Doki Doki Subversion Club! Gothic Ghosts, Uncanny Glitches, and Abject Boundaries

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Abstract

This article investigates the visual novel and dating simulator *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017) and examines the unique potential of video games as a media form to produce uncanny, gothic, and abject horror texts. In *DDLC!*, these modes of horror are manifested through "game breaking" mechanics, such as purposeful glitches and moments where the boundaries of the operating system are transgressed. Through this transgression, the game haunts the player's computer, and by extension, their home. This haunting is achieved through unique aspects of the video game medium as well as the ubiquitous nature of digital technology present in our daily lives and domestic spaces.

Keywords

Uncanny; abject; gothic; operating system; digital space; *Doki Doki Literature Club!*

Content Note

This paper includes discussion of mental health, suicide, and self-harm. Reader discretion is advised.

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Welcome to the Club

At first glance, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (*DDLC!* hereafter; Team Salvato, 2017) resembles a conventional visual novel and dating simulator (dating sim). Divided into four acts, the game begins with the player finding themselves in the shoes of a male teenager who joins the titular club at their high school. Through specific choices presented by the game, the player becomes romantically involved with one of the members. Either the seemingly optimistic childhood friend Sayori, the angsty Yuri, or the choleric and snarky Natsuki. The player is also introduced to the confident Monika, who is the club's leader but cannot be courted. However, the game's romantic narrative steadily transitions into a nightmarish exploration of adult themes, with depictions of obsession, depression, self-harm, and suicide. In contrast with other visual novels that outwardly belong to the horror genre, such as *Saya no Uta* (Nitroplus, 2003), *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* (Chunsoft, 2009), and *The Letter* (Yangyang Mobile, 2017), *DDLC!* masks itself in a light-hearted facade. Below the bright colours and cheerful music, players will discover an uncanny, gothic, and abject horror game. These specific forms of horror focus on the familiar becoming unfamiliar, achieved through the deployment of ghosts, decay, and that which is "cast off" and blurs boundaries (Baldick, 2008).

DDLC! utilises aspects that are unique to the medium of video games to create its horror experience. These aspects begin appearing after a few in-game days, equating to a couple of hours of playtime, the tipping point being the players' discovery of Sayori's dead body. After that point the game begins to simulate glitches, corrupting familiar characters and places, transforming them into unfamiliar distorted versions of themselves. The player later discovers that Monika is responsible for these glitches, as she is "self-aware" of her existence as a video game character and "hacks" the game, creating the digital breakdown.

This terror does not stay within the confines of the game and crosses the boundaries into the player's computer, producing an abject affect. What starts as humorous fourth-wall breaks, with characters talking directly to the player, quickly descends into moments of immediate horror. Christopher Barkman (2021) describes these fourth wall breaking moments within *DDLC!* as metalepses, as the game actively taking agency away from the player to "elicit horror and uncertainty" (p. 2) and making its "diegesis… further indistinguishable from its nondiegesis" (p. 14). By leaving its own confines and entering the player's operating system (OS), *DDLC!* makes the player a character within the story, separating them from their in-game counterpart. It is this transgression from immediate to hypermediate, from game to OS, that transforms the up-beat romantic game into a dark, psychological horror story.

The aim of this analysis is to not only show that *DDLC!* embodies these specific types of horror, but how it does so by utilising medium-specific aspects, such as glitches and digital space. I will first introduce the conventions of the dating sim and visual novel genres and explore the spatial, aesthetic, and ludic aspects *DDLC!* subverts. I will then show how the modes of horror are conveyed, using specific examples from the game.

Defining the Club

The dating sim genre typically concerns story, choice, branching narratives, and dialogue trees presented in anime/manga aesthetics (Taylor, 2007). On the surface, *DDLC!* fits within these genre conventions, specifically *bishōjo* games, where the player character is coded as a straight male and interacts with "attractive girls," with the end goal being to enter into a relationship with one of them. The genre emphasises dialogue between characters, description of actions, and the protagonist's inner thoughts. There is minimal animation as the background remains static (see Figure 1). The high-school setting is also a conventional aspect of the genre (Cavallaro, 2010, p. 8), and the notion of "innocent" romance is heightened through incorporating the Japanese *kawaii* style, which highlights a cute, cuddly, and pastel aesthetic (Cheok, 2013).

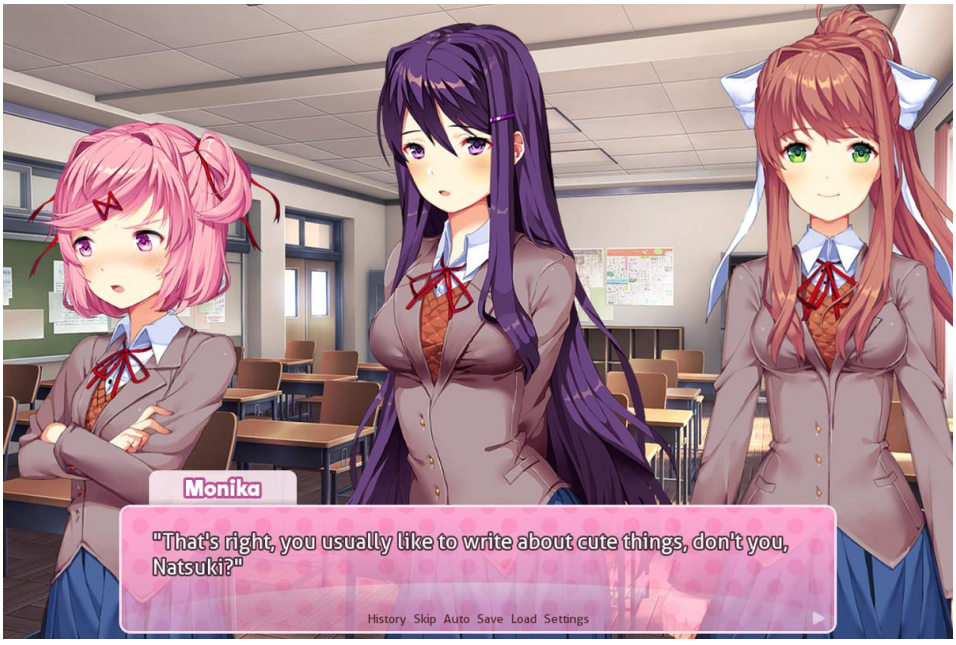

Figure 1. Standard gameplay displaying static background, sprite-based characters, and the textbox in *DDLC!* Screenshot by the author.

Gameplay consists of choices that alter the story's outcome. In *DDLC!*, these choices include dialogue options, such as deciding who to help with a project, who to romance, and ultimately what to say to Sayori before she commits suicide, once again highlighting the drastic shift in tone. Other choices that impact the story are made through a mini-

game in which the player is tasked with writing poems. In this recurring section of the game, the player must select words from a list, with each word corresponding to one of the characters. Choosing specific words leads to the development of a romantic relationship with one of them. For example, to romance the broody and shy Yuri, the player must choose words such as "anxiety," "eternity," "melancholy," and "uncanny." Conversely, Natsuki prefers words like "candy," "fantasy," "pink," and "strawberry" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Gameplay of choosing words for the poem in *DDLC!* Screenshot by the author.

These visual, aural, and ludic aspects are present throughout the first act, meaning the first few in-game days of the game, fitting within the conventions of the dating sim genre. However, after the death of Sayori, the game's diegetic space begins to glitch and tonally transform into a horror experience. This transformation subverts the dating sim's generic conventions narratively, aesthetically, and ludically.

Subversive aspects such as these moments of direct address and purposeful glitching create an oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) define immediacy, stating: "the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop" (p. 6). Narrative based texts, such as films or TV shows, conventionally aim for immersion, to be immediate and engage the audience. As Florian Kerschbaumer and Tobias Winnerling (2003) explain, immediacy is a normative process within a text. As they write: "it is typical for all media to invisibilise or neutralize their artificiality, their factitiousness, and most of all: their arbitrariness. Media tend to become invisible in their usage" (p. 7). There can be deviations from this expectation of immediacy, moments where immersion is broken, and the text becomes hypermediate. Bolter and Grusin state that hypermediated forms "ask us to take pleasure in the act of mediation"

(1999, p. 14). Hypermediacy can be found in a variety of different media and texts including certain video games that subvert conventions and purposefully break immersion for the sake of player enjoyment, as these texts often create humorous moments of self-reflexivity. For example, in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions, 2008), a character tells the player to swap discs, a self-reflexive reference to the original *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998), which had multiple discs. Importantly, Bolter and Grusin also contend that "new digital media oscillate(s) between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity" (1999, p. 17). *DDLC!* exemplifies this oscillation as it forms a self-reflexive and subversive experience. However, rather than creating humour, the game generates terror.

Digital Spaces and Digital Lives

DDLC! uses aspects of video game mediation, such as digital space, to create specific forms of horror. Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy (2008) refer to the interaction between the player and the game as a "gameplay event" that creates "a set of intimate circuits between human bodies and minds, computer hardware and the algorithms and affordances of the virtual worlds of videogames" (p. 21). The console acts as a tool of mediation by projecting the game onto the screen, creating discrete conceptual spaces like the game's diegetic world and the digital space of the OS. Video game consoles, like the various incarnations of the Sony PlayStation, contain digital spaces that are represented through an OS. The OS is a separate space that functions outside of the games themselves, acting as a launchpad for the software to be hosted and allowing for other applications to run beside games such as internet browsers, various communication interfaces, word processors, data storage and other computing functions. The OS is therefore a representational system of computing functions that can facilitate a multi-layered approach.

Drawing on the work of Paul Edwards (1996, p. 246), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) present the frame of operating systems in a vertical model where, "machine language code interacts with lower-level binary information, which ultimately is derived from electronic signals. The hierarchy could continue upwards as well: machine-level code interacts with a higher-level operating system" (p. 146). As Salen and Zimmerman explain, the conventional framing of the OS as a separate level of function means it is perceived as a distinct space from the game (p. 146). This is evident when a player "quits" a game, as they exit the space of the game and return to the OS launchpad. This normative structure of play demarcates the two spaces as separate. *DDLC!* disrupts this conventional configuration of space, subverting the expected relationship between the game and the OS by crossing the boundaries between these spaces. How users conceptualise and imagine digital environments contributes to the horror aspects of the game. This

imagined digital space is constructed through the user interface (UI) design, to convey depth, feedback, and materiality.

Digital environments, such as an OS, produce affective feedback, giving them a greater sense of depth and interactivity. Drawing on the work of art historian Alois Riegl (1901/1985), Lev Manovich (2000) describes digital space as having both optic and haptic feedback (p. 219). According to him, users can both "see" (optic) and "feel" (haptic) the digital space (p. 220). These senses can manifest through various means of feedback; for example, the layered interfaces of the OS depicting a sense of depth generates optic feedback, whilst musical motifs responding to certain actions on the computer (such as notifications) provide a haptic response. This affective feedback helps to provide agency for users, as Janet Murray (1998/2017) states:

> When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience the second characteristic delight of electronic environments—the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices. We expect to feel agency on the computer when we double-click on a file and see it open before us or when we enter numbers in a spreadsheet and see the totals readjust. (p. 123)

Furthermore, users of an OS such as Microsoft Windows conventionally have the background and toolbar in the screen's foreground. Each program or application opened is placed over the background or over another open window. This terminology of opening a window necessitates looking from one space into another. Computer files are organised in such a way that, as each one is opened, the user descends into another level of the OS, often seen in the linear directory (e.g., C:\Users\Name\Desktop\Folder Name\File name). This creates a sense of depth and physical space within the OS. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2005) observes how users relate the OS to an actual space:

> Software, or perhaps more precisely operating systems, offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware: they do not represent transistors but rather desktops and recycling bins. Software produces "users" . . . Users know very well that their folders and desktops are not really folders and desktops, but they treat them as if they were—by referring to them as folders and as desktops. (p. 43)

Chun's (2005) argument emphasises how digital space is conceptualised as having depth and creating relationships between machine and user. The capability for users to move and access these files and folders means the computer can be regarded as a metaphorical material space. When considering the haptic and optic feedback of that space, the OS is imbued with a sense of physicality. Vili Lehdonvirta (2010) similarly argues for this sense of materiality in digital space, writing that "virtual

spaces have material culture. After all, virtual spaces are not incorporeal dream worlds, but real artefacts that are experienced through the senses" (p. 886). Lehdonvirta's argument contends that digital space is more than capable of providing sensorial experiences; it can create affective experiences through its design. Computers and other digital devices have become more tangible and are now an extension of our daily lives and domestic spaces.

Whether scholars call them "ubiquitous media" (Featherstone, 2009), the "digital banal" (Dinnen, 2018), or "ambient intelligence" (Aarts & de Ruyter, 2009), digital devices such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets have entered and augmented the home in many countries around the world. Since 2018, the number of homes with computers has reached 88% in the United Kingdom (Popovic, 2022). Not only have computers entered the home, but they have become an extension of domestic space, much like what occurred in the 1950s with the advent of television in the United States (Spigel, 2010). As computing technology has evolved, digital devices have increasingly provided personalisation options such as custom wallpapers, icons, and sounds, as if the computer and its OS had become part of the home's interior decoration. Chun (2005) has explored how software programmers make computers "personal," asserting that "folder names such as 'my documents' . . . stress personal computer ownership. Computer programs shamelessly use shifters, pronouns like 'my' and 'you,' that address you" (p. 43). This means that not only is the computer a part of the home, but so are the documents stored within it. Kember and Zylinska (2015) similarly argue that computers are designed to be familiar. As they state: "Affective computing . . . involves embedding computers and computational processes into everyday objects that are familiar to us" (Kember & Zylinska, 2015, p. 112). *DDLC!* uses the conceptualised depth and space of the OS, as well as the familiarity of the PC in the household, as sources of horror. In one sense, the computer becomes part of the game; in another sense, the game transgresses players' homes and lives, taking control of their possessions.

Gothic Ghost and Glitches

Through its unique digital mediation, *DDLC!* conveys certain modes of horror, specifically the gothic, the uncanny, and the abject. This can be seen with the simulation of glitches and its connection to the gothic. The gothic is both an aesthetic and a genre that is fascinated "with death and the mutability of the past" (Piatti-Farnell & Beville, 2014, p. 2). Robert Mighall (1999) defines the genre as having a "concern with the historical past . . . [and using] rhetorical and textual strategies to locate the past and represent its perceived iniquities, terrors, and survivals" (p. 15). These aspects of death and the past manifest notably through the presence of ghosts and haunted spaces that are in ruin and decaying. Decay is another concern of the gothic, manifesting in gothic tales as a temporal quality apparent in physically neglected or haunted

spaces. An example of this decay is the archetypal crumbling manor, seen in the work of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe. According to Byron (2015), this physical decay is symbolically linked to anxieties and fears "about national, social, and psychic decay" (p. 186). Therefore, the physical decay in gothic texts are the effects of a greater systemic, social, or personal problem, such as class inequality or sexual desires.

The video game medium affords multiple vectors to represent this decay of space, which both develop from and transcend stereotypical gothic representations. Instead of old manors and Victorian ghosts, *DDLC!* is haunted by digital decay, an effect created via the simulation of visual and auditory glitches. The connection between the gothic and the glitch is explored by Marc Olivier (2015), who discusses digital mediation in horror films:

> Visual glitches, or temporary disruptions to the flow of information such as unexpected pixilation, chromatic shifts, and other error-based distortions, now constitute essential tropes in the language of cinematic ghost stories. The jarring spectacle of data ruins is becoming to the twenty-first century what the crumbling mansion was to gothic literature of the nineteenth century: the privileged space for confrontations with incompatible systems, nostalgic remnants, and restless revenants. (p. 253)

This form of digital gothic is also present in video games through an interaction with a diegetic game world that supersedes the intended design. Olivier (2015) examines this link between glitched space and the gothic:

> The gamer achieves a level of supernatural power. Glitch-generated transcendence can either be read as a liberating poetic use of space, or simply as cheating. Either way, the glitch operates counter to established norms, much like the classic gothic ghost. Also in gothic tradition, gamers experience uncanny phenomena. (p. 264)

According to Olivier (2015) glitches are a common occurrence in the video game medium (p. 264). When programmed purposefully into a game, glitches act as self-reflexive moments of hypermediacy, as glitches are synonymous with a broken game. By simulating glitches (see Figure 3 and 4), *DDLC!* capitalises on the unique digital mediation of video games. However, instead of the player utilising the supernatural power afforded by glitches, as Olivier suggests, they are haunted by them. After the dramatic revelation of Sayori's death, the game presents the player with a game over screen and forces them back to the main menu. The game then restarts, and the player revisits the events of the first act. However, Sayori is missing, and the other characters behave as if she had never existed at all. In addition, the familiar images, songs, text, and characters from the first act have become corrupted, falling

apart into discordant versions of themselves, as if they were glitching. As the second "broken" act progresses, the purposeful glitching continues in visual, aural, and textual ways. The game becomes a corrupted version of itself, as the narrative, ludic, and aesthetic conventions of the dating sim game juxtapose with the horror genre. For example, as the story "restarts", instead of meeting Sayori like the player did in the first act, the game glitches. Dialogue becomes incomprehensible as fractured images of the characters split apart. The glitching gives the impression that the suicide in the narrative was so disruptive to the boundaries of a conventional dating sim that it "broke" the game. This tonal shift and the gothic glitches break the player's immersion, making them aware of the medium as it shifts in their attention from immediate to hypermediated. This use of purposeful glitching also makes the hypermediate disruption immediate. The glitches remind the player they are interacting with a game, a piece of digital software rendering the experience hypermediate. However, the glitch is a part of the story and the self-reflexive moment is part of the narrative immersion, connecting the digital decay to the psychological decay, which is experienced by the player. Therefore, it becomes immediate too.

Figure 3. Digital decay in *DDLC!* Screenshot by the author.

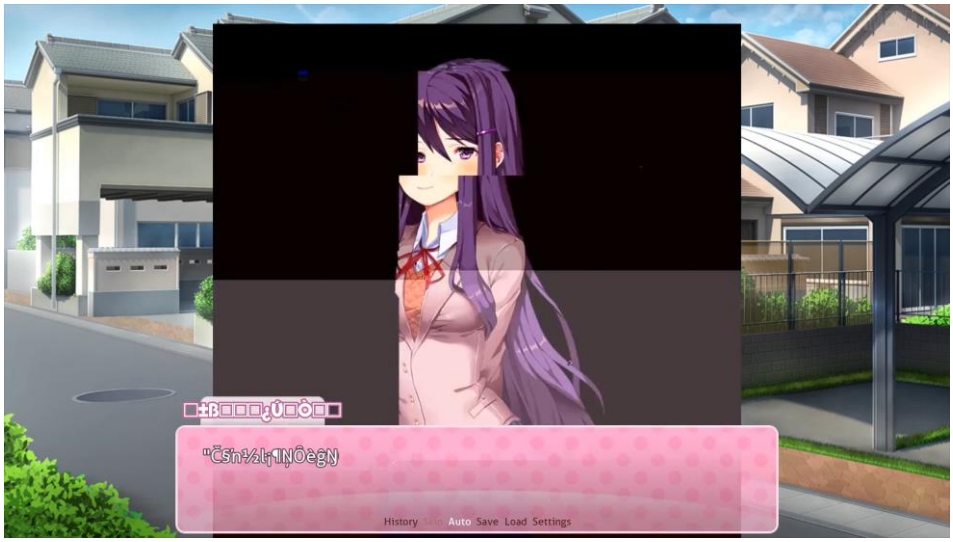

Figure 4. Purposeful glitches. Screenshot by the author.

DDLC! also portrays the gothic through the haunting presence of ghosts, as Sayori and Monika become spectres that haunt the game. Sayori is a digital ghost who, by using the metaphorical transcendence of the gothic glitch, re-enters the game in the third act, after her death. The image of her suicide reappears in a poster in the background of the classroom (see Figure 5), meaning it continues to haunt the player and the game. Monika also displays her phantom-like presence by transgressing between the diegetic game spaces and spaces of the OS.

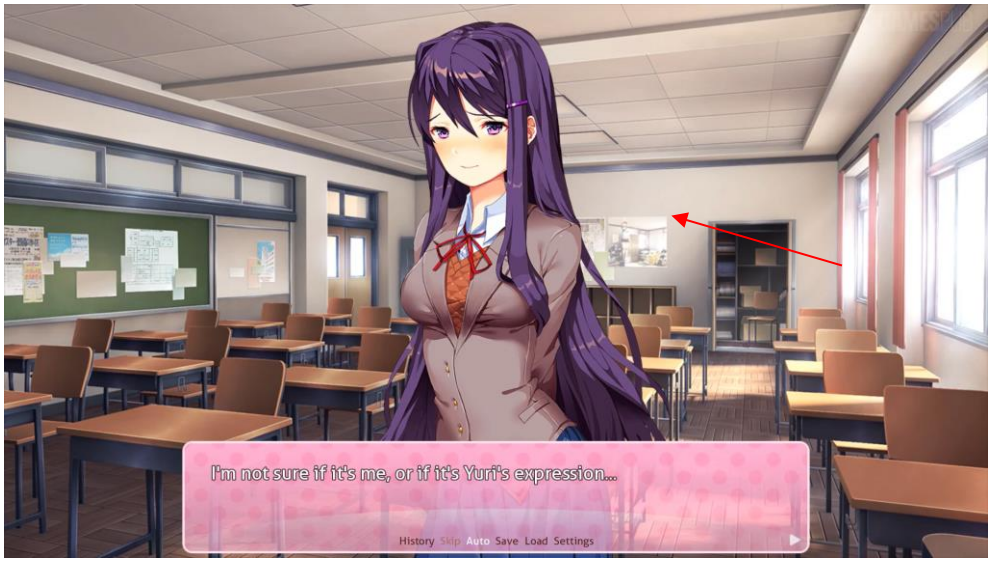

Figure 5. Image of Sayori behind Yuri (see red arrow). Screenshot by the author.

As previously discussed, players often regard these spaces as separate. When Monika passes through the bounds of the text box interface (i.e., in front of the UI; see Figure 6), she does so as a ghost would through the walls of a haunted manor. A diegetic character intrudes upon non-diegetic spaces, transgressing the established spatial boundaries of the

game. This ghostly movement of Monika is made more apparent in the final act of the game, where the player themselves must move outside of the game to continue to progress within it, a point I will come back to later. These examples demonstrate how *DDLC!* uses unique aspects of the medium such as glitches and digital space to create its gothic horror experience. Moreover, the haunting of *DDLC!* by gothic glitches opens a channel for movement across different conceptual spaces to facilitate encounters with things uncanny and abject.

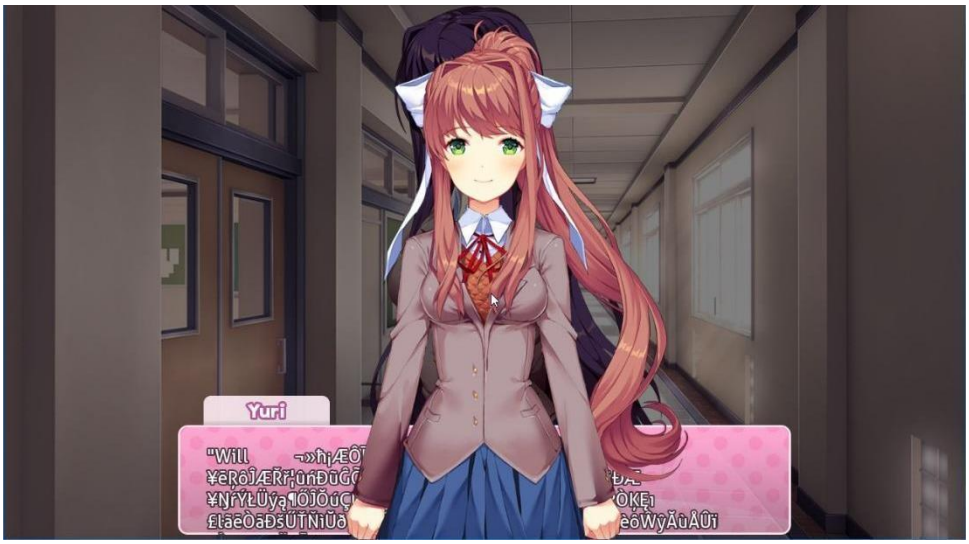

Figure 6. Overlapping the UI. Screenshot by the author.

The Uncanny and Unfamiliar

The uncanny is a specific form of horror dealing with the familiar-unfamiliar and the undefinable. Sigmund Freud (1919/2003) described the concept as:

> undoubtedly belong[ing] to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. (p. 1)

Freud's (1919/2003) definition here highlights another key aspect of the uncanny: its connection to the home and the familiar. Freud asserts this connection to the familiar, stating: "The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home'" (1919/2003, p. 2). This aspect of *unheimlich*, or unhomely, shows how the concept possesses an aura of both familiarity and unfamiliarity (Buchanan, 2010). The home is familiar in practical terms, symbolically seen as a common lived area, and as a space of safety and comfort. For a home to become uncanny, it would therefore have to be familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously. Richard Rouse III (2009) discusses the way horror video games use familiar spaces, arguing that "horror is . . . ideal for games because it presents a familiar world but with enough of a twist to make it seem fantastic and

special. Horror stories are typically set in highly recognizable locations that players can identify" (p. 17). *DDLC!* takes place in locations that would be familiar to most players: a school, a neighbourhood, a home, and a friend's house. However, as previously mentioned, after the player finds Sayori dead, these familiar spaces become unfamiliar and uncanny.

Rosa Menkman (2001) argues that glitches can be a source of the uncanny. She describes the relationship between them as:

> an uncanny or overwhelming experience of unforeseen incomprehension. Experiencing a glitch is often like perceiving a stunningly beautiful, brightly colored complex landscape of unexplainable, unfathomable and otherworldly images and data structures. (p. 30)

This means that the glitches are both gothic, as they represent digital decay, and uncanny, as they present a familiar-unfamiliar version of what the player has previously seen. This quote also describes glitches as a sublime experience, or what Menkman (2001) refers to as "the void." Both the sublime and the void describe being in the presence of something so overwhelming that meaning breaks down. This breakdown of meaning can be seen in the previous example, especially in figure 4, where the meaning of the text falls into the void of the glitch. Figure 6 also conveys the uncanny, as the familiar game space of the UI is made unfamiliar through Monika's spatial transgression, which defies the conventions of the game up until that point.

This transgression also contributes to Monika being a self-aware agent within the game that renders her uncanny. Psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch (1906), who influenced the work of Freud, argued that the uncanny blurs the lines between life and death, highlighting that it casts "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not, in fact, be animate" (p. 8). Monika, like all the other characters, is lifeless code, a digital object placed within a game. Monika, however, is distinguished by her representation within the game, which endows her with a semblance of subjecthood. Through the oscillation of hypermediacy and immediacy in the game, she becomes metaphorically "self-aware," giving her the appearance of being alive. Whilst this "self-aware" state only occurs diegetically, she still represents a character who blurs the boundary between life and death, real and not real, familiar and unfamiliar. In the final act, the generic branching dialogue paths, which usually progress the story, cease as Monika has trapped the player in an endless conversation loop. This moment strips the player of their choices and agency as they no longer receive the affective feedback from the game. As previously discussed, choice is a common aspect of the dating sim genre but, in this instance, it is now gone, contributing to the feeling of uncanny horror. Barkman (2021) argues that "Monika is acting as an

independent entity, manipulating the game's code to slowly take autonomy away from the player until she alone remains for the player to choose" (p. 14). Monika symbolically takes away the player's agency and gives it to herself. Once again, through this interaction, she is creating an uncanny disruption in the game, the familiar generic aspects are being tampered with.

Through Monika, the player's computer becomes an uncanny object as well. The final act sees Monika "deleting" the other club members, which she already did to Sayori after her suicide. In this moment, the game continues to transgress digital space, creating a highly self-reflexive experience. This breaking of boundaries does something else to the game; it makes it abject while serving to disrupt generic conventions by transgressing the boundaries between game and OS.

Abject Boundaries

The transgression and breaking of boundaries are characteristic of the abject, as conceptualised by philosopher Julia Kristeva (1980/1982). The abject is a form of horror often seen in gothic texts, specifically concerning something that ambiguously sits on the borders between the self and that which is "cast off," such as the excretion of bodily waste, or offspring (Baldick, 2008). These excretions elicit disgust and repulsion; however, this kind of horror does not only describe a kind of visceral reaction. Like the uncanny, what is horrific about the abject is the underlying disruption and ambiguity that it represents. Other critical theorists like Judith Butler (1993) have used abjection to explore the problems with the heteronormative approaches to gender and sexuality. The utilisation of abjection in this manner shows that the concept can be applied to other things besides literal bodily excretions, as Kristeva elaborates:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject. (1980/1982, p. 4)

Kristeva's (1980/1982) definition shows that abjection describes not only a state of being cast off from a body, but it is also about transgressing taboos and bringing attention to certain dividing lines. The abject, then, results from a greater disruption, rather than just a moment of disgust. In this manner, abjection is not simply about human bodies, but societal bodies or systems as bodies, too.

In the case of video games, the game itself and the OS can be seen as bodies, as they are distinct systems that have an enclosed boundary. *DDLC!* transgresses into the ancillary spaces, considered outside the

boundaries of the game itself. These include software files and memory storage devices, both of which are a part of the OS. This transgression also illustrates the role personal computers (PCs) have in domestic spaces as they have become extensions of the home (Williams, 2003). *DDLC!* haunts the player by moving from the confines of the game and into their home. Transgressions of this kind first occur in *DDLC!* through aforementioned moments of direct address, which in the first act of the game are presented as comical, perpetuating the pleasure of hypermediacy and self-reflexivity. For example, Monika states: "Monika's writing tip of the day! Sometimes you'll find yourself facing a difficult decision. When that happens, don't forget to save your game!" However, when the game "corrupts" after Sayori's suicide, the direct address becomes uncannier and more sinister. Monika is revealed to be the catalyst of the glitches and horror. She continues to talk to the player through dialogue that underlines uncanny ambiguities at play: "Who am I talking to," "can you hear me?," "We are the only real people here," and eventually, "I didn't want to break the fourth wall," "you do know I'm aware that this is all a game right?" From this point on, Monika appears to have transcended from her status as a simple non-player character programmed for a game; she has gone rogue. Monika becomes an abject figure, breaking and existing between the conventional boundaries of the game.

As the player subsumes the role of the game's protagonist, dialogue and gameplay become a direct interaction between the player and the game itself. This direct conversation between Monika and the player creates a new form of immediacy. This sense of immediacy is strengthened when Monika addresses the player by their computer's username (meaning whatever the profile name is, which is often the player's real name), thus bringing information outside of the game (the OS) into it. The utilisation of personal information stored in a domestic space creates a moment of uncanny address as a part of the player's identity is pulled into the unfolding horror. The depth, personalisation, and optic/haptic feedback of the OS is exploited here to create the specific abject horror of the game. This abjection is carried even deeper by the uncanny glitches created by Monika, which expose the digital mediation of informatic code and data running underneath. Digital mediation is often hidden below the surface of a game (its graphics) to produce immediacy. However, if the game is perceived as a body within Kristeva's (1980/1982) terms, the bursting of code and digital gore into the game is an instance of abjection that is metaphorically comparable to being exposed to the organic blood and guts of an actual body. Mark Nunes (2012) draws a similar connection, asserting that glitches and errors within digital media are inherently abject, stating, "[e]rror gives expression to the out of bounds of systematic control. When error communicates, it does so as noise: abject information and aberrant signal within an otherwise orderly system of communication" (p. 3).

Abjection within DDLC! not only affects the game but goes on to impact the player's OS too.

After the player has made certain choices and progressed the narrative, the game begins to create files within its installation directory. These include the picture "Hxppy_Thxughts.png" (see Figure 7), which resembles the ghostly Sayori, as well as the text files "Traceback.txt" and "CAN YOU HEAR ME.txt." In these examples, the game moves beyond its diegetic boundaries, adding an extra layer of realism to the game's gothic and abject transgression of space, as players find the domestic space of their OS and computer becoming contaminated with the cast-off excretions of *DDLC*'s diegetic game space.

Figure 7. "Hxppy_Thxughts.png." Screenshot by the author.

To progress past the section where Monika has taken over the game, the player must access the game files from their OS and delete the "Monika" file from the character folder. In this moment, the interactivity of the game moves outside the diegesis, thus being both hypermediate and immediate, as the player is interacting with a different space, a space conventionally separated from gameplay. While diegetic game space and the player's computer are conventionally different areas of interaction, they become connected in this section of the game. This conforms to Lehdonvirta's (2010) argument that computers exist as material space and can provide an affective experience since they are "real artefacts" (p. 886). Through this transgression, Monika once again becomes a transcendent phantom, able to move from game to computer

files, which can either be read as the game breaking out of its frame or bringing the player through it. In either case, the player is invited to transgress the boundaries of the game and participate in the abject activity of playing inside and outside of *DDLC!*.

Conclusion

DDLC! emulates the tropes of the *bishōjo* subgenre only to turn a stereotypical light-hearted game into a psychological horror story. *DDLC!* utilises aspects of the video game medium, such as glitches and the OS, to create specific modes of horror. The gothic aspects of the game, such as the digital decay through glitches and the haunting presence of certain characters, create an uncanny experience where familiar spaces like homes and schools are made unfamiliar, as they become distorted versions of themselves. This uncanny experience does not stay within the diegesis of the game, but transgresses into the player's OS, and, by extension, their home. This transgression shows how abject horror relies on boundaries being blurred, most commonly boundaries that are corporeal. The horror enters the player's home, taking advantage of specific aspects of video game mediation, crafting a unique horror narrative that does not remain self-contained.

This analysis is purposefully limited in scope to one game but can be applied to a wide range of others. Whilst *DDLC!* examines the relationship between games and the OS, other games such as the Metal Gear Solid series (Kojima Productions, 1998–2015) highlight the role of controllers, memory cards, and console generations. *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) similarly utilises memory stored within an OS, presenting a fictional world that remembers the player's actions even after they have started the game again. *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016) and *The Hex* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2018) play with genre and the notion of games as coded and programmed objects. These games do not all use hypermediation to create moments of horror, instead utilising a wide range of affects, such as self-reflexive humour, seen in the previously mentioned *Metal Gear Solid 4* example. These non-conventional hypermediated texts also allow for a greater understanding of video game mediation through their play, pushing the boundaries of the medium, and all deserve their own individual analysis. However, *DDLC!* is a specific example of a self-reflexive game that utilises video game mediation to incite gothic, uncanny, and abject horror. The use of video game mediation assures that it provides a terror-filled experience that no other medium can replicate.

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