Are you cheating?:

The relationship between agency and breaking the fourth wall in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The dating sim *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017) in the form of a visual novel has been a great success. The game's lure does not lie in the cuteness of the game, but rather in the horrors that are behind this cute facade. The genre-breaking aspects and the fourth wall breaks in this game create alienation. The player's sense of agency is also questioned. Therefore, this research focuses on the relationship between agency and breaking the fourth wall in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. Little is written on this topic and this game is a great example to analyse this relationship. This research can be placed in the debate around agency. Some background information about genre conventions and breaking the fourth wall is also given to give more context. A game analysis and using two different types of play, instrumental and free play, are used as a method to uncover the relationship between agency and breaking the fourth wall in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. The analysis of this research shows that the player's agency has many aspects regarding breaking the fourth wall. Agency is used as a topic to play with breaking the fourth wall. The player's agency can be expanded, threatened and limited by fourth wall breaks. These factors add to the fact that *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is a genre-breaking game, since it puts the player in the position that they cannot choose a character to date with, but the main character, Monika, chooses to date the player instead. Moreover, the player can shape the protagonist, who is an empty shell. By doing this, the player's agency is not limited to the protagonist's personality and their actions; the player can fill these factors themselves to take meaningful action.

Introduction

Dating sims are games that have been around for quite some time now. In these dialogue-heavy types of games, the player that has to befriend a character and eventually build a romantic relationship with them.[1] The visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato 2017, abbreviated as *DDLC!*) uses this same mechanic.[2] The story revolves around a male high school student in a Japan-like setting. The protagonist joins the school's literature club and interacts with its four female members: Monika, Sayori, Yuri and Natsuki. A typical dating sim revolves around a male character that dates traditionally considered 'cute' girls. The playable male character in *DDLC!* however, is able to experience romantic moments with the girls, but is not able to date them. Despite this, the free game became a great succes, it was downloaded one million times, three months after the game's release.[3] This game's lure does not lie in the cuteness of the game, but rather in the horrors that are behind this cute facade. An instance of horror is generated in the game's fourth wall breaks. The fourth wall is the border separating between the game's fictional world and the player's real world. This wall is broken if this distinction is not clear anymore.[4] By breaking the fourth wall, the game creates a feeling of alienation.

After its release in September 2017, many game critics played and reviewed *DDLC!*. They noticed that the game's horror was conjured from the feeling of helplessness and the destruction of a sense of control. The player does not understand what happens in the game and the game's world, because of glitches and files that are deleted and added to the game's folder. Game critic Amy Josuweit pointed out that, while other visual novels have also broken the

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[1] Josiah Lebowitz and Chris Klug, *Interactive storytelling for video games: a player-centered approach to creating memorable characters and stories* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2011), 45.
[2] Team Salvato (2017), *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, [version played: Microsoft Windows], Team Salvato, Steam.
[3] Brian Barnett, "Doki Doki Literature Club Hits 1 Million Downloads," *IGN*, December 12, 2017, https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/12/11/doki-doki-literature-club-hits-1-million-downloads.
[4] Steven Conway, "A Circular Wall?: Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 2 (2010): 145-46, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.2.2.145_1.

fourth wall by adding extra files, *DDLC!* deliberately destroys the game's files.[5] According to game critic Victoria Rose, the player becomes and stays alienated from what is happening on their screen, which she perceives as different from traditional horror games and abnormal for traditional dating sims.[6] Due to these reviews, *DDLC!* has earned the reputation of an innovative scare and a genre-breaking game. Because of this innovative scare, the player's sense of control can be threatened; the player's agency can be damaged. Agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" according to digital media scholar Janet Murray.[7] In this thesis, I will research how the player is able to take meaningful action in the fourth-wall breaking game *DDLC!* and how these possibilities of meaningful action are being played with. This research will distinguish itself from other research by its strong focus on agency in a game that destructs the player's sense of agency by breaking the fourth wall.

The contents of this thesis can be placed within the discourse of agency in games. Even though many scholars such as Janet Murray, Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern have researched agency in games, I will argue that my research will be academically relevant, because it will add to, and expand, the existing discussion of agency.[8] I believe that there is a gap of academic knowledge concerning agency in fourth wall breaking games, especially concerning genre traditions. Little is written about agency in fourth wall games. So far, only agency in fourth wall breaking films and television shows have been researched.[9] Some have written about agency in fourth wall breaking games, but they have only dedicated one

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[5] Amy Josuweit, "Doki Doki Literature Club is a hidden horror game for the internet age," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, October 31, 2017, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2017/10/31/doki-doki-literature-club-horror-game/.

[6] Victoria Rose, "Doki Doki Literature Club is an uncontrollably horrific visual novel," *Polygon*, October 22, 2017, https://www.polygon.com/2017/10/22/16512204/doki-doki-literature-club-pc-explained.

[7] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*: *The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 159.

[8] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 159-162; Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 156-57; Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, "Interaction and Narrative," in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 647-52; Gonzalo Frasca, "Rethinking agency and immersion: video games as a means of consciousness- raising," *Digital Creativity* 12, no. 3 (2001): 167-71, https://doi.org/10.1076/digc. 12.3.167.3225; Barry Atkins. "What Are We Really Looking at?: The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2006): 133-35. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1555412006286687.

[9] Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 13-14.

paragraph to this topic.[10] I will include research that has touched this topic in my theoretical framework. The reason why I have chosen to research *DDLC!* in particular is because this game breaks the fourth wall on a higher level compared to games, such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team, 1991) in which Sonic breaks the fourth wall by leaving the screen if the player leaves their controller alone.[11] *DDLC!* can almost be viewed as a computer virus; the game collects your computer data and uses it to enhance the game's narrative. Games such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* break the fourth wall within the fictional world by Sonic leaving the screen. Sonic shortly makes contact with the player's non-fictional world. However, *DDLC!* merges the game's fictional world with the player's non-fictional world by using the game's files and the player's computer data. The game does not make contact with the player's non-fictional world for a short amount of time, but it does more extensively. This level of breaking the fourth wall relates to agency, because *DDLC!* uses agency as a tool to play with the fourth wall. In order to 'defend themselves' or even 'beat the game', the player has to use their agency in various ways, even if these ways are not intended by the game. I will elaborate more on this aspect when I will describe the focus of my method, which is game analysis.

My research question reads as follows: "What is the relation between agency and breaking the fourth wall in the non-traditional dating sim *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?". The focus of my research will be about the way in which *DDLC!* plays with the relationship between the fourth wall and agency. I will answer this research question by answering three sub-questions first. My first sub-question is: "What is the interactive narrative structure of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* in relation to agency?". The answer to this sub-question will give me the foundation from which I will be able to analyse the player's agency. The second sub-question reads as follows: "How is the player able to use their agency when playing instrumentally in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?". To state shortly, one plays instrumentally when the player plays

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[10] Frasca, "Rethinking agency and immersion," 170; Samantha Stahlke et al., "The Fall of the Fourth Wall: Designing and Evaluating Interactive Spectator Experiences," *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* 10, no. 1 (2018): 55-57, https://doi.org/10.4018/ijgcms.2018010103.

[11] Conway, "A Circular Wall?," 148; Sonic Team (1991), *Sonic the Hedgehog*, [multi-platform], Sega.

along the game's rules and follows their cues.[12] In this sub-question, I will analyse the game's responses to the player's instrumental actions. A focus will be placed on the fourth wall breaking responses, for they are fundamental in this research. In my third sub-question "How is the player able to use their agency when playing freely in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?", I will look at how the game responds to the player's free actions in relation to the player's agency. The player plays freely when they do not follow any game objectives or challenges.[13] I will carry out a game analysis, in which I will dissect the ways the player has agency by researching the game's formal elements in relation to two variations of play, which are instrumental and free play. This approach is relevant, since it will allow me to divide the player's possibilities and boundaries concerning agency in this game. I will use Clara Fernández-Vara's book *Introduction to Game Analysis* and Jasper van Vught and René Glas' article about considering play as a method as a base for my research. This approach will be discussed in more detail in the method section.

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[12] Jasper van Vught and René Glas, "Considering play: From method to analysis," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017): 5, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/considering-play-from-method-to-analysis/.
[13] Van Vught and Glas, "Considering play," 5.

Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework, more insight will be given into the background and debate around the concepts 'dating sim traditions', 'breaking the fourth wall' and 'agency'. These concepts are related to each other in my research, since *DDLC!* breaks genre traditions to use agency as a tool to play with the fourth wall. Therefore, a certain order in this theoretical framework is needed to understand these relations. I will explain the dating sim genre traditions first. The focus will be on the subgenre bishōjo games, since *DDLC!* is such a game. This subgenre is about a playable male character who interacts with traditionally considered attractive girls.[14] In this part, I will connect the genre's traditions to how *DDLC!* breaks these traditions. Secondly, I will give more background information about the fourth wall to make sense how *DDLC!* breaks the fourth wall. Thirdly, I will illustrate the debate around how agency relates to games.

Breaking genre traditions

Dating sims as we know them today originate from Japan. It is a genre that was only popular in Japan at the beginning of the 2000's.These games were very uncommon in the American and European gaming market at the time.[15] Japanologist Emily Taylor views dating sims as a video game with a strong focus on dating that may contain erotic content. These dating sims identify several subgenres. The most common subgenre is bishōjo games. In this subgenre, the playable male character interacts with traditionally considered attractive girls. These girls are drawn in an anime style. It is also common for the male character to interact with secondary characters such as neighbours and family members. Dialogue usually appears via text on screen. In some cases, the dialogue is spoken by voice actors. The main character's actions and thoughts are described via on-screen text only; they have no voice actor.[16] Dating sims are, usually, very static due to its

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[14] Emily Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2007): 194, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/apps/doc/A172514688/AONE?u=utrecht&sid=AONE&xid=c92611dc.
[15] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 193-94.
[16] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 194.

lack of varied animation, though the characters do alter between poses. The interactive element of the game is presented via dialogue options. These dialogue options are mainly binary and occasionally consist of three or more options. They often revolve around trivial choices such as whether the player wants to go to the museum or the cinema. On the other hand, life-changing decisions cannot be made by the player. Bishōjo games, and dating sims in general, have several possible endings. These endings can be "good", the player ends up with their desired character, or they can be "bad", the main character lives an unhappy life. It is a very common practice that players want to "beat" the game by unlocking all possible endings.[17] Taylor continues that the only way to "lose" the game, in this process, is to experience the same ending twice. She also tries to classify dating sims as an ambiguous genre. She notices that playing dating sims are more passive than playing arcade-style video games. Since the player can auto-forward text, they do not have to click when they have read the dialogue if they do not want to. Taylor concludes that the dating sim genre incorporates elements of video games, manga, anime and pornography.[18]

Even though it is clear how dating sims are constructed, it is important to know how the male and female characters in dating sims are presented to the player. Taylor characterizes the playable male character in a bishōjo game as an "empty shell". These male characters lack personality and are mediocre students. She concludes that the player can easily fit themselves into this character, because the character is easy to mold to their liking. Moreover, the male character's face is rarely shown. If it is shown, his eyes are covered by his hair.[19] In *DDLC!*, the player is able to control this empty shell. This player is able to take meaningful action, because the player can partly fill in this protagonist's presentation. Whereas the male character is generic, the female characters are not. They have unique traits and rarely appear Japanese. These characters often have multicolored hair and eyes and have exaggerated personalities. These female characters would not resemble any real-life people that the player might know. Moreover, these female characters are never strong. They might appear to be strong in the first place, but the player learns they are weak; they desire to be subordinate to men. Thus, these female

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[17] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 194-95.
[18] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 194-98.
[19] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 198.

characters can be characterized as shōjo, which means they are presented as cute, inexperienced or emotional girls.[20]

Comparative literature scholar Myrtle Antioquia has also researched *DDLC!*. She notes that this game is unique compared to other dating sims, because *DDLC!* uses its ergodic nature to craft a narrative of horror.[21] Antioquia cites game scholar Espen Aarseth's definition of his coined term 'ergodic literature': "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text". The reader, or in this case the player, has to actively participate in the construction of the text.[22] Antioquia argues that not all video games are ergodic, however most visual novels have no mode of interaction and would therefore be considered non-ergodic. *DDLC!* goes further than a typical narrative text. This game goes beyond its genre and form, because the source code becomes part of its story. Antioquia uses the term 'ludus' to discuss the game's structure. She uses a psychoanalytic framework to illustrate how the game's programmed glitches and the game's manipulation of its ludic structure disrupts and exposes hegemonic tropes that can be found in dating sims. She concludes that the player is stripped of their right of narrative control and sexual expression, even though these are typical for dating sims.[23]

To be able to understand the contrasts between a typical dating sim and *DDLC!*, we have to understand the game's gameplay and synopsis first. *DDLC!* is a dating sim in the form of a visual novel. The game consists of two-dimensional images of characters from the player's point of view. The dialogue and the narration are displayed via text. The game's protagonist provides the narration. This means that the game allows low player interactivity, since the player essentially only has to click through text and they sometimes have to make narrative decisions at certain points in the game, such as which girl the player's poem will be dedicated to. These decisions determine the course of the game; they affect the protagonist's relationships with the characters. The player has to compose a poem from a set of words multiple times. Each girl prefers certain words. Every time a player picks a certain word, a chibi version of one of the

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[20] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 200-201.

[21] Myrtle Antioquia, "Exposing Hegemonies and Disrupting Codes in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*," *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature* 17, no. 1 (2018): 142-43, https://www.tmc.upd.edu.ph/index.php/jescl/article/download/6792/5885.

[22] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 2.

[23] Antioquia, "Exposing Hegemonies," 143-53.

girls, meaning small and chubby cartoon character, jumps at the bottom of the screen. This shows that that certain girl likes the word that the player has chosen. The player can experience additional scenes with the girl that liked most of the player's chosen words. The game consists of four acts. The game restarts between these acts. The player is sent back to the game menu.

Even though the gameplay is clear now, I will elaborate on the plot of the game to investigate how *DDLC!* breaks its genres traditions through agency. The protagonist is invited by his childhood best friend Sayori to join the school's literature club. He joins her and he meets the other members of the club: Natsuki, Yuri and club president Monika. The player has to write poems. The protagonist shares poems with his fellow club members. He also deepens his relationships with the girls. The club prepares themselves for the school's cultural festival. After the story progresses, Sayori reveals to the protagonist that she suffers from depression. The following day, Monika shows the protagonist a morbid poem by Sayori. He rushes to Sayori's house, only to find her dead in her room. She has hanged herself. The game abruptly ends and a "new" game starts. This does not happen in normal bishōjo dating sims; the gameplay does not usually include having to restart the game. However, in *DDLC!*, the player is forced to restart the game.

The player is automatically sent back to the main menu. All previous save files are erased. The story is almost the same when the player starts a new game, except for that Sayori is remarkably absent. Sayori's name and dialogue are illegible. The characters also do not remember her anymore. In normal dating sims, female characters are not removed from the story. Monika invites the protagonist to the club instead of Sayori. After a while, Yuri becomes unstable and prone to self-harm. Monika dismisses this behaviour. However, Natsuki secretly gives the protagonist a message, which is disguised as a poem, telling him to seek help for Yuri. Natsuki is immediately manipulated into telling the protagonist to ignore the message and to only give attention to Monika. Eventually, Yuri sends Monika and Natsuki away from the classroom. Yuri confesses her love for the protagonist. She commits suicide by stabbing herself multiple times, regardless of the player's choice whether to accept or deny Yuri's confession. The protagonist has to stay a whole weekend with Yuri's corpse due to the game's broken script.

When Monika arrives on Monday, she apologizes to the protagonist for the protagonist's "boring" weekend. Monika deletes Yuri's and Natsuki's character files.

The game automatically starts a new file. Monika is seated in a room and looks directly at the player. She reveals to the player that she is aware that she is a video game character and that she has manipulated the game's files. She also admits that she knows that the protagonist is controlled by the player. This is where the fourth wall is explicitly broken. The fourth wall is broken multiple times before in the game, but this moment where the fourth wall is undeniably broken is different from the previous cracks in the fourth wall. The previous cracks were subtle, whereas this fourth wall break is direct. Monika tells the player that she has been lonely and she confesses her love to the player. She will talk about various topics to the player for an indefinite time. The player has to manually delete Monika's character file to stop her from talking. Monika is mad that the player has deleted her, but she ultimately forgives him. She restores the game and the characters excluding herself. Depending on the player's actions, the game can have three endings. I will elaborate further on this during the analysis of the game's interactive narrative structure. What is worth noting, is that the player can choose between characters in traditionally dating sims. In *DDLC!*, however, the character chooses the player. Monika is the one who wants to date the player.

Thus, *DDLC!* plays with its genre conventions. The game starts off as a dating sim, but it slowly turns into a psychological horror game. The player cannot choose to have a "good" or a "bad" ending. Instead, they are forced to experience one of the three possible endings by the game. These endings can be character-specific or game-specific. I will elaborate further on this in my analysis. Antioquia also argues that the game's programmed glitches and manipulation contributes to breaking the dating sims genre traditions; it exposes its tropes and comments on the traditions themselves. Moreover, the fourth wall is part of this transition of a dating sim turning into a psychological horror game. The player becomes alienated from the game when they are addressed as a player instead of the protagonist.

Breaking the fourth wall

A character in a video game can explain to the player how to use the controls in the game. In this case, the 'fourth wall' is broken. The term 'fourth wall' is usually attributed to the critic, philosopher and dramatist Denis Diderot. In 1758, he introduced the term as an imaginary wall at the front of the stage that separates the audience from the actors.[24] The fourth wall is associated with naturalist and illusionist theatre. The actors had to deny the audience's presence. In the mid-twentieth century, it became more common for the actors to "break" the fourth wall for comic or dramatic effect; the actor addressed the audience directly. This act is metatheatrical.[25] Breaking the fourth wall is also possible in video games, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. Steven Conway, a game scholar, writes that the fourth wall is mostly seen as the division between the game's fictional world and the player's real world by game scholars. However, Conway argues that breaking the fourth wall should be perceived as relocations of the fourth wall or expansions of the "magic circle" (the fictional game world).[26] The term "magic circle" has been attributed to historian Johan Huizinga, who wrote:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[27]

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[24] Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 203.

[25] Michael Mangan, *The Drama, Theatre and Performance Companion* (London: Redglobe Press, 2013), 172.

[26] Conway, "A Circular Wall?," 145-50.

[27] Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*, reprint of the 1949 edition (London: Routledge, 1998), 10.

Even though Huizinga uses the magic circle as one of the examples of "play-grounds", Salen and Zimmerman believe the term is used to indicate an idea of a special place in time and space which is created by a game. Thus, the game takes place in the magic circle.[28] What Conway means is that the game treats all non-fictional items as if they are part of the fiction too.[29] In *DDLC!*'s case, the game files are embedded into the narrative, making it part of the fiction. Conway's view on breaking the fourth wall in video games, does not match with breaking the fourth wall in a traditional sense. His notion does not include the idea that the audience's illusion is broken by an actor acknowledging them directly. Conway describes how the video game *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998) asked the player to put their controller on their neck, simulating a back massage given by an in-game character to the player.[30] Conway writes:

> [...] these examples illustrate not the breaking of the fourth wall in the traditional sense, as it is not actively shattering the suspension of disbelief, but instead how the fourth wall is itself relocated, enhancing the sense of immersion, as it is moved from in front of the player to behind him or her, and he or she is drawn further into the fictional universe of the gameworld, which now encompasses the technology of the television set or game control pad.[31]

Thus, Conway argues that the player will be more fully immersed into the fictional world when the magic circle is expanded. It would not take the player out of the fictional world, whereas the viewer is taken out the performance in fourth wall breaks in theatre. The magic circle can be expanded by including the game's hardware for example. In short, video games break the fourth wall by its expansions of the magic circle. To illustrate *DDLC!*'s fourth wall breaks, I will use Conway's vision on breaking the fourth wall.

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[28] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 95.
[29] Conway, "A Circular Wall?," 147.
[30] Conway, "A Circular Wall?," 149; Konami Computer Entertainment Japan (1998), *Metal Gear Solid*, [multi-platform], Konami Computer Entertainment Japan.
[31] Conway, "A Circular Wall?," 149.

Agency in games

In the previous segments, I have shed some light on how *DDLC!* breaks its genre traditions and how it breaks the fourth wall. In this part, I will elaborate on the discussion of agency in games. This discussion is necessary to understand how *DDLC!* breaks its genre traditions by using agency as a topic to play with the fourth wall and how the game can create an illusion of agency. The concept of agency within games has been widely discussed by scholars.[32] Digital media scholar Janet Murray perceives agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices".[33] However, she notices that one does not expect agency in a narrative environment, since our sense of agency is generally limited in this kind of environment. According to Murray, agency goes beyond both activity and participation. One should not perceive agency as interactivity. Interactivity is a dialogue, whereas agency is an experience.[34] One thing to take into account, is that players can only act within the possibilities by the game's programming and design.[35] Similarly, game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that making choices and taking actions are essential when playing a game that is designed to support meaningful kinds of choice-making.[36] Thus, both Murray and Salen and Zimmerman make a connection between taking actions and making choices, in which player activity is emphasised. Moreover, Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, who are both game scholars, build on Murray's definition, but they give a more condensed definition. According to them, the player contributes formally to elements of the character and materially to the plot. However, these contributions are limited by formal and material causes. They argue that agency arises when the design of the game affords and limits actions. Mateas and Stern divide the constraints into two categories: formal constraints and material constraints. Formal constraints are the opportunities motivated by the "dramatic probability in the plot", whereas material

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[32] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 156-57; Mateas and Stern, "Interaction and Narrative," 647-52; Frasca, "Rethinking agency and immersion," 167-71.

[33] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 159.

[34] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 161-62.

[35] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 187.

[36] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 156-57.

constraints are functional restrictions of the game.[37] Thus, player agency is mainly determined by the design of the game.

The previous mentioned researchers view agency as a choice. However, other scholars view agency as freedom; they view agency as unrestricted. Gonzalo Frasca, game researcher and game designer, does not associate agency with narrative meaning. He argues that the character will have less personality once the player is given more freedom.[38] Barry Atkins, a game researcher, proposes that the "cause and effect" relationship, in which the player is oriented toward the future, offers pleasures of play. Hence, the player will actively test the boundaries of the game. Atkins views agency as the ability of the player to be a "creative investigator" who uncovers new responses from the game.[39] By uncovering Easter eggs, the player of *DDLC!* becomes a creative investigator.

Whereas the previous mentioned scholars focus on what agency is, Marie-Laure Ryan, a narratology scholar, focuses more on how agency can be perceived within an interactive narrative structure. She gives nine interactive narrative structures in which the relationships between actions and events become clear.[40] Traditionally, dating sims have a tree structure. A tree structure allows no circuits. If one branch is taken, the player cannot return to its previous decision point. Branches are isolated from other branches. Therefore, it becomes more clear to the player what choices have resulted in a certain event (see figure 1).[41] As I have mentioned before, Taylor argues that dating sims traditionally have binary choices. These games also have ten to twenty possible endings.[42] These factors correspond with Ryan's suggested tree structure.

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[37] Mateas and Stern, "Interaction and Narrative," 647-52.
[38] Frasca, "Rethinking agency and immersion," 167-68.
[39] Atkins, "What Are We Really Looking at?," 133-35.
[40] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 246-58.
[41] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 248.
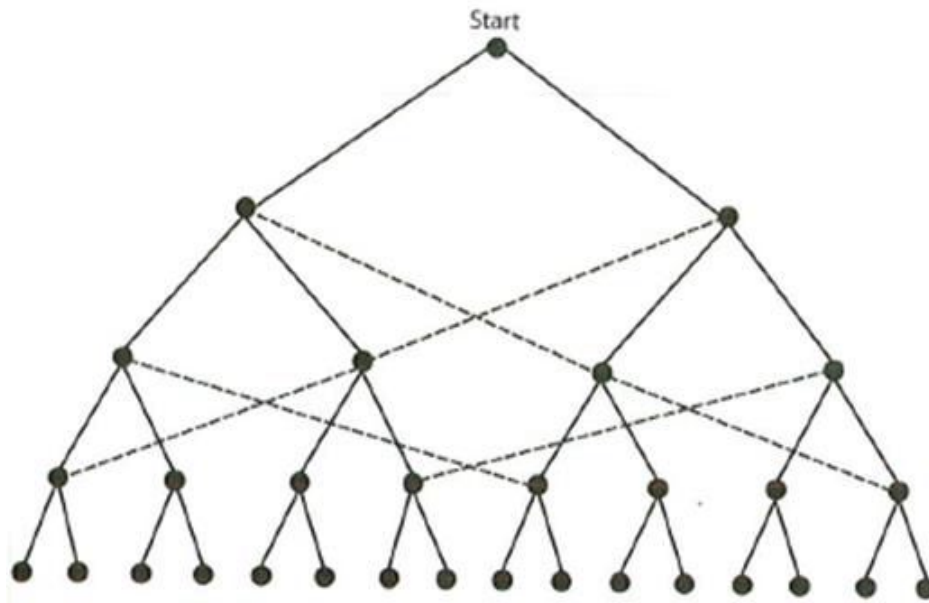[42] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 194.

Figure 1. The tree structure. This image is from Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 249.

In relation to my research, I will need Ryan's theory to determine *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure, to examine if *DDLC!* differs from Ryan's suggested structures. As an addition to Ryan's notions, game scholars Josiah Lebowitz and Chris Klug have written about different types of branches within these interactive narrative structures. They distinguish between minor branches, moderate branches and major branches. According to them, minor branches branch off very shortly and rejoin the main branch very quickly. These branches have no impact on the story and only serve to offer different versions of a scene. Whereas minor branches rejoin the main branch very quickly, moderate branches take far more time to do so. However, these branches do not have a significant impact on the story. Thus, minor and moderate branches modify the main branch. In contrast, major branches break away from these main branches. They form new main branches and have a significant impact on the story. Lebowitz and Klug note that decision points are somewhat hidden for the player in Japanese visual novels. The game will choose one branch automatically based on the player's previous choices.[43] This means that these automatically chosen options limit the player's agency.

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[43] Lebowitz and Klug, *Interactive storytelling for video games*, 185-94.

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Ryan is not the only one who has written about agency in interactive narrative structures. Michael Heron and Pauline Belford, both game scholars, have written about agency in narrative games. They argue that the player's agency is limited. Players can move around and use objects within the world of these narrative games, but they have no ability to shape the world.[44] Sometimes, narrative games can give the illusion of agency. The player can prolong an NPC's (non-player character) life by making a certain decision for instance. However, the NPC will still die at some point. Therefore, there is a lack of real agency. Heron and Belford argue that narrative games that lack agency can be categorised as "visual novels". Interactivity may be the core element of the game, but the player cannot control the game's story. Thus, the game gives the player an illusion of agency.[45]

All mentioned scholars have a different view on agency. Some build on each other's work, while others reject their work. For my research, I will position myself between these visions to make clear what vision I will mean throughout this thesis. I do agree with Murray on her vision of agency in games. However, I do believe her vision is too general for my research, since Murray has this vision of agency in her head when considering games in general. I, on the other hand, will solely focus on a dating sim. Therefore, I will need Mateas and Stern's more restricted vision to be able to answer my research question, especially when *DDLC!* affords and limits certain actions by the player. This is where Atkins' theory gets involved. When the player actively tests the boundaries of the game, it becomes clear which actions are afforded and which are limited. Regarding the interactive narrative structure, I will need all visions to make sense of my research. However, some aspects of each text are more relevant than others. For instance, Ryan's different types of interactive narrative structures will serve as a base, but I will need Lebowitz and Klug's vision on different kinds of branches to understand the details of Ryan's suggested structures. Moreover, I argue that *DDLC!* gives the illusion of agency. Therefore, I will need Heron and Belford's vision to analyse how this illusion of agency is presented in *DDLC!*.

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[44] Michael James Heron and Pauline Helen Belford, "All of your co-workers are gone: story, substance, and the empathic puzzler," *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2015): 9-15, http://gamescriticism.org/articles/heronbelford-2-1.

[45] Heron and Belford, "All of your co-workers are gone," 15-21.

Method

In this research, I will analyse what the relation between agency and breaking the fourth wall is in the non-traditional dating sim *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. I will construct my own methodology based on two different suggestions by game scholars. I will carry out a game analysis, focused on the formal elements of the game concerning rules of the fictional world and choice design by using two different types of play (instrumental and free play). This method will allow me to answer my research question, because it will show the game's boundaries concerning agency. It will show what the player is able to do and what not.

      Game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara has written a clear instruction how to analyse a game in her book *Introduction to Game Analysis*.[46] Based on her suggestions, I have chosen to construct my own collection methodology, since she does not literally offer a readymade methodology. I will research the formal elements of the game. Fernández-Vara mentions that these elements will help the researcher to describe the game in detail, which will provide insight about how the game is played and how it works.[47] Casting our minds back to my theoretical framework, I will need several theories to analyse the formal elements of the game. I will be able to analyse the rules of the fictional world by using Taylor's, Mateas and Stern's, and Atkins' theories concerning agency. They have written about the player's restriction within games. I will use their theories to show what *DDLC!* allow the player to do and what the game prevents the player from doing. This section will heavily focus on the amount of agency the player has. Mateas and Stern's theory will also help me analyse which formal elements disencourage or encourage to play the game certain ways. Moreover, I will be able to analyse the choice design of the game by using Taylor's, Ryan's, Lebowitz and Klug's, and Heron and Belford's theories concerning narrative structures. Their theories will allow me to analyse the choice design in *DDLC!*, in which I will focus on the consequences of the choices.

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[46] Clara Fernández-Vara, Introduction to Game Analysis, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5-14.
[47] Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 131.

One approach to analyse *DDLC!* is not good enough. Fernández-Vara's suggestions are not sufficient enough when considering playing the game differently each time. Game scholars Jasper van Vught and René Glas have written a guide on how to consider play as a method. I will need their suggested method to trigger different responses from the game. Van Vught and Glas consider two different types of play: instrumental play (playing according to the rules) and free play (not playing along to any challenges or objectives).[48] I will play *DDLC!* as a whole, meaning all four acts, two times. During my first session, I will play instrumentally, which means that I will follow the game's cues that should lead to a game that is suitable based on the functioning of the game's formal elements, as a cooperative player.[49] During my second session, I will play freely. I will push the boundaries of the game which leads to an iterative understanding of the game. Moreover, I will be able to understand the possibilities of the game and its potential readings.[50] This approach will help me answer my research question, because I will understand the boundaries of agency within this game. This approach will add to Antioquia's approach, since her approach was restricted to a psychoanalytic framework. Due to this, her research was not as focused on agency as mine will be. With my approach, I will be able to give more insights on agency in *DDLC!*, whereas her approach has given more insight on the defamiliarization of the gameplay.

Since I have explained my methodology and my approach, I will connect these parts to make sense of how this methodology and this approach will answer my subquestions. The first subquestion "What is the interactive narrative structure of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* in relation to agency?" will be answered by drawing the interactive narrative structure of the game when playing it. Based on my drawing, I will be able to analyse which of Ryan's suggested structures match with mine. This will also suggest if this structure is traditional for a dating sim and if so, it will give me the opportunity to argue why it is not. I will also take Taylor's, Lebowitz and Klug's, and Heron and Belford's theories into account to explain *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure and why it might be unusual for its genre.

The second subquestion "How is the player able to use their agency when playing

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[48] Van Vught and Glas, "Considering play," 4-5.
[49] Van Vught and Glas, "Considering play," 7-8.
[50] Van Vught and Glas, "Considering play," 8-10.

instrumentally in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?" will be answered by playing the game according to the game's cues. This will show what the player's initial agency entails. The third subquestion "How is the player able to use their agency when playing freely in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?" will be answered by pushing the game's boundaries. This will show how the player can "defend themselves" in a narrative environment where their sense of agency is destroyed. However, bear in mind that a sense of control does not equal having agency. According to the definition of agency that I use, the player only has to take meaningful action. I will also consider how the game affords and limits the player's actions.

Investigating *Doki Doki Literature Club!*

Since I have played the game two times as a whole, I will combine and compare my findings of these sessions when answering the subquestions. Then I will give a subconclusion to each subquestion to dwell on what these findings mean for my research as a whole. In my analysis, I will talk about 'the player', 'the protagonist' and 'I'. These terms relate to the idea of the protagonist as an empty shell. The player is able to shape this empty shell by taking various actions. These terms also relate to the notions of agency and the fourth wall, since the player might feel more agency if they take action as a player rather than the protagonist. The fourth wall is broken by the game when they address the player as a player and not the protagonist. I have chosen to make a division between these actors, because these actors are separated from each other in the beginning of the game. However, they are slowly intertwined as the game progresses. I will talk about 'the player' when the player in general is able to click on items. For instance, the player is able to click on the save button and they are also able to choose between the girls by clicking a button with their name on it. I will use 'I' when I am the one who has chosen to click on a certain item. I will also use 'I' when I am directly addressed by the game. I will talk about 'the protagonist' when he speaks during the game. His lines are scripted; the player is not able to choose between these lines.

Interactive narrative structure

As I have mentioned before, a visual novel has a low level of interactivity. This means that the player has little input regarding choosing between dialogue options. However, the player is able to change the course of the game to a certain degree. Yet, this varies between acts. The game mainly consists of minor branches. According to Lebowitz and Klug, these branches function as a side trip, but these branches have no significant effect on the story.[51] This matches Ryan's suggested vector with side branches structure, in which a determinate story is told in a chronological order, but the game allows the player to take short side trips.[52] I will argue that there are two different types of minor branches in this game: branches based on choices during the poem minigame and branches based on choices made between dialogue options. I will also argue how *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure differs from typical dating sims.

During the first day of act 1, the player is not able to interact at all before they have to compose their first poem. The player can only read that the protagonist walks to school with Sayori, how the protagonist meets the club members and that the protagonist walks back home with Sayori. The player follows the main branch of the game. The player is able to leave this main branch for the first time when they have to write their poem. Based on the words that the player has chosen, they will experience a certain scene the next day. For instance, if the player has mainly chosen words that Natsuki will like, they will experience an additional scene with her. The same applies to Yuri and Sayori. This branch is based on a more hidden choice. The player knows that the words that they have chosen will affect which additional scene they will have. However, the player will not be sure which words their favourite character will like until they have clicked on a certain word. Thus, they do not have certainty what route they will follow.

The player is able to pick a dialogue option a couple times. Sayori will confess her love for the protagonist on Sunday during act 1. The player is able between the following dialogue options: "I love you." and "You'll always be my dearest friend." (see figure 2). Even though it might seem that the choices will have a great impact on the story, Sayori will still take her own life no matter what option the player has chosen. Similarly, Yuri will kill herself regardless of

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[51] Lebowitz and Klug, *Interactive storytelling for video games*, 186.
[52] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 249.

whether the player has accepted or refused her confession to the protagonist. These choices are more visible than the ones in the poem minigame. Whereas the choices made during the minigame will show the player's impact via additional scenes, the choices made during Sayori and Yuri's confessions will automatically result in the same event. Sayori will be sad regardless of the player's choice; she feels as if she is not worthy of love and goes home. The next day, she will commit suicide. Yuri will immediately commit suicide. This agrees with Taylor's notion that life-changing decisions cannot be chosen by the player.[53] The player might feel satisfaction when they encounter an additional scene with their favourite character, but they will be sent to the main branch shortly. Typical dating sims do not send the player back to the main branch. This is where *DDLC!* differs from typical dating sims.
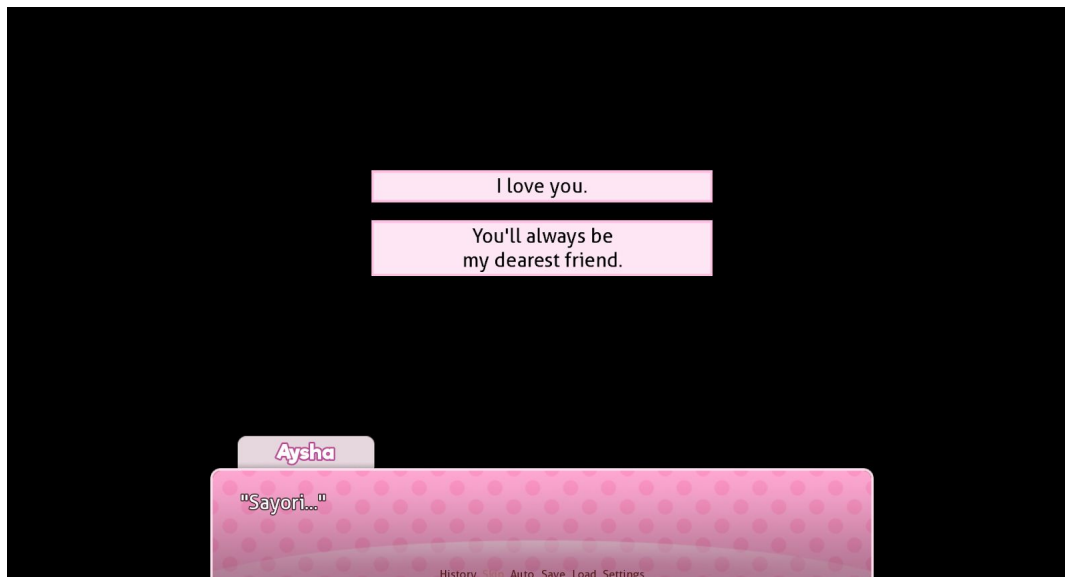

Figure 2. A binary choice in the game. This is my screenshot.

The player will experience these minor branches when both playing instrumentally and freely. This implies that the player cannot use their agency to experience moderate or major branches. However, a minor branch sometimes does not rejoin the main branch. The minor branch can also end and the player is sent to the previous event. For example, when the player has to choose who the protagonist will help prepare for the festival, the player can choose between Monika, Sayori,

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[53] Taylor, "Dating-Simulation Games," 194.

Natsuki and Yuri. When the protagonist would like to help Monika or Sayori, the player has to choose again, because the club members will explain that Monika and Sayori will work together. Therefore, they do not need the protagonist's help. This time, the player is only able to choose between Natsuki and Yuri. This also does not happen in typical dating sims. In these dating sims, the player has to make a definite choice. In *DDLC!* however, the player is forced to rethink their choice, because the game wants the player to follow their programmed path.

The story does not have moderate and major branches, but it does have many possible endings. This means that the narrative only splits all the way in the end. These endings can be divided into two categories: character-specific endings and game endings. Character-specific endings happen when a character in the game is deleted and/or has died. Game endings concern endings in which the player has no possibility to progress the game. Character-specific endings still allow the player to progress the game. Sayori's ending happens at the end of act 1 when she kills herself. Yuri's ending happens at the end of act 2 when she kills herself. Monika's ending happens at the end of act 3 when the player deletes Monika's character file. These three character-specific endings are not necessarily different endings of the game. Nonetheless, these events are inevitable. This agrees with Heron and Belford's notion of the illusion of agency; the player is given the illusion of agency when the player thinks they can save one of the girls. However, the player cannot control the game's story. Thus, the game gives the player an illusion of agency.[54] Natsuki's ending happens in act 2. When the protagonist reads her poem on day three, she shortly snaps her neck. The screen will show the word "END". However, the game resumes where the player left off. The protagonist will share his poems with Monika and Yuri. Natsuki still lives during this part. Thus, her life is not permanently ended in this end. Moreover, this event is optional.

There are three game endings which I have called the normal ending, the good ending and the quick ending. The normal ending happens when the player has not saved and loaded their games multiple times to spend more time with all the girls. This is normally the ending that many players achieve when they play the game for the first time. During act 4, the game starts off the same way it did as in act 1, but Monika does not take part in this act. Sayori is the club's

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[54] Heron and Belford, "All of your co-workers are gone," 15-21.

president. She mentions that she knows what has happened. She also thanks the player for deleting Monika. Monika, who still is around as her consciousness, believes that every character that will become the club's president, will become self-aware; they have no free will. She decides to delete the whole game, including its characters, during the credits. After the credits, Monika will leave a note saying that no happiness can be found in the literature club. The player is not able to play the game again, except for when they uninstall and reinstall the game. The player can also stop playing after an ending with one girl, meaning at the end of one act. However, I do not consider this an ending, because the player has not finished the game. The good ending is similar to the normal ending. This ending can only happen if the player has experienced all ten character scenes (three for Natsuki, three for Yuri, three for Sayori and one for Monika). This time, Sayori will thank the player for trying to make all the girls happy. After the credits have ended, the player will receive a thank you note from the developer. It mentions why he has made the game. The quick ending happens if Monika's character file is deleted before a new game is started in act 1. Sayori becomes self-aware that she is in a game. She closes the game and she deletes all the characters' files. If the player reopens the game, the player will see a black "END" screen, which is followed by a picture of Sayori hanging herself. After ten minutes pass, the message "Now everyone can be happy." appears. If the player deletes Sayori's character file before starting a new game in act 1, the black "END" screen and Sayori hanging herself will automatically appear. These game endings differ from typical dating sim endings. In *DDLC!*, the player cannot end up with their favourite girl. In typical dating sims, the player can. This shows that ending up with your favourite girl is not the goal of *DDLC!*. The game's goal is to make the player aware of how interactive media can defy the player's expectations.

To sum up, *DDLC!* is very lineair. It does include minor branches, but the player will be sent to the main branch shortly. There are two types of minor branches in these games: branches based on choices during the poem minigame and branches based on choices made between dialogue options. The player can also be forced to rethink their choice. The game has four character-specific endings and three game endings. Therefore, I conclude that *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure is a mixture of two of Ryan's options: the vector with side branches and the maze. *DDLC!*'s story is definite and told in a chronological order. The game

may restart multiple times, but Monika and Sayori still know everything that has happened. The minor branches that I have mentioned are "short side trips" as Ryan describes it.[55] However, a definite story would imply that there is only one ending. This is not true in *DDLC!*'s case. This is why I believe some elements from the maze structure can be recognized in *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure. The maze structure does not allow the player to run in circles. It also contains terminal nodes that may be dead ends. The player might have to backtrack. In *DDLC!*'s case, Natsuki's ending is a terminal node. In addition, the player has to choose whom the protagonist will help to prepare for the festival. However, the player has to choose again if they try to pick Monika or Sayori. The player can also encounter different endings. The reason why *DDLC!* does not match the maze structure entirely is because this maze structure would imply that the game mainly consists of moderate and major branches. Yet, this is not the case. Hence why I argue that *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure is a mixture of the vector with side branches and the maze.

Taking all of this into account, *DDLC!* breaks genre traditions by its interactive narrative structure. A dating sim typically does not follow one determinate story; it allows the player to follow various stories via different paths. Whereas *DDLC!* forces the player to follow one certain path, typical dating sims do not. This forced path is supported by Monika's fourth wall breaks. The player cannot continue to talk to a certain girl, because Monika has decided to delete her. Even though it does not become clear that Monika has deleted the girls in the beginning, it does become clear that the game forces the player to follow a certain path. Therefore, the player cannot use their agency to experience moderate or major branches. Antioquia's ludic structure was solely focused on the game's glitches and fourth wall breaks.[56] However, I have argued the player's position and their lack of agency in the interactive narrative structure.

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[55] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 249.
[56] Antioquia, "Exposing Hegemonies," 144-45.

The player's agency during instrumental play

As I have mentioned before, Janet Murray views agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" in which these decisions and choices can determine the direction of the game.[57] Taking Murray's vision and Mateas and Stern's vision on formal and material affordances and constraints into consideration, I will analyse the player's agency during instrumental play in this chapter. In *DDLC!*, the player can take meaningful actions, that is to use their agency, that do and do not determine the course of the game. I will illustrate this by using examples of the game. These examples are the key moments in the game that relate to agency and/or the fourth wall.

The first time the player is able to take meaningful action is when the player has to compose their first poem. Before the player is able to do so, the player is shown a pop-up message that says "It's time to write a poem! Pick words you think your favorite club member will like. Something good might happen with whoever likes your poem the most!". This is the first time that the player is able to follow the game's cues. The player has learned that certain girls like certain themes, as Monika has explained this to the protagonist during the first club's meeting. Thus, the player will most likely experience an additional scene with their favourite club member, since they will choose the words that their favourite club member will like. Every time the player chooses a word that a certain character likes, a chibi version of that character will jump at the bottom of the screen. This will satisfy the player, since their goal is to choose words that their favourite character will like. The ultimate result of the player's decisions will be shown the next day when the player will experience an additional scene with the girl that liked the most chosen words. Thus, the player has agency during this part. They can choose which character they would like to experience some extra time with. Even though the player can see the result of their choices, these additional scenes do not determine the course of the game, since the player is sent to the main branch shortly. The game affords formally by giving the player the opportunity to experience an additional scene with their favourite club member. However, the game also constraints materially by sending the player to the main branch shortly.

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[57] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 159.

The second time the player is able to take meaningful action is when they are given options. These vary from choosing in which order the player wants to show their poem to the girls to actual dialogue options. In these situations, the game affords the player formally to pick an option. As mentioned in my section about the game's interactive narrative structure, these options do not have a great impact on the story. No matter what option the player has chosen, the story will be the same. It might take a short side trip, but it will still follow the main story afterwards. The player will probably not save and reload the game, because the game has not cued the player to do so. Consequently, the player might not notice that their chosen option does not have impact on the story. Thus, the illusion of agency is given to the player. They might think their chosen dialogue option led to Sayori's death for instance; they might think they could have saved her had they chosen a different dialogue option. Truth is that this is not the case.

The third time the player is able to take meaningful action, and when the fourth wall is broken for the first time, is when Monika gives the protagonist the following writing tip:

> Sometimes you'll find yourself facing a difficult decision... When that happens, don't
> forget to save your game! You never know when you might change your mind. Or
> when something unexpected may happen! Wait. is this tip even about writing? What am
> I even talking about? Ahaha! That's my advice for today! Thanks for listening~

This is the game's cue for the player to save and reload their game during difficult situations. The player has learned they can re-experience certain moments by reloading their game. The player can use their agency to relive these moments, which the game has formally afforded to this so. However, assuming that the player did not know how to save multiple files at a time, the player cannot experience the good ending, in which the player has experienced all the additional scenes. The player should have saved before composing the first poem to be able to experience all these scenes. This is where the player's agency is materially restricted. However, the player's agency is expanded by Monika giving this tip via a fourth wall. The player now knows another way to take meaningful action.

The fourth and last time the player is able to take meaningful action during instrumental play, is during act 3. The player learns that Monika is self-aware. The player's sense of control is damaged when Monika addresses the player directly by their computer's username. She explicitly explains to the player how she has deleted the other girls' character files. This is the game's cue for their player to use their agency. The player can go to the character files to delete Monika's character file. The player has taken meaningful action and they can see the results of their decisions. However, this does not change the course of the game. The player had to eventually delete Monika to progress the game. Thus, the player was materially constrained in this choice. In relation to the fourth wall, the player's agency is threatened for a short amount of time. The player does not know if they can still take meaningful action. However, when Monika explains how she has deleted the other girls, the player will know they can take meaningful action by deleting Monika herself.

To conclude, the player is able to take meaningful action during instrumental play. They can use their agency to pick between options that will lead to a different situation, they can reload the game and they can even delete Monika's character file. Even though the game affords the player to do so by giving cues, the player is still limited in their actions. The player's choices do not have a great impact on the story and the player is not able to achieve an alternative ending. Overall, the player can use their agency, but it is in a programmed environment, meaning that the developers show how the player can take meaningful action and the developers also limit this meaningful action by their minor branches in the interactive narrative structure. Yet, by breaking the fourth wall, the player's agency can be expanded but also threatened. In the following segment, I will use this information to argue how the player can still use their agency to test the game's boundaries by becoming a "creative investigator".

The player's agency during free play

In the previous section, I have argued how the player can use their agency in *DDLC!* and how their agency is restricted when playing instrumentally. In this section, I will argue how the player can use their agency when playing freely. This agency is based on knowledge that is gained during the instrumental session.

Firstly, the player can take meaningful action by playing around with the game files. During the first session, the player has learned they can delete files. The player can delete Monika's and/or Sayori's character file(s), which results in the quick ending; Sayori becomes self-aware and she hangs herself. This implies that the agency of the player is great. The player is able to change the course of the game. The fourth wall is broken when the player realizes they can use the game files when Monika indirectly tells them so in act 3. The broken fourth wall gives the player more possibilities to use their agency. Instead of playing the game by opening the application and starting the game, the player has decided to ignore this progress and delete files to unlock a response. However, bear in mind that the programmers have kept this option in mind. If they had not, the player would not get this ending. They would have probably gotten an error message. This implies that the player's agency is less meaningful than it might seem. Even though the player plays with the game files to achieve this ending, the player can also play with these for another purpose. The player can add Monika's character file before starting a new game in act 4. Her character file was missing in the first place, because she was deleted by the player. However, when she is added back again, Monika will tell the player the following via a pop-up message: "Please stop playing with my heart. I don't want to come back.". Act 4 will continue as usual without Monika's character file, because she has deleted it herself. Although this player's action is meaningful, since the player can see the result of their decision, it does not determine the direction of the game. The game would still be the same if the player did not add Monika's character file to the game in act 4. The relation between agency and the broken fourth wall here is that the player's use and amount of agency can be addressed. Even though the player's action is meaningful, the player now knows they cannot use it on a higher level, because Monika will

not allow them to. Moreover, the player can successfully cheat in the game. If the player copies, pastes and reloads a save file from another act during act two, three or four, a black screen will appear. Monika asks the player if they are trying to cheat. The player's action is meaningful, but by breaking the fourth wall, the player will know they have reached their goal; their agency cannot be greater than this. However, if the player copies the "persistent" file from another act, which stores information about the current act, and replaces it with the current persistent file, the player is able to reload a previous save file that was deleted in the first place. In the first attempt, the player's agency is great, but is still restricted, since they still have to resume their game. In the second attempt, the player's agency is great and is not damaged. It is clear that the programmers have not programmed this situation. The player's agency is not restricted.

Secondly, there are formal elements in the game that allow the player to take meaningful action. These formal elements do not entail the game's source code, but solely the on-screen formal elements. If the player has read all Monika's possible monologue options during act 3 the player is able to skip her monologue. However, Monika notices it and turns off the option to skip her monologue. The player can see the result in their decision. Even though their intention was to skip through text, they get a response from the game. Even though Monika punishes the player by turning off the skip option, the game rewards the player for discovering this easter egg. The player is a creative investigator à la Atkins. The player has tested the boundaries of the game and they have uncovered new responses. In addition, when the player closes and reopens the game during act 3, Monika notices that the player is the one that does so. Yet, she does not remove the option to close the game. In this case, the player's action is meaningful, but not as meaningful as the other situation. The result of the player's action is that Monika acknowledges the player's action, but Monika does not take action herself. Instead, she accepts that the player wants to close the game once in a while and she resumes her conversation as if everything is normal.

Thirdly, making use of reloading previous save files can lead to meaningful action. After playing the first session, the player knows that they can save and reload previous save files. With this knowledge, they are able to experience all the additional scenes with the club members. If the player has experienced all these scenes, they are rewarded with the good ending in which the club members thank the player and in which a note from the developer is shown. The player's

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meaningful action has changed the course of the game. Even though this might not be clear during the game, the player's choices will lead to an alternative ending. In this case, the player's agency is not restricted formally nor materially. However, the programmers did program this ending. Thus, the programmers expected that players could play this way. The player has not beaten the game, but they have unlocked a new response by being a creative investigator. This response is not available when playing instrumentally.

Fourthly, using certain software will lead to meaningful action. The player is able to download the game for free via the developer's website or via Steam. If one downloads it via Steam, Monika will note that the player can access the game's properties via the 'Browse Local Files' option. Similarly, Monika knows when the player is recording the game. If the player uses any kind of recording programme, Monika will notice it and will jumpscare the player (see figure 3). These meaningful actions due to formal elements and using certain software does not determine the course of the game. Monika notices it, she will act on it and she will continue where she left off. Even though this action is meaningful, the game is the one who has acted meaningfully instead of the player. This is because the player has not actively tested this boundary. The main reason why a player would record the game is for a gaming stream. The game notices that the player is streaming and the game, or rather Monika, acts on it.

Figure 3. Monika's response to recording the game. This is my screenshot.

Thus, the player can take meaningful actions that do and do not determine the course of the game. Some actions may lead to a different ending and some actions will lead to Monika noticing the player's actions. Whereas the first one does determine the course of the game, the latter does not. Even though the player might feel as if they are not in control when Monika addresses them as a player and not as the protagonist, the player is the one that took meaningful action that led to this result. However, the player's agency still can be restricted when playing freely.

For instance, the player cannot load a game file at a certain point. When the protagonist finds Sayori dead in her room, the player can try to load a previous game file in order to try to save Sayori. Even though it is clear that the player cannot save Sayori whatsoever, the player is also not able to load a previous game file at all. Two pop-up messages will show with the following texts: "File error: "characters/sayori.chr". The file is missing or corrupt" and "The save file is corrupt. Starting a new game". These messages hint that the player is not able to rethink their decision and has to accept that they have to start a new game. These messages also link the game actively to its underlying platform by using its coding language. Moreover, the player is forced to choose to help Monika with the festival preparations during act 2. Whereas the player was able to choose between all the girls to a certain degree in act 1, the player is forced to click on Monika's name. Whenever the player tries to move their cursor to anyone but Monika's name, the cursor will automatically be moved to Monika's name. If the player somehow successfully clicks on Natsuki's or Yuri's name, a set of purple eyeballs will look at the player and many "Monika" buttons will be shown (see figure 4). The player has to click on any of these buttons to progress the game. The protagonist eventually teams up with Monika. These situations show that the player's agency is restricted materially. The player wants to take meaningful action by preventing a certain event, but the player learns that this is not possible due to the game's restrictions.
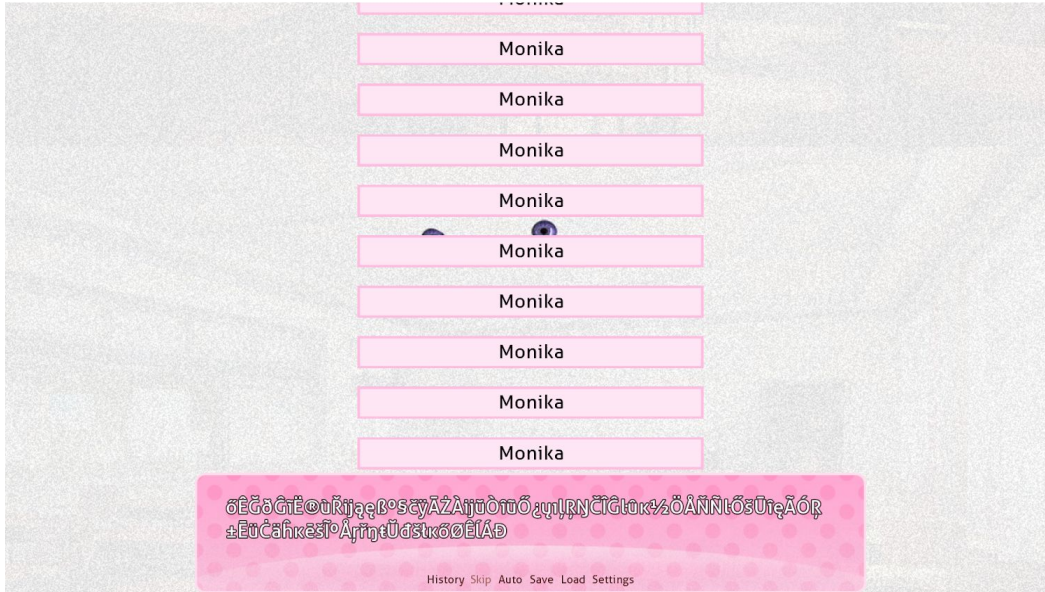
Figure 4. The Monika options. This is my screenshot.

In addition, the player is not able to save the game or load a previous game file during act 3. All previous game files have been deleted by Monika. If the player tries to save the game, a pop-up message will show, saying that "there's no point in saving anymore". This implies that the player's agency is materially restricted. By this fourth wall break, the player's sense of control is damaged. The player knows they cannot take meaningful action in this situation.

In short, the player's agency during free play is great. Especially compared to their agency during instrumental play. Meaningful action by the player can be created by playing around with the game files, playing around with the formal elements of the game and by reloading previous save files. Meaningful action by the game is created by the player's use of a recording programme. Yet, the player's agency can be restricted by the game forcing the player to follow a certain path. The relation between agency and the broken fourth wall is to show the player the boundaries of their agency.

Conclusion

To be able to answer my research question "What is the relation between agency and breaking the fourth wall in the non-traditional dating sim *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?", I will give a quick overview of what I have analysed and concluded for my subquestions. *DDLC!*'s interactive narrative structure is a mixture of Ryan's the vector with side branches structure and the maze structure. The structure only consists of a main branch and several minor branches, which are supported by Monika's fourth wall breaks. This structure differs from a typical dating sim, which usually is a tree structure. The player's agency is limited in the structure of *DDLC!*. Moreover, the player's agency during instrumental play is limited, even though the game affords the player to use their agency by giving cues. The player's actions have little to no impact on the story. In addition, the player's agency during free play is great. Their actions can uncover new responses of the game. These responses are fourth wall breaking.

In *DDLC!*, agency is used as a topic to play with the fourth wall. The relation between agency and breaking the fourth wall has many aspects. By breaking the fourth wall, the player's agency can be expanded, threatened and limited. When Monika implicitly or explicitly gives the player hints, the player's agency can be expanded by using a different way to take meaningful action. The player's agency can be threatened by Monika addressing the player by their name. The player might doubt if they can take meaningful action ever again, but soon they will realise they still can by deleting Monika's character file. The player's agency can be limited when Monika catches the player cheating or when Monika realises the player wants to add her back to the game after being deleted. These responses show that the player cannot take more meaningful action than this. The player cannot always fulfill their desired meaningful action. All these reactions are genre-breaking, since it puts the player in the position that they cannot choose a character to date with, but the main character, Monika, chooses to date the player instead. Moreover, the player can shape the protagonist, who is an empty shell. By doing this, the player's agency is not limited to the protagonist's personality and their actions; the player can fill these factors themselves to take meaningful action.

I argue that my method was successful. By using two different approaches, a game analysis and considering play as a method, I have given more insight on the matter of agency in games. However, my approach lacks in giving more insight on breaking the fourth wall. I could have incorporated that aspect more into my approach to be able to answer my research question better. Moreover, I could have anticipated my analysis better by structuring my preliminary work better. I have made many notes while playing the games, but these notes were not cohesive at all. Of course, I still have to connect the dots myself, but I do believe I have not structured my preliminary work as well as I would have wanted to. Consequently, the answers to my research questions were a bit hard to answer in the first place. However, I argue that I have managed to give sufficient answers to my subquestions and my research question.

By having researched this phenomenon, I argue that I have added to the academic debate on agency in games, especially in fourth wall breaking dating sims. Nonetheless, further research can still be done on this topic. There is a major lack of research on fourth wall games, especially agency in fourth wall games. It is relevant to research this, because these two concepts are more connected to each other than expected. Further research could therefore be about other case studies that use agency as a topic to play with the fourth wall. These other case studies will probably deliver other insights, which can be useful to know more about the relationship between agency and breaking the fourth wall.

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