world – employs the label “visual novel” in this Western sense on both of its English and Japanese-language store pages, facilitating potential modifications of Japanese discourse through this Western conceptualization.

Common to all of these different legal and discursive paradigms – irrespective of their perceived “Japaneseness” or lack thereof – are the very global trends exhibited in the merging of the literature and the video game, the textual and the immersive. While the genres of graphic adventure and the role-playing game thus share the common conceptual lineage with visual novels, the visual novel is the only one that managed to retain its initial conceptual identity to this day, whereas the other genres suffered the erosion of their predominantly textual storytelling under the burden of environmental narration and the evolution of their gameplay mechanics.

Conversely, it is this very continuity that renders the visual novel as one of the most inclusive – as well as the most replicable and contagious – video game paradigms there is. It is also for these exact reasons that the visual novel does not lend itself well to definition, while simultaneously allowing for a wide palette of theoretical approaches to its discussion. To quote Szczepaniak and his succinct explanation of the genre given in *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers*:

Visual novels. Sound novels. Adventure games. Graphic adventures. Text adventures.

Interactive fiction. Dating-sims. In addition to these umbrella terms there are also many sub-genres. What I became acutely aware of when investigating this genre bouillabaisse, is that there are a myriad of interconnected terms, meaning different things for different people. From *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* [...], through *Snatcher* and *Policenauts*, to *EVE* and *Disgaea Infinite*. All distinct, yet all sharing similar DNA. There are even games developed in the West

which could be described as being akin to visual novels, such as certain FMV games from the past, and more recently *The Walking Dead* by Telltale Games. (Szczepaniak, 2014, p. 312)

Phrased differently, the relative consistency of the visual novel's mechanical core – combined with the wealth of this genre's historical developments, vast geographic spread and thematic variety – facilitates innovative application of the visual novel across all of the already mentioned fields, e.g. education, sociology, linguistics and computer science, literary, theatre or game studies. These hypothetical research projects can employ a wide palette of analytic prisms – from the global unity of the genre's mechanical elements, across distinct subgenres and formal elements, all the way to the tangentially related computer software – or even the physical manifestations of, for instance, the choose-your-own-adventure paradigm. The same logic applies in the spatial context as well, with a plethora of cultural and sub-cultural implications across different geographic regions, whereupon even the face-value examination of the phenomenon of “Japaneseness” covered above could hypothetically result in insightful conclusions capable of moving the scholarship forward.

There is, however, one approach to discussing the visual novel that stands out as highly undesirable in the light of this thesis' findings – most academic writers who have dealt with this interactive sphere so far have not seemed to possess the basic knowledge of the genre's history nor the understanding of its mechanical underpinnings in their most fundamental sense (as outlined in Chapter 2). The problem of translation – of expository writing as well as the game software – represents a considerable barrier standing between the regions and scholars; this situation is exacerbated further by the deeply rooted terminological and conceptual frameworks associated with this genre. While these hurdles may seem imposing, I have no doubts that coming researchers will find a way to acquire this necessary theoretical background and go on to introduce new and improved terminology and conclusions about the world of the menu-based

hypertext, with each of their works representing a branching path contributing to the so-called “TRUE END”, an ultimate contextualization of this highly nonlinear story and its many assorted mysteries.

## **Epilogue: The New Adventures Await...**

Throughout this thesis, I have been using the term “visual novel” to denote the four decade-strong phenomenon of the games that employ the mix of text, visuals and human-to-software interaction to convey their stories. This treatise on the visual novel and its elements – as manifested in temporal, spatial and discursive contexts – emerged as a result of the unclear definition of this genre and the necessity for a more systematic discussion thereof. In the pursuit of such a globally coherent angle for conceptualizing the visual novel, I first had to pinpoint the conceptual consensuses attached to it in the realms of research, journalism and video game publishing; my subsequent task was to challenge these frameworks through historical, mechanical and criteria-related analyses on the interregional scale.

The stereotypical conceptualization of the visual novel points first to the already mentioned mixture of textual, graphical, sonic and interactive elements to tell a story; after this, it usually proceeds to highlight the genre’s Japanese origin and stylistic elements such as anime-inspired art, layered graphical planes, nonlinearity, sexually explicit romance, etc.

Akin to the so-called “common route” oftentimes present in nonlinear visual novels, this image of the genre represents but a single aspect of the wider story, inadequate in its capacity to fully illustrate the visual novel’s inherent complexity. I have shown this complexity emerging in the attempts to define this video game genre, as well as in the interplay between the Japanese writing systems and the personal computer hardware sold in the 1980s Japan; finally, I have explored the very use of the label “novel” as a marketing tactic in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan.

Observed at the intersection of technology, language, creativity, marketing and discourse, the genre's many outlying phenomena framed the remainder of my exploration.

The most prominent of these phenomena was the entirety of the highly dynamic era of the 1980s Japanese adventure game, a genre that derived its initial inspiration from the Western-produced interactive fiction while simultaneously serving as the progenitor of the present-day visual novel. From its earliest experiments with the visual presentation and the text-based human-to-software interaction, to the standardization of its interactive techniques and presentation styles, the adventure game in Japan abounded with new technical developments, expressive experiments and stylistic reinventions.

While the anime-like art style, the adoption of the *Portopia*-like menu organization and the gradual intertwining with *erogē* were the most readily apparent results of these 1980s innovations, the most significant thread that united all of these Japanese titles was their menu-based approach to narrative (as well as the spatial) navigation – in other words, these games relied on menus as the primary means of the human-to-software interaction, while simultaneously eschewing the representational depictions of traversal. Ultimately, it is these traits that mechanically differentiate the Japanese adventure game from the graphic adventures of the Western tradition and the Japanese role-playing games, while simultaneously positioning it under the same conceptual umbrella that houses the visual novel.

This menu-centered conceptual paradigm presents itself as dominant when compared to the labels of nonlinearity, eroticism and anime art style that are stereotypically employed in the visual novel perception and discourse; while widely disseminated across the genre, these formative labels expose obvious applicative limitations when subjected to more detailed scrutiny through the analysis of the software that falls outside of these stereotypical boundaries. The contemporary outlying titles show that their discursive association with the visual novel sphere

arises foremost as the result of the aforementioned mechanical distinctions, which is significantly undergirded by the perception of these works as belonging to the otaku sphere due to their stylistic, thematic or auterial lineage.

It is, therefore, these two findings – the menu-based interaction and navigation on one side, and the cultural point of origin within the broader perception of the genre on the other – that constitute this thesis’ primary contribution, insofar as they elucidate the nature of the intuitive criteria for labeling individual works as visual novels in the contemporary discourse, with the former criterion presenting a key to delineating the visual novel from other video game genres, and the latter performing a more narrow role of pigeonholing menu-based titles based on their connection to the broader database of otaku elements, developments and actors involved.

This contribution ultimately presents a decisive new step in the process of capturing this elusive genre; next goals might lie in the further untangling of the visual novel’s historical, interregional and terminological complexities. While my examination of the these three contexts throughout this thesis has never left the domain of the purely introductory, I believe in its power to illuminate the present misconceptions and gaps in the visual novel scholarship, and in doing so help move the discourse beyond the conventionalized representations that focus on the “beautiful anime girls” and fixed formal tropes, towards a framework that acknowledges the genre’s ever-shifting expressive identity, as well as the global context in which it ultimately operates.

This global lens represents a particularly important facet of my argument; this thesis examines the genre that – despite stereotypically positioned as a mere element within the contemporary Japan’s otaku culture – has in fact emerged as the result of emulating global interactive software trends of bridging the gap between the literary and the ludic in the attempt to achieve a deeper sense of immersion and investment in the context of imaginative texts. The same unique interplay of hardware and language that initially forced the Japanese software creators to adopt the English

language text-parsing paradigm of interaction would go on to incentivize Japanese developers to reposition their focus into the visual domain; the accelerated standardization of the superficially observable visual and formal elements in the Japanese visual novel vis-à-vis the global interactive fiction would then go on to frame the perception of the “otaku” as the dominant nature of the genre domestically, similarly to how the notion of the visual novel’s “Japaneseness” was adopted in the West.

In this sense, neither does the visual novel represent a purely Japanese development, nor is the highly inclusive Western sense of this term applicable solely in the Western context. While the contemporary academic conceptualizations (across both sides of the geographical spectrum) contain misinformed statements and flawed frameworks, their ultimately intuitive nature – exhibited in their silent acknowledgment of the menu-based paradigm – renders them as a legitimate – if somewhat debatable – aspect of the overarching conversation about the visual novel.

The conversation, however, should not stop there. Given the global implications stated above, future research should mobilize its efforts to reduce the terminologically imposed divides between Japan and the West – which I have consistently employed throughout this text as well – while at the same time acknowledging differences between the computer hardware, linguistic peculiarities, public intellectual climate and dominant terminology of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan and the “English-speaking world”.

While these inherent complexities – as well as the language barriers traditionally present in this sphere – will remain a challenge to prospective scholars, the breadth of academic opportunities inherent to this highly immersive form of reading and play should ultimately present the main incentive in tackling its complexity. It is my hope that this thesis will prove informative and inspire the academic works to come in challenging the established academic

status quo, exploring the global and historical perspectives, as well as in offering innovative applications that will enrich and even transcend the study of the visual novel itself.

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