Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies

“The Game Behind the Game”

How Indie Games use User Interface
to Challenge Player Expectations

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Graphic Design (DL826). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: 

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Abstract

Video games have been around for decades, technologically conditioning players' expectations by following the conventional formula of clarity, predictability and empowerment. This thesis examines how independently-developed, contemporary video games strategically break user interface (UI) conventions to disrupt player expectations and challenge assumptions of user agency and control, as opposed to merely acting as the predictable gateway to gameplay. The introduction discusses the origins of video games and UI. Chapter 1 analyses the Cognitive Dissonance and Uncanny Valley Effect these games may trigger. Chapter 2 observes the effects of Parasocial Intimacy and the discomfort triggered by these games' invasive methods. Finally, Chapter 3 is an overall discussion on the anxiety one may feel when experiencing these games due to the lack of player agency and control provided. This research investigates how unconventional UI behaviour functions as a rhetorical device that blurs the boundaries between game and player, contributing to the broader discussions on the ethics of game design, user interface and user agency and interactivity.

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Introduction

The term “video-game” is thought to have been used regularly by November of 1973, though the exact origin of the term remains relatively unknown. Etymology researcher Keith Smith (2015) has suggested that the term may have first been coined by Nolan Bushnell in a letter to a manufacturing company dated July 10, 1972, though Smith himself remains cautious about this claim due to the limited research material available.

The first video game ever thought to be created was *OXO*, a simple X’s and O’s game built by engineering student A.S. Douglas as part of his PhD research in 1952 (Knezovic, 2025). Designed for Cambridge’s EDSAC computer, *OXO* was played using a rotary telephone dial and allowed the player to choose whether to move first or let the computer begin for a more challenging experience. Despite its innovation, the game was only available on the EDSAC system, meaning only Cambridge students could experience it, and very few people outside the university ever had the opportunity to play.

Human-computer interaction and video games have evolved significantly since then. One notable event was the development of *Spacewar!* in 1961, initially confined to the DEC PDP-1 minicomputer in Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Bellis, 2025) but made suitable for distribution on other platforms by other developers due to the code being open-source. Despite being labelled as the first commercial video game, there is actually no record of *Spacewar!* being distributed outside of university computer labs. However, it is considered one of the most influential video games ever made, and its development is recognised as a pivotal moment in the evolution of video games and user interface (Goldberg and Moddens, 2015, p. 125).

With the progressing development of video games came the development of more sophisticated user interfaces. User interface (UI) started out as primarily text-based, requiring users to manually type commands to interact with their machines. This was known as Command-Line Interface (CLI), and while efficient for experienced users,

this method was highly inaccessible for beginners due to its steep learning curve (Diaz, 2023). The beginning of the more accessible Graphical User Interface (Hopkins, 2017) could be traced back to the invention of the light pen by Ivan Sutherland in 1963, where he demonstrated visual user interface through the act of grabbing assets and moving them around, changing their size, copying and deleting them (Myers, 1998, p. 45).

However, the invention of the computer mouse serves as one of the most notable inventions for human-computer interaction to this day. It first became a commercial asset in 1981 as part of the Xerox Star, and later, with the Three Rivers Computer Company's PERQ (1981), the Apple Lisa (1982), and the Apple Macintosh (1984) (Myers, 1998, p. 47). Nowadays, the mouse remains a fundamental component of interface design, particularly for video games, and despite alternatives such as trackpads and touchscreens being developed, it continues to be the favoured user component by the general public.

User interface nowadays is built much more easily using User Interface Management Systems (UIMS), a concept that gained prominence in the early 1980s. Löwgren (1988, p. 33) summarises UIMS as "to be used both in designing a user interface and in managing the user interaction in the application domain." Virtually all modern software incorporates some form of UI built through such systems, with the goal of making technology as accessible and intuitive as possible for its intended users, whether casual consumers or industry professionals.

Fig 1: Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018)

Fig 2: Ace Attorney (2001)

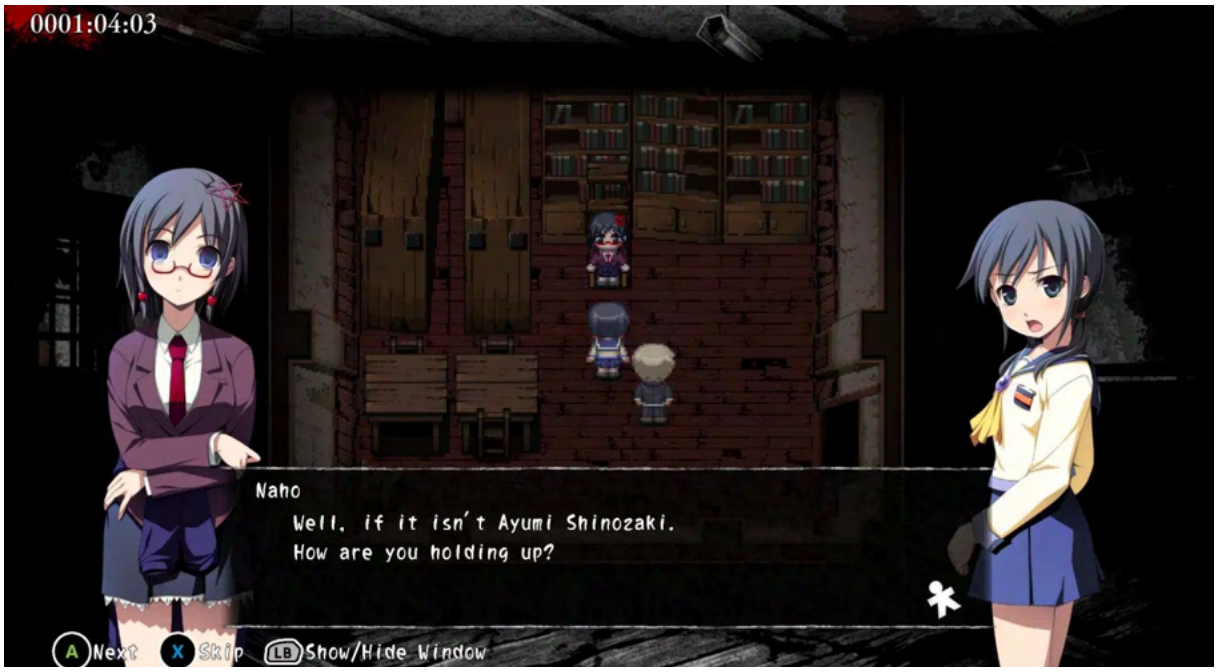

Fig 3: Corpse Party (2021)

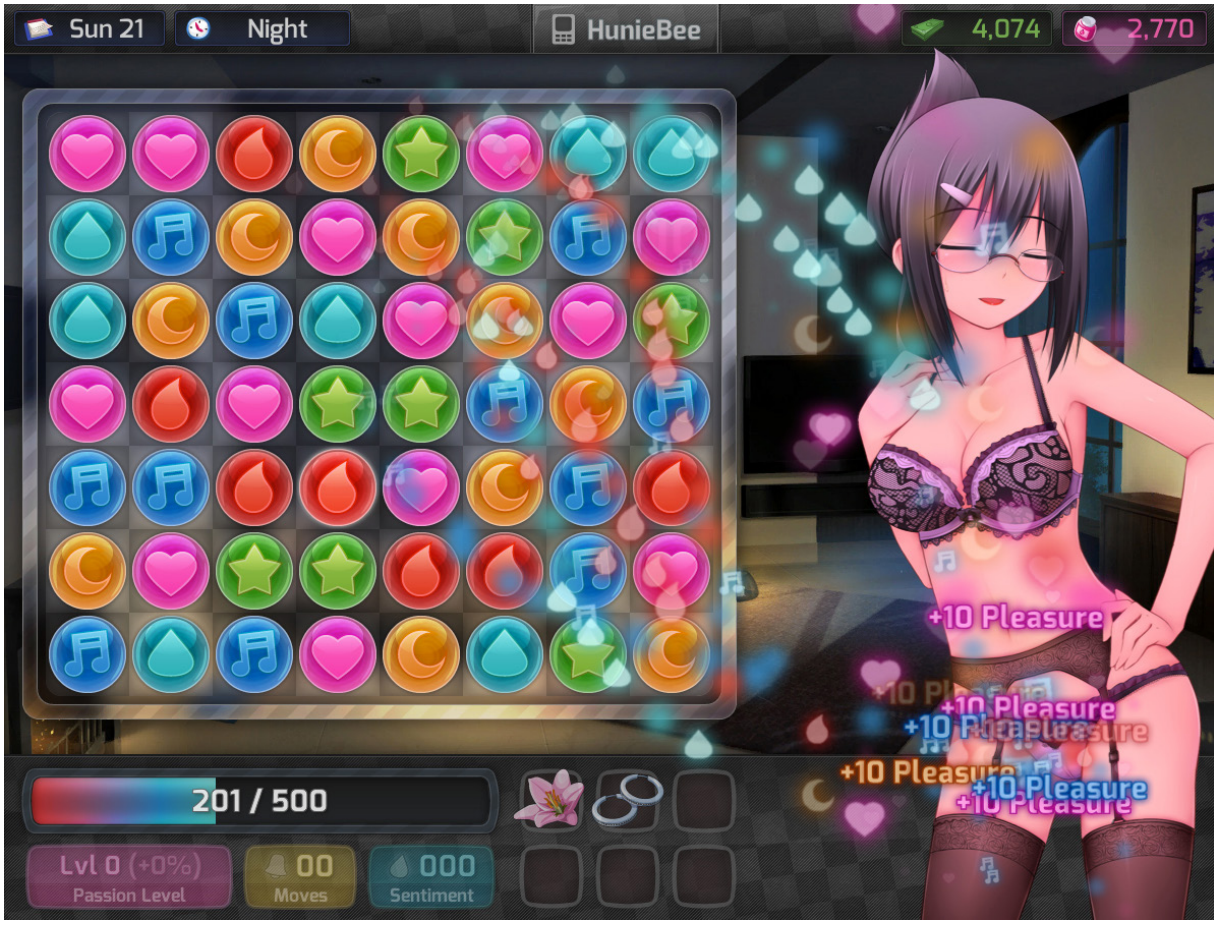

Fig 4: Huniepop (2015)

User interface in video games has been designed in many different ways, depending on how the developers expect the users to interact with the game. For elaborate, high-fidelity games, the UI is generally quite complex. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Fig 1), for example, is a highly complex, high-budget 3D action-adventure game, set in a fictionalised version of the USA in 1899. The game is best played on a controller, as opposed to a keyboard and mouse, and requires many different buttons, physically and virtually, to utilise all the features in the game. Such interactions include the direction you travel in, the camera angle, choosing your weapon, checking your location on the map, mounting and dismounting your horse, and speaking with in-game characters (either politely or rudely).

Lower-budget games generally have more simple user interfaces to account for fewer in-game interactions. An example of video games that use minimal UI is the visual novel genre. Visual novels are text-based story games that originated in Japan in the 1980s. Their UI design is quite rigid and often follows the same formula – a text box in the foreground to display context or dialogue, and a static character sprite directly behind it to indicate who is speaking. The gameplay is usually very simple, often requiring no more than a mouse click to progress dialogue, or to pick a choice prompt to potentially change the outcome of the story. Despite the constraints of the gameplay, visual novels are a very popular genre due to their art directions, character designs, compelling storylines and, in some cases, diverse range of outcomes depending on the choices the user makes prior to their conclusion.

Due to the narrative versatility this type of gameplay provides, visual novels can come in any genre, such as horror or mystery, popular examples being *Ace Attorney* (Fig 2) and *Corpse Party* (Fig 3). However, nowadays, visual novels are often stereotyped to be dating simulators due to the exorbitant amount of games in the romance genre compared to any other. Romantic visual novels generally follow the same visual language – vibrant settings, brightly coloured dialogue boxes, simple typefaces and distinguished, stylised characters, generally illustrated in the Japanese anime style. Sometimes, these characters can be depicted very sexually, as seen in Figure 4 where the user is interacting with a character dressed in lingerie in the 18+ game, *Huniepop*.

Despite the differences between the aforementioned games and their respective user interfaces, most in-game interactions are coded to follow the same basic formula. To give a few examples, the *Esc* key on the keyboard is expected to lead to the menu screen. The *A* button on a controller is expected to act as the primary selector, as is the *left click* on a mouse. *Ctrl + S* is widely known as the "quicksave" shortcut for mainstream software. Decades of research and development in the video game and user interface areas have shaped the way we, as the users, expect them to act when interacted with. User interface is a constant, serving as a gateway for everyone interacting with a computer, television, phone, and even household appliances. In the following chapters, I will explore the unconventional uses of UI by independent game developers, and how they experiment with dismantling that sense of familiarity and safety one may associate with typical mouse-clicks and button-pressing.

1: Cognitive Dissonance and the Uncanny Valley Effect

1.1: Weaponised cognitive dissonance in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*

Cognitive dissonance is described as the discomforting feeling of carrying, and trying to believe, two pieces of contradictory information at the same time (Cherry, 2025). The theory of cognitive dissonance has been studied extensively by many, notably by Leon Festinger, who states "It has frequently been implied, and sometimes even pointed out, that the individual strives towards consistency within himself. His opinions and attitudes, for example, tend to exist in clusters that are internally consistent" (Festinger, 1957, p. 1). His research was highly influential and contributed to hundreds of studies on cognitive dissonance, many of which could be applied to the impact of the distressing nature of the video game, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017).

Doki Doki Literature Club! is an indie visual novel game, created by Team Salvato and directed by founder Dan Salvato. Salvato was inspired to create the game due to his "love-hate relationship" with anime and its overuse of tired tropes. He sought to create a game that started off as almost a parody of western-produced Japanese media, only to betray the player by tearing the once safe and reliable environment apart (Jackson, 2017).

As previously noted, romantic dating simulators take up a very large portion of the visual novel genre, and most of them follow the same general "formula". These games are frequently set in Japan, regardless of which country the game was developed in, and the characters (usually female) are often illustrated in a typical Japanese anime art style. Features of this character design include large eyes, vivid hair colours and, in some cases, exaggerated bodily features, such as unrealistically large breasts for sexual appeal. These characters often do not have a lot of emotional depth, which can be reflected in the game's dialogue – shallow and light-hearted, intended to be easy on the mind. The UI, as previously noted, is simple and straightforward, rarely straying from the dialogue boxes and occasional choice prompts.

Fig 5: Doki Doki Literature Club's title screen and characters: Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki and Monika

At first glance, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* appears to conform to the conventions of the typical innocent dating simulator - brightly coloured character designs, light-hearted dialogue, and a user interface that signals accessibility and familiarity, however, rather than continuing to adhere to conventional expectations of a trustworthy and stable user interface, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* integrates the gradual breakdown of its own UI system into the narrative, using this destabilisation as a symbolic reflection of the characters' deteriorating mental states.

The game's success is closely tied to its deliberate subversion of genre conventions. It initially presents itself as an archetypal visual novel, satirising the exaggerated "pseudo-Japanese" aesthetic that dominates much of the genre. This was achieved with the stylised anime character sprites, bright and colourful backgrounds, and the inclusion of female characters whose personalities conform to well-worn anime tropes, none of whom come close to passing the Bechdel test.

Figure 5 is the game's menu screen, depicting the four female love interests who conform to some of the most stereotypical Japanese personality tropes in the romance genre. From left to right, we see Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki and Monika. From

my own observations, Sayori is the “Deredere” – the childhood friend who is sweet, energetic and optimistic, spreading positive energy to everyone she meets. Yuri is the “Dandere” – shy and socially anxious but very sweet when she opens up. Natsuki is the “Tsundere” – someone who acts short-tempered, mean and irritable to hide their true romantic feelings (Prado, 2025).

The only character who does not immediately appear to conform to any of these “dere” archetypes is the club’s leader, Monika, which, as the player will discover later, is deliberate. The protagonist himself, in keeping with genre convention, is a nameless, blank, faceless stand-in, lacking individuality or emotional depth. By exaggerating these stereotypes, the game lulls players into a false sense of familiarity and comfort before systematically dismantling it.

Fig 6: Writing a poem: The words the player selects will determine which girl they attract

The game takes place over the course of four acts, beginning in Act I with the lonely, socially anxious protagonist getting convinced to join the school's literature club by his best friend, Sayori. There, he meets the other girls, who all show an immediate interest in him. The player can choose which girl they want to interact with by writing a poem at the end of the school day (Fig 6). This poem is "written" by selecting from various lists of twenty randomly-generated words, each word awarding a certain character a point if that specific word appeals to them the most. Whichever girl gets the most points will be the one who likes the poem the most, and that will be the character the protagonist will spend the following day with. For example, if the player choses words that mostly appeal to Natsuki, they will spend the day hanging out with Natsuki. There is notably no option to write a poem that appeals to Monika.

Over the course of Act I, the game continues to act deceptively innocent, consisting of reading and writing poems, interacting with these cute girls, and engaging in funny conversations within the pink dialogue box. One notable moment is when Natsuki and Yuri get into a small argument with each other. The scene unfolds as a relatively ordinary disagreement between two characters, which is quickly diffused when Sayori intervenes with light-hearted humour to restore harmony. This wholesome, and almost anticlimactic resolution is a reflection of Act I as a whole – easy-going and not to be taken seriously, just as this game disguises itself to be.

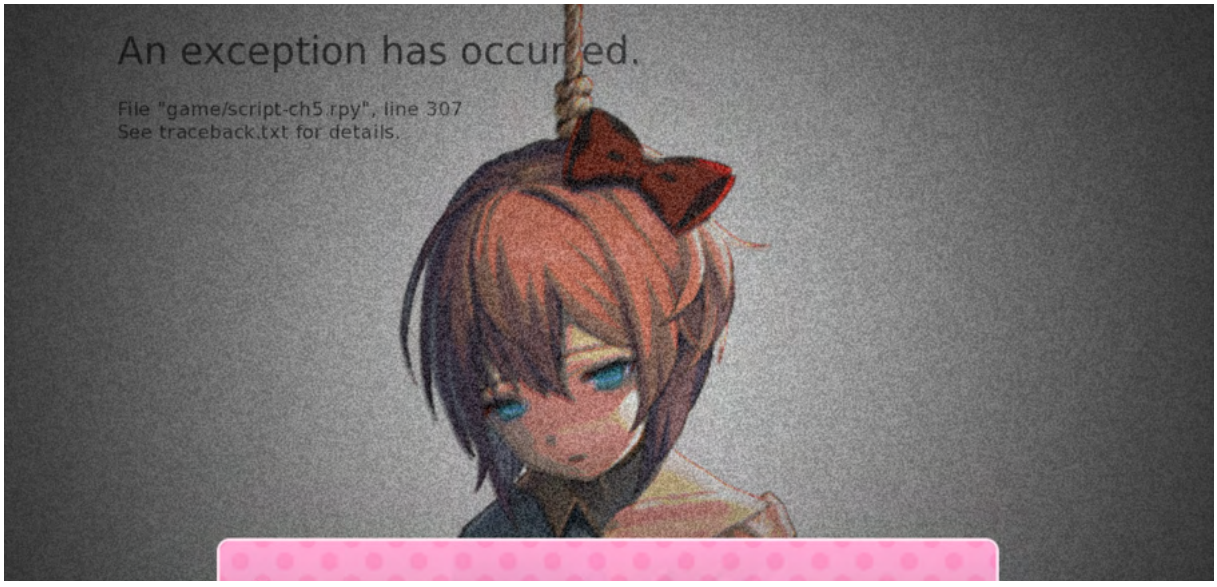

Fig 7: Sayori commits suicide and the graphics glitch for the first time

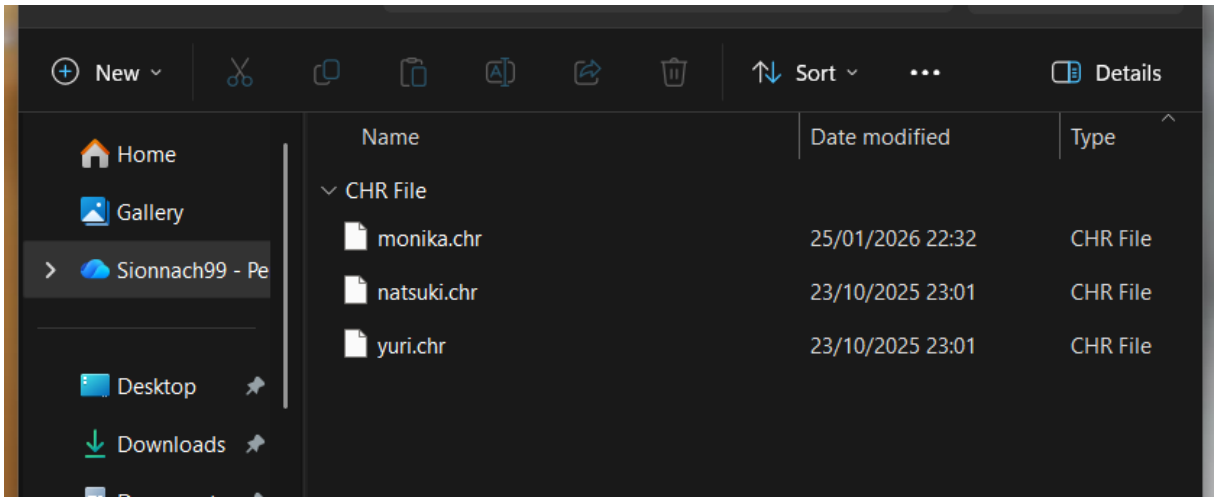

Fig 8: Sayori's source code disappears from the game files after her suicide

Towards the end of Act I, Sayori opens up to the protagonist about suffering with severe depression. This scene is very sad and could be viewed as the first hint that this game is a bit deeper than how it is marketed, however, nothing prepares the player for how dark the game gets. The end of Act I is marked when Sayori abruptly and graphically commits suicide. This scene is very sudden and leaves the player in a state of visceral shock at the sudden disturbing nature of the otherwise innocent and friendly experience. This is also when the game's UI breaks for the first time, showing an error screen behind Sayori's hanging body (Fig 7).

Act II begins directly after Sayori's suicide. With very little time for the player to process what happened, the game abruptly reboots and the timeline of the story restarts as if nothing happened, once again depicting the protagonist walking to school and lamenting about having few friends and no girlfriend. This is where Sayori should appear and convince him to join the literature club, but instead, Monika is the one who does so. There is zero mention of Sayori from any of the characters from this point onwards, including the protagonist, and her source code is also missing from the game files (Fig 8). Nobody remembers her existence at all, as if she's literally been deleted from the game. The player's save files have been deleted as well.

Fig 9: Sayori stops the argument with humorous dialogue in Act I

Fig 10: Monika stops the argument by breaking through the UI in Act II

Sayori's absence is not all that's wrong with Act II. All the scenes from Act I play out again, but the UI, music and the characters' behaviour are all uncannily altered. Some text is illegible, the music distorts randomly and the character sprites glitch spontaneously. Natsuki and Yuri's disagreement happens again, but not in the same way as it did the last time. The repetition produces an unsettling sense of déjà vu, as the player recognizes the scenario, yet its details have shifted in disturbing ways.

The music begins distorting, static fills the screen and the two characters are now hurling cruel and vindictive insults at each other instead of having a trivial disagreement like last time. The UI deteriorates rapidly and brings further chaos and a sense of inescapability to an already violent scene. Rather than intervene normally, Monika instead disrupts the scene by breaking through the interface layer itself, inserting her presence into the foreground of the UI, rendering it unusable, and asks the protagonist to leave the room with her. Figures 9 and 10 show the difference between these two scenes.

Despite it now being obvious that this game is not a romantic visual novel, but a horror game, the player is still tempted to push forward and voluntarily expose themselves to more of its horrific content. From my own experience with playing the game, as well as watching YouTubers play, there is a common, intense desire for everything to make sense and eventually be resolved into a happy ending, despite it being evident early on that everything will remain nonsensical and upsetting.

This is a direct symptom of cognitive dissonance, where a person will actively seek out as much information as possible in the hopes of justifying their beliefs, such as the idea that this visual novel will eventually resolve into a happy ending, just like other romantic visual novels. This usually comes in the form of one only exposing themselves to selective information to relieve distress (Festinger, 1957, p. 176), but given that *Doki Doki Literature Club!* has a linear narrative, there is no way to filter any information, forcing the player to push forward and be exposed to content they do not want to see, in the hopes of finding the information they do want to see.

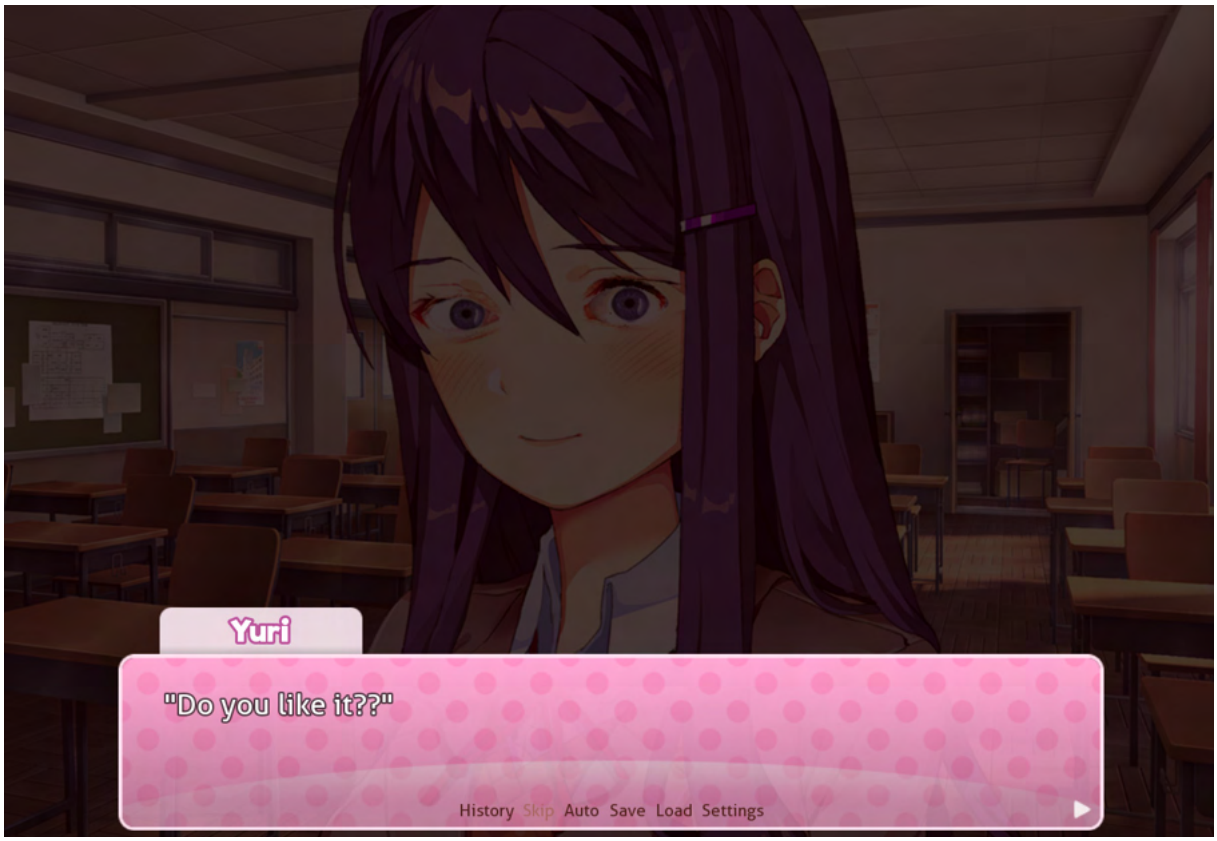

Fig 11: Yuri develops realistic eyes out of nowhere and speaks erratically

Fig 12: Natsuki develops a realistic mouth and her dialogue becomes illegible and nonsensical

Aside from the intentionally buggy UI, the developers made other uses of unconventional horror methods, such as characters appearing to break the fourth wall, and integrating realistic, almost grotesque images into the otherwise stylised environment. Figure 11 shows Yuri, displaying uncharacteristic behaviour through visual presentation. Yuri is an otherwise polite, gentle and well-spoken character, whose personality and emotions are displayed through her eyes. She is intelligent with an active imagination, leaving her to be frequently lost in thought, which is shown through her thousand-yard gaze, and her shyness is shown through her inability to make direct eye contact with the protagonist.

So when she suddenly positions herself uncomfortably close to the screen, speaking erratically to the protagonist with twitching, piercing, semi-photorealistic eyes, it's discomforting and frightening, as if she's transitioning from a cartoon character into an almost-human entity, attempting to reach the player through the screen. A similar incident happens when Natsuki suddenly forms a realistic, disfigured mouth and recites a random string of words that have nothing to do with the game (Fig 12).

Here, we enter the territory of the Uncanny Valley Effect (UVE), a form of cognitive dissonance that causes discomfort in a person when they are presented with an entity that appears almost human, but not fully. This effect can be achieved through multiple sensory stimuli, such as audio that sounds like human dialogue but with completely indiscernible words, however, the UVE is most commonly felt visually. For example, AI art could be considered uncanny due to appearing realistic but with a noticeable lack of human life, especially when depicting a human face. "As entities began to take on human characteristics, they initially seemed more appealing and likeable but this only held true up to a certain point, because when those characteristics became convincingly close to human, the entities suddenly seemed eerie and unsettling instead of more acceptable." (Lay, Brace and Pike, 2016)

Vukadinović, B. Njegovan and M. Njegovan (2023) studied the UVE on 72 adults, using photos of human-like robots and computer-generated faces. Some of these faces were deliberately designed to be scary, and the others were created with the intention of looking as realistic as possible. With the exception of a few outliers,

they found that the photos containing the more objectively realistic and human-like faces were the ones that elicited the most negative reactions from the participants. “When people are confronted with near-humanlike forms, subtle deviations from human norms make those near-humanlike forms look creepy, ugly, and unattractive.” (Vukadinović, B. Njegovan and M. Njegovan, 2023, p. 371) My personal assumption is the realistic, creepy faces were not intended to be so but were a result of technological constraints that caused them to lose some subtle human-like qualities.

It could be argued that Salvato deliberately attempted to create the UVE as an aspect of horror to unsettle the player. The photorealistic eyes and mouth on Yuri and Natsuki stand out on top of their character sprites, creating a contrast between the Japanese anime art style and the sudden grotesque human body parts. Because the player is accustomed to these characters existing within a consistent visual language, the abrupt insertion of realistic human features breaks that coherence. Yuri’s hyper-detailed eyes suggest awareness, emotion, and observation in a way that feels intrusive, while Natsuki’s realistic mouth exaggerates expressions into something grotesque and unnatural. Rather than making the characters feel more lifelike, these features distort them, creating a tension between recognition and rejection. The player simultaneously recognizes human traits and senses that they do not belong, which produces unease.

Additionally, the timing of these occurrences is very random and makes zero sense from a narrative standpoint, reinforcing the feeling that something familiar and safe has been dismantled and corrupted. Both instances happen during relatively calm points in the story, where two characters are interacting normally, so this sudden emergence of realistic human features takes away from this cozy fictional environment, breaking the moment of serenity and making the player lose their sense of consistency and control.

1.2 *Pony Island*'s UI as a narrative device

While *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is a fantastic example of cognitive dissonance in UI design, another game called *Pony Island* can also be used as an example of a game that uses unconventional user interface methods to confuse and unsettle the player. *Pony Island* (2016) is a metafictional video game created by indie developer Daniel Mullins. In *Pony Island*, you play as an unnamed protagonist in front of an old point-and-click arcade game of the same name. This protagonist has no memory of who they are, and their soul is trapped in *Pony Island* due to the game being corrupted by the devil Lucifer. With the help of a previous player, who is still trapped in the game, the player must fix the game's user interface and break down the game's code in order to escape.

Fig 13: "Start game" doesn't work and is replaced with an error message

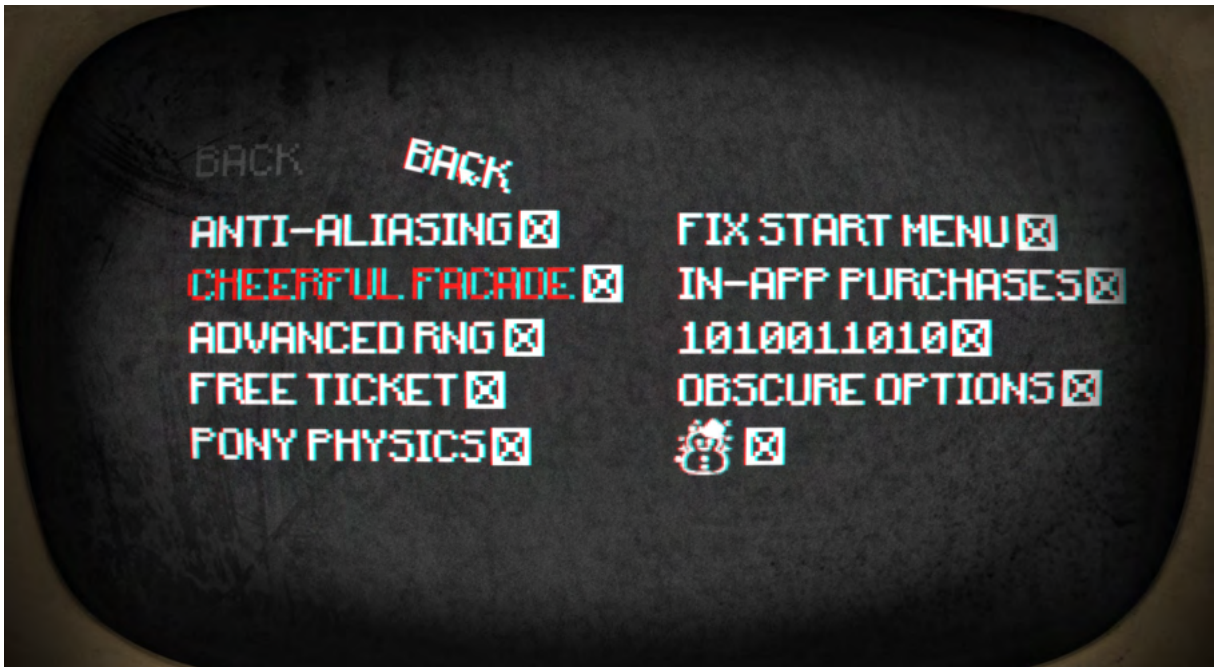

Fig 14: The "back" button in the settings collapses and needs to be dragged back into place

Fig 15: The game's code needs to be redirected in order for the "Start" button to be fixed

Right from the beginning, it is clear that there is something wrong with this game. The option to even begin the game doesn't work, causing an error message to pop up when selecting "start game" (Fig 13). The player has to fix the start menu by going into "options and help" and checking off some boxes. Doing so will also cause the "back" button to collapse and the player needs to drag it back to its original spot in order to return to the start menu (Fig 14). Upon returning, "start game" has been replaced by a portal-like entity, which, upon selected, is revealed to be a puzzle game disguised as game code (Fig 15). The player must solve the puzzle by redirecting the game's code, which, when done successfully, will repair the start menu and allow for the game to begin. However, even the loading screen is corrupted, and the player has to locate another portal to the game's code in order to bypass the blockage.

Only about five minutes into the game, *Pony Island* has displayed great use of the user interface as a method of confusing and frightening the player. It disrupts the expectation of menus and pause screens as safe and predictable spaces to disconnect from the horror aspects of the game, instead, becoming a horror aspect themselves. Because players typically assume UI elements are neutral and trustworthy, the game's deliberate corruption of them creates an immediate sense of instability and unease. The player learns early on that the UI is not there to help them, but is actively working against them. Where most games use menus and buttons for simple navigation, *Pony Island* reinterprets these mundane interactions as puzzle mechanics. Tasks players normally perform unconsciously, such as pressing start, adjusting settings and navigating tabs suddenly require problem-solving and lateral thinking.

This goes against everything designers are taught when building an effective UX and UI system. Steve Krug wrote a book called *Don't Make Me Think*, which works as a guide to making user interface as easy as possible for the average user. In the first chapter of the revisited version, when addressing the discussion of what the most important aspect of UI is, he states: "It's not 'Nothing important should ever be more than two clicks away' or 'Speak the user's language' or 'Be consistent.' It's 'Don't make me think!'" (Krug, 2013, p. 29) From my own experience as a graphic design student, it's been firmly instilled in me that ease of readability and navigation are

the most important parts of design. It could be theorised that Mullins deliberately went against these rules as a way to gamify the UI of *Pony Island*, making it stand out significantly among other horror games.

Fig 16: The gameplay of Pony Island. The pony must run to the end and shoot the devils

Fig 17: A more complex code puzzle. Completing it will crash Pony Island

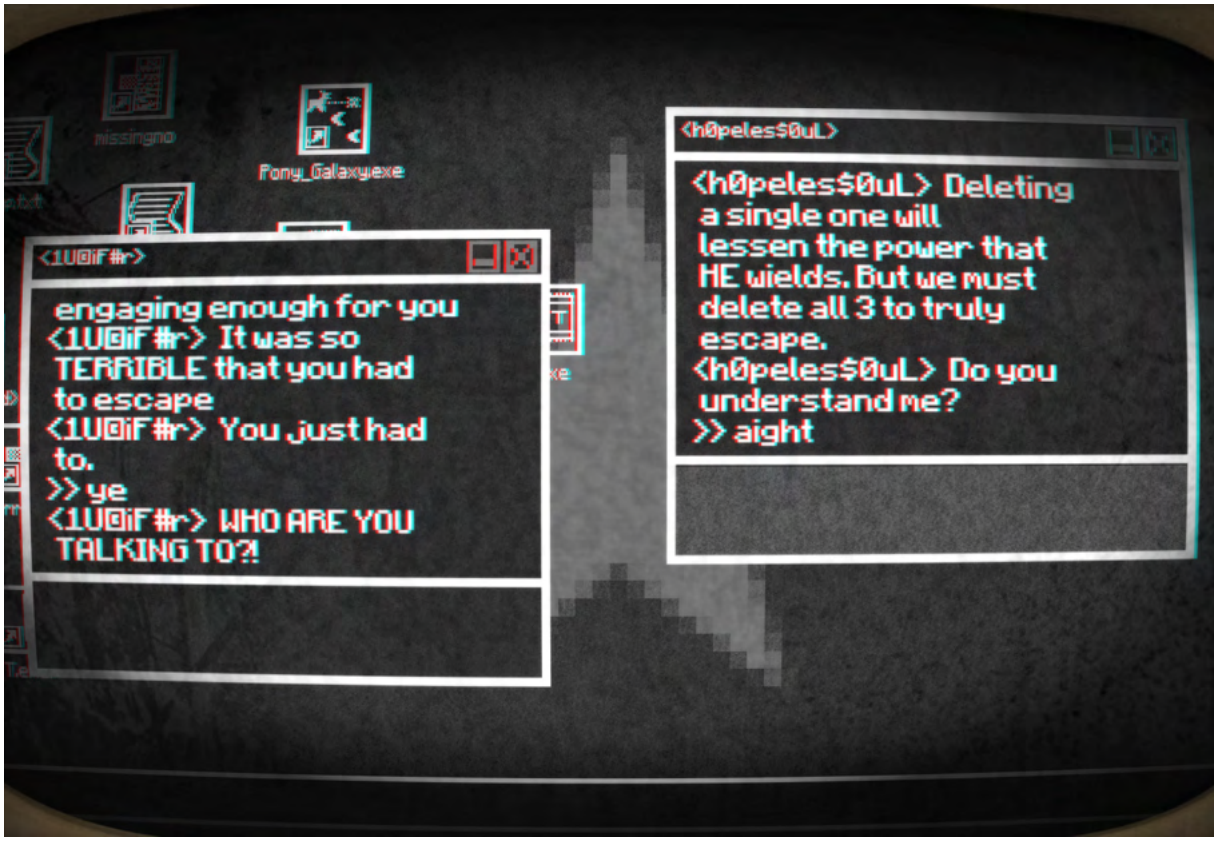

Fig 18: Now on the desktop, two entities fight to communicate with the player

Once the puzzle is solved, an entity within the game notices that the player has bypassed the obstacle, and communicates their frustration via pixelated text above the loading icon. This entity does not reveal who they are, but condescendingly introduces the player to *Pony Island*. The player is then taken to the actual gameplay of *Pony Island*, a 2D side-scrolling game where you play as the aforementioned pony, running in a straight line, jumping over obstacles to reach the end, and using a laser to shoot up little devil sprites that get in the way (Fig 16). This innocent and simplistic gameplay is comparable to the Google Chrome dinosaur game, feeling very out of place among the complex puzzle that is the broken user interface.

After reaching the end and “winning” the game, another code portal opens, which gives the player the opportunity to crash the game (Fig 17). Once the game crashes, the player is taken to what resembles a computer desktop, with a backdrop and shortcuts to other software. Most of these shortcuts don’t work, including *Pony Island*. The only software that does work is the messenger app, which unexpectedly

activates when a mysterious user named “h0peles$0ul” manages to reach out to the player. Through a wall of text, he explains that he too is trapped in the game, and he needs the player’s help dismantling *Pony Island* in order to escape. He also reveals that he’s the one opening the portals that allow the player to modify the game.

Simultaneously, a second user named “1U@iF#R” also messages the player, condescendingly congratulating them for hacking their way out. Both can sense the player is talking to someone else and each ask the player to stop (Fig 18). Hopeless Soul has his window forcibly minimised, and Lucifer commands you to type “yes master” into the messenger, so that he can trap you in *Pony Island* again. Regardless of what you type, the text will change to “yes master”, and the mouse cursor will automatically move to the game’s icon, forcing the player to return to *Pony Island*.

Fig 19: Corrupted religious and occult imagery in Pony Island

Fig 20: The game's abrupt change in art style. The butterfly sprites are still corrupted

The UI and art style of *Pony Island* do not remain consistent whatsoever throughout the game, drastically changing into various genres as the player progresses. Just when the player thinks they have the hang of the game, the UI turns into something completely different, forcing the player to get used to a new system again. For instance, there's a moment in which the UI actively works against the player, being taken over by a daemon named Azazel. Rather than completing a puzzle like normal, the player has to work against Azazel, who sort of functions like a "player 2" and actively works to sabotage the player's progress by moving assets out of their correct places. Another instance is when the game suddenly switches to a 2D "open world" type, which forces the player to run around a map in order to discover different levels to progress.

The most notable instance however, is when the game resets and has completely changed in UI and art style. The colour palette is now bright and innocent, depicting green hills and a sunny, blue sky. The pony avatar is no longer a blank, white slate but bright pink and textured. Even the demon creatures that need to be shot at have

turned into pink butterflies that the pony needs to blow away with a gust of wind instead of the laser. Guiding the player through the process is an uncanny, devil-like avatar called Louey. He treats the player as if it's their first time playing the game and shows confusion when they already know how to play perfectly. *Pony Island* has now transitioned from horror themes and corrupted religious imagery, into what could be considered a children's game, as if it's been cleansed of Lucifer's influence. Figures 19 and 20 demonstrate this jarring change.

However, as the game progresses, it slowly deteriorates. Some in-game sprites don't load in properly and cause the game to glitch violently when interacted with. Louey firmly tells the player not to interact with them and urges them to keep playing normally. Subsequently, more and more sprites stop rendering, or render in upside down, the music distorts and disturbing messages such as "YOU KILLED JESUS" flash on the screen. Louey attempts to distract the player by making them do puzzle games, but they also deteriorate overtime, as audio bites from the previously corrupted *Pony Island* play sporadically. It is now clear that *Pony Island* is still not free of Lucifer's influence, and it finally breaks down fully into its former state, cold and corrupted.

The sudden back-and-forth of the UI and art styles can induce cognitive dissonance in the player, due to the game deliberately going against everything it previously established. At first, the reset appears to resolve the tension and corruption established earlier in *Pony Island*, however, it's difficult to be convinced due to how quickly everything was fixed without the player's interference, and subsequently, the deterioration of this new version of the game. The player, naturally distrusting, becomes hyper-aware of inconsistencies, scanning for signs of deception among the green valleys and flowers, making the subsequent inconsistencies more noticeable and anxiety-inducing.

The user interface of *Pony Island* does not work as a passive gateway for playing the game, but instead, functions as an almost personified representation of Lucifer's corruption of the game. It erects obstacles to prevent progress, disguises essential functions, and attempts to trick the player with false paths or intentionally confusing

information. Even simple actions like starting the game or navigating to the options menu become battles of will against an interface determined to remain in control. The player's struggle against the UI mirrors their struggle against Lucifer's demonic presence, making the interface itself a metaphorical enemy. This inversion of the UI's traditional supportive role amplifies the theme of entrapment.

Doki Doki Literature Club! and *Pony Island* challenge player expectations not simply by subverting genre conventions, but by deliberately inducing cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable tension between what players believe should happen and what the games force them to confront. The weaponisation of the graphics, storylines, and especially the UI, something that most would consider safe and familiar due to years of computer usage and, in some cases, video game experience, leaves the player with persistent psychological discomfort and a sense of no control, forcing them to reevaluate their assumptions on safety and agency when playing a video game.

2: Breaking the Fourth Wall and Parasocial Intimacy

2.1: *Doki Doki Literature Club*'s invasive scare tactics

Parasocial relationships are a topic that has been studied extensively over the years, initially focusing on the one-sided relationships individuals may develop with television personalities or actors due to carefully constructed character archetypes and repeated exposure. Perse and Rubin (1989, p. 60) describe parasocial relationships as "an imaginary, one-sided friendship a television viewer has with a mass communication "persona" or character." (Perse and Rubin, 1989, p. 60) They theorised that parasocial relationships are most commonly formed with fictional characters in soap operas due to the attractive physical attributes of the actor, intimate close-up shots of the character's body language, and the informal conversational dialogue that is considered the "main ingredient" of soap operas (Fine, 1981, p. 97). Unlike other genres that may rely on action or horror to retain viewer engagement, soap operas keep their audience hooked through character-to-character interaction and development, relying extensively on the viewer's empathy and relationship with those characters (Perse and Rubin, 1989, p. 60).

This research could apply directly to the characters in *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. As I mentioned previously, most of the characters, as well as the nameless protagonist, have personalities that lean very heavily into some of the most popular "dere" archetypes. This was most likely deliberate in order to disguise the game as another stereotypical visual novel and to quickly get the player emotionally attached to the characters, so that their mental deterioration and deaths have a heavier impact.

Visual novels, particularly romantic or erotic ones, are known to encourage parasocial feelings due to being written to take advantage of a person's loneliness and isolation, particularly that of males. *Huniepop* (2015) is an example of an erotic visual novel. It is well-known in the western market due to it being written in English and fully voice-acted, with a diverse range of female characters with different appearances and personalities to suit every taste. As well as that, it stands out for having tile-matching

mechanics incorporated into the gameplay in order to determine the success of a romantic date, as opposed to just dialogue buttons. There is no end-goal to this game, other than to romance and sleep with as many characters as you want. While it stands out for its excellent quality and unique gameplay mechanics, *Huniepop* does not stray from the stereotypical, parasocial-encouraging visual novel.

Doki Doki Literature Club! is known for defying all the stereotypes of a romantic visual novel, however, rather than also defying the parasocial-encouraging aspect of the typical visual novel, it instead embraces it in an unusual fashion, and the game has unfortunately fallen into controversy due to a character interacting with the player in a way that could be considered extremely invasive.

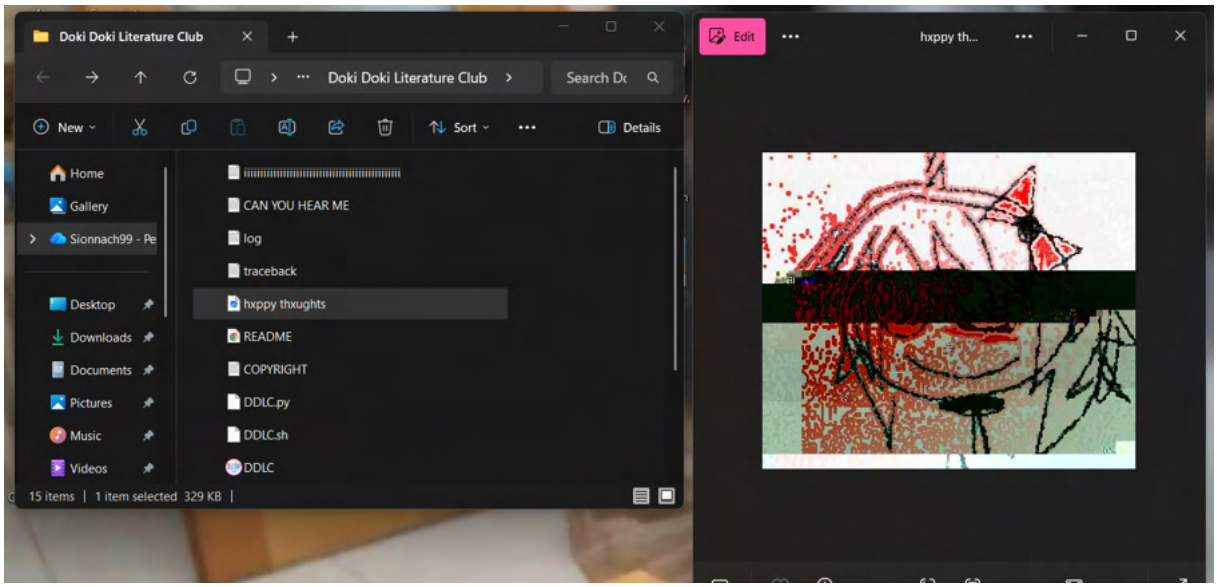

Fig 21: Disturbing image appears in the game files after Sayori's suicide

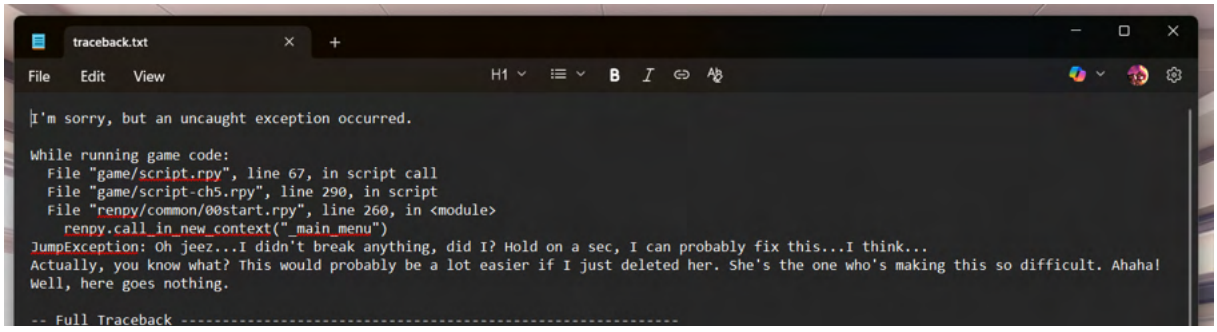

Fig 22: Traceback txt file contains strange dialogue

As previously noted, while most of the characters' personalities fall into a typical archetype, the club's leader, Monika, does not outwardly appear to follow any of these tropes. This does not seem immediately suspicious, however, she begins to exhibit some unusual behaviour, which becomes more obvious and frightening as the game progresses. On the second day of Act I, the characters share the poems they wrote the night before. Most of the poems are unremarkable and simply reflections of each character's personality, but Monika's poems are strange, eerie and quite abstract. While vague, her writing hints that she's aware she's in a video game. Her first poem, Hole in the Wall, is one of the more obvious ones, describing her realisation that she is looking out, "And he, on the other side, was looking in." She also bluntly reminds the player to frequently save their game, though this could easily be seen as the game developers being funny.

Her strange interactions with the player become obvious after the end of Act I, when Sayori takes her life. Not only is Sayori's source code deleted, a disturbing, crudely drawn image named *hxppy thxughts* randomly appears in the game files (Fig 21). As well as that, a notepad file named traceback moves to the top of the file list, meaning it was recently edited. When opened, it shows jumbled code, and a message that reads "Oh jeez...I didn't break anything, did I? Hold on a sec, I can probably fix this...I think... actually, you know what? This would probably be a lot easier if I just deleted her. She's the one who's making this so difficult. Ahaha! Well, here goes nothing" (Fig 22). This is a clear indicator that someone may have been messing with Sayori's code, and therefore, her mental health, pushing her to take her life. On top of that, all of the player's previous save files have been deleted, leaving them unable to go back and make different choices to change the outcome. They are now stuck with the knowledge that the decisions they made in-game may have killed Sayori.

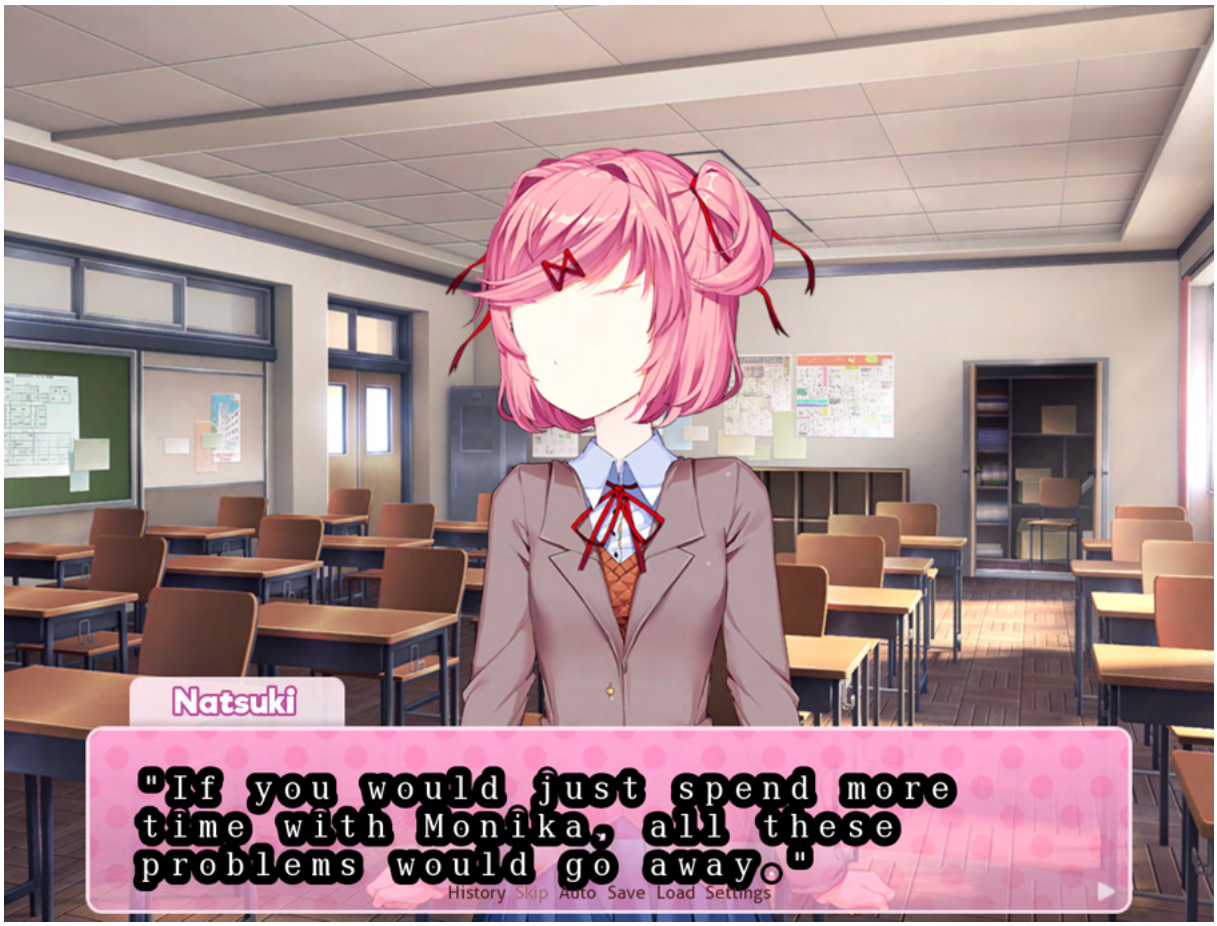

Fig 23: Natsuki loses her facial features and tells the player to spend more time with Monika

Fig 24: Yuri glitches and says disturbing things about Natsuki

With the protagonist's closest friend out of the way, Monika goes all out to ensure the protagonist spends as much time with her as possible. This can be seen immediately when she replaces Sayori's role in convincing the protagonist to join the literature club, glitching erratically during this interaction. As we progress further into Act II, the behaviour of the other characters becomes progressively stranger, as if somebody is manipulating their personalities. At one point, Natsuki gives a whole monologue on why you should be spending more time with Monika instead of her (Fig 23), and Yuri develops this sudden intense hatred for Natsuki, randomly stating "Who cares about that stupid brat? Nobody would cry if she killed herself" (Fig 24).

What started as a petty rivalry between these two characters in Act I, has abruptly turned into the desire for each other's death in Act II. This is a very startling development, however, it is clear that this isn't supposed to be happening. Natsuki temporarily loses her facial features and Yuri's character sprite glitches dramatically during these interactions, as well as the dialogue typeface changing to develop a thick black outline. This altered typeface only occurs when someone says something completely out of character, as if the words are not theirs. It's easy to assume someone may be altering their dialogue and behaviour to make them as unlikable as possible, so that the player will want to spend more time with the only remaining sane person in the game – Monika.

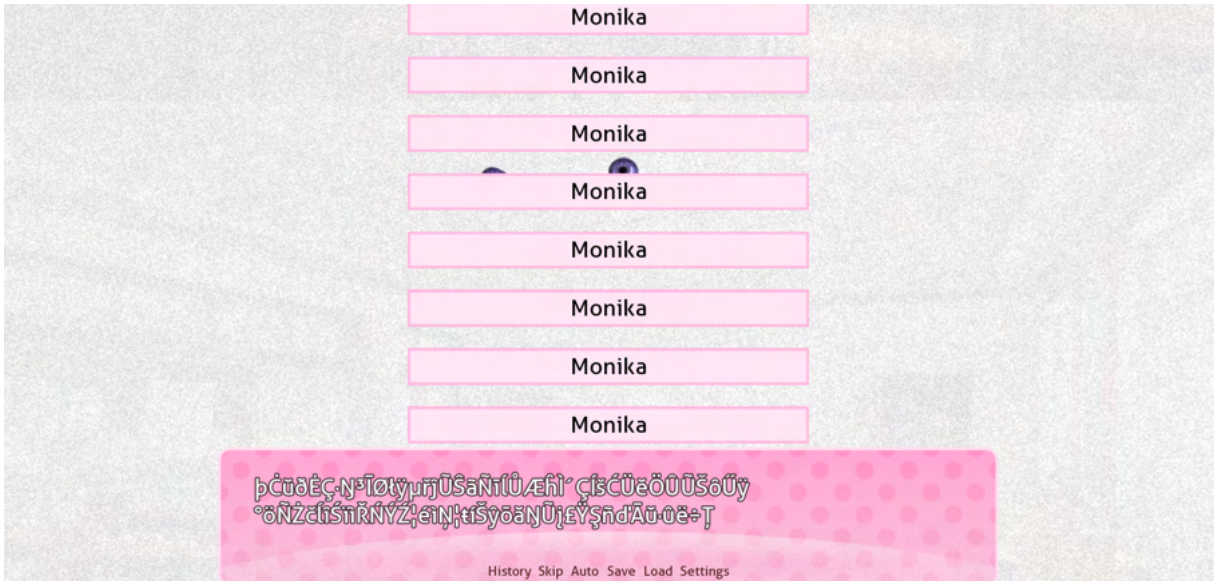

Fig 25: Monika forces the player to select her name

Fig 26: Monika reaches out to the player via the UI

Fig 27: Monika's "poem" is just broken code

Monika continues to attempt to reach the player by altering the user interface to force interactions between her and the protagonist. In one instance, the player has to choose whose house to go to over the weekend to prepare for an upcoming event. Choosing any character besides Monika is almost impossible, as the mouse cursor is forced to hover over Monika's name. If the player somehow manages to select another character, the screen fills with static, the dialogue box reads gibberish, and every choice button available reads "Monika", giving the player no option but to select her name (Fig 25).

Other instances include her sending a notification via the game stating "please help me" (Fig 26), placing herself in front of the dialogue box, as previously mentioned, and showing the player a "poem" she wrote, which is just glitched static against a white page. Her dialogue after this implies this was not actually a poem, but an elaborate attempt at altering the game's events, which did not go as planned due to her inability to code it properly (Fig 27). It's never been confirmed what this "poem" was supposed to be.

Fig 28: Yuri commits suicide and the player is forced to watch the aftermath

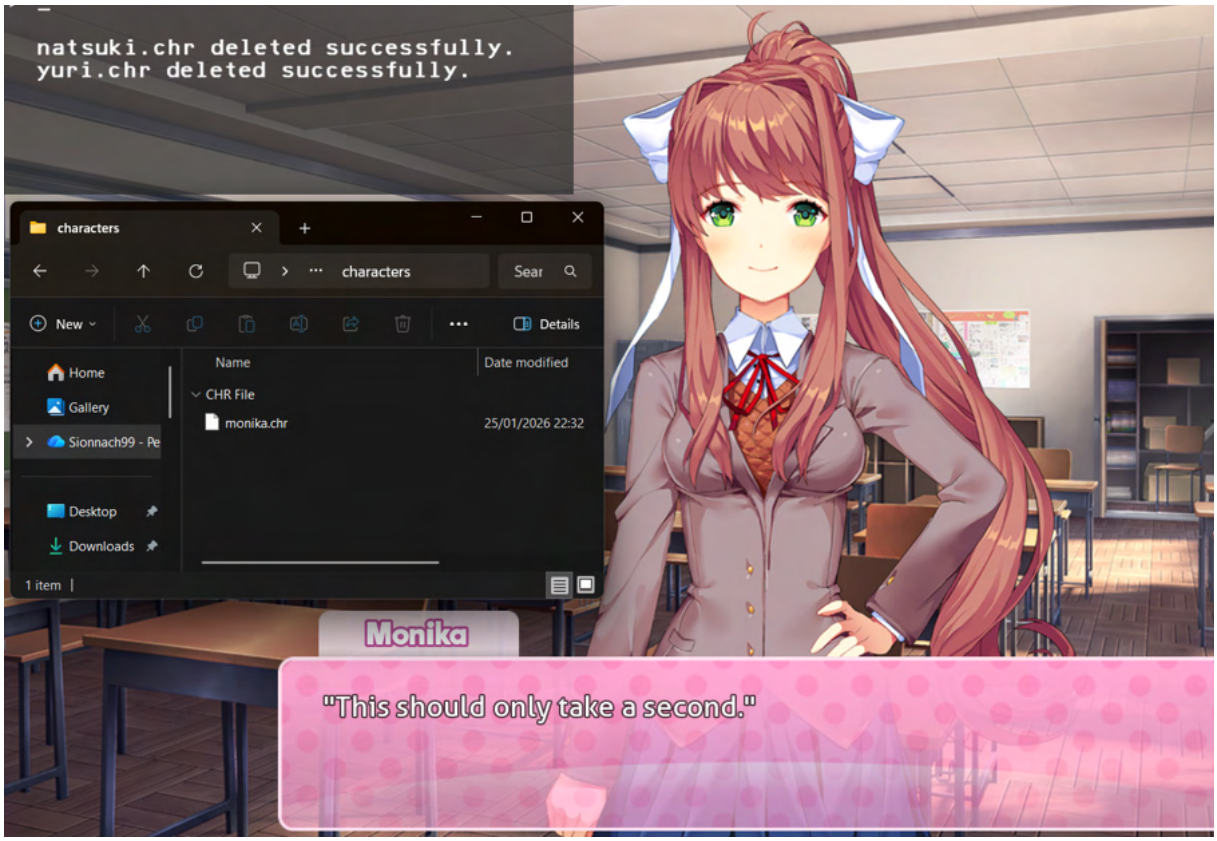

Fig 29: Monika deletes Yuri and Natsuki. Their character files disappear from the game directory

Act II reaches its climax when Yuri, who had been pushed to her limit due to the constant manipulation, stabs herself in front of the protagonist and collapses to the ground. Simultaneously, the protagonist's routine is disrupted from the previously broken code, which forces the player watch Yuri's lifeless body decompose for the entire weekend, while endless nonsensical dialogue forms randomly (Fig 28). Right before this happens, a new file called "have a nice weekend!" gets dropped into the directory, implying that Monika knew this was going to happen. When Monika returns to school on Monday, she seems legitimately surprised at Yuri's suicide, however, just like with Sayori, she deletes Yuri's character file and Natsuki's along with it, causing the game to restart once again, marking the beginning of Act III (Fig 29).

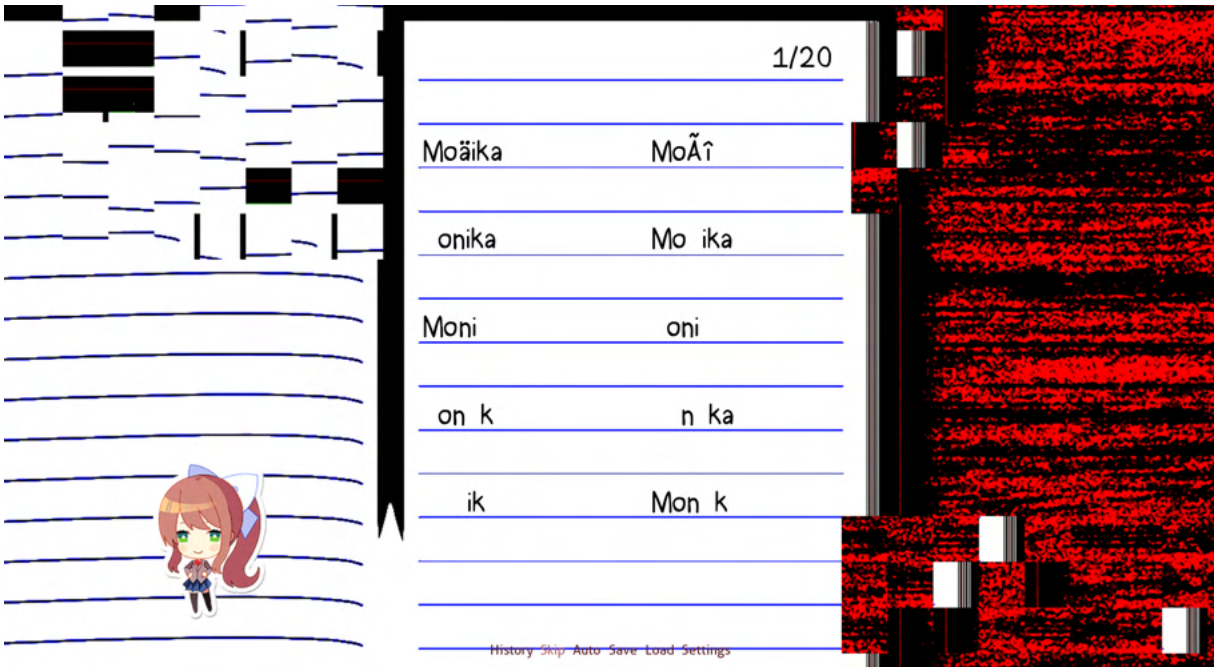

Fig 30: The poem-writing gameplay is glitched and broken

Fig 31: The option to save no longer works

Fig 32: Monika glitches violently when the player deletes her character file

Act III merely consists of the protagonist and Monika sitting at a table together, where she explains how she became aware she's confined to a video game, and that she's fallen in love with the person playing the game, not the protagonist. She talks about how she manipulated the other characters to make them unappealing so the player would spend more time with her, but ultimately, none of that worked, so she resorted to deleting everything and leaving behind just the player and herself in an empty room. She also begins addressing the player by their real name, not the name given to the protagonist. After explaining her side of the story, she asks the player to spend an eternity with her in this tiny room, talking with her, spending time with her and writing poems for her in the now-broken gameplay (Fig 30).

Act III could go on forever if the player chooses to let it. Monika has a total of 55 conversation topics that will play out at random, circling back to the first one after all have been covered. Some of these topics include expressing her desire to physically be with the player, questioning her religious beliefs, contemplating what it would be like to die, criticising the game's Japanese setting and the other characters'

stereotypical personalities, what her ideal romantic date would be, asking the player to introduce her to their friends, as well as lighter topics like food preferences and favourite colours. If the player attempts to save the game, she will say there's no point, and that she's not going anywhere (Fig 31). The fourth wall is fully broken by now, and she's speaking to the player as if they're her romantic partner.

The only way to end Act III is by going into the file directory and deleting Monika's character source. This causes her and the game to fall apart, and she breaks down at the player's betrayal (Fig 32). Despite this, she feels guilty and reinstates all of the deleted characters, except for herself, and the game restarts once again, beginning Act IV. Monika no longer exists in the in-game universe and Sayori is now the literature club's leader.

Fig 33: Youtuber 'Kubz Scouts' has his real name revealed by Monika

The disturbing and invasive acts of messing with computer files, using the UI to communicate with the player and addressing the player by their real name, are things that no other visual novel has done before, and it has caused the game to fall under intense scrutiny by the public and media outlets, particularly in June of 2018, following the suicide of 15-year-old Ben Walmsley, who was allegedly a fan of the game. Ben's father, Darren Walmsley, attributed his son's death directly to the influence of the game, claiming that the game's depictions of suicide and its emotionally manipulative characters "dragged him in." He stated "It is free to download but once you get into it, it will not leave you alone. The characters befriend and love you and give you tasks to do but if you do not do them, they turn nasty" (Britton and Yarwood, 2018). He also falsely claimed the game would send messages to his son's phone. Although these claims gained significant media attention, there is no conclusive evidence linking the game to the deterioration of teenagers' mental health. Nonetheless, the controversy prompted calls for parental monitoring and the implementation of stricter content controls to prevent younger children from accessing the game (Armacollo, 2022).

There was also a bit of controversy surrounding the game having access to the player's real name. This was achieved due to it either detecting what the player named their computer, or by reading their Steam tag, which is an impressive trick, but it raises the question of whether or not it's ethical to have access to information that sensitive, particularly in the case of Youtubers or streamers who go by aliases for anonymity (Fig 33). In a subsequent update, the game was coded to not reveal the player's name if it detected any active recording or streaming software. Instead, Monika would greet the viewers and scare them as a joke.

2.2: *Pony Island*'s metafictional methods

Pony Island does not encourage parasocial interaction as aggressively as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* does, although it embraces certain metafictional aspects that may unsettle the player. Throughout the game, it appears evident that the other characters are not interacting directly to the player, but instead, have taken the more conventional route of interacting with an in-game protagonist, whose soul is trapped in the old arcade machine, forcing them to keep playing the corrupted *Pony Island*. Through several interactions with Lucifer, many details about the protagonist can be discovered, including their name, date of death, cause of death, and their family.

These details are not relevant to the primary narrative, however, a canon name and backstory for the protagonist actually stands out significantly, as these types of faceless stand-in protagonists often do not receive this level of developmental treatment. It could be argued that the protagonist being created to stand out from the rest was done deliberately in order to deceive the player into believing the protagonist would play a much larger role than they actually do, which would ultimately amplify the surprise when Hopeless Soul reveals he had actually been addressing the player the entire time, not the protagonist.

For context, Hopeless Soul is the previous player of *Pony Island*, having his soul trapped in the game alongside the protagonist and thousands of others. While it's never explained why he is the only one who can communicate with the protagonist, he plays an essential role in dismantling the system Lucifer created. He is the one who opens portals to the game code that allows the protagonist to delete core files and cheat their way out of the game. At the end of the game, he assists in helping the thousands of other trapped souls escape, defeating Lucifer and destroying *Pony Island* for good. Hopeless Soul being self-aware is hinted at a couple of times throughout the game. For example, despite the protagonist having a name, he gives the player the option to choose their own name, and is the only character who addresses the player by that name, albeit very rarely.

It's not until the very end of the game where he finally reveals himself to be self-aware. After successfully defeating Lucifer and releasing the thousands of other souls trapped within *Pony Island*, Hopeless Soul interrupts the credit sequence to let the player know that he is still trapped, and will remain trapped unless the game is uninstalled from the computer's hardware. He reveals the whole purpose of guiding the player to beating *Pony Island* was so the game could finally be uninstalled, freeing him for good.

Alternatively, here is a secret second ending that can be achieved if the player gathers all 24 collectables scattered across the game. These come in the form of arcade tickets and are hidden very randomly in unsuspecting places, often requiring multiple playthroughs to find them all. When all tickets are found, Hopeless Soul will initially be upset that the player spent all that time trying to collect useless artefacts while he is still being held prisoner in *Pony Island*, and will provide the player with a final boss fight to give them the "ultimate ending" he accuses them of craving so badly. Once the fight is over, he tells the player that's all he has to offer, and to quit the game as there's nothing left to experience. The player will then be left running in an endless void until they choose to shut off the game.

This ending is unsatisfactory and could leave the player with a sense of guilt due to not being able to free the character that guided them through the whole game. They may feel that their efforts were meaningless. They have solved puzzles, endured glitches, and resisted deception, yet the core injustice remains unresolved – the person who helped them escape is still stuck. The game has completely manipulated the player's expectation that everyone would make it out safely, and that their agency in Hopeless Soul's attempt to escape would result in success, but it did not. This mirrors themes of limited control and betrayal present throughout the game.

Both *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* collapse a boundary between fiction and reality that video games are not known to do, forcing players into relationships they did not consent to and cannot easily escape. This intimacy becomes unsettling precisely because it feels real. The characters know your name, monitor your actions, and respond to you as a person, not a character. When these games violate

the expected separation between screen and player, they unravel long-standing assumptions about narrative distance and emotional safety in digital spaces. In doing so, they redefine what interactive storytelling can achieve, demonstrating that the most profound disruptions of expectation occur not within the game world, but in the space where game and player meet – the UI.

3: Discussion on Anxiety and the Loss of Control

There's a variety of reasons for why one might want to take up video games as a regular activity. For example, some people may hold a preference for multiplayer games, where they can play online with their friends as a social activity, fostering a sense of connection and belonging (Acaster, 2025). Other people may prefer solo puzzle games to stimulate their minds, and a small minority take the route of competition, practicing endlessly for tournaments or streaming their play-throughs to a live audience and turning it into a professional career (Vareare Miral, 2025).

Video games, when played in moderation, are shown to have many mental and even educational benefits. Mark Griffiths (2002, p. 49) found that video games are used by many facilities to help develop various skills in children, such as language, reading, maths and social skills, as well as support those with developmental and physical disabilities. Hazel, Kim and Every-Palmer (2022, p. 544) studied the emotional effects of video games on adult players, finding that 88.4% of the participants reported playing games to be psychologically beneficial. "The genres most strongly correlated with psychological benefits were music games, role-playing games and survival horror games. Multiplayer online battle arena games had lower scores for psychological and emotional wellbeing" (Hazel, Kim and Every-Palmer, 2022, p. 541).

Video games are also a great source of escapism. Most people who play video games, including myself, do so to relax, unwind and forget about the chaos and uncertainty of life for a few hours. This was studied quite extensively in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, where it was observed how people would turn to video games as a form of escapism when coping with unemployment during uncertain times. While this frequently took the form of seeking social connection online (Kowert and Marston, 2020, p. 3), most people were happy to play on their own, enjoying the temporary break from reality. The psychological benefits of this helped reignite their sense of self-confidence and control, ultimately aiding their journey towards re-employment (Lee and Chen, 2022, p. 353).

Video games foster a predictable and rewarding environment, one where the player is in total control. They instruct the player on how to play and reward them for playing the game correctly, sometimes in the form of material assets, such as powerful weapons, or in the form of emotional gratification, such as receiving a happy ending or developing relationships with other characters. The UI of the games also gives the player agency to save their progress and turn off the game whenever they please, leaving them with the sense of security that everything will be just as they left it when they resume at a later time.

Doki Doki Literature Club! deliberately goes against these conventions by punishing the player for interacting with the UI in the way they normally would, and for choosing the options they believe are correct. It deceptively disguises itself as a dating simulator, framed as the type of game where the player would be rewarded for their efforts impressing their favourite character through poetry. Unfortunately, none of the choices within the game are impactful in any way. Sayori and Yuri will both commit suicide, no matter how the player interacts with them, the UI and game directory will be tampered with, and the game will always end on a dissatisfying, emotionally discomforting note, rather than the "happily ever after" ending that romantic visual novels are known for. Exploring different paths and character interactions will only expose the player to more disturbing content and will not impact the gut-wrenching ending. There are no rewards or happy endings for any of the characters or the player – just emptiness.

Through these methods, the game undermines the player's sense of control by deceiving them into believing they can make a difference, but forcing the same tragic outcome no matter what. This would naturally lead to feelings of frustration, emotional distress and powerlessness over the unpredictability of the game's events. All of these symptoms are linked to the lack of control, which is known to be caused by events linked to trauma or failure (Riachi, Holma and Laitila, 2023, p. 4).

Pony Island, while a little more merciful, is still quite deceptive, in that it disguises itself as a simple arcade game, yet refuses to let the player even progress past the menu screen without the exploitation of glitches. It constantly works against

the player, never rewarding them for progressing and using unpredictability to its advantage by refusing to stick to a consistent interface system. It can create a sense of unease due to its incessant fourth-wall breaking and the blurring of fiction and reality. There is only one instance in which *Pony Island* explicitly interacts with the player's computer, and it's when it mimics a friend sending a message on Steam. While this could be considered extremely invasive, developer Daniel Mullins (2020) justified it in an interview with Jake Theriault. "So any game on Steam has access to the Steam API, which is a set of functions that can provide you with information – one of them is just "Get Friends", and this is intended I imagine to be used for built-in social functionality, like an in-game menu to invite your friends to the match, but once I realized I could kind of get this information, my mind started racing on how I could use it best to freak people out." (Mullins, 2020)

Mullins was very explicit in his intentions to scare the player through his metanarrative methods, telling the story through the breaking of the fourth wall and shattering of multiple facades throughout the game, constantly bringing attention to its self-awareness and own artificiality (Theriault, 2020). "My first thought was to do this thing where the entire game is within the options menu of another game – and what is that other game? Oh maybe it's this – it appears to be this cute thing, but it's actually created by the Devil." (Mullins, 2020)

Ultimately, video games are valued for their predictability, rewards, and the sense of control they offer players, all of which are deliberately subverted to create the sense of unease and discomfort in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. They exploit the player's expectations of agency, safety, and emotional payoff, instead using deception, metanarrative techniques, and fourth-wall breaking to induce discomfort, frustration, and a profound loss of control. By doing so, they stand in stark contrast to the traditional psychological benefits associated with gaming, demonstrating how interactive media can also be used to simulate feelings commonly linked to trauma, powerlessness, and uncertainty. These titles highlight the unique capacity of video games not only to comfort and empower, but also to unsettle and challenge players in ways that are distinct from other narrative forms, setting the foundation for further discussion on how agency, and player expectation function within interactive horror.

Conclusion

Having assessed the impact these games have had on their fanbases, it's quite apparent that *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* demonstrate that unconventional user interfaces can function as integral narrative devices rather than neutral tools for interaction. Both games intentionally break these norms by breaking menus, changing the UI systems and refusing to behave in predictable ways, forcing the player to engage with the interface itself as part of the narrative, as opposed to interacting with it passively like one may do with conventional games. This results in the comfortable predictability being constantly challenged, leaving the player with a sense of unease and entrapment.

This design approach directly contributes to the discomfort players often feel while playing these games. By removing reliable patterns and undermining player agency, the games evoke anxiety and helplessness, mirroring psychological experiences associated with loss of control. Players are no longer guided by clear rules or consistent feedback, which destabilizes their sense of mastery and safety. *Doki Doki Literature Club!* punishes the player for every decision they make, killing off characters and attempting to hold the player responsible for what happened. *Pony Island* has zero predictability, constantly switching up the user interface and gaming systems, leaving little time for the player to adjust and build a consistent system in their mind. The feeling that the game is antagonistic, or even aware of the player, intensifies unease, as familiar boundaries between player and system are deliberately blurred.

Ultimately, the discomfort produced by these unconventional interfaces is not coincidental but essential to the games' storylines and impact. Both of these games use confusion, unpredictability, frustration and anxiety as a means of deepening emotional engagement and reinforcing their themes. By leveraging interface manipulation to provoke unease, these games expand the possibilities of interactive storytelling, demonstrating that discomfort can be a meaningful and effective design strategy rather than a limitation to be avoided.

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