

Serious ‘techno-intimacy’

Perceiving Japanese dating simulation video games as serious games

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Abstract

In present paper, I will argue that Japanese dating simulation video games can be considered as serious games. Prior to advancing my main argument, I will introduce the popular dating sim *LovePlus* and relate it to the historization of the concept of ‘techno-intimacy’ within the Japanese society. For further contextualization of the field, I will theorize the audience at which dating sims are aimed. Definitions by other scholars concerning serious games will form the theoretical framework in which I demonstrate that we can indeed perceive Japanese dating sims as serious games.

Keywords: serious games, dating sims, LovePlus, techno-intimacy, otaku culture

Introduction

It's Sunday and I meet her at the harbour. The sound of waves in the distance and seagulls above my head when I meet her. She's wearing a white shirt and slightly darker turtleneck, a pink tank top beneath it. As usual, she's also wearing her pink ribbon in her hair. We've known each other for about a month and started dating last week. We decided to stop by at a café near the beach when she asks whether I often date girls. I have to admit that she's my first real date, after which she teases me by calling me teacher. She giggles. At sunset, we take a stroll along the shores. She looks like a model with the setting sun and sparkling sea behind her. Once we're in front of her home, she blushes and rhetorically asks whether it was a real date. Before I can answer, she waves at me and runs towards her home. Upon entering my room, I receive a text message from her. 'It's already bedtime for me, so good night. You better get to bed early, too, okay?' I smile and wonder where this is going.

This excerpt could have been from a diary, but it actually is a description of an event from the dating simulation video game *LovePlus*, developed by Konami and released for Nintendo

DS in 2009. In this game, players fulfil the role of a second year transfer student, whose personality is determined by blood type and self-reference.¹² After finding a job at a family restaurant, joining the library committee and train at the local tennis club, he becomes engaged with three female characters, of which each one is associated with one of the previously mentioned activities. In my case, I happen to get along best with the timid classmate Manaka Takane, who excels in schoolwork and tennis, but has never been to a fast food restaurant before.

The ‘gameplay’ of *LovePlus* can generally be separated into two sections. I use single apostrophes here to indicate that there is no actual ‘play’ in the traditional sense of the word to speak of. Advancing the story requires the player to tap the screen to select an option or scroll through narratives and dialogues. During the first section of the game, the player has to boost his personality (athletics, intelligence, sensitivity and charm) by engaging in various activities, such as preparing for next day’s lectures or attending at a committee meeting, to be able to converse and eventually impress the female characters. The goal for this first section is to have a girl confessing her love to the player, which has to be achieved through conversation, walking home together, exchanging text messages and numerous dates, of which one described above.

Once a girl confesses her love and the player indicates this feeling is mutual, a kiss follows (again by tapping the touch screen) and the credits roll. The girl asks the player to save the game before the start of the second section, where the aspect of dating simulation is taking to a higher level. The game allows the player to choose between ‘real-time mode’ (in which the game’s clock matches the Nintendo DS’ clock, and thus advances in real time) and ‘skip mode’ (one day in the game equals a few minutes in real time, like in the first section of the game). In ‘real-time mode’, the player has the ability to call his girlfriend during classes to meet her afterwards to talk, often literally via the Nintendo DS’ internal microphone, and schedule a date, at which the player has to attend in real-time. The goal of this second part and ultimate achievement of *LovePlus* for the player is to maintain a healthy relationship and eventually marry his favourite girl.

¹ The protagonist in *LovePlus* is male and the game itself targets a male audience, therefore I will refer to ‘the player’ as male.

² At the beginning of the game, the player can choose whether he would like the protagonist to refer to himself as *ore* or *boku*, both generally used by males to refer to themselves, albeit *ore* is considered slightly more boastful.

What is remarkable about *LovePlus* in comparison with other dating simulation video games (hereafter: dating sims), is that although it follows the conventions of visual novels during the first section, similar to any typical dating sim, it innovates within the boundaries of dating sims by emphasizing what is called ‘techno-intimacy’ during the second section of the game. As this statement may require some contextualization, I will shortly discuss the history of, and subgenres associated with dating sims before focusing on the definition of ‘techno-intimacy’ in relation to *LovePlus* and other video games and toys. During the conclusion, it is my attempt to answer the following research question:

Can we consider Japanese dating simulation video games as serious games?

Historizing ‘techno-intimacy’

Dating sims originated as a hybrid of the genres simulation games and visual novels, interactive fiction with static images that require little effort from the player. Dating sims have been in circulation since early 1980’s (Jones, 2005) and nearly all follow the conventions of previously released dating sims. The player takes controls of a male protagonist, often a high school student surrounded by female friends, who attempts to evoke affection from the girls around him through correct choices during conversations. The goal of such dating sim is to eventually engage in a relationship or have sexual intercourse with one of female characters before the game ends, often after a predetermined period of time. Dating sims feature multiple female characters with each their own story and branching dialogues, to provide the game with more replay value.

While dating sims most often involve a male protagonist surrounded by female characters, also called *bishōjo gēmu* (‘beautiful girl games’), there are numerous variations among the dating sims. One of the more popular subgenres is *otome gēmu* (‘maiden games’), which feature a female protagonist with male friends to engage with. Other subgenres revolve around homosexual relationships, such as BL (Boys’ Love) and GL (Girls’ Love) games, also known as *yaoi*³ and *yuri*⁴ games, respectively. Another major subgenre is the *erogē* (‘erotic game’), which is more focused on sexual relationships and therefore features pornographic content. Even within this subgenre, there are various niche subgenres satisfying on a player’s more deviant desires, such as *shota*,⁵ the focus on young male characters, and *erogē* that revolve around *kemono* (‘anthropomorphic animals’) or female hybrids of human and mythological monsters.

The majority of dating sims end when the player manages to successfully establish a relationship with one of the female characters in the game. In *LovePlus*, however, achieving

³ The term *yaoi* is an acronym for *yama naisshi*, *ochi naisshi*, *imi naisshi* (‘no climax, no conclusion, no meaning’) and is often compared to American slash-fiction. (Thorn, 2004)

⁴ The origin of the term *yuri* remains unclear. According to the website of Yuricon, “[i]n 1973, Ito Bungaku, the editor of *Barazōku*, a gay men’s magazine, called lesbians in Japan “the lily tribe” - *bara* is Japanese for “rose” and *yuri* is Japanese for the lily. Hence, gay men were *barazōku* (薔薇族), or “rose tribe” while lesbians were *yurizōku* (百合族), the lily tribe. This name was taken by many *bentai manga* and *doujinshi* artists, who then named their lesbian characters “Yuri” or “Yuriko,” so that it became a kind of cliché for the genre itself.” (Friedman, 2011. Her italics).

⁵ “*Shota* is an abbreviation for “Shōtarō complex,” from Kaneda Shotarō, the boy who pilots the robot in the manga and anime *Tetsujin 28 gō* (what became *Gigantor* in English

this is merely the first section of the game, which indeed unfolds as if it were a conventional *bishojo gēmu*. In the second section of *LovePlus*, the game continues to build not only on the relationship between the protagonist and female character, but also the relationship between the player and his virtual girlfriend. Such relationship between man and machine is what Anne Allison calls ‘techno-intimacy’ in her chapter on Tamagotchi, a portable gaming device that allowed players to raise a virtual and fictional pet. (2006) Allison discovers a clear shift in Japan’s ideologies and argues that:

“Techno-intimacy is a sign of the times. While *mecha*-tronics was the fantasy as well as national policy for rebuilding Japan after the war – remaking the country as a techno supernation – sof-tronics is the symptom and corrective to this industrial master plan in the new millennium – assuaging the atomism, alienation, and stress of corporatist capitalism with virtual companionship.” (Allison, 2006: 190)

In other words, there has been a shift in the ideology of *mecha* around the turn of the millennium. After the devastating impact of the Second World War on Japan, ideologies of the nation’s rebuild were initiated by manga and later anime revolving around *mecha*, such as the early works of Osamu Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* (1952). This perception was further fuelled by popular television series, for example *Space Battleship Yamato* (Matsumoto, 1974) and the start of the *Gundam* series with *Mobile Suit Gundam* (Tomino, 1979). This ‘*mecha*-tronicism’ arguably climaxed with the controversial anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno, 1995),⁶ which can be perceived as a metaphorical rendition of post-war Japan with an initial emphasis on *mecha* during the first twenty episodes, followed by a sudden shift towards psychological affection and criticism regarding *mecha* in latter episodes.

In 1996, the year *Neon Genesis Evangelion*’s broadcast ended, Japan’s ideology shifted from *mecha*-tronics to sof-tronics. Japanese toy and video game maker Bandai started selling Tamagotchi devices. Although it sold forty million units worldwide by spring 1998 and the Tamagotchi craze died off, the “mechanical fantasy it gave form to – techno-intimacy – has

⁶ Neon Genesis Evangelion had a tough development cycle. After the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo’s subway in 1995, director Hideki Anno had to remove elements that he felt were too similar to the accident and thus alter the plot, resulting in scheduling restraints and a decrease in the amount of frames that could be drawn for each episode since episode 16. (Woznicki, 1998) The two latter episodes primarily consisted of static images and narration by the voice actors, which fans received as disappointing. After the series’ broadcast, Anno produced a film named *Death and Rebirth*, which was primarily a recap of broadcasted episodes and the first half of the definitive ending, which could not be finished due to budget issues. In 1997, after having Anno having received numerous death threats, he released the second half of the definitive ending as the award winning film *The End of Evangelion*, and included some of the death threats in the ending of the movie.

only intensified in the years afterward (...)"'. (Allison, 2006: 188) Allison fortifies her argument by listing subsequently releases of 'sof-tronics', such as the Furby, an electronic toy resembling an rodent-esque owl by Hasbro's Tiger Electronics, and AIBO, Sony's autonomous robotic pet dog. As these examples demonstrate, the concept of 'techno-intimacy' was initially focused on the relationship between human and virtual pets based on hardware.

Ten years prior to the release of the Tamagotchi, however, similar relationships between human and non-human were utilized in video games, an early example being *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei* (Atlus, 1987), in which the protagonist could summon tamed demons from another dimension into the real world. This concept was later reused by *Dragon Quest V* (Chunsoft, 1992) and ever since popularized by Nintendo with the *Pokémon* metaserries, in which the player has to catch, train and then use monsters in combat. Nine years later Nintendo again demonstrated the success of raising virtual pets in the award-winning Nintendo DS game *Nintendogs* (Nintendo EAD, 2005), making use of the touch screen to caress the dog and speak through the microphone to learn the dog its name.

While raising a virtual pet in the numerous above mentioned games and maintaining a healthy relationship with a virtual girlfriend such as in *LovePlus* may seem quite contradictory at first, both approaches to simulation games heavily depend on the relationship between man and machine, or 'techno-intimacy'. In the case of the *Pokémon* franchise, the player can select one out of three Pokémon monsters to start his adventure with. Since the first generation of *Pokémon* games, *Pokémon Red* and *Green* (Game Freak, 1996)⁷, each generation has introduced at least 150 new Pokémon monsters, accumulating in 646 collectable creatures in the series' latest entries, *Pokémon White Version* and *Black Version* (2010). Based on empirical observations, it seems that albeit one playthrough often exceeds 25 hours, many players will keep their initial Pokémon in their active party throughout the game. One member of the online forums of The Escapist states that he "love[s] [his] starter pokémon with all [his] heart", while another member proclaims to feel "guilty" if he does leave his initial Pokémon out of his active party. (The Escapist, 2010) These comments illustrate that man's 'techno-intimacy' is not limited to artificial intelligent toys, such as the Tamagotchi and Furby, but also may portray affection towards fictional creatures within a video game.

⁷ In Western regions, the first generation *Pokémon* games were released as *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue*.

Ever since Japan's ideologies have shifted from *mecha*-tronics to sof-tronics, scholars have attempted to explain the relation between man and machine. According to Allison, "(...) the *tamagotchi* serves to artificially "imagine" for its users; it operates as a fetish bearing both an absence (a loss) and a presence (that masks, stands in place for, and – in this case – also transforms what has been lost and is still desired). (2006: 190, her italics) Similarly, anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi has argued that mechanical puppets, or robots, of which the first were created as early as the seventeenth century in Japan, have been considered as an extension of the human figure. (2002) Furthermore, he argues that: "(...) Japan industrialized through the spirit of play, and not through calculated economic logic as is usually assumed both by the Japanese themselves as well as by foreign observers." (Yamauchi, 2002: 82).

Even today, this historical approach towards 'techno-intimacy' may explain the affinity between the Japanese and machines. As Allison indicates, "[i]ntimate play goods are machines used for play and instruction and also for communication and companionship. Significantly, these devices are also said to be "healing" in rhetoric that assumed players are already wounded: psychically on edge, overworked, stressed out. Being touched by another, albeit a machine, is soothing: the s(t)imulation of social intercourse." (2006, 190)

As discussed before, Konami explored the possibilities of 'techno-intimacy' between the player and a virtual girlfriend in *LovePlus*. Before Konami developed *LovePlus*, however, it already had a rich history of developing dating sims, most notably the popular *Tokimeki Memorial* (1994) series. This franchise consists of six main games, numerous spin-offs titles, an anime television series and a live-action movie. Despite the immense popularity of *Tokimeki Memorial* in Japan, it received little attention from Western audiences, partly because none of the games had been professionally translated and localized in Western regions.⁸ In December 2009, *LovePlus* received global attention as one of the players, a man who uses the moniker SAL9000, married his virtual girlfriend in *LovePlus* (Meyers, 2009). One may argue that this extraordinary marriage might have been a PR stunt by publisher Konami rather an actual declaration of love, but one cannot question the existence of the *otaku* subculture in Japan, which I will further elaborate before moving on to the discussion of the seriousness of 'techno-intimacy' and dating sims in the remaining section of this paper.

⁸ Various communities devoted to hacking games, such as GBAtemp, offer a platform for members to voluntarily engage in projects focused on translating games that are not professionally translated and localized by Western publishers.

Theorizing the *otaku* and his sexual desires

In an interview with Reuters Television, SAL9000 commented that in “the Japanese otaku or nerd culture, there's a tradition of calling characters my wife, and I sort of thought of [the virtual female character] Nene as my wife. Since I was calling her that, I thought we'd just have to get married then.” (Meyers, 2009) While Reuters translated *otaku* as ‘nerd’, it is problematic to compare, let alone equate the Japanese term *otaku* to the Western notion of a nerd or geek. Indeed, although there might be some similarities between the terms, such as association with negative connotations and an interest in video games, the term *otaku* is much more complex than this, as I will further elaborate in the following paragraphs.

In general, the Japanese term *otaku* is used to indicate people, often male adults, with an – literally – obsessive interest in anime, manga and video games. The term was first coined during the 1980’s and has been associated with negative connotations throughout the 1990’s.⁹ An important work in defining the principles and intentions of the *otaku*, is the manifesto *Denpa Otoko* (literally ‘Nonsense Man’, 2005) by Tohru Honda. In this book, Honda, who considers himself as an *otaku*, criticizes the novel *Densha Otoko* (‘Train Man’, 2004) by Nakano Hitori, in which an otaku saves a female passenger on a train from sexual harassment by a drunk person and upon sharing his story on the online Japanese textboard 2channel, he is considered an hero and entitled *Densha Otoko*. In the end, the otaku and the passenger he saved fall in love and eventually leaves 2channel after inappropriate messages from other posters. Honda argues in *Denpa Otoko* that if *Densha Otoko* would have been a ‘real otaku’, he would not have given up his hobbies for “love capitalism”; instead, he would have introduced her to 2channel and transformed her into an otaku (Honda, 2005).

Although the *otaku* subculture and associated cultural products, such as anime and manga, have long been associated with negative connotations, there have recent been various attempts to ‘cleanse’ the term *otaku*. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs Tarō Asō is considered an *otaku* for reading a dozen of manga on a weekly basis and introducing the

⁹ This negative sentiment was initially caused by accidents throughout the 1980’s and 90’s, as described by professor Susan J. Napier in the foreword of her book on research in the field of anime and manga: “On a more ominous note, Japanese society has on occasion convulsed into what the sociologist Sharon Kinsella has described as a “moral panic” regarding the otaku culture, as it determined anime and manga to be socially unhealthy. The first time this occurred was in the 1980s when a young man accused of murdering four little girls was found to be an avid watcher of violent pornographic anime. More recently, the Japanese media, indulging in an orgy of blame-finding for the disastrous sarin gas subway attack in 1995 by the cult group Aum Shinrikyo, claimed that many of Aum's “best and brightest” followers were also avid fans of apocalyptic science fiction anime.” (Napier, 2005: 8)

National Manga Award for non-Japanese manga artists in order to cultivate ties with foreign countries in 2007. (International Manga Award, 2010)

Since the turn of the millennium, the *otaku* culture has also been a regular field for academic research. In his work on the animalization of the *otaku* culture, cultural critic Azuma Hiroki described the shift in the postmodern *otaku* culture from prioritizing the quality of individual works to the attractiveness of characters in anime and manga. In order for producers to evoke *moe* (the fictional desire for characters of anime, manga, games and pop idols), they draw elements of *moe* from databases, such as the elements of “cat ear” and “hair sticking up like antennae”. (Azuma, 2009: 47) Another significant work in this field is practicing therapist Saitō Tamaki’s psychoanalytic approach of *otaku*’s desires in *Sentō bishōjo no seishin bunseki* (‘Armored cuties: A psychoanalysis’, 2001). Tamaki indicated that definitions of the *otaku* are often exposed to impressions and value judgments and it was his attempt to describe the *otaku* with as few distortions as possible. His descriptors of the *otaku* are as follows: “They have an affinity for fictional contexts (*kyōkō no kontekusuto*); They resort to fictionalization in order to possess the objects of their love; They have multiple orientations when it comes to enjoying fiction; For them fiction itself can be a sexual object.” (Tamaki, 2007)

The *otaku*’s consumption of *moe* databases as described by Azuma and Tamaki’s descriptor of the *otaku*’s affinity for fictional contexts are key concepts in understanding the ‘techno-intimacy’ in *LovePlus*. In order to illustrate these concepts within the context of *LovePlus*, I would once again like to focus on Manaka Takane, one of the three female characters in the game. Like Azuma’s example of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* character Rei, “using newly registered *moe*-elements (quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power)” (Azuma, 2009: 52), *LovePlus* character Manaka Takane’s characteristics can also be broken into *moe*-elements, such as quiet personality, shy, long hair, ribbon and outfit (during her tennis matches). While Nene Anegasaki, the female character SAL9000 married, may also be associated with the *moe*-elements shy and outfit (during her part-time job), she differs from Manaka Takane in that her mature personality is associated with the *moe*-element of *oneesan* (‘big sister’).

While these characters may have been originally constructed by accumulating *moe*-elements, there are many imageboards which allow users to insert *moe*-elements in a search engine to discover illustrations that correspond with the *moe*-elements the user inserted. For

example, if one searches for the *moe*-elements ‘ribbon’ and ‘outfit’, it is likely that illustrations of *LovePlus* character Manaka Takane in her tennis outfit appear, along with other illustrations that have been tagged with these *moe*-elements. The user can further specify the search by adding more specific terms, such as ‘LovePlus’ or the name of a character. These non-hierarchical semantic structured imageboards, such as Danbooru, are clear and common examples, or actually translations of Azuma’s concept of “database consumption”. (2009: 47)

Tamaki’s descriptor of the *otaku*’s affinity for fictional context, more specifically the resort to fictionalization in order to possess the objects of their love, is also clearly demonstrated by fanatic *LovePlus* players. In the year of *LovePlus*’ release, the Japanese website Hachimaki shared messages from *otaku*’s who excessively celebrated the birthday of *LovePlus* character Manaka Takane (Hachimaki, 2009). Manners of celebrations range from baking a birthday cake that features the character’s name to the purchase of perfume and flowers for the *otaku*’s virtual girlfriend. One year later, Sankaku Complex reported about an *otaku* who collected numerous Nintendo DS units and *LovePlus* games, and arranged the consoles in a circle around a birthday cake to simulate a birthday for his virtual girlfriend (‘Artefact’, 2010). The numerous photographs this very *otaku* shot and shared through online textboards illustrate the *otaku*’s resort to fictionalization, as the room in which the birthday was held featured merchandise, such as figurines and posters, all based on or inspired by the *LovePlus* character Manaka Takane.

Defining, or an attempt to define serious games

So far, I have introduced and described the content of dating sim *LovePlus*, contextualized the concept of ‘techno-intimacy’ within the medium of video of games and theorized the audience at which these dating sims are aimed. In the final section of this paper, I would like to explore the boundaries, or rather a lack of clearly defined boundaries of ‘serious games’ in order to argue that dating sims, such as *LovePlus*, may as well be considered as serious games. In order to do so, I will cite definitions of serious games by other scholars and discuss in detail to what extent these dating sims can be perceived as a serious games based on each definition.

In the introduction to her book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009), author Mary Flanagan provides the following description of what she calls ‘activist games’:

"They [activist games] are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through game mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone." (Flanagan, 2009: 13)

While Flanagan does not explicitly use the ambiguous term serious games, her descriptive outline of so-called ‘activist games’ corresponds with the majority of features that other scholars associate with serious games. Of importance is Flanagan’s argument that these activist games ‘engage in a social issue’, which is no less ambiguous than the term serious games itself. These social issues can be interpreted both as issues that play a significant role within a society and as issues in terms of social relationships and relevant interpersonal complications. While a typical dating sim is rarely concerned with political and governmental activities, it does provide the player with characters, often female, that embody a common social issue. For example, in the case of *Clannad* (Key, 2004), a popular visual novel bordering on the genre of dating sims, social issues embodied by female characters range from an ingenious orphan who suffers from introversion since her parents’ deaths to a fragile girl who, despite her efforts, repeatedly succumbs to illness and fails her third school year two years in a row.

Important elements in the engagement of social issues, according to Flanagan, are “most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters (...)” (2009: 13). In

demonstrating the equal importance of these elements in dating sims, I will ground my argument on *Clannad's* overarching and recurring theme: 'family'. In a fight with his alcoholic father, male protagonist Tomoya permanently injured his shoulder, preventing him from playing basketball. After numerous attempts to decline his father's alcohol use, Tomoya leaves his father behind and moves in at his best female friend's home, whose family he perceives as 'perfect'. (Enterbrain, 2004) This basic summary of the protagonist's story arc already indicates the importance of the theme 'family' and its link with the narratives, setting, goals and characters.

Moreover, similar to Flanagan's 'activist games', in dating sims there is little emphasis on "game mechanic, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone" (Flanagan, 2009: 13). Game mechanics, play paradigms and interaction are usually limited to pressing a button (in the cases of *Clannad* and *Tokimeki Memorial*) or touching the screen (in *LovePlus*) to advance the narrative. Branching dialogues require the player to occasionally select one out of three or four options to determine through what branch the dialogue will continue. In *LovePlus*, the player also has the ability to 'touch' and 'talk' to the female characters by using the Nintendo DS's touch screen and internal microphone, respectively.

To provide another definition of serious games, the essay 'The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*' by Hector Rodriguez advances the following core argument:

"Playing can be part of the learning process because the subject to be learnt is, at least in some respects, essentially playful. The use of serious games in the learning process therefore illuminates the fundamental nature of the subject being taught." (Rodriguez, 2006)

Rodriguez' notion of serious games initially evokes a sense of traditional education through a virtual medium, such as learning the subjects of mathematics or biology. I would like to argue that education in serious games is not limited to subjects of disciplines or traditional school courses, but can also extend to the subject of social interaction, as demonstrated by *LovePlus*. While one may argue that the primary goal of *LovePlus* is entertaining the player and satisfying the desires of the *otaku*, one cannot deny the sense of 'realism' that the virtual girlfriends in *LovePlus* evoke.

As the term ‘realism’ is used in many contexts and defined in numerous manners, I would like to discuss my use of this term before advancing my argument. In Lev Manovich’s article on technology and style in cinema, the author explores various types of cinematic realism. (1992) In citing French film critic and film theorist André Bazin, Manovich identifies the function of Bazin’s realism as “the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color and relief”, (quoted in Manovich) contrasting it with French film director Jean-Louis Comolli’s more ideological interpretation of realism. As Konami has attempted to ‘reconstruct’ the female as a virtual female character in *LovePlus*, the definition of realism in my argument parallels Bazin’s statement that “the modern technology of cinema is a realization of an ancient myth of mimesis”. (Manovich, 1992) The reconstruction of reality in *LovePlus* is naturally not limited to merely the appearance of the female characters, but also the manner in which they speak, address the player, behaviour and change in personality over a longer period. Therefore, one may consider the ‘reconstructed’ female characters in *LovePlus*’ reality as a ‘constructed reflection’ of *moe*-elements drawn from a database to attract players, (Azuma, 2009) constituted into a reflection of actual female humans to evoke a sense of realism.

If we perceive the female characters in *LovePlus*’ from this perspective, one may consider the *moe* of these characters as an invitation for *otaku*’s to engage into learning and experimenting with human interaction in a ‘reconstructed’ and therefore secure reality. An example of this learning process was illustrated in the August 14th, 2010 issue of the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shinbun. The article cited a fanatic *LovePlus* player, in real life a 21 year-old single *sarariman*,¹⁰ who considered his virtual girlfriend a “practice for when he finds a real girlfriend” (quoted in JIN, 2010). Thus, while theoretically the subject of *LovePlus*, interacting with one’s girlfriend, can be learned through playing the game, there are also examples of players, more specifically *otaku*’s, who consider the game as a manner of practice for future engagements with women.

The third and final definition I will base my argument on, is taken from the book ‘Serious Games: Mechanisms and Effects’ by Ute Ritterfeld, Michael J. Cody, Peter Vorderer. In the introduction to their book, they define serious games as follows:

¹⁰ *Sarariman* is a common term used to indicate office workers (literally, ‘salary man’).

“As starting point, we define serious games as any form of interactive computer-based game software for one or multiple players to be used on any platform and that has been developed with the intention to be more than entertainment.” (Ritterfeld et al., 2009: 6)

What is problematic about this rather broad definition in this particular research is the latter remark concerning “developed with the intention to be more than entertainment”. Developers of the more popular and thus influential dating sims, such as *LovePlus*, prefer to remain anonymous, no interviews or other forms of information regarding the developers’ motives and intentions for designing these games can be found. While *LovePlus* has been clearly designed to entertain the player, it is difficult to estimate whether the game was developed with the intention to be educational or even persuasive. Although some players consider the game as practice for future engagement with women, as I just indicated, it remains unclear whether this ‘serious approach’ was an intentional part of the development. Needless to say, further research is required and essential to clarify the developers’ intentions concerning *LovePlus*’ development.

Conclusion

In the concluding section of present paper, it is my attempt to answer the research question as stated at the beginning of this paper:

Can we consider Japanese dating simulation video games as serious games?

By illustrating the effects of ‘techno-intimacy’ and citing generally accepted definitions of serious games to use these definitions as a theoretical framework for dating sims, I have demonstrated that Japanese dating sims can indeed be considered as serious games. By following Flanagan’s definition, I have demonstrated that there is little difference in game design between what she describes as ‘activist games’ and dating sims such as *LovePlus*. Furthermore, Rodriguez’ definition of serious games emphasized the educational aspect of serious games. Although it remains unclear whether *LovePlus* was intentionally designed to serve the purpose of practicing future engagements with women, as I elaborated with Ritterfeld’s definition, *LovePlus* can indeed be perceived in this fashion, as illustrated by *otaku*’s undertakings throughout this paper.

Unintentionally, I have also demonstrated the lack of clearly defined boundaries of definitions of serious games. For example, none of the aforementioned definitions state that virtually every serious game is available for use, often as download, at no cost or an optional fee, while *LovePlus* has to be purchased in stores for a price equal to that of other video games. Another characteristic of serious games that scholars rarely define is the scope of the issues addressed by these games. Mostly, serious games present social issues on a global level, such as the “logistical challenges of delivering food aid in a major humanitarian crisis” in the case of *Food Force* (World Food Programme, 2005) and “Civilisation is headed for meltdown. Can you prevent it?” in *Fate of the World* (Red Redemption, 2011). Individuals’ social issues, such as problems concerning making friends or engaging in conversations with possible partners, may be considered as unique among topics in serious games.

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