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VISUALITY AND FICTIONALITY OF JAPAN AND EUROPE IN A CROSS-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

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Interpreting/subverting the database: Character-conveyed narrative in Japanese visual novel PC games

Luca Paolo BRUNO (Leipzig University, Germany)

ABSTRACT

This article examines Japanese visual novel games, an under-researched game genre whose main feature is character-driven prose storylines in light of existing scholarship on characters and manga/anime aesthetics (Azuma 2007 & 2009; Galbraith 2009 & 2011; Nozawa 2013; Kacsuk 2016). It offers a brief overview of the visual novel game genre as a game genre where the presence of characters constituted by what Azuma (2007; 2009) defined as 'database elements', character building blocks which, by virtue of their commonality within fan culture, constitute each an access point and an expression of the wider fan culture as a whole. In turn, fans develop enthusiastic reactions to these fantasy elements, the so-called moe phenomenon (Galbraith 2009). Moe is an open-ended phenomenon which runs as the basis for the development of emphatic bonds with characters within visual novels.

Examining visual novel games under the framework provided by Espen Aarseth (2012) for the analysis of narrative within games, characters' constitutive database elements are examined, exploring them as being present at both the representational level and, due to the open-ended nature of the bond of empathy developed between the character and the player, the simulation level. The constant presence of database element-constituted characters on the screen makes visual novels' narrations dependent on characters, whose database elements are each an open window through which the setting and narration of the game is conveyed to the player through character identity.

*This process is demonstrated through the examination of *Sōkō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2009), a visual novel game whose various storylines turn the player's expected consumption of characters against them, and by doing so reinforce both the character's identity and the importance of the game's narration.*

KEYWORDS

Visual Novel; *Sōkō Akki Muramasa*; Game Studies; Database Consumption; Moe.

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Introduction

Within the Japanese video game market, games targeted towards an exclusively mature audience have seldom been approached within Japanese studies, and among these, so-called visual novels are peculiar because, in spite of their classification as erotic games with subsequent featuring of pornographic scenes, their main appeal is not pornography, but rather a developed textual narrative which the player reads like a novel, hence the genre's name.

Featuring limited interaction, these games develop their characters in a way that is coherent with character dynamics found within Japanese anime and manga, with a huge emphasis on endearing the player towards the girl. However, the simple generation of endearing is not the sole appeal provided by visual novel games, which often feature articulated narratives with a message to convey. Furthermore, the visual element, character representations, is developed according to what cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2007; 2009) has called the ‘character database’. By virtue of their constant presence on the screen and the pivotal role female characters play in how the player is supposed to make sense of the narrative, approaching visual novels and how, in turn, the characters are influenced by the narrative, means analysing these games requires a double approach to the game’s narrative and limited interactive elements.

Within this paper I’m going to showcase a Japanese visual novel game, *Sokō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2009), and place particular attention in how female characters become the focus of the player’s reading of the game’s underlying narrative and themes and how, through the characters, the game’s depiction of a fictionalised, exceptional Japan and a fictionalised and monster-ified (Miyake 2015) West is depicted and shown to the players.

First I will make a brief outline of visual novels as a game genre, what are the peculiarities of their framework of interaction and consumption of content and how this influences the narrative which is transmitted through the characters. Subsequently I will outline the peculiarities of *Sokō Akki Muramasa* against the wider genre of visual novels and how the peculiarities of the game influence how the game’s themes are showcased to the player. Finally, I will analyse each of *Sokō Akki Muramasa*’s female characters in their respective storylines and how the design of characters according to the character database is employed within the characters’ storylines to advance the game’s wider narrative.

A Brief Outline of Visual Novels

Japanese visual novel games are interactive software characterised by the reliance on text and content over interactivity: the player is limited to reading text on screen while enjoying character art and voices depicting the scenes being described within the text (see figure 1). Narration is usually in the first person, and the protagonist is generally described in very vague terms for player identification purposes. These games

have been identified by Patrick Galbraith as interactive visual romance novels (Galbraith 2009a, np) and subsequently as games that focus on interaction with beautiful girls (2011, np). He further elaborates the description of these games:

The world is seen through the playable character's eyes, a male who rarely appears on screen. Backgrounds are static and change when he changes locations; they are often recycled. Onscreen text describes the place and situation. When the playable character encounters a girl, she appears on screen; she has a unique design (exaggerated hair style, costume, personality) to distinguish her from other female characters. (Galbraith 2011, np)

The issue of collocating these games within the wider mediascape of Japanese pop culture has also been addressed differently, with Taylor (2007) collocating them in the same category of anime and manga due to the commonality of languages, to the point that she defined them as interactive anime/manga with erotic content (Taylor 2007, 198).



Fig. 1. Example of standard visual novel gameplay. Image is ©Key 2004

Azuma Hiroki (2009), on the contrary, argues that visual novels are distinct from anime/manga due to their metanarrative properties: the player can replay the game and choose different options, opening up new narrative possibilities (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani, 216). What Azuma concedes in the commonality of visual novel games with

anime/manga is that they both are passive and share the same visual aesthetics (Azuma 2009).

As products of written prose, Azuma argues that visual novels, as fiction which is supported by what he calls the character database, an ensemble of items which are employed in the design of characters. Characters created in this way do not represent reality, but rather fiction. In other words, the mechanism by which reality is represented does not reflect actual reality anymore, but rather reflects reality as represented by fiction, in this case anime/manga-based character fiction, in what is a departure from the naturalism, representing nature as it works in reality (Azuma 2007).

To this end, Zoltan Kacsuk (2016) further argued that, in order to properly understand and consume works which employ this database, a literacy in the items that compose this database, the understanding of its invoked codes is necessary (Kacsuk 2016, 277).

But, it's necessary to ask, what composes this database which has been referenced above? Azuma (2009) has argued that postmodern otaku (fan) culture is structured like a database, a great unordered ensemble of items which connect to fan culture as a whole. Fans feel attachment to characters rather than overarching narratives. More precisely, Azuma argues that fans feel attachment at the level of the elements present in the characters themselves, rather than characters in their distinctive unicity. These elements can be visual (hairstyles, glasses, clothes etc.), related to the demeanor of character (*tsundere*, *kuudere*, *yandere*, *derekere*, etc.),¹ but are in no way limited to certain categories.² As long as the element is employed in the creation of a character and obtains enough success to be iterated, anything can become an item within the character database.

The character database contains all these elements, each of which is capable of engendering a specific kind of attachment within the audience, the phenomenon known as *moe*. *Moe* is a feeling of enthusiasm that is felt towards imaginary characters, and

1 The so-called *-dere* demeanors all involve a duality in the behavior of the character, with a factor contrasting her affection. It can be hostility (*tsundere*), coldness (*kuudere*), exaggerated sweetness (*derekere*) or possessive homicidal psychopathy (*yandere*).

2 It needs to be noted that, while the examples provided in this paper are related to female characters, female fans have also been described as feeling attachment towards characters (cf. Galbraith 2009b, np) and that visual novels directed towards female fans (*otome* games), similar patterns of recurring character constitutive elements can be observed in male characters.

has been observed since the 70s (Sasakibara 2004, 27, 28), with the current word taking form over internet boards by conflating the meaning for two homophone *moe words* (sprout, 萌え and burn, 燃え) and using it to describe the euphoric response to fictional characters (Galbraith 2009b, np). He elaborates the concept further in his discussion of the phenomenon:

Moe is affect in response to fantasy forms that emerged from information-consumer culture in Japan in the late stages of capitalism. Otaku scholar Okada Toshio states that moe is most strongly felt among 'third-generation otaku,' or Japanese born in the 1980s who watched Neon Genesis Evangelion in middle school and grew up amid a wealth of anime, manga, games and character merchandise following the seminal anime series. As Okada sees it, 'There is a strong tendency among this generation of otaku to see otaku hobbies as a form of "pure sanctuary"' (Okada 2008: 78). The use of 'pure' here should not be overlooked. The period of advanced economic development and material affluence from the 1960s to the 1970s was also the time when anime, manga, game and character merchandisers in Japan promoted extreme consumption among youth. (Galbraith 2009b, np)

Visual novels are particularly linked to the phenomenon of *moe*/character attachment because the characters within visual novels are almost constantly on the screen and depicted in a series of idealised poses/demeanors which serve to communicate the character's general state of mind.

These poses are not made with a particular scene in mind, and as highlighted by Galbraith (2011, np), these 2D images, also known as *tachi-e* (standing images) or *bust shots*, are re-used through the game and linked to a particular character's state of mind, changing as the character shifts from one state to another.

The composition of these 2D character images, full body illustrations, with the main differences situated in the representation of the head makes these images very reminiscent of character model sheets employed in the production of animated series (see figure 2).

Character model sheets, known in Japan as *settei*, represent the characters in various key poses and expressions, and are intended to provide a reference which "possesses the maximum expressivity with the least number of tracts" to animators as they draw the character as part of production (Vitagliano 2005, 267).



Image ©Studio Khara 2012



Image ©Nitroplus 2009

Fig. 2. Comparison between anime settei and visual novels' bust shots. Note the focus on providing an instant impression of the character in both.

The similarity cannot be overlooked, because both *settei* and bust shots fulfill a similar purpose: they provide a bedrock upon which the character can be expressed, either as part of animation production or with the imaginative power of a visual novel player

reading through the text. Database elements thus become a fixed point from which imagination can iterate and develop the character.

Just like the animator uses *settei* as a reference to draw characters in a certain situation, visual novel players can employ bust shots as the foundation to place the character into the situation described by the text, connecting the dots between the initial set of database elements and the situation described in the prose text.

The first person narrative, by inviting identification with the visual novel's main character, is arguably conducive to the development of attachment towards the other characters as the protagonist (and the player with him) and the game's romanceable heroines interact and develop bonds and relationships.

These fictional relationships, which in the end become physically and emotionally intimate can be stretched over games with up to thirty-fifty hours of gameplay, making visual novel games particularly conducive to long play sessions, making it particularly conducive to be played in the aforementioned state of 'pure sanctuary', a space identified with one's room, which is to be filled with media and merchandise of a soothing nature, all to preserve one's identity from society (Okada 2008, 87-88).

Furthermore, the genre has its historical roots in the home computer market and amateur circles dedicated to computer programming (Picard 2013, np), placing visual novels in a particular intermediate layer between mainstream consumption and production, as the industry is not subjected to the lengthy creative and supervision processes of mainstream media conglomerates such as Kōdansha or Shueisha.

Galbraith's (2011) discussion of *bishōjo* games, a more generic umbrella which conflates visual novels with every other game featuring interactions with database-constituted characters, presents a very particular Nintendo DS game, Love Plus (Konami 2007) as the paper's case study, which is described with the usage of Anne Allison's (2006) concept of techno-intimacy, which refers to the bonds that are engendered as part of games that require the care of a virtual pet, which Allison exemplifies in her examination of the Tamagotchi device and is based on the continual enforced performing of menial tasks (such as feeding and cleaning the virtual pet, lest the pet becomes unhappy, ill or even die). Love Plus combines elements of visual novels with virtual pet games by first having the player work towards conquering the affection of one of three possible characters through progressive building and management of five possible characteristic scores, and then turns into an open ended experience, placing the girl in

the context of a virtual pet. The player can bring the girl with them and use the DS' camera to place the girl in a real context. The framework of interactivity in which the player is placed does not describe what happens within visual novels, although the absence of any overarching narratives moving the characters and their design via database elements echoes the claim that character takes precedence over the wider narrative (Azuma 2009), and the latter was no longer the target of engagement between fans subscribing to the character database and the media products they consumed.

A good example is the development of *To Heart's* (1997), the final game in the Visual Novel Series by software house Leaf. These four games can be considered the first visual novels, not only for the name, but above all, for the fact that the game's ten romanceable heroines were outlined and designed basing themselves on the data-set (database) of *moe* elements before development of any narrative could begin; the narrative exists because scenario writer Takahashi wanted to illustrate the characters (Tinami 2000: np).

Further reiterating the start of a shift to consumption of *moe* elements over narrative, the game's multiple storylines were crafted around the various heroines after their key traits and themes had been designed, setting the model for later visual novel titles' focus on characters and not on narrative, or, in the case of more articulated narrative games, to present the game's narrative through database elements within the character themselves.

However, this does not explain why visual novel games with articulated narratives like *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula* (Light 2007), the *Muv Luv* series (âge 2003, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) or this paper own's case study, *Sokō Akki Muramasa*, have been released to great success. These titles combine database elements-constituted characters with highly developed settings and narratives, with the game's database elements-constituted characters exerting an influence on the depiction of the setting and vice-versa.

For instance, the first game in the list I've provided, *Dies Irae ~ Acta es Fabula*, develops a setting in which the story's main antagonists, the Longinus Dreizehn Orden, a cabal of sorcerers dating back from world war two occult Nazi societies, can act and function (see figure 3).



Fig. 3. Art representing the Longinus Dreizehn Orden. Note their iconic appearance. Image © Light 2007

Even though every character in the order is a database-element constituted character, both males and females, and everybody is characterised and act as their database elements mandate, they still advance an articulated story, with their head Mercurius offering comment on the nature of narrative to the player and how human beings develop attachment to stories.

Within *Muv Luv*, database-constituted characters are instead subjected to re-contextualisation through multiple parallel universes, and through them, themes like what constitutes Japanese identity is and the relationship between the United States and Japan are explored. Finally, within *Sokō Akki Muramasa* we have a series of representations of Japanese identity within a narrative that is advanced through database-constituted characters and the affection the player develops towards the characters.

It is thus more likely that the claim advanced by Nozawa Shunsuke:

The take-away point of this database theory is that people are affectively attracted not necessarily or not always by narrative “world” as such but by character elements that are organized at the database level, what Azuma calls “grand non-narrative.” That is, characters live on beyond specific narratives as an ensemble of elements and a site of affective engagement. This affective dimension is often described as moe, characterological empathy (see Galbraith 2009 for more extended discussion). On the other hand, the database view does not make narratives disappear totally. Quite the contrary: it generates a special relation of dependence to narrative. The potential pattern of combining different elements to create new characters requires new narrative imagination and narrative eventfulness (see

Ōtsuka 2010).

Decontextualized databases always afford narrative recontextualization, and decontextualization and recontextualization always form a feedback mechanism. Nothing is forever decontextualized, and no single context exists that is self-sufficient without others. It is character non-inconsistency that mediates between these processes. (Nozawa 2013, np)

Nozawa's description of characters as an ensemble of elements is apt, but, as with other descriptions of database consumption and the engagement it engenders, referring to both database elements and *moe* means employing terms whose meaning varies considerably depending on the context they are used in. Before a more in-depth discussion of video games which rely on the character database as the bedrock through which they provide the narrative to the player can take place, it is necessary to approach how to better define the process of engagement which is referred to as *moe* and how it works with what Azuma (2007; 2009) defined as the character database.

The problem of *Moe* and the database

Moe has been referred to as a euphoric reaction to fantasy characters (Galbraith 2009: np). Pop culture critic Okada Toshio commented that *moe* is not only the act of euphoric response itself, but also the meta-awareness that comes from observing oneself in such a state (Okada 2008, 100-101).

Beyond euphoric reactions, Studio Gainax's director Kazuya Tsurumaki's view of *moe* as the act of filling one's missing information by oneself (Kōdansha 2003, np) is also interesting, as it provides a perspective into an often overlooked aspect of character fruition: the fact that the character is made one's own personalised experience.

Psychologist Tamaki Saitō has commented that *moe* characters are an object of desire which is possessed through the act of fictionalisation (Saitō 2007, section 8, para 1).

While Azuma (2009) commented that feeling *moe* is to take apart each character's database elements and turn them into items filed into a database (Azuma 2009, chapter 2 section 5 para. 3), there is a lack of focus on the inherent interactive value of having to fill the blanks, and this is none more evident within visual novels, where the player has to constantly fill missing information starting from the character image present on the screen, which are then integrated by the player in the actions provided by the prose text.

This process of filling the blanks turns character consumption into the player's own personalised experience, and can, in a sense, be considered a part of the game's interactive experience. But to discuss that, it is first necessary to approach the database itself.

Azuma (2007; 2009) uses the term 'database consumption', to describe how character elements are consumed within Japan's postmodern society, basing himself on the Lyotardian (1979) premises of the postmodern condition, which sees the 'Grand Narratives' of the past (Idealism, Enlightenment, Marxism and so on) as having disappeared and with them, the ideological justifications for social order.

However, the description of database Azuma provides is 'not simply the kind of computer program or web site for storing and retrieving information that humans are finding increasingly difficult to live without, but rather a model or a metaphor for a worldview, a grand nonnarrative that lacks the structure and ideologies (grand narratives) that used to characterize modern societies" (Azuma 2009, translator's introduction).

Azuma views (2007; 2009) the shared, communal element of otaku culture indeed acts like a database, to which content consumers and producers alike can draw on to produce media products which sustain themselves on this ensemble of shared meanings.

However, the use of the term database as a metaphor is problematic. The term with references to its employment in software and thus a very precise meaning has the potential for either misuse or leaving out certain facets of its meaning.

Interestingly, software scholar Lev Manovich, with a similar Lyotardian premise, came to the conclusion that a database, as a cultural form, is an unordered representation of the world as a list of items (Manovich 2007, section 2 para. 1). He contrasts it with narrative, which is a trajectory of items regulated by cause-and-effect (Manovich 2007, section 2 para. 2). He then turns his attention towards video games, database given a narrative form: video games, although representative of new media and assembled as databases, are experienced like narrative, with the player attempting to uncover the algorithm lying behind the creation of the game's settings, characters and events; (Manovich 2007, section 2 para. 3)

The idea of the database as an unordered representation of the world is extremely interesting, especially in light of the description given by Azuma (2009) of the database

as an aggregate of settings (*settei*)³ (Azuma 2009, section x para y) which seems to fit into Manovich's statement. Each *settei* is in turn a link towards otaku culture as a whole, in what is a repurpose of Ōtsuka Eiji (2010) framework of narrative consumption, which see each media in a franchise as a window into an overarching grand narrative which includes "the era in which the main characters live, the place, the relations between countries, their history, their manners of living, the personal histories of the respective characters, the nature of their interpersonal relations etc." To Azuma, instead, each element in the database of otaku culture is a link towards culture as whole, which is a chaotic ensemble of elements whose meanings are shared amongst the fan base.

If we also take into account Kazuya Tsurumaki's (Kōdansha 2003) definition of *moe*, we can argue that the database is indeed unordered, as the elements are initially unordered as part of the character database. After a series of database elements has been selected to construct the character, connections between the various points are drawn as part of character fruition. This echoes digital art scholar Christiane Paul:

Database aesthetics suggest the possibilities of tracing process--individual, cultural, communicative-in its various forms. The understanding of a database as the underlying principle and structure of any new media object delineates a broad field that includes anything from a network such as the Internet (as one gigantic database) to a particular data set. (Paul 2007: section 2 para.1)

However, while each fan can create their own personalised version of each character and indulge in fruition accordingly, there is always the need for a starting point, an ensemble of elements which can be connected.

Nozawa Shunsuke's (2013) argument regarding the importance of character consistency describes this phenomenon pretty well. When a character is re-contextualised from one media to another as part of a media-mix, there must be an assurance that that particular character is still that particular character (Nozawa 2013, np).

The same can be argued with the feeling of attachment itself, as two fellow fans, however different their own personal version of a character can be, must still be certain that that character remains the same character. This constancy is what allows narrative to be conveyed to the player.

3 The translation employed within the English translation of Azuma's text is 'setting', however the original term is *settei*, and the meaning is not immediately clear, especially in light of what *settei* are within the Japanese animation industry.

Last but not least, the continuous interaction engendered at the level of the character's constitutive database elements is what allows player to feel *moe* towards a character, or, more precisely, engage in a process of emphatic engagement towards the character as an ensemble of database elements which provide the bedrock continual re-articulation of the elements themselves.

Visual Novels/Novel Games as games

Of course, visual novels can feature a varying degree of sophistication in the setting they present, and this off course influences how much narrative is conveyed to the player. As video games, a visual novel, albeit their framework might suggest otherwise, is not a simple digitised book, even in the face of their limited interactivity, and thus analysis cannot be limited to mere content analysis.

Beyond mere playing, the game's individual components must be analysed in relation to what role they play in contributing to the experience of the game (Consalvo and Dutton 2006). As it was also highlighted by Malliet (2007), elements of representations within game cannot be divorced from elements of simulation, the model of an object's behavior and response to stimuli (see Frasca 2003).

As I have already highlighted, it is extremely easy to mistake a visual novel for a digitised book, but instead it is possible to highlight characteristics of simulation as the player traverses the game's world and makes decisions which affect other characters and the game world.

According to the framework recently developed by Espen Aarseth (2012), there is no single way a game tells a story, and there must be a reflection of this in the analysis critics employ in examination of games:

My present approach is to see the ludo-narrative design space as four independent, ontic dimensions: WORLD, OBJECTS, AGENTS, and EVENTS. Every game (and every story) contains these four elements, but they configure them differently. Game worlds can typically be linear, multicursal, or open, and this has great effect on the game's perceived narrative structure. Objects (including avatars and player vehicles) can be dynamic, usercreated, or static, and again we see a span between the ludic (dynamic, simulated) and the narrative (static). Agents can be presented as rich, deep and round characters (the narrative pole), or shallow, hollow bots (the ludic pole). The sequence of events can be open, selectable, or plotted, and the narratological notion of nuclei (kernels; events that define that particular story) and satellites (supplementary events that fill out the discourse) can be used to describe four different game types:

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

2. The hypertext-like game (*Myst*, *Dragon's Lair*): Choice between kernels, fixed satellites.
3. The “creamy middle” quest game (*KOTOR*, *Oblivion*): Choice between kernels, flexible satellites.
4. The non-narrative game (*Chess*, *The Sims*): No Kernels, flexible discourse: just a game. (Aarseth 2012, 3-4)

Visual novels best resemble the second type, the hypertext-like game. The player is presented with choices at key parts of the game, which determines where the story of the game will orient itself, but the process of transiting between a decision and another is always the same. The ultimate goal is to get to the end of the story and experiencing the character storyline’s ending. Special events during the plot can be represented with full-screen illustration, usually to showcase a particular character’s qualities or to depict intimacy.

Progress in the completion of the game can be usually gauged by checking how many images the player has seen in a special gallery screen located in the game’s main menu. (see figure 4).

These images have been defined as *gohōbi-e*, reward images by Miyamoto Naoki (Miyamoto et al 2013: 24), but are also known as event CGs. The gallery can be seen as a sort of inventory of collectible items, which the player collects as part of their journey.

More interesting is the employment of characters, especially in light of the constant re-articulation and emphatic engagement they engender. Database-constituted characters can be, as outlined above, seen as strings of database elements. They provide content and are placed within a narrative, usually resulting in a character with a more or less defined identity which react to the decisions of the player. This places them within the category of agents.



Fig. 4. Example of gallery screen. Image © Unison Soft/Blossom 2010

As they read the prose text, player also is at work in drawing the connections between one database element and another. Arguably, the possibility of drawing the connections between various database elements can constitute a facet of interaction which should place database elements within the category of objects, making the analysis of characters within visual novels a double-layered endeavor, taking them into account both as representations and as elements belonging to the game's simulation. The game world is multi-cursal, which defines the game's perception as a multi-ended narrative.⁴ These aspects, together with the influence of the *moe* database on the narrative, will be discussed within the analysis of this paper's case study, *Sokō Akki Muramasa*.

Sokō Akki Muramasa: Character-conveyed narrative and character-based deconstruction

Sokō Akki Muramasa is a 'slash dark adventure' visual novel game released by Nitroplus in 2009. The game is story-heavy, featuring extensively developed characters and settings which describe an alternate-history science fictionalisation of postwar Ja-

⁴ There is also the case where a game forces a player to see multiple endings before presenting the player with a final, 'true end', as it is the case in *Fate/Stay Night* (TYPE-MOON 2004), making the game world a linear world presenting multiple multi-cursal storylines.

pan. This particular title was selected due to the fact that it uses the player's expectations against them and, in doing so, conveys and reinforces the game's dark narrative. It also operates a deconstruction of visual novels gaming mechanisms while making them explicit in the process, thus serving as an excellent candidate to show the genre's wider trends.

The game is set in an alternate history Japan (known by the name of Yamato) under occupation by western powers, a non-specified western/Anglo-saxon "United Federation" under the control of the British Crown following a non-specified conflict in which Japan surrendered to the enemy, resulting in the occupation of the Japanese archipelago. The western powers rule through a General Headquarters (GHQ) using the Japanese government, the internally divided and constantly in-fighting Rokuhara bakufu, to enforce their will while the populace suffers. The world presents a mixture of alternate history and techno-magic elements against a backdrop reminiscent of Japan's situation immediately after the war, with desolation and poverty plaguing the country.

The allo-historical alterations that produce the setting see the Ashikaga Shogunate avoiding collapse, which leads to the Meiji restoration not happening due to the lack of a centralised power and the preservation of the Mikado as Japan's head of state. On the other side of the globe, the American Revolution ends in failure, ensuring British supremacy in North America and the Commonwealth evolving into the United Federation. Fantasy elements revolve around the presence of techno-magical suits of armor known as *tsurugi*. *Tsurugi* armor suits are sentient armors capable of granting special powers to the wearer and whose forging process involves the armorsmith committing ritual suicide to infuse their soul in the metal and bestow sentience on it.

Visually, *tsurugi* constitute a very important portion of Muramasa's narrative universe, as they bestow main characters with super powers which allow them to stand above others. Together with the characters, *Tsurugi* armor offer a window into the wider world of the game. Both Japanese and western forces employ *tsurugi* suits, with industrially mass-produced armor destined for rank-and-file soldiers and specially crafted armor suits being employed by persons of importance.

This is employed by the authors to divide *tsurugi*-wearing characters along cultural lines, which is further reinforced by depicting the craft of smithing non-industrially made armour to a culturally-specific class of people: Emishi for the Japanese suits and dwarves for western suits.

The division along cultural lines continues within mass-produced *tsurugi*, which place the division within references to World War II. Japanese *tsurugi* reference World War II Japanese piston-powered aircraft, while western *tsurugi* reference postwar American jet aircraft.

By way of depicting warfare and the relative highly detailed battle scenes (pages of text are devoted to the description of how a *tsurugi* operates, how air warfare between armored suits is conducted, the importance of the angle of attack etc.) the narrative offers a window into the game's wider universe, becoming a window into "the era in which the main characters live, the place, the relations between countries, their history, their manners of living, the personal histories of the respective characters, the nature of their interpersonal relations etc." (Ōtsuka 2010, 107).

Interestingly, the majority of the game world is of the extra-ludic variety (Aarseth 2012, 4). The game world is evoked through text descriptions, image background and the characters' database elements. The game world becomes ludic when the player is presented with a choice of where to steer the storyline. In that case the world becomes an arena where gameplay takes place. Based on the previous statement that database elements provide an interactive dimension as part of character fruition, one could argue that any screen which has a database-constituted character on the screen can become a ludic space, but the claim would need additional examination. Database items are also difficult to categorise, because, while their belonging to the objects dimensions is easily demonstrated because they are, by all intents and purposes, "static, usable objects" (Aarseth 2012, 5) which contribute to the overall experience of the game, they are a constitutive part of the game's characters, and thus can also be argued to belong to the game's 'agents' dimension.

This rich setting provides a background for the player character, Kamakura police detective Kageaki Minato, to pursue a particular goal shown at the beginning of the game: track down and kill a *tsurugi* user known as the Silver Star (Ginseigō). Kageaki has formed a covenant with the artifact *tsurugi* known as the Muramasa, which follows him and aids him in his investigation. The armour, however, is bound to the principle of balance between good and evil, and for every wicked being Kageaki strikes down while using the armour, he will be possessed by it and forced to strike down a being he loves.

The curse in action during the prologue sets the tone for the game, and called forth at the end of all five chapters of the game minus the various endings. with the focal

character of the chapter ending up dead by Kageaki's hands together with the chapter's wicked antagonist.

However, the game presents the characters that have to die within the chapter as being confined to that chapter for two consecutive instances, enough to reinforce the perception that they are confined to the game's episodic nature, thus encouraging the player to stir the game's story towards a certain character, which at the beginning of the game is either GHQ-aligned woman Ōtori Kanae or young justice fanatic Ichijō Akane (see figure 5).



Fig. 5. Game heroines Ichijō Akane and Ōtori Kanae **Image © Nitroplus 2009**

The progress in establishing this relation is marked through a comparative affectivity meter (see figure 6) which can be viewed at any time in the game's pause menu, and grows in accord with the player's action, until chapter three, in which Kageaki is forced to strike down someone he loves by the Muramasa's curse.

The target of this curse will eventually be the heroine whose score in the affectivity meter is the highest, with great potential for emotional impact on the player, as this removal of a character from the game is done on two levels: that of objects (database elements) with the relative interaction engendered in the feeling of empathic engagement and that of actors (with the removal of the character from the game world). Furthermore, the distribution of kernels which bestow points to a heroine's affectivity score is as such that any attempt to alter the score forces the player to go back to at least the beginning of chapter two, which, in the time economy of the game, can be potentially daunting.



Fig. 6. The game's affectivity meter. **Image © Nitroplus 2009**

The death of the heroine forces the player on a path in which he is forced to develop engagement with the remaining character, and even then, the conclusion of both women's storyline is tragic: Ichijō's storyline concludes with the death of Kageaki after she cannot forgive him for the murder he committed as part of the curse due to her inflexible, fanatical sense of justice. Ichijō takes upon the Muramasa and continues her personal crusade.

Kanae's story concludes with him and Kageaki going on a final fight and killing each other in the process in one last fight, after she revealed herself as a woman without any sense of morality towards murder on a revenge spree.

Narrative aside, the revealing of the affective meter's real purpose within the game turns the player's perception of the game's algorithm from the 'raise the score of the girl you wish to see the ending of' to 'avoid raising the girl's score to see her storyline'. However, ultimately, every effort by the player to make the character live comes at the cost of the Kageaki's life (Ichijō), or both Kageaki and the heroine's (Kanae).

It is only when the player makes the conscious effort to distance from both heroines that the third romanceable heroine, and the game's true ending is opened to him. Kageaki (and the player with him) chooses to not get attached and embarks on the game's true ending, which provides the player with answers about the nature of Muramasa's curse and the world at large, while making Kageaki and the player engender affection with the spirit of the Muramasa, which is revealed to be the third, secret heroine whose column on the affectivity meter is normally kept obscured.

The coming of the true end is interesting because, before the player can bring the characters he killed back to life by embarking on a new story path and thus "infusing them with new blood" (Azuma 2007), he has to shoulder the experience of choosing a path which results in the loss of a character, either through death of the heroine or death of the main character.

This makes character death once again meaningful, as getting to the true end, where both Ichijō and Kanae survive, will still deny intimacy between the two heroines and Kageaki and, with him, the player. Negating the possibility of intimacy between the player and the characters, whose survival is tied to the player making the choice of not pursuing him, thereby crystallising each character in the game's narrative and thus making them dependent on their host narrative universe brings the wider narrative into importance once more, as the game's narrative is reinforced not only through each character's design and individual database elements, but also by the narrative itself, which is, once again worthy of examination and consideration.

From database, representation

As stated above, the game's narrative is articulated both through character and through the game's world, which is even more evident when one takes into account the choices offered to the player. The game's narrative universe represents Japan as a lawless territory where the strong prey on the weak, where endless brutality reigns in a continuous cycle of vengeance.

Large portions of the narrative are spent detailing the effect of Kageaki's curse on the world, ranging from the killing of innocent people to restore the balance of good and evil to which the Muramasa armour must abide to how the political entities within the world of *Sokō Akki Muramasa* act.

The stream of information, and the oblique references to the state of Japan after the Second World War, with its state of poverty and devastation, cannot be merely overlooked in favor of what revolves around database element-constituted characters. The importance that the background narrative plays in the overall experience of the game is such that database elements need to express the game's host narrative into the character, in order to maintain a narrative experience which is coherent with the tone of the narration.

Beyond the game's narrative tone, the division along cultural lines between Japan and the rest of the world, along with the structuring of characters along character database lines references meanings which go beyond the database itself and onto long-standing cultural myths shared within Japan and Japanese perceptions of western countries, leading to a mix of *moe* elements and references to wider cultural myths about Japan and the west. This operation is undertaken in both the design of the tsurugi armours and the characters. The combination of *moe* elements and cultural references arguably runs contrary to Azuma's main assumption that grand narratives of any kind are no longer relevant.

In fact, the grand narrative, both as envisioned by Azuma and Ōtsuka, are extremely relevant within *Sokō Akki Muramasa*, and play a pivotal role in the construction of the main focus of the player's attention, the character's themselves. The three young friends around which the first chapter of the game focuses, all reference pre-war Shōwa-era (1926-1945) Japan in the design of their clothes, which are still employed on the basis of the Azuman character database. Characters belonging to the GHQ are assembled via crossed references to *moe* elements linkable to foreign characters such as blonde hair, wide jaws, beards, moustaches and a mixture of early twentieth century European uniforms.

Japanese tsurugi armours resemble samurai armour and alternatively brandish traditional Japanese bladed weapons or machinecannons which reference World War II firearms. Western tsurugi resemble European field plate armour, whose weapons are

alternatively rifles heavily influenced by European designs or medieval longswords and rapiers.

While an in-depth discussion of how a Japanese self and a western Other is represented within the game is well outside of the scope of this paper, the deliberate division along cultural lines contributes to form a background which is continuously referenced by the game's characters, with the Japanese forming an empathise-able imagined community (Anderson 2006) against a cold and militarised west.

Of particular interest is also the depiction of Japan as an exploited nation that runs through the whole game, as the country is depicted to be in control of a foreign power, its precious resources something to be fought over with no regards for the local populace.

In fact, the usage of the term Yamato to fictionalise the Japanese populace is the iteration of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) which has long been the subject of much idealisation and commodification in a variety of contexts, from pop culture to tourism. In a way, the division along cultural lines of East and West and the depiction of Japanese and westerners as complete opposites, seems to echo Kōichi Iwabuchi's (1994) concept of complicit exoticism, as Yamato (Japan) possesses all kinds of special qualities such as being the place most favorable for the forging of tsurugi armours. By virtue of this particular relationship with the creation of techno-magical armours, Japan, fictionalised as the land of Yamato, is rendered exotic via the use of orientalist tropes, each of which is conveyed through the character database.

Another instance of narrative being conveyed through database elements is the iteration of Japan's narrative as a peace-loving people, which is congruent with what James McVeigh describes as 'Peace Nationalism': a form of anti-militarist nationalism focused on the portrayal of the Japanese people as victims of war and of the machinations of immoral wartime leaders (McVeigh 2004: 208-210).

Rokuhara Shogunate head Ashikaga Moriuji, fulfills this role, exerting oppression on the Japanese populace by means of tyrannical military might in an eventual effort to overthrow the western occupiers. His evil and lack of fundamental morality, although being depicted in accordance with similar visual novel characters such as Matō Zōken from *Fate/Stay Night* (TYPE-MOON 2004), in this case echo the depiction suggested by McVeigh within his description of peace nationalism.

The harsh occupation by western forces, and the subsequent subaltern relationship between Yamato (Japan) and the United Federation (English-speaking West) is stated by

one of the game's heroines, Ōtori Kanae, as being necessary, as the alternative (siding with Russia), would be much worse. This detail is not vital for the comprehension and fruition of Kanae Ōtori as a character, but still interacts and is intertwined with her constitutive database elements, especially the one known as 'Ojōsama' (daughter of nobility).





Fig. 7. (Above and previous pages) Bust shots comparison of Western and Japanese tsurugi and personnel. Images © Nitroplus 2009

The intersection of background narrative into characters' constitutive database elements results in the iteration of narrative through the database elements themselves, with the database elements providing the common ground by which the narrative can be made comprehensible to the audience.

Narratives by themselves are not part of characters' constitutive database elements, however, when the narratives are articulated through database elements, as it happens within *Sokō Akki Muramasa*, that narrative is attached to that particular database element and becomes integral part of the character's identity, and thus referencing the background narrative becomes necessary to maintain character consistency which is the absolute condition for character-based media (see Nozawa 2013, np). The more a database element is employed to articulate a narrative, the more that narrative becomes part of the character's identity which in turn must be preserved within the process of re-contextualisation, bonding the character with the narrative.

This is a process that can be observed in all of Muramasa's female characters. Akane Ichijō, self-styled hero of justice (a database element), sees it as a way to express commentary on the nature of justice itself. By holding a fundamentalist view of what is right

and wrong, with no place for subtlety or nuance and holding every transgressor as being worthy of death, the character of Akane Ichijō carries part of the background narrative (the game's uncaring world) within her character identity.

These two examples show a process which results in characters whose individual characteristics/database elements are drawn from the character database, but at the same time see their individual identity developed through the articulation of each database element. When these elements are made to reference a peculiar narrative contest, we have conservation of the character's host narrative in their constitutive database elements, as the characters must be depicted with that particular articulation of database elements to maintain character consistency.

This constancy is carried even when the characters are re-articulated within different contexts. See the following (figure 8) wallpaper featuring all of *Sokō Akki Muramasa*'s principal female characters as pinup girls. This is most evident within the wallpaper in the side character of Chachamaru (third from the left). During the course of the game, she is depicted as a warrior girl fighting for the Rokuhara *bakufu*, and this is preserved by her being depicted with a Japanese sword in hand.



Fig. 8. Characters recontextualised as pin-ups. Image © Nitroplus 2009

Furthermore, references to the game are made in the ornament which dangles from her bikini top, which references the samurai armour she wears for most of the game. The same can be observed with Ichijō Akane (first from right, foreground), whose pin-up dress includes references to her role as a *tsurugi* mechanic during chapter three of the game. A third example lies in Muramasa (second from left), whose leg accessory references the temple where she is kept (as a *tsurugi* suit of armour) in the game.

Thus it can be argued that, as the setting of the game becomes more articulated, the more this universe is preserved and communicated within the character's database elements, and this is preserved during the process of character re-contextualisation. Even if one was to look at the above representation of Chachamaru without prior knowledge of either the character or *Sokō Akki Muramasa*, by simply noting that she wields a sword they will deduce that Chachamaru is a fighter. Furthermore, if the ornament is identified, the viewer will be able to deduce, at the mere minimum, that she belongs to a world where samurai exist, which is reinforced by the ornament dangling from the bikini top. The way in which she is depicted as a pinup, however, also embeds narrative, as her clothes are depicted to be of a cloth that is not found in a completely orthodox depiction of samurai warfare, and thus the viewer will be able to deduce that she lives in a world where samurai and modern technology coexist.

In fact, should we remove those two articulations of database elements, character coherency would waver, and it would become very difficult to tell whenever that character is indeed Ashikaga Chachamaru.

When a database-element constituted character is placed within a setting home to an articulate narrative, as is the case with *Sokō Akki Muramasa*, the parallel necessities of articulating each character's constitutive database elements and communicating the narrative in which the characters act results in a conflation of the narrative within the articulation of database elements. This, in turn, makes it so that the articulation of database elements needed to preserve character coherency cannot be accomplished without referencing the host narrative. This, as argued by Nozawa (2013), rather than leading to the disappearance of narrative, leads to a "new relation with narrative." In other words, in the event of the character being subjected to re-contextualisation (Nozawa 2013, np), it would still be necessary to maintain character consistency, and with it, narrative information would still be carried over to the new context, allowing a preservation of narrative within character identity, whose other side is character-consistency.

It is within this starting point that information about the ‘grand narrative’ as espoused by Ōtsuka Eiji (2010) is conveyed. The more the setting in the background is developed, the higher the amount of information pertaining to the narrative will be conveyed through each character’s database elements.

Database elements provide a common interface for the perception of unique character identity, in a way that is not unlike what has been detailed by Jos de Mul (2015) in his examination of personal identity within database contexts: when people’s identity is turned into data, and thus into a database, what allows the creation of an individual identity is the presence of the same interface, facebook in de Mul’s case and the character database in the case of character identities within visual novels.

In the case of visual novels, database elements are the common framework by which characters and narratives can be comprehended and consumed. Within *Sokō Akki Maramasa*, the character database is purposed as the access point(s) into the narrative, which in turn creates and solidifies character identities whose unicity is reliant on the context they communicate through the articulation of their constitutive database elements.

Arguably, the character database did not lead to the disappearance of narrative, but rather became the new interface by which narrative is conveyed to the audience. In fact, the database approach produces commonality through which unique character identities (and host narratives) can be shared with the public.

Conclusions

This paper has offered a discussion of visual novels as a game genre enmeshed in the phenomenon described by Azuma (2009) as the character database and more in particular, how it relies on emphatic engagement (*moe*) in the construction of character identity and their relation to the game’s narrative. The paper did so by providing an overview of previous approaches to visual novels, especially those by Emily Taylor (2007) and Patrick Galbraith (2011), while also attempting to reconcile the various attempt at defining the phenomenon of *moe*, especially in light of the fact that precise definitions outside of ill-defined ‘euphoric reactions’ have not yet been offered.

The paper sought also to improve previous attempts at collocating visual novels, especially in light of the particular interactive framework that is offered by database elements, moving away from the view as ‘interactive choose-you-adventure books’ (Taylor 2007, 277) or simple interactive romance novels (Galbraith 2009a, np). Database

elements and the interactive and open-ended nature by which an affective bond develops in the player arguably offer another dimension of interactivity parallel to the choices offered to the player during the course of the game.

In fact, the game is a space where the player interacts with the database elements that constitute the characters, enjoying character fruition by way of filling the gaps between one database of elements and another, forming a personalised interaction which however remains founded on the constancy of the single database elements, whose peculiar articulation is what gives the character a unique identity. The particular articulation of database elements is a foundation by which the character's identity is maintained and preserved, which allows the preservation character consistency when the character is subjected to re-contextualisation (cf. Nozawa 2013, np).

From a game's studies standpoint, this places database elements in the dimension of objects (Aarseth 2012) while keeping the character they constitute as agents within the ludic dimension of the game software. This is a possible line of investigation that could offer interesting results in future examinations of visual novels from a game studies perspective.

With a firm basis in these findings, the article presented *Sokō Akki Muramasa* as a case study, arguing that the subversion of the development of affection towards characters for narrative purposes present within the game makes the mechanisms evident for analysis and commentary.

The reversal of visual novel mechanics is deployed to reinforce the game's narrative, influencing the player's actions and reversing the meaning that the player attributes to the pursuit of characters. While the player can, in a metanarrative sense, bring the character back to life by going back to a previous savegame or choosing another storyline (Cf. Azuma 2007), the only way they can save the character's life is by not pursuing the character in question.

As each character's storyline is explored by the player, each articulation of a database element is experienced in a way that reinforces the game's narrative and provide an increasingly unique identity to both the players and the game's world, resulting in a limitation to how the characters can be re-contextualised outside of their original narrative context, as the character identity (complete with the death they face within their storyline) is necessary for the preservation of character identity.

It is thus arguable that, in spite of Azuma's (2007; 2009) espousing the disappearance of narrative from the consumption of media products, narrative is in fact still prominent and as important as before, and, as the background narrative grows in sophistication and detail, the possibility for endless re-contextualisation (cf. Nozawa 2013, np) diminishes in light of the need to preserve character identity. Thus, narrative becomes subjected to its interpretation as per database elements, but does not disappear.

In fact, the articulation of character constitutive database elements can be employed to generate new narrative possibilities which are not present within the database itself, as it is shown within *Sokō Akki Muramasa*.

Furthermore, database elements can be subjected to discussion and deconstruction, and also employed to convey a complex narrative which is not readily referenced by the database itself. Further research possibilities on this particular video game genre could present opportunities to examine a genre of digital text which has been seldom explored within Japanese studies and, in particular, those focusing on Japanese pop culture. Possible approaches include examinations of the mode of narration presented by visual novels as games and how these modes tie into the wider fan culture behind it and what influences they exert, on the rest of Japanese pop culture at large.

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