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A Novel, A Game, or a 'Glorified PowerPoint Slideshow'? Otome Visual Novels as Contemporary Ergodic Literature

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A NOVEL, A GAME, OR A ‘GLORIFIED POWERPOINT SLIDESHOW’?
OTOME VISUAL NOVELS AS CONTEMPORARY ERGODIC LITERATURE

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents……....2

1 Introduction: Drawing the Line Between Literature and Games 3

1.1 *Research Objective and Methodology* 5

2 Context: Playful Private and Collective Reading Habits in Japan 9

2.1 *A Brief History of Japanese Reading Culture: Reading as a Socially Sensitive Practice* 9

2.2 *The Shift to Socially Subversive (Digital) Reading in Japan* 14

3 Best of Both Worlds: The Curious Case of (*Otome)* Visual Novels 19

3.1 *The Different Genres and Japanese Sociocultural Context of Visual Novels* 19

3.2 *The Salient Characteristics of Visual Novels* 21

3.3 *The Otome Subgenre* 27

4 Literature Review: Reading Games and Playing Novels 30

4.1 *Reading in the Digital Age: An Omnipresence of Text in a Time of Short-Form Reading* 31

4.2 *Integrative and Immersive Multimodality as the New Norm for Textual Media* 34

4.3 *Drawing The Ludonarrative Line Between Literature and Games in Visual Novels* 38

5 Case Study: *Otome* as Contemporary Ergodic Literature 46

5.1 *Putting the Novel in Visual Novel: The Indispensability of Text in Otome* 47

5.2 *A Rewarding Read: Integrated Visuals and Audio as Enhancers of Immersive Reading* 56

5.3 *Otome Ergodicity: Guided Interactivity and Non-Trivial Effort for Ultimate Immersion* 64

6 Conclusion: Towards A New, Digital Type of Immersive Reading 72

7 Bibliography 75

1 Introduction: Drawing the Line Between Literature and Games

Traditional print reading is falling out of favour among the younger generations in Japan. With the rise of Web 2.0 and the omnipresence of text in daily life through digital media and personal devices like smartphones, the time spent reading print media has shrunk to a minimum compared to digital reading.[1] The fast-paced nature of the Internet has also led to a preference for short-form texts with images, audio books, films, and games as an alternative to 'conventional' print reading, as literary fiction and other long-form texts generally demand a larger vocabulary and more intricate textual decoding.[2] Short-form multimodal texts, then, generally make for an easier read. This growing prevalence of digital media over print media is a widespread phenomenon, but it is particularly relevant in Japan. Whereas Japanese youngsters read much fewer books now than a decade ago, they read more news articles, web comics, social media contributions, and other types of short-form reading on electronic devices.[3] International research on reading habits shows that Japanese university students even outscored peers in the United States, Germany, Slovakia, and India with onscreen reading.[4] It may then be no surprise that Japan is widely regarded as an early adopter and active developer of digital reading practices.

Over the course of the 21st century, the Japanese visual novel (ビジュアルノベル *bijuaru noberu*) genre in particular has grown tremendously in popularity among young Japanese, but also among niche foreign audiences. Some argue that especially in recent years, visual novels have become 'a driving force of globalizing media culture coming from Japan'.[5] Visual novels—not to be confused with graphic novels—aim to provide a novel-like style of reading by presenting large portions of text alongside visual and audial elements on gaming devices, thus creating a multimodal reading experience.[6] The genre dates back to the early 1990s and comes in a variety of subgenres, the two most widely read subgenres being *bishōjo* 美少女 (romantic games aimed at heterosexual men) and *otome* 乙女 (romantic games aimed at heterosexual women). These two subgenres simulate the experience of dating

[1] K. Kurata et al., 'Print or Digital? Reading Behaviour and Preferences in Japan', *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 68 (2017), pp. 884-94.
[2] M. Kovač and A. van der Weel, 'Reading in a Post-Textual Era', *First Monday* (2018).
[3] K. Sawasaki. '大学生の読書習慣が 10 年間でどう変わったか—静岡県立大学新入生の調査 (2009-2018) より— (How Have the Reading Habits of University Students Changed in the Past 10 Years? A Study of Newly Admitted Students of Shizuoka Prefectural University from 2009-2018)', *Kokusai Kankei – Hikaku Bunka Kenkyū* 19 (2020), pp. 55-79 (p. 73).
[4] N.S. Baron, 'Reading in a Digital Age', *Phi Delta Kappan* 99 (2017), n.p.
[5] K. Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games', Arts 10 (2021), pp. 1-18 (p. 1).
[6] Ibid.

a variety of fictional characters of the opposite sex. Visual novels are historically considered 'passive' games because in many visual novels, the player simply reads walls of text on a screen rather than controlling an avatar and performing tasks, quite similarly to what one would expect of a contemporary print novel.[7] The *bishōjo* subgenre is notoriously 'passive' in this sense as it has not undergone much technological and narrative innovation since its inception, resulting in its audience shrinking by half in the past 15 years.[8]

On the other hand, the Japanese market for the *otome* subgenre is booming: the market value of *otome* was estimated at 80 billion Yen (approx. 570 million Euro) in 2021,[9] more than five times the estimated 14.6 billion Yen (approx. 100 million Euro) in 2011.[10] *Otome* has proven to be an incredibly versatile and successful subgenre that exemplifies the technological development and potential of visual novels as media for storytelling. The *otome* subgenre is celebrated for its high-quality scripts, graphics, music, and voice-acting, and is now even seen as a beacon of Japanese women's exploration of romantic and sexual preferences through interactive fiction.[11] Contrary to *bishōjo*, *otome* works are known for their 'emergent elements' alongside the narrative text, meaning that the readers' involvement in the narrative is emphasised through interactive features such as dialogue options, minigames, and more recently also through immersive mechanics enabled by artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality.[12] Because of these interactive elements and the fact that they can only be opened on gaming consoles and smart devices, visual novels tend to be categorised as games.[13]

Even so, visual novels rely heavily on text to build narrative and convey meaning not unlike 'traditional' novels. In fact, the 'player' of a visual novel spends most of his or her time reading, sometimes for hours on end until an opportunity for interaction comes by.[14] Nevertheless, research on *otome* and visual novels in general as textual media—(digital)

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[7] H. Azuma, ゲーム的リアリズムの誕生—動物化するポストモダン２— (*The birth of game-like realism: The animalising postmodern 2*) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007), p. 198.
[8] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 8.
[9] T. Mochizuki, 'Twin Sisters Score Japan's Hottest IPO by Making Mobile Games for Women', *The Japan Times,* 3 March, 2021. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/03/03/business/corporate-business/coly-women-mobile-games/> (21 April, 2022). Currency conversion based on the exchange rate in June 2022.
[10] M. Tanikawa and Y. Asahi, 'Study to Clarify the Type of "*Otome* Game" User', in *International Conference on Human Interface and the Management of Information* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), pp. 625-31 (p. 626).
[11] K. Hasegawa, 'Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girls' *Otome* Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. by M. Kapell and A. Elliott (New York: Bloomsberg, 2013), pp. 135-49 (p. 136).
[12] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 8.
[13] R. Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels: Differences and Similarities in Experience for Japanese and English-Speakers', *Mechademia: Second Arc* 13 (2021), pp. 169-86 (p. 169).
[14] Azuma, *The birth of game-like realism,* p. 199.

media that are centred around text and therefore require a significant amount of reading for these media to be enjoyed—is scarce. Visual novels are essentially a mix of literature and games: they evoke a feeling of influence over the plot progression through interactive options, which could hamper their assessment by the standards of traditional print literature; yet, they require a significant amount of reading as they present walls of text as their method of story-building, which could also preclude their consideration as games. This leads to wonder why visual novels seem to have been overlooked as a part of reading practices in academia, even though they evidently require a substantial amount of reading. Additionally, an inquiry into the relation of visual novels to broader Japanese reading habits may shed light on their immense popularity in Japan and provide insight into the current state of reading habits among Japanese youngsters in the digital age.

1.1 *Research Objective and Methodology*

Otome is a thought-provoking and topical niche in terms of Japanese reading habits. This is because *otome* visual novels are read for similar reasons as 'regular' novels are: we often read novels to relax, become absorbed in a story, and temporarily escape from the throes of daily life to a fictional world.[15] *Otome* take this notion to an extreme: *otome* visual novels are often marketed to girls and women who want to fictionalise their existence and become a different, more exciting version of themselves. One article summarising the reasons for the popularity of *otome* even says: 'I am sure you have thought "I am so tired of who I am and my life is so boring" at some point. That might be the time for you to try reading an *otome*.'[16] Though the market for *otome* alone is currently a tenth of the size of that of printed books in Japan, the subgenre might eventually come to rival the popularity of traditional print literature among young Japanese women.[17] The goal of this thesis is therefore to establish what characterises the *otome* reading experience, and assess to what extent *otome* visual novels qualify as textual media.

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[15] R. Hisgen and A. van der Weel, *De lezende mens: De betekenis van het boek voor ons bestaan*, (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2022), p. 34.

[16] Sakura, '恋愛疲れも癒す！女子が乙女ゲームにハマる理由 (It Will Heal Your Tiredness of Romantic Relationships! The Reason Why Girls are Into *Otome* Games)', *HauCore,* 19 April, 2020. <https://trilltrill.jp/articles/1391670> (30 June, 2022)
Original text: 普段の自分に疲れたり、「私の人生ってつまんないな・・・」と思うときが一度はあると思いますが、そんな時は、乙女ゲームをしてみるのもいいかもしれません。

[17] Statista, 'Sales Value of Printed Books in Japan from 2012-2021', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/686103/japan-book-sales-value/#:~:text=The%20sales%20value%20of%20printed,billion%20Japanese%20yen%20in%202021> (30 June, 2022)

After all, one could argue that 'even if text as a *modality* remains constant, its materialisation as a *medium* has taken a variety of forms'[18]: a textual narrative may no longer need to materialise itself as a material book to be considered a textual medium, and a textual narrative may simultaneously no longer need to materialise itself in codex-form to be considered a novel. The visual novel genre is a unique and contemporary example in this regard: it combines traits from both the gaming devices it is read on as well as the literary experiences that it seeks to emulate, which seems to preclude its categorisation as games or literature per se. Visual novels thereby tread the line between literature and games, and yet there currently exists no up-to-date academic framework to analyse such interactive fiction. A tailor-made approach that incorporates theory from primarily Reading Studies—supplemented by contemporary theory from Game Studies and Literature Studies—is therefore necessary to perform an all-encompassing analysis of visual novels and do justice to the uniqueness of the genre.

In order to illustrate the quality of visual novels as textual media, Chapter 2 will first discuss the history of reading culture and current statistics on print and digital reading in Japan. Chapter 3 will subsequently situate visual novels and the *otome* subgenre within this whole by diving into their salient characteristics and generic conventions. I will also take into account the Japanese sociocultural context in which these visual novels are read by expanding on two seminal works by sociologist and literary scholar Hiroki Azuma. Azuma argues that many present-day Japanese pop culture works like visual novels leave out 'grand narratives' (大きな物語 *ookina monogatari*) of political ideology and contemporary social issues, and instead incorporate fragmentary 'database elements' (データベース *dētabēsu*) from previous works such as appealing character and narrative tropes.[19] By replacing these references to the real world with fantasy elements and empathy-inducing characters and storylines, works like visual novels lend themselves well as a temporary escape from the sometimes unfavourable Japanese social reality. In this context, visual novels might be seen as not just a technologically enhanced reading practice fit for the current generation of so-called 'digital natives', but a reading practice that offers a means of escapism similarly to—if not more than—immersive reading practices using traditional novels.

[18] A. van der Weel, *Changing our textual minds*: *Towards a digital order of knowledge,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011). Emphasis in original.
[19] H. Azuma, 動物化するポストモダン ―オタクから見た日本社会― (*The animalising postmodern: Japanese society through the eyes of otaku*) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2001), p. 44; p. 52.

The method of this thesis will be two-fold, consisting of a literature review and a case study. The literature review in Chapter 4 will present theory on digital and notably multimodal reading habits, and elaborate on the increasing interplay between the fields of literature and games in recent years. Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) will function as the mainstay for this literature review. Aarseth's work provides a literary analysis of the concept of 'cybertext', which Aarseth defines as interactive pieces of fiction that are commonly read on computers and therefore border the disciplines of both Literary/Reading Studies and Game Studies. He coins the term 'ergodic literature', referring to digital literature for which the reader has to actively make an effort to traverse the full text through a range of choices and interactive elements.[20] Such interactive fiction encompasses not only that composed of hypertext, for example, but also covers early adventure games for home computers that rely heavily on text.[21] In this context, the visual novel genre could be seen as a more up-to-date example of ergodic literature. Aarseth's work could seem obsolete because of its age given the fact that technology in general has developed rapidly from the 1990s until now, yet this is precisely the reason why Aarseth's *Cybertext* is a seminal work for the analysis of contemporary visual novels. Though early forms of interactive fiction were initially hailed as promising interactive media with great potential to shape the future of reading, their popularity among readers and scholars alike died down around the turn of the millennium.[22] At the same time, the continually improving graphic quality of games and the proliferation of the gaming industry shifted the focus away from text-based games. This development culminated into the formation of Game Studies as a separate academic field in the early 2000s.[23] Because of this, there currently exists no homogenous theoretical framework for the analysis of ergodic literature aside from Aarseth's book. This gap of two and a half decades emphasises all the more why visual novels deserve more attention in contemporary academia, as this genre revives the bygone debate of the blurred line between literature and games.

In order to contextualise Aarseth's discussion of ergodic literature in the contemporary academic discourse of digital reading and converging media types, the literature review will open with literature on contemporary digital reading habits from the

[20] E. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 1.
[21] Ibid, p. 12-13.
[22] A. Mangen and A. van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?', *Convergence* 23 (2017), pp. 166-81 (p. 167).
[23] For example, see S. Deterding, 'The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research', *Games and Culture* 12 (2017), pp. 521-43.

perspective of Reading Studies, such as Ruud Hisgen and Adriaan van der Weel's *De Lezende Mens* and Naomi Baron's *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio*. This theory will be supplemented with a selection of secondary sources exploring interactive elements in literature and narrativity in games to illustrate the convergence of Literature Studies and Game Studies on a broader scale. Chapter 5 will subsequently apply the theory introduced in the literature review in a case study that examines a corpus of Japanese *otome* visual novels in order to provide insight into their role as part of contemporary digital reading habits. Some of these *otome* series are longstanding franchises that have existed for at least a decade, and to which new additions are still regularly released. Through a thorough analysis of *otome*, I hope to explain the uniqueness of visual novels and establish the genre as a new, digital type of immersive reading that is a logical product of the digital age.

2 Context: Playful Private and Collective Reading Habits in Japan

Japan has an incredibly rich history of reading practices, spanning over many centuries and including a wide variety of media for reading. This chapter will provide a brief history of Japanese reading culture, and aims to illuminate the position of the comparatively recent *otome* visual novel phenomenon in relation to the reading practices that preceded it.

2.1 *A Brief History of Japanese Reading Culture: Reading as a Socially Sensitive Practice*

Reading culture in Japan is rooted in Japan's historical ties to China, dating back to the 5th century A.D. when the Chinese script was first introduced in Japan.[24] At the time, the Japanese had no writing system of their own. Continued interaction between the two civilizations resulted in the adoption of Chinese logographs (漢字 *kanji*) by the Japanese male elite in order to produce script that could be—to an extent—understood by speakers of both languages. While *kanji* was considered the formal writing system mostly used by men for official texts, the Japanese also created simplified characters out of these *kanji*, called *hiragana,* which was used as an informal writing system for entertaining texts and literature read by both men and women.[25] This distinction between public/male and private/female script continued well into the Heian period (approx. 8th-12th century) known for its highly literate court culture. In Heian court life, literacy was also associated with one's social skills and a collective mindset: literate court members were expected to be familiar with Chinese and Japanese classical literature and poetry, as these works would be regularly alluded to in daily conversation.[26]

The conception of reading as a social activity remained present in Japan after the Heian period as well. As these subsequent eras (approx. 13th-18th century) preceded the mass-production of literature, it was common practice for family and friends to share popular literature and read in groups. Literacy (as well as authorship) in general was still mostly restricted to the wealthy few. Multimodal texts became increasingly common, which provided visual aids and lavish depictions of what was happening in the actual text. The most well-known example of this is *Genji Monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji'), a classic 11th-century text about courtly love. Though the original manuscript no longer exists, the work was

[24] A.T. Kamei-Dyche, 'The History of Books and Print Culture in Japan: The State of the Discipline', *Book History* 14 (2011), pp. 270-304 (p. 270).
[25] Ibid., p. 271.
[26] A.T. Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature* (2017), n.pag. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.287>

published anew many times and many renditions of the work were accompanied by elaborately illustrated picture scrolls as early as the 12th century. The popularity of *Genji Monogatari* saw a great revival in the 17th century. This resulted in a wealth of picture scrolls (絵巻 *emaki*) and artistic renditions of the work in *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵, lit. 'pictures of the floating world') style, meaning woodblock prints emphasising hedonist and transient topics such as nature, female beauty, the pleasure districts, and pornography (see Fig. 1).[27] The ease and speed with which woodblock prints could be produced, even in colour, led to a surge in multimodal texts and an abundance of beautiful works of art available for the masses at a low cost.[28] In a more general sense, then, reading was mainly a leisurely practice to escape the hardships of contemporary life in the late medieval to early modern period, and continued to function as such for the centuries to come.

Fig 1: A typical *ukiyo-e* print by Kitagawa Utamaro, depicting a courtesan with a young client.[29]

With the end of the period of military governance and the dawn of the Meiji Restoration in the latter half of the 19th century came also the rise of the large-scale production of printed books, including serialised fiction, self-help books, picture books, and tourist guides, but also Japanese translations of 'Western learning' books covering topics such as science, philosophy, and fiction.[30] This is strikingly similar to the popular types of

[27] Kamei-Dyche, 'The History of Books and Print Culture in Japan', p. 273.
[28] Ibid., p. 275.
[29] MET, 'Erotic Print', <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60027894> (7 June, 2022)
[30] Kamei-Dyche, 'The History of Books and Print Culture in Japan', p. 275; 277.

printed literature in European countries in the 19th century.[31] Early newspapers, or *kawaraban,* were also pivotal to the development of early modern print culture in Japan, and they are even considered the 'forerunners of the Western-style newspapers that developed in the late[-]nineteenth century'.[32] This allowed for a wide variety of (continued) readerships and led to a surge in literacy.[33] The appearance of fiction in such media simultaneously promoted easy access to literature and an increase in leisurely reading, as it could now be read easily and by any literate Japanese. As was the case in many countries across the world, literature and literacy were beacons of modernisation in Japan, and Tokyo's Kanda-Jinbochō book town fulfilled an important social function as the centre of the Japanese book trade and publishing industry from the 19th century onwards.[34]

The mass-production of readily accessible print literature also led to an increase in the time people spent reading alone, as sharing books was no longer a prerequisite. However, collective reading practices such as sharing books and reading in groups remained popular: book clubs have long provided an especially important platform for young Japanese girls to 'greatly enhance the pleasure of the text while also providing girls with the opportunity to consider more pragmatic issues of everyday life'.[35] This trend continued with the rise of Japanese girls' magazines around 1900, which offered readers' columns for readers to submit their own contributions regarding the stories featured in the magazine. This helped shape a sense of commonality among the magazine's audience of young girls, which culminated in conventions where readers could meet their favourite authors as well as likeminded readers.[36] On a broader scale, reading continued to be seen as a highly esteemed social practice that served a greater (national) good more than writing or speaking could, especially since it was paid close attention to schools: according to Kamei-Dyche, reading supposedly helped young pupils 'understand the national essence and their duty to safeguard it'.[37] Reading was therefore seen as a vital tool for becoming a modern citizen and for fostering a sense of communality among the Japanese people.

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[31] J. Mollier and M. Cachin, 'A Continent of Texts: Europe 1800-1890', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by S. Eliot and J. Rose, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 303-14 (pp. 308-310).
[32] Ibid., p. 275.
[33] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.
[34] A.T. Kamei-Dyche, 'Mapping the Intellectual Landscape: Bookstores and the Book Towns in the Late Era', *Annals of Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University: Linguistics, Literature and Methodology of Teaching* 16 (2016), pp. 267-76 (p. 272).
[35] T. Aoyama and B. Hartley, 'Introduction', in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan,* ed. by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-14 (p. 5).
[36] H. Tsuchiya Dollase, 'Ribbons Undone: The *Shōjo* Story Debates in Prewar Japan', in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan,* ed. by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 80-91 (p. 82).
[37] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.

Even from the mid-20th century onwards, reading remains an important part of Japanese daily life, but the ways in which it does so have changed considerably compared to previous centuries. In general, the Japanese literacy rate was estimated at 99% in 2021, and reading is still actively encouraged by the Japanese government.[38] For example, Japan hosts an annual national reading week, and reading comprehension is considered a highly-valued skill in schools.[39] Since the 1980s, Tokyo has also been the setting of large book fairs such as the Tokyo International Book Fair, which is the largest of its kind in Asia.[40] However, the period after WWII is particularly characterised by an increasing interplay between textual and visual modes in Japanese print culture as a continuation of the 17-19th century *ukiyo-e* trend, which remains a pivotal part of reading practices in Japan to this day.

The *manga* industry enjoyed particular success in the post-war period, as an easy and entertaining read for a wide audience due to the small amount of text compared to the large number of elaborate illustrations. According to a 2003 study by Allen and Ingulsrud, Japanese students tended to list *manga* as their preferred method of reading because 'you don't have to think anything when you read manga', and the illustrations cause readers to 'just get an image of the stories instantly'.[41]A more recent study by Steele et al. argued that this overwhelming interest in *manga* has been detrimental to students' reading competences and has therefore impeded their desire to read long-form texts, both for leisurely and educational purposes.[42] Again, this seems to be the case because *manga* constitute a comparatively simple and visually stimulating reading experience that teaches valuable life lessons, but this seems to have caused Japanese students to mistakenly assume that they 'don't have to read normal books in order to learn about the world and life'.[43] This latter study nevertheless notes that there is a lively community surrounding readers of *manga,*

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[38] M. Yasumochi, '識字率とは？日本の識字率が 100％ではない理由と世界のランキング (What is Literacy? The Reason Why Japan's Literacy Rate is Not 100% Versus the Rest of the World)', *Ethical Choice,* 17 July, 2021. <https://myethicalchoice.com/journal/sustainable/literacy-rate/> (3 June, 2022)
[39] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.
[40] W. Liu, 'The 2005 Tokyo International Book Fair', *Journal of East Asian Libraries* 2006 (2006), pp. 45-47 (p. 45).
This event was unfortunately discontinued after the main sponsor and host of the fair ceased business operations in 2018. Some blame this on the decline of the book publishing industry in Japan. For example, see K. Matsui, '「出版先進国」日本で国際ブックフェアが再開されない不思議 (The Mystery of International Book Fairs Not Being Hosted in Japan, a "Developed Country in Terms of Publishing")', *Diamond Online,* 18 July, 2019. <https://diamond.jp/articles/-/208991> (3 June, 2022); S. Asai, 'Demand Analysis of Novels Released as Books and Pocket-Sized Paperbacks', *Publishing Research Quarterly* 33 (2017), pp. 147-59.
[41] K. Allen and J.E. Ingulsrud, 'Manga Literacy: Popular Culture and the Reading Habits of Japanese College Students', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 46* (2003), pp. 674-83 (p. 678).
[42] D. Steele, R. Zhang, and S. Song, 'The Impact of Manga on Japanese Students' Reading Habits', in *Proceedings of the 2018 2nd International Conference on Education and E-Learning,* pp. 206-11.
[43] Ibid., p. 210.

which makes it an attractive way of making new friends, thereby fostering 'a feeling of networking and belonging to a group'.[44] This suggests that reading in Japan—at least for multimodal media for reading such as *manga*—retains a collective aspect. This is in line with Kamei-Dyche's conclusion that there is a 'strong emphasis on the social values of reading, understanding reading not primarily as an individual engagement with one's interests but rather as a means to acquire a consciousness of one's group and nation.'[45] However, the rapid advancement of digital media seems to have created opportunities for more individual reading and other types of reading practices to develop as well.

It is important to note that the status of media genres differ greatly between Japan and Europe and North America, and that media genres often converge in contemporary Japan. An example of this is the difference between the status of *manga*/comics, animated series, and games: these media are typically associated with children's or 'nerdy' leisure in Euro-American countries, yet enjoy much prestige in Japan among all ages.[46] Additionally, franchises of Japanese popular media often are not limited to a single medium: it is virtually a rule for popular *manga* and games to be adapted as *anime* series or so-called 'light novels' (short, serial novels) and vice versa.[47] Similarly, some visual novels include booklets with short stories pertaining to the visual novel's plot itself when buying a physical copy of the 'game'.[48] It is also common for visual novels or game franchises that feature famous voice actors to include so-called 'drama CDs'. Drama CDs are short audiobooks that do not feature monologues like 'regular' audio books do, but rather put the listener in a first-person perspective and listen to the plot unfolding around them in similar fashion to radio play.[49]

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[44] Ibid., p. 206.
[45] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.
[46] Christopher Pizzino notes that the medium of graphic novels is generally seen as literarily illegitimate, 'disposable and juvenile, fit only for children or for culturally stunted adults unable to leave their adolescence behind' in the United States. On the contrary, *manga* enjoy considerable prestige in Japan and cater to a wide variety of age groups, ranging from elementary schoolchildren to adult men and women. The same thing seems to be the case with *anime* and games, as these also have a comparatively higher sociocultural and artistic status in Japan than the somewhat childish image of animated television series and video games in Euro-American countries, for example. For example, see C. Pizzino, *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), p. 1.
[47] The *Danganronpa* series of visual novels is a good example of this phenomenon. All three visual novels have been adapted as *anime,* and there are even a number of short, original *anime* seasons which are set in between these three visual novels in terms of storyline. While it is not necessary to watch these in-between *anime* seasons to enjoy the visual novels themselves, many fans nevertheless deem it necessary to watch the respective in-between *anime* to fully understand the story in the visual novels. For example, see LUST, 'Danganronpa Series in Order', *Steam,* n.d.. <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1504273907> (7 June, 2022).
[48] This is the case with the deluxe physical copies of two instalments of the *Diabolik Lovers* visual novel franchise, *Vandead Carnival* and *Lunatic Parade.* I will explain these visual novels in more detail in Chapter 5.
[49] Reverie Wonderland, 'Where to Get Japanese Drama CDs – *Otome*, R18, BL, Talk CD', n.d.. <https://www.reveriewonderland.me/2019/03/where-to-get-japanese-drama-

Media that exhibit a fusion of multiple modalities—especially in the context of reading practices—therefore seem to reach more receptive eyes (and ears) in Japan than anywhere else in the world. The definition of this 'multimodality' and its implications for visual novels will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, but it can generally be defined as the combination of different methods to convey meaning in a single medium, such as the combination of graphics and text in *manga*, graphics and audio in *anime,* and graphics, audio, and text in visual novels.

2.2 *The Shift to Socially Subversive (Digital) Reading in Japan*

Textual media in general are still fairly popular in Japan, with approximately 24% of the Japanese population reading for leisure on a daily basis in 2021, as opposed to the 7.1% of Japanese who do not read at all.[50] Notably, there is still an undeniable love for print. For example, Japan has the largest readership of printed newspapers in the world, although newspaper readership has declined significantly in recent years due to the explosive growth of online news outlets.[51] Reading paper media is one of the preferred methods of spending time on public transportation, [52] especially conveniently pocket-sized paperback books.[53] There is a large quantity of media available for reading, both print and digital, and tailored to a wide variety of audiences and reading preferences. Aside from regular novels, the markets for *manga* and light novels have also thrived from the 1970s onwards.[54] *Manga* gained even more popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the market value of *manga* was estimated at roughly 209 billion Yen (approx. 1.6 billion Euro) in 2021.[55]

The undeniable technological prowess of contemporary digital media has also drastically influenced Japanese reading habits. Despite the overwhelming love for print, the majority of reading among young people is done digitally on smart devices and computers, although long-form literature in digital format (e-reading) seems to be lagging behind.[56] A

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cds.html#:~:text=We%20can%20define%20Drama%20CDs,person%20or%20third%20person%20perspective> (8 June, 2022)

[50] Statista, 'Frequency of Reading Books in Japan as of August 2021', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1301195/japan-book-reading-frequency> (6 June, 2022)

[51] Y. Yasaki, 'Newspapers and Political Accountability: Evidence from Japan', *Public Choice* 172 (2017), pp. 311-31 (p. 313).

[52] V. Varghese et al., 'Analysis of Travel-Time Use in Crowded Trains Using Discrete-Continuous Choices of Commuters in Tokyo, Japan', *Transportation Research Record* 2674 (2020), pp. 189-98 (p. 189).

[53] Asai, 'Demand Analysis of Novels', pp. 147-48.

[54] Azuma, *The birth of game-like realism*, p. 28.

[55] Statista, 'Printed Manga Book Market Size in Japan 2014-2021', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/688461/japan-manga-comics-sales-value/> (5 June, 2022)

[56] Sawasaki, 'How Have the Reading Habits of University Students Changed in the Past 10 Years?', p. 73.

survey conducted among approximately 10,000 adult Japanese users (20-69 years of age) of Rakuten Books, a popular online shop for print books, e-books, CDs, and games, showed that only 53 percent read exclusively print literature, whereas roughly 40 percent read both print and digital books in 2021.[57] It is important to note that Japanese read much fewer books in general compared to previous years: according to a 2019 government survey, the most common reasons for this were a lack of time due to work or school, as well as an increase in time spent on electronic (smart) devices.[58] The technological advancements of the digital age have also given birth to innovative ways of multimodal reading, such as online (sometimes illegal) platforms for reading *manga,* web comics, and most notably visual novels on gaming consoles and personal devices. This development does not only include the digital format of literary works themselves, but also the digital presence of the communities reading these works. Although collective reading is no longer as common in Japan as it once was, Web 2.0 is home to many social media platforms and fora for book lovers to share their thoughts with other readers around the world, such as Facebook, Twitter, and the popular Japanese-only forum 5Channel, as well as some separate online book clubs such as JSU Book Club.[59] That is not to say these communities do not exist in real life at all, particularly when it comes to visual novel communities: for example, a lively *otome*-focused area exists in Ikebukuro, Tokyo where *otome* fans meet one another and experience a piece of their favourite fictional worlds in the 'real world' through themed cafés and merchandise shops.[60] One could therefore argue that the act of reading itself is performed alone, opportunities to interact with fellow readers still exist, although online communities have largely replaced the 'traditional' book clubs.

Especially for women, reading has become both a socially subversive practice and a socially sensitive practice, a development which is also reflected in the *otome* subgenre. Japanese popular media such as *manga* and *anime* typically distinguish between male and female audiences (*shōnen/seinen* for boys and men, and *shōjo/josei* for girls and women,

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[57] Statista, 'Book Reader Share in Japan 2021', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/921458/japan-share-people-reading-books-by-type/> (5 June, 2022)
[58] Jiji, 'Over Two-Thirds of Japanese People Say They Read Fewer Books, Blaming Work and Smartphones, Government Survey Shows', *The Japan Times,* 29 October, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/29/national/smartphones-blamed-67-3-japanese-say-reading-fewer-books-government-survey/> (5 June, 2022)
[59] V. Martins, 'A History of Book Clubs', *New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication* 2 (2022), pp. 111-20 (pp. 118-19). See also JSU Book Club, <https://jsubookclub.jp/> (9 July, 2022) and 5Channel, <https://www2.5ch.net/5ch.html> (9 July, 2022).
[60] L. Andlauer, 'Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in *Otome* Game Contents and Fan Practice', *Mechademia: Second Arc* 11 (2018), pp. 166-83 (p. 170).

respectively).[61] This distinction is also made in visual novels, albeit using the terms *bishōjo* and *otome* to refer to men and women as the intended audiences instead. This gendered distinction is particularly interesting in the context of female readers. As concluded in the previous section, reading in Japan is a means to 'acquire a consciousness of one's group and nation'. Paradoxically, it is simultaneously deemed an escapist and socially subversive practice for women in a society that is considered rather patriarchal. Already from the 1900s onwards, literature and literary magazines for girls featured short stories abundant in 'sentimentalism, melancholy, and exoticism' with the sole purpose of transporting its readers to appealing fantasy worlds far away from reality.[62] Despite the fact that the Japanese are increasingly diverging from the 'traditional' gendered division of labour—the breadwinning salaryman and the wife who bears children and runs the household—social expectations and stigmas with regard to this division remain.[63] In daily life, this division manifests itself in considerable wage gaps and lack of career opportunities for women.[64] In the fantasy worlds presented in young girls' *shōjo* literature, however, virtually anything is possible, which inherently 'undermines the social tendency to limit [the female reader's] worth to that of a source of devalued labour, often in the role of wife and mother-in-waiting, or to define and then castigate her as a passive, narcissistic consumer'.[65] In other words, there seems to be a history of Japanese media for reading being geared towards immersion and escapism from the real to the fictional when women are the target audience. One could argue that this trend continues with *otome* works as well, particularly as highlighted by testimonies of *otome* readers that these visual novels are a way of experiencing exciting adventures and romances even as a 'boring' member of society.[66]

It is important for *otome* readers to feel a sense of community in order to combat the stigma of not fulfilling one's reproductive purposes in Japanese society. In fulfilling this socially subversive goal, *otome* visual novels have also been discussed as a facilitator of collective social practice among Japanese women. While *otome* visual novels are typically read alone, many avid fans seek friendships with other fans in (online) communities to support and validate the romantic affection that they experience from the dateable male characters, or *ikemen* (*イケメン,* 'handsome men'), that appear in these works. This is

[61] R.E. Brenner, *Understanding Manga and Anime*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 30.
[62] Tsuchiya Dollase, 'Ribbons Undone', p. 83.
[63] E. Dalton and L. Dales, 'Online *Konkatsu* and the Gendered Ideals of Marriage in Contemporary Japan', *Japanese Studies* 36 (2016), pp. 1-19 (p. 5).
[64] Ibid.
[65] Aoyama and Hartley, 'Introduction', p. 7.
[66] For example, see Sakura, 'It Will Heal Your Tiredness of Romantic Relationships!'.

because ‘dating’ fictional characters, however real it may feel, may not necessarily be condoned in contemporary society. Giard notes that ‘in the world of *otome* games, one’s friends—the members of one’s chosen community—are the ones who make love meaningful’.[67] These communities also converge in physical places: Andlauer mentions *Otome* Road in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, where numerous merchandise shops and themed cafés provide a haven for *otome* fans to socialise, discuss their favourite *otome* works, and purchase and exchange *otome*-themed goods. This makes *Otome* Road the centre of the *otome* community where ‘the fantasy world extends into real spaces in the lives of ardent fans’.[68] Whereas the actual practice of reading *otome* visual novels is private, there are still ample opportunities for likeminded *otome* readers to interact with one another. This is not unlike ‘regular’ book clubs and the general collective social practice of reading in Japan as outlined the previous section. This collective aspect of *otome* simply serves to validate the *otome* reading experience and thereby strengthen readers’ immersion in the fantasy world of the visual novel itself.

In general, reading in contemporary Japan is considered a practice indispensable to a well-functioning modern society and is therefore strongly encouraged through governmental initiatives and in educational settings. In contrast to earlier centuries, Japanese now tend to read in solitude rather than in in-person groups due to the easy accessibility of literature in the digital age, although communities that bring together likeminded readers still thrive, albeit mostly in the digital sphere. This signals that there still are some collective aspects to reading in Japanese society. However, reading also seems to be a socially subversive practice for Japanese women centred around creating an immersive fictional experience to temporarily escape from social reality. In this sense, the larger sociocultural purpose of female readers’ *shōjo* literature in the 20th century seems to be the same as that of *otome* visual novels today, yet *otome* visual novels seem to take this escapist notion to an extreme by offering virtual substitutes to real-life relationships. On one hand, the act of reading an *otome* work itself is mostly a private practice aimed at becoming deeply immersed in the story. At the same time, *otome* consumers come together in (online) communities to discuss and validate their experiences with gaining emotional satisfaction from ‘dating’ their favourite fictional *ikemen,* as the act of resorting to virtual romance instead of real-life romance is considered stigma in a

[67] A. Giard, ‘Many Friends Are Needed to Love a Handsome Man. Sociability Practices Around Romance Games (*Otome* Games) in Japan’, *Diogenes* 1 (2019), pp. 107-25 (p. 112).
Original text: Dans l’univers des *otome* games, ce sont les amies – les members d’une communauté élue – qui donnent du sens à l’amour
[68] Andlauer, ‘Pursuing One's Own Prince’, p. 170.

rapidly aging Japanese society. Having established the important socioculturally subversive role of *otome* visual novels that goes above and beyond that of earlier escapist fiction of the 20th century, it is now time to find out what the visual novel genre actually entails in terms of characteristics and mechanics, and what particular generic qualities *otome* visual novels exhibit.

3 **Best of Both Worlds: The Curious Case of (*Otome)* Visual Novels**

Visual novels have grown from a niche *otaku* ('geek') fad to a widely consumed media genre in Japan. The term *otaku* was long considered a derogatory term for socially inept people (typically men) who develop an obsession with pop culture media and choose to live by fictional values over social reality.[69] In recent years, it has gained a more positive connotation and the number of people (openly) referring to themselves as *otaku* has subsequently grown. The term *otaku* now includes both men and women, and generally refers to people who enjoy pop culture-related hobbies as well as more general hobbies such as cosmetics, DIY, trains, and so on 'more than the average person (一般よりも深く愛好する *ippan yori mo fukaku aikōsuru*)'.[70] In this sense, the escapist quality of *otaku* activities seems to remain. According to a 2017 survey by the Yano Research Institute, approximately 20 percent of Japanese between the ages of 18 and 69 identified as an '*otaku* of some kind (何らかのオタク *naniraka no otaku*)'.[71] Along with this development, the stigma associated with *otaku* activities has largely evaporated in the past decade. *Otaku* iterations such as *manga* and *anime* are now even used as a tool of soft power by the Japanese government to attract foreign visitors to Japan, with great success.[72] However, *otaku* works have not found popularity abroad until fairly recently, and even now, the popularity of visual novels in particular is lagging behind outside of Japan. This chapter will briefly describe the different genres and reception of visual novels, as well as their common characteristics, and the salient properties of *otome* visual novels in particular, in order to shed light on their potential as a textual medium.

3.1 *The Different Genres and Japanese Sociocultural Context of Visual Novels*

Visual novels come in a wide range of genres, quite similarly to what one would expect from contemporary commercial literature. These subgenres include science-fiction and thriller series (such as *Stein's Gate*, *Ace Attorney,* and *Danganronpa*) and games that incorporate visual novel elements alongside, for example, turn-based battle (such as the *Persona* and *Fire Emblem* series) or puzzles (such as *Catherine*). The majority of visual novels come in the

[69] Azuma, *The animalising postmodern*, pp. 43-44.
[70] '2030 年には 3 人に 1 人がオタクの時代!? (Will One in Every Three People be an *Otaku* in 2030!?)', *Trans.co.jp,* 30 September, 2019. <https://www.trans.co.jp/column/knowledge/undrestanding_otaku/> (18 May, 2022)
[71] Ibid.
[72] For example, see K. Iwabuchi, 'Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of "International Cultural Exchange"', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21 (2015), pp. 419-32.

shape of so-called 'dating simulators,' in which readers take on the role of a heterosexual male or female protagonist (the *bishōjo* and *otome* subgenres, respectively) and virtually 'date' comic-style characters in a romantic storyline. A significant portion of its Japanese audience therefore uses these works to satisfy romantic and emotional needs that they cannot satisfy in real life, and thereby escape the often restrictive gender roles of contemporary Japanese society that were mentioned in the previous chapter.[73] For this reason, dating simulators lack references to the real world and instead include fantasy scenarios that stimulate the idea of a meaningful relationship with idealised, *manga*-esque representations of men and women. According to Hiroki Azuma, the success of dating simulators and similar *otaku* media is therefore determined by the empathy-inducing quality of their so-called 'database elements' rather than 'grand narratives' discussing political ideals and social issues, or an accurate representation of real-life circumstances in general.[74] These 'database elements' are recognisable narrative fragments like character archetypes and plot tropes that are taken from a database underlying all previous *otaku* works and combined in a new, appealing manner. Scholars such as Emily Taylor have noted that especially the *bishōjo* and *otome* subgenres are tailored to their Japanese sociocultural context (especially gender relations) and the *otaku* scene, so much so that the lack of this cultural context abroad has led to the genres being ridiculed outside of Japan.[75] In other words, the database elements characteristic to Japanese visual novels seem incompatible with foreign audiences. For this reason, these so-called 'dating simulators' are rather uncommon abroad, but in Japan, they are the most popular type of visual novel and have had an enormous sociocultural impact.

The variety of visual novel subgenres invite different ways of reading, particularly immersive reading, which is reminiscent of traditional genre fiction, as well as playing a video game or watching a film. Immersive reading can be defined as 'a practice in which we plunge into the plot of a story in such a way that we become detached from the world around us'. [76] This is also the case for visual novels: as Saito argues, 'the cyclic narrative experience' of the visual novel 'generates the illusion of the player-PC [player-character] identification and thereby immerses the player in the diegetic world of the story'.[77] The reader becomes immersed in the narrative by assuming the role of the protagonist, which is in turn enhanced

[73] Galbraith, '*Bishōjo* Games'.
[74] Azuma, *The animalising postmodern*, p. 58.
[75] E. Taylor, 'Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture', *Southeast Review of Asian Studies,* 29 (2007), pp. 192-208 (p. 192).
[76] Kovač and Van der Weel, 'Reading in a Post-Textual Era'.
[77] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 5.

by the visuals, realistic audio, and a degree of interactivity and influence over the plot progression. However, it must be noted that visual novels, notably dating sims such as *otome* and *bishōjo* works, also invite specific forms of immersion inherent to the genre. While some readers might simply enjoy to take a few hours out of their day to plunge into the cliché, romantic plot of a dating simulator similarly as one would with, say, a bouquet novel, others may use such visual novels as a concrete substitution to real-life romantic relationships.[78] In discussing the immersive qualities of visual novels, I will therefore hereafter distinguish between the terms 'immersion' and what I will call 'hyper-immersion'. The term 'immersion' will be used similarly to the aforementioned definition of immersive reading, and 'hyper-immersion' will be used in the (mostly Japanese) context of becoming thusly emotionally involved in visual novels and their characters that the line between the real and the virtual becomes blurred.

Despite the fact that the majority of visual novels—that is, dating simulators like *otome* and *bishōjo*—are tailored to a specifically Japanese sociocultural context, it is interesting to note that some works have become popular among niche groups in Euro-American countries as well. A variety of visual novels—ranging from thrillers to romantically-themed games—have been translated to various languages, and their popularity has even led to the production of several non-Japanese visual novels.[79] Yet even though they have constituted an established genre of media in Japan for decades, with its origins in the mid-1990s, visual novels are still largely uncharted territory in academia. Many *otome* visual novels have received considerable upgrades in terms of graphics and technological features in recent years, but the basic elements of the visual novel genre as a whole have barely changed: the essence of visual novels remains that of the immersive experience of reading a technologically enhanced novel.[80]

3.2 *The Salient Characteristics of Visual Novels*

As the term suggests, visual novels emulate a novel-like style of reading through the digital presentation of large portions of text on a screen. They are generally composed of four sensory qualities: text, visuals, audio, and haptics/interactivity. Visual novels also include a number of secondary mechanics, such as branching storylines and features that enable

[78] Galbraith, '*Bishōjo* Games'.
[79] For example, see D. Neri, 'Reflections from the Computer Screen: An Examination of Western Romance/ Horror Hybrid Visual Novels Commentary on Traditional Eastern VN Romance Tropes', *ReVisions* (2018) <https://revisions.pubpub.org/pub/odpf39ub/release/1> (3 June, 2022)
[80] Azuma, *The birth of game-like realism,* p. 199.

identification with the protagonist. This section will detail each of these characteristics in favour of a comprehensive portrayal of the visual novel genre of media.

The two most recognisable modes presented in visual novels are text and visuals. Like 'regular' novels, visual novels are typically divided into chapters of text, often including a prologue and an epilogue (see Fig. 2). The narrative presented in these chapters typically consists of the protagonist's first-person monologue and dialogue between the protagonist and supporting characters, both contained within a text box that includes the name of the character who is speaking (see Fig. 3 on the next page). The reader pushes a button to advance to the next 'page' of text, and may also push a button to advance the text automatically if desired.

Fig. 2: The chapter selection screen for one of the *otome* dateable characters in the second instalment of the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise, *More Blood*. This franchise will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.[81]

[81] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Grand Edition,* (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2019), Nintendo Switch.

Fig. 3: The common layout of a visual novel. Depending on the visual novel genre and reader's preferences, the main character may not always be shown.[82]

The monologue, much like first-person novels, provides contextual clues as to what is happening in a scene, as the visual elements—the background image and the *manga*-style character representations ('sprites')—presented on the screen are static. One could theoretically take the visual and audial aspects of visual novels out of the equation entirely and only read the text, and the narrative would still be coherent. The background images and sprites are alternated as a scene progresses: the background may shift to a different image as the setting of the scene changes, and a character's stance or facial expression may change depending on the situation. In addition to this, the reader is 'rewarded' with a so-called CG (computer graphic) every once in a while. A CG is a still image that depict important events occurring within the story in more detail (see Fig. 4 on the next page). Many contemporary visual novels also include subtle animations in the otherwise static character sprites, such as blinking eyes and moving lips while the character in question is speaking. In general, the 'visual' aspect of visual novels mostly serves to complement the narrative and give a face to the story's characters. The reader needs to exercise their imagination in order to envisage what exactly is happening in the story as not everything is visualised, much like traditional literature. The audio and interactive elements, then, have more distinguished functions within the contemporary visual novel genre.

[82] Ibid.

Fig. 4: An example of a CG in *Diabolik Lovers: More Blood,* which shows the protagonist (the blonde-haired girl in the middle) being kidnapped.[83]

In terms of the audial aspects of contemporary visual novels, the onscreen text is simultaneously read aloud by professional voice actors, although the protagonist's lines are usually not voiced. One could therefore say that visual novels resemble audiobooks and radio play as well, albeit without the voiced monologues, and with accompanying text and basic visuals. However, visual novels do more than just present a written and audible dialogue between characters: in recent years, the use of binaural audio has become increasingly common, which creates the illusion of spatial proximity to the characters involved and 'gives direction to the player'.[84] Aside from voice-acting, visual novels also include background music that changes depending on the situation or mood of the characters involved, as well as a wide array of sound effects in accordance with the events portrayed in the narrative. The character voice-overs by professional voice actors and sound effects therefore serve to give a sense of realism to the narrative, whereas the background music may 'underscore specific narrative events, emphasising emotional states and creating a specific atmosphere, and forms part of the diegetic world' as is often argued for radio play.[85] In other words, the realistic audio in visual novels balances out the rather static, two-dimensional visuals and on-screen text, and thereby contributes heavily to the reader's immersion.

[83] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Grand Edition.*
[84] R. Crawford, 'Half Game, Half Comic: How the Visual Novel Adapts Manga', *Intersections (Postgraduate Journal-Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences)* 1 (2019), pp. 58-62 (p. 60).
[85] M. Arvidson et al., 'Intermedial Combinations', in *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning Across Media,* ed. by J. Bruhn and B. Schirrmacher. (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2022), pp. 106-37 (pp. 118-19).

In addition to text, visuals, and audio, visual novels are especially intriguing in terms of the interactive options they offer, which altogether serve to actively involve the reader in the narrative. These devices, typically gaming consoles and smartphones, enable player input through a variety of methods. Depending on how the reader interacts with the visual novel, the narrative may be steered into a different direction. Most importantly, visual novels have branching storylines: they do not present one single linear story but instead offer the reader a set of dialogue choices to respond to as they see fit, and so the outcome of their choices may put them on a different narrative 'route' (see Fig. 5). Through these choices, the reader may reach a variety of endings: some visual novels even have dozens of endings in total, such as *Fate/Stay Night* with its 46 total endings.[86] Some works also include interactive mechanics that involve one-on-one interaction with the story's characters, such as minigames and the option to purchase and give gifts to characters.[87]

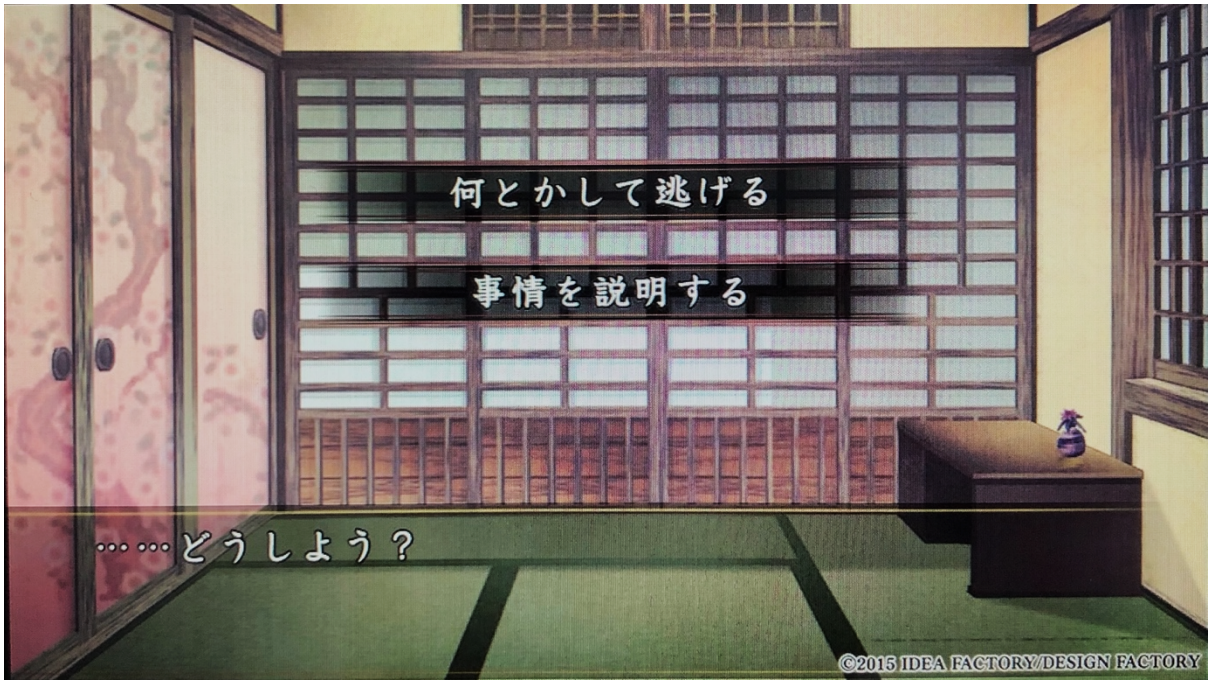

Fig. 5: Dialogue choices in the *otome* game *Hakuōki: Shinkai Fuu no Shō.* The text box reads 'what should I do?' and the two options in the middle read 'try to run away somehow' and 'explain the situation'.[88]

These mechanics are more often than not separate from the narrative and exert no influence on the progression of the plot, contrary to the dialogue choices. However, some visual novels indeed use minigames and the like for raising certain parameters or 'love meters' that

[86] B. Baker, '15 Games with the Most Possible Endings, Depending on How You Play', *The Gamer,* 25 Feb, 2021. <https://www.thegamer.com/games-with-multiple-endings/> (8 June, 2022)
[87] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 8.
[88] Idea Factory, *Hakuōki: Shinkai Fuu no Shō*, (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2015), PlayStation Vita.

ultimately determine whether the reader is presented with a good or bad ending with a character, for example.[89]

Aside from these interactive features, there are also more subtly embedded immersive mechanics in visual novels, most of which are related to the reader's immersion in the role of the protagonist. The majority of visual novels, notably the *bishōjo* and *otome* subgenres, allow the player to enter their own name in the place of the protagonist's standardised name. *Bishōjo* works either do not depict the male protagonist at all or do not show the protagonist's face in the CGs.[90] This is because the protagonists of *bishōjo* games typically do not have pronounced personalities nor many lines, as the main objective of *bishōjo* games is to romantically and/or sexually 'conquer' the female dateable characters, and the protagonist-character is simply a vessel through which the reader executes this objective.[91] The protagonists of *otome* works, on the other hand, are given a comparatively prominent place in the narrative through background stories and more lines. In *otome*, CGs often give the reader the option to display the protagonist as well, whereas this typically is not the case in male-oriented *bishōjo* games.[92]. Overall, the reader of a visual novel may disable the visualisation of the protagonist if they feel that it hinders their immersion in the story. The combination of the textual and visual elements with audio, interactivity, and secondary mechanics, then, create an overall immersive reading experience with room for the reader's personal input.

All in all, visual novels consist of four elements: text, visuals, audio, and interactivity. Among these four elements, everything hinges on text: without the text displayed in the text box, the other three modes—the visuals, audio, and interactivity—would not necessarily form a coherent whole. This is because the protagonist's unvoiced monologue and lines describe the context of the story, and the visuals are merely static, alternating images that cannot visualise a scene in full detail. On the other hand, taking all other modes out of the equation and simply reading the script of a visual novel—while not providing the same experience—could still result in a coherent narrative. In other words, reading the text is the one indispensable part of visual novels, and the other modes complement the text by helping the reader feel more immersed in the plot through character representations, scenery

[89] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 8.
[90] Taylor, 'Dating-Simulation Games', p. 194.
[91] Ibid, p. 201.
[92] K. Tatsumi, '乙女ゲームがギャルゲーと決定的に違うこれだけの理由 (These are the Decisive Reasons Why *Otome* Games are Different from Bishōjo Games)', *Hatena Blog,* 12 February, 2018. <https://tatsumi-kyotaro.hatenablog.com/entry/2018/12/02/235915> (16 May, 2022)

images, voice-acting by real people, and the ability to steer the story in one's preferred direction. The *otome* subgenre then seems to be the most representative example of visual novels for academic analysis, as the longstanding reputation and success of the subgenre in Japan suggests it contains the elements necessary to create successful contemporary works of interactive fiction—a genre that supposedly met its demise more than two decades ago.[93]

3.3 *The Otome Subgenre*

The term *otome* itself is an archaic Japanese word for 'maiden' or '(unmarried) young woman', which is said to implicitly denote purity, innocence, and virginity.[94] The term was given new life with the rise of *otome* visual novels, as the topics of *otome* works often aim to 'celebrate the positive energy of romance' and portray stories of heteronormative true love that conquers all.[95] There are some exceptions to this, however: some *otome* visual novels touch upon more unconventional and sometimes even unsettling topics. Most notably, *Diabolik Lovers* (2012) is a subversive work that puts the reader in the shoes of a high-school girl trapped in a mansion with a family of vampires, which results in nightmarish downward spiral of scenarios including sadomasochism as well as verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.[96] Similarly, *Hakuōki* (2008) is a historical *otome* franchise about a young woman joining a group of 19th-century Japanese revolutionaries who fall prey to a contagious disease that turns them into ravenous vampires.[97] *Amnesia* (2011) portrays narratives of toxic relationships, memory loss, and anxiety.[98] *Hakuōki* and *Amnesia* are the only franchises of these three that have been published in English as well, and all three have enjoyed considerable popularity in Japan despite their curious subject matter. Some argue that these unconventional *otome* are therefore used as a method of emotional catharsis in their audience: like horror films, the aforementioned works could be used to enjoy certain experiences that might be frightening, harmful, or simply undesirable in reality in a safe, fictional environment instead.[99] The *otome* subgenre of visual novels therefore not only includes 'pure', feel-good love stories, but also features unconventional topics that could induce emotional or sexual catharsis. This suggests that *otome* works must provide a sufficiently immersive story and reading experience to be

[93] Mangen and Van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?'.
[94] Hasegawa, 'Falling in Love with History', p. 137.
[95] Ibid.
[96] A.M. Cosmos, 'Sadistic Lovers: Exploring Taboos in *Otome* Games', in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by H. McDonald (Natick: AK Peters/CRC Press, 2017), pp. 245-51 (p. 249).
[97] Ibid., p. 247.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., p. 248-49.

able to offer such opportunities for catharsis. Such a deep level of immersion in a medium for reading warrants a closer look at the mechanics and contents of *otome* visual novels.

Though there are some exceptions in the early days of the *otome* subgenre, the vast majority of contemporary *otome* works feature text and narrative as the core elements. The *otome* subgenre is said to originate in 1994 with the dating simulation game *Angelique*.[100] Though *Angelique* can be considered a roleplaying game rather than a visual novel, it shares characteristics with the *bishōjo* subgenre that emerged around the same time, such as the (albeit sporadic) presence of a text box, a strong emphasis on narrative, and the option to date a variety of fictional characters.[101] These generic qualities form the foundation of contemporary *otome* works to this day. The *otome* subgenre and its *bishōjo* counterpart therefore seem strikingly similar in terms of its format and premise, and yet only *otome* seems to have stood the test of time: the market for *bishōjo* works has shrunk massively over the past two decades, whereas the market for *otome* visual novels has thrived ever since its inception.[102] Still, academic research on the *otome* subgenre is even more scarce than research on the visual novel genre as a whole. Academic literature on *otome* visual novels as part of contemporary reading practices—other than a few hesitant mentions by authors such as Kamei-Dyche and Saito—simply does not exist. The few academics that discuss the *otome* subgenre in detail rather do so from a sociocultural perspective. On one hand, *otome* are discussed as a manifestation of Japanese girls' sexuality that might contribute to the downfall of Japanese society as a whole, as Japan has been plagued by a low birth rate for decades.[103] In the worst-case scenario, women who read *otome* visual novels and become immersed in a romantic storyline with one or multiple fictional characters may ultimately prefer these fictional love interests over real-life partners.[104] This fear has also been expressed in popular media in light of *bishōjo* visual novels and other male-oriented dating simulation technology.[105] However, such an argument warrants some nuancing: whereas one could argue that finding romantic satisfaction in reading *otome* and *bishōjo* visual novels negatively

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[100] H. Kim, 'Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (2009), pp. 165-88 (p. 173).
[101] See Kim, 'Women's Games in Japan'.
[102] Mochizuki, 'Twin Sisters Score Japan's Hottest IPO'.
[103] Dalton and Dales, 'Online *Konkatsu*', pp. 4-5.
[104] Giard, 'Many Friends Are Needed to Love a Handsome Man', p. 108.
[105] An extreme example of such discussion is the case of Japanese office worker Akihiko Kondo, who married a hologram of the virtual singer Hatsune Miku after being bullied by his female colleagues and thereby losing interest in relationships with real-life women.
See 'The Story Behind That Guy Who Married an *Anime* Hologram in Japan', *Vice,* 14 November, 2018. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nepbgx/the-story-behind-that-guy-who-married-an-anime-hologram-in-japan> (23 May, 2022)

impacts the Japanese birth rate, one could also argue that these media provide solace for those who fall outside of the traditional Japanese gender norms in the first place.

In general, visual novels (and *otome* in particular) are tailored to a very specific Japanese sociocultural context, and so it is no surprise that most academic discussion on the topic focuses on the sociocultural context under which these works are consumed. However, despite the interactive elements in visual novels, it is undeniable that the genre relies heavily on text and requires much reading on the receiving end, which calls for their consideration as a textual medium. This aspect has thus far been brushed aside in academic research but should not be ignored, precisely because works like *otome* visual novels may fulfil such a powerful sociocultural role. This leads to wonder what it is that makes *otome* works an immersive reading experience, and how the subgenre was able to become such a successful textual medium that even fills an emotional and romantic void for many women in contemporary Japan. In order to perform the case study on *otome* visual novels as immersive textual media, the next chapter will turn to contemporary theory on (on-screen) reading in the digital age in relation to visual novels, taking into account theory on multimodal reading and other forms of 'playful' reading to account for the visual, audial, and interactive aspects of the genre.

4 Literature Review: Reading Games and Playing Novels

It is evident that the rise of the Internet and Web 2.0 have brought about drastic changes in our reading habits. Although we seem to be presented with more text on a daily basis than ever before, academics and traditional media outlets alike worry about the adverse effects that an abundance of instantly accessible, short-form texts over qualitative long-form texts may have on younger generations.[106] Still, digital devices have accommodated a variety of reading practices such as hypertext fiction, e-reading, and, of course, visual novels.

However, visual novels are situated at the crossroads of literature and games. The average first-person shooter enthusiast would argue that visual novels require too much reading and too little interactivity to be considered games, yet visual novels still employ *some* degree of interactivity characteristic to the gaming medium which would not be possible without the technological capacities of gaming consoles or smartphones. It should be noted that this is not the first time games have sparked such a debate: with the rapidly improving technological capacities and graphic quality of gaming consoles, academics have recently focused on the blurring generic distinctions between film and games.[107] Along with this development, many also argue that the potential of modern games as platforms for storytelling—'ludonarrativity'—should not be underestimated.[108] How should we go about assessing visual novels in an academic context, then? As visual novels are mostly read rather than played, I will approach the subject as a new type of immersive digital literature using theory from the field of Reading Studies with references to relevant, contemporary literature from the fields of Literature and Game Studies. In doing so, I argue that studies of literature (and by extension, reading) and games have become increasingly intertwined in the past two decades, which has caused a lack of cohesive theoretical frameworks to analyse more ambiguous works of interactive fiction that exhibit traits of both categories, like visual novels.

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[106] For example, see Hisgen and Van der Weel, *De lezende mens,* p. 217; N.S. Baron, 'Reading in a Digital Age'; H. Natanson, 'Yes, Teens are Texting and Using Social Media Instead of Reading Books, Researchers Say', *The Washington Post*, 20 August, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/08/20/for-american-teens-texting-and-social-media-are-replacing-books/> (2 July, 2022).
[107] For example, see J. Kallay, *Gaming film: How games are reshaping contemporary cinema*, (New York: Springer, 2013); D. Pop, 'The Gamification of Cinema and the Cinematization of Games', in *Transmediations: Communication Across Media Borders,* ed. by N. Salmose and L. Elleström, pp. 52-74 (London: Routledge, 2019).
[108] H. Koenitz, 'Narrative in Video Games', in *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games*, ed. by N. Lee (New York: Springer, 2019), p. 1.

4.1 *Reading in the Digital Age: An Omnipresence of Text in a Time of Short-Form Reading*

Whenever traditional news outlets and popular media report on the current state of our reading habits, it is rarely in a positive manner. Especially due to the dramatic increase in time spent on digital devices over the past years, chronicles of adolescents 'texting, scrolling, and using social media instead of reading books and magazines' abound.[109] Others fear that not just the younger generations but society as a whole seems to refrain from reading long-form texts, and as a result of which, we have entered a 'post-literate' era.[110] After all, literacy was considered a stepping stone to emancipation and higher education in modern society, whereas it has now become a prerequisite to participating in society at the most basic level.

There also exists a wide array of definitions of literacy in the digital age, as different social contexts may require different 'kinds' of literacy. In 2000, Burniske distinguished between three main forms of literacy (though many more exist): 'functional literacy', 'critical literacy', and 'computer literacy'.[111] Functional literacy refers to literacy in the most basic sense: being able to read and write an alphabet and reproduce the words they form with one's voice. Burniske argues that functional literacy 'serves as a stepping stone to more complex types of literacy' like 'the critical literacy that describes a liberally educated or learned person' who is able to decipher and critically engage with complex texts.[112] The third type, 'computer literacy', refers not only to the basic ability to operate a computer to accomplish tasks (similarly to functional literacy), but also the ability to 'read and interpret' the interactions made possible by computers and the impact this has on their users.[113] Nowadays, this 'computer literacy' has been overshadowed by the broader concept of 'digital literacy', which also encompasses contemporary digital technologies such as smart devices, communication tools, and otherwise computerised machinery, and the 'necessary skills and competencies to perform tasks and solve problems in digital environments'.[114]

Along with this development, anyone can now write anything on social media for the world to see, whether it is a well-informed piece of writing or not, whereas the relationship between author and reader was once a one-sided, hierarchical one that persisted in print materials. It is therefore no surprise that we are presented with more text on a daily basis than

[109] Natanson, 'Yes, Teens are Texting and Using Social Media'.
[110] C. Crain, 'Why We Don't Read, Revisited', The New Yorker, 14 June, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/why-we-dont-read-revisited> (27 May, 2022)
[111] R.W. Burniske, 'Literacy in the Cyber Age', *Ubiquity* (2000), n.p., <https://dl.acm.org/doi/fullHtml/10.1145/341836.341844>
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] P. Reddy, B. Sharma, and K. Chaudhary, 'Digital Literacy: A Review of Literature', *International Journal of Technoethics* 11 (2020), pp. 65-94 (p. 66).

ever before. Indeed, the digital revolution has also brought with it substantial technological innovation and many advantages with regard to textual media such as improved, cost-effective, and often instant access to texts, better accessibility of texts for the impaired, improved searchability, and a wealth of visual and audial enrichments to text.[115] This makes on-screen reading an incredibly attractive alternative to print reading. However, textual scholars around the world argue that the decline of long-form reading and an overall shift from print to digital texts has negatively impacted the attention span and critical thinking skills of particularly the younger generations.[116] Depending on whether a text is presented in print or in digital format, a text may also invite very different ways of reading: for instance, 'deep reading' means to read in a 'thoughtful, typically slow, reflective' way, and is typically associated with print rather than digital substrates.[117] This is because deep reading is particularly difficult when reading digital texts on the Web, as these often include many hyperlinks and audio-visual distractions that invite the reader to stray from their intended reading objective.[118] Such issues have weighed heavily on educational institutions as well, and leads to discussion about to what extent schoolchildren are motivated to read in print when, realistically, most reading is done digitally.[119] It therefore seems that the position of reading in society has changed dramatically with the rise of on-screen reading.

Along with this shift in the position of reading in our society, the digital age can also be characterised by drastic changes in *how* and *what* we read. Hisgen and Van der Weel note that the more we develop a routine for reading, the less cognitive effort we have to spend on decoding a given text: we can instead invest this effort in 'higher levels of reading', meaning to critically engage with the contents and language of the text.[120] Within these higher levels of reading, there are three broader attitudes: deep reading, skimming, and immersive reading.[121] Deep reading, as mentioned earlier, applies to texts that require attention to and critical consideration of minute (con)textual details, such as legal texts. Skimming, on the other hand, refers to the act of briefly looking through a text in order to find keywords and grasp the general gist. Skimming is particularly relevant in the digital age, as we tend to skim

[115] N. Buzzetto-More, R. Guy, and M. Elobaid, 'Reading in a Digital Age: E-Books—Are Students Ready for This Learning Object?', *Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects* 3 (2007), pp. 239-50 (p. 239).
[116] Baron, 'Reading in a Digital Age'.
[117] N.S. Baron, *How we read now: Strategic choices for print, screen, and audio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 12.
[118] Ibid., p. 33.
[119] Ibid., p. 45.
[120] Hisgen and Van der Weel, *De lezende mens,* p. 31.
[121] Ibid., pp. 32-34.

through an abundance of news headlines, short-form texts, and Web pages in order to quickly grasp the current state of the world or find something that interests us enough to read further.[122] Immersive reading, thirdly, is the most relevant attitude with regard to the discussion of visual novels: immersive reading applies especially to genre fiction such as thrillers, as this method requires not necessarily critical engagement with the text but rather one's full attention and empathy in order to submerge oneself in the story.[123] Deep reading and immersive reading have become less common due to the prevalence of short-form texts in digital format rather than long-form texts, and an overall diminished interest in reading for pleasure in general.[124] Contrarily, Naomi Baron notes that audiobooks have gained much popularity in recent years, as audiobooks seem to encourage multitasking: many consumers of audiobooks 'read' an audiobook while cleaning, commuting, and so on.[125] Though audiobooks can be an enjoyable means to pass the time when stuck in traffic, for example (as it is not advisable to read a print novel while driving a car), Baron illustrates that readers of print texts still tend to remember more of the text than those who listened to the audio track or even the televised adaptation of that text.[126] However, Baron notes that audiobooks may not only entail negative effects: for example, when combining audiobooks with text, students with and without reading disabilities alike tend to read faster, understand the text better, and notably have a 'higher overall reading proficiency' than those who did not listen to an audio track while reading.[127] The same has been suggested in the context of foreign language learning.[128]

In general, the types of reading that characterise traditional long-form reading in print, such as deep reading and immersive reading, are on the decline. It also seems that reading nowadays is often accompanied by many elements other than text, such as images, video, audio, hyperlinks, and so on, which—especially in the context of digital reading—are seen as impeding factors to a reader's focus on the actual text. However, the combination of audiobooks and text may have positive effects on reading comprehension, and so this leads to wonder in what other ways 'multimodal' reading experiences can still be successful. After all, *otome* visual novels still seem to constitute an immersive reading experience despite the fact that they contain not only text, but also visuals, audio, and interactive elements.

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid., p. 34.
[124] Baron, *How we read now,* p. 41.
[125] Ibid., p. 164.
[126] Ibid., p. 166.
[127] Ibid., p. 177.
[128] Ibid., p. 178.

4.2 *Integrative and Immersive Multimodality as the New Norm for Textual Media*

Multimodal media seem to have become the 'new normal' for reading in the digital age. The term 'multimodality' refers to the combination of different 'modes' in one medium that stimulate multiple senses at once and altogether contribute to the semiotic process (i.e., the process of constructing meaning).[129] The most commonly combined modes in multimodal media are textual, visual, audial, and sometimes kinaesthetic (tangible/haptic) modes. A multimodal text that also includes (moving) images, audio, and opportunities for interaction may therefore construct meaning in a very different fashion than a traditional, monomodal print text would. Seeing as *otome* visual novels are not limited to text alone but also include images, audio, and a degree of interactive elements that stimulate the kinaesthetic sense, a closer look at theory on the way multimodal texts are read and understood provides insight into the success of *otome* as well.

In more concrete terms, media such as picture books, YouTube videos, and blog posts can be considered multimodal media, as these media combine (moving) images with text and sometimes also audio, whereas print novels typically only contain text and are therefore considered monomodal. However, the distinction between monomodality and multimodality is disputable. Some argue, for instance, that print books that only contain text are monomodal, while others claim that truly monomodal texts cannot exist, as the visible and tangible elements of a print text such as layout, font, line spacing, the cover image, and even the substrate itself also contribute to the meaning of the text and the overall reading experience.[130] Similarly, when the narrative contents of a monomodal text are visually, olfactorily, or otherwise sensorially descriptive, this triggers the reader's imagination and prompts the reader to 'sensorialise' the contents of the text in their own mind. Heidi Peeters refers to this phenomenon as 'cognitive multimodality' and notes that the success of this form of multimodality—as well as the way in which it is practiced—is naturally dependent on the imaginative competence of the reader.[131] For clarity, texts that rely solely on the textual mode to convey meaning will henceforth be referred to as monomodal.

The process of reading itself is not passive, but instead an active interplay between the reader and the text in order to establish meaning according to Wolfgang Iser and Hans Jauss'

[129] Peeters, Heidi, 'Multimodality and its Modes in Novelizations', *Image & Narrative* 11 (2010), pp. 118-29 (p. 119).
[130] C. Jewitt, 'Multimodality, "Reading", and "Writing" for the 21st Century', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26 (2005), pp. 315-31 (p. 315).
[131] Peeters, 'Multimodality', p. 123.

'reader-response criticism' theory.[132] In this light, Maureen Walsh claims that monomodal and multimodal media invite fundamentally different semiotic processes. Readers of monomodal media such as traditional print-based novels require a significant amount of background knowledge in order to pick up on intertextual and intratextual elements and 'visualise, infer, predict, conceptualise, and imagine' certain aspects of a story.[133] This is because the words of a novel themselves may not necessarily spell out the totality of the meaning of the text, and the reader therefore has to harness their previous reading experiences and their imagination in order to interpret the text. In other words,

> the text is indeterminate, in the sense that the 'reality' it describes or evokes is incomplete and requires the imaginative and ideational activity of the reader to develop and extend it, to 'realize' it, in effect. Unlike a real object, […] a literary structure composed of a certain number of words, is only active and significant as a stimulus to the construction of a virtual world, which is open to any number of realizations.[134]

The semiotic process is therefore quite different in multimodal texts: for media such as picture books or blog posts, for instance, the reader constructs meaning not only by reading a piece of text, but also taking in visual elements using one's eyesight, and even exercising one's hearing and possibly kinaesthetic senses. There is naturally still room for interpretation in multimodal texts, but likely less than in monomodal texts as visuals and audio give the reader a head-start in interpreting the text. Audiobooks are also interesting in this regard: while a written text naturally forms the basis of this medium, the way in which (and by whom) this text and its appearing characters are narrated and the use of background music and audio effects may give a sense of realism to the text, and thereby influence the reader's (or listener's) interpretation.[135] In sum, the affordances of each type of text invite different types of engagement in the reader: whereas monomodal texts mostly *tell* and the reader simply follows along with the narrator, multimodal texts can also *show,* and provide more opportunities for individual interaction with the text through a variety of sensory modes.

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[132] J. Lane, 'Reception Theory and Reader-Response: Hans-Robert Jauss (1922-1997), Wolfgang Iser (1926-) and the School of Konstanz', in *Modern European Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide,* ed. by J. Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 278-85 (p. 279).
[133] M. Walsh, 'Reading Visual and Multimodal Texts: How is 'Reading' Different?', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 29 (2006), pp. 24-37 (p. 25).
[134] Lane, 'Reception Theory and Reader-Response', p. 282.
[135] L.C. Larson, 'E-Books and Audiobooks: Extending the Digital Reading Experience', *The Reading Teacher* 69 (2015), pp. 169-177; M. Geronazzo et al., 'Creating an Audio Story with Interactive Binaural Rendering in Virtual Reality', *Wireless Communications and Mobile Computing* 2019 (2019), pp. 1-15.

Despite all of this, traditional reading research tends to focus on multimodality as something that takes away from the reader's immersion in a text as one's attention 'jumps back and forth between illustrations and text'.[136] Especially in the context of digital texts on the Web, it is often argued that immersion is nearly impossible because the reading process of such texts is dominated by 'shallow' forms of reading such as skimming, and that any multimodality in such texts is characterised by an abundance of visual, audial, and kinaesthetic stimuli that distract the reader from concentrating on the text itself.[137] Even in hypertext fiction—online pieces of literature that are enhanced by hypertext links—the reading experience consists of 'sensory-motor (and primarily haptic) interaction with the technological features of the hypertext, rather than a primarily hermeneutic immersion in the fiction being told'.[138] Others similarly argue that screen-based reading behaviour in general is defined by 'one-time reading, non-linear reading, and reading more selectively, while less time is spent on in-depth reading and concentrated reading'.[139] In this line of thought, any interactivity and multimodal elements in on-screen texts are viewed as distractions that strongly discourage the immersive reading process, and screens are therefore deemed 'unfit for imaginary immersive reading'.[140]

However, recent research suggests that digital multimodal texts can indeed invite immersive reading and create an empathy-inducing experience—possibly even more so than traditional monomodal texts—if the different modes blend together seamlessly, and the multimodal experience comes to the reader without their conscious effort. In doing so, the particular affordances of each mode may be given more prominence in particular parts of the story to enhance the immersive experience.[141] Ideally, the different modes equipped in multimodal media are aptly integrated, enrich one another, and contribute to one harmonious, meaningful whole. This 'ideal' form of multimodality is also referred to as 'integrative multimodality', a term coined by Heidi Peeters, which denotes a

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[136] T. Hillesund, 'Digital Humanities: Why Worry About Reading?', in *Going Digital: Evolutionary and Revolutionary Aspects of Digitalization,* ed. by K. Grandin, (Stockholm: The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2011), pp. 128-60 (p. 132).
[137] A. Mangen, 'Hypertext Fiction Reading: Haptics and Immersion', *Journal of Research in Reading* 31 (2008), pp. 404-19 (p. 408).
[138] Ibid., p. 412. I will come back to the topic of hypertext in the next section.
[139] Z. Liu, 'Reading Behavior in the Digital Environment: Changes in Reading Behavior over the Past Ten Years', *Journal of Documentation* 61 (2005), pp. 700-12 (p. 700).
[140] Hillesund, 'Digital Humanities', p. 152.
[141] For example, see A. Bell et al., 'Immersion in Digital Fiction', *International Journal of Literary Linguistics* 7 (2018), pp. 1-22; E. Chew and A. Mitchell, 'How is Empathy Evoked in Interactive Multimodal Life Stories?', *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 42 (2016), pp. 125-49.

> 'filmic text, where edited images, dialogued voices, sounds, music, and subtitles are attuned to such a degree that the viewer does not notice them as separate entities anymore, but sees them as part of the reality of the text'.[142]

Visual novels are particularly interesting in this regard, as they seem to meet all of these requirements: text constitutes the main element of the genre and is presented prominently in a text box on the screen; this text is accompanied by character imagery, background images, and CGs, which provide hints as to the context of each scene; most of the dialogue is read aloud by voice actors so that the player may read along with ease; and sound effects and background music tie the whole work together by emphasising certain movements or events, and contributing to the overall mood of the scene. Leaving out one of these elements would cause problems: for example, if the character voice-overs were to be left out, especially *otome* visual novels would lose part of their immersive quality as it is more difficult to imagine what certain characters would sound like.[143] At the same time, the protagonist's lines are purposely unvoiced to invite the reader to project their own voice onto the character. Additionally, if there were no text, the reader would only be listening to voice actors talking without any guidance by the protagonist's first-person monologue, and so on. In other words, omitting one of the modes would disrupt the meaningful multimodal whole of the visual novel.

In sum, multimodal reading has become commonplace in the digital age due to the ease with which multimodal media can be consumed. When considering Heidi Peeters' definition of the ideal manifestation of integrative multimodality, then, visual novels seem to be the exact archetype, as they provide a reading experience that is enriched with visuals, audio, and interactivity. This calls for closer inspection of the visual novel as a multimodal medium for reading in a two-fold approach: firstly, from the perspective of Literary Studies, seeing as visual novels seem to qualify as a medium for reading; and secondly, from the perspective of Game Studies, as visual novels are often read on gaming devices, which has naturally led them to be categorised as games.

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[142] Peeters, 'Multimodality', p. 119.

[143] It should be noted that many (often low-budget) visual novels do not include (fully) voiced dialogue. Some visual novels are only partly voiced: for example, the murder mystery visual novel *Danganronpa* only features fully voiced dialogue during certain parts of the story, and otherwise only plays short voiced catchphrases whenever a character starts talking to capture the 'tone' of what they are saying (e.g. 'hmm', 'I see', 'yay!'). See Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels', p. 176.

4.3 *Drawing The Ludonarrative Line Between Literature and Games in Visual Novels*

It is evident that literature is losing terrain to other forms of media, such as films, television series, streaming services, and games. Along with this development, the growth of digital media and the technological capacities of such media in the past two decades has led to blurred boundaries of what could be considered a textual medium. This ambiguity materialises itself best in the Japanese visual novel genre.

According to Hiroki Azuma, the visual novel genre, or 'novel-like games' (小説のようなゲーム, *shōsetsu no yō na gēmu*), began with the low-budget *bishōjo* game *Shizuku* in 1996.[144] Azuma argues that the 'gameplay' of visual novels is extremely similar to reading a book, as the 'player' is presented with walls of text and clicks a button to advance to the next page, which is an 'exceptionally monotone and passive experience' for a game.[145] In other words, 'instead of shooting a gun or searching for treasures, the player spends most of his time in front of the screen reading'.[146] The only way the 'player' interacts with the game is choosing between a set of two or three dialogue options once in every few hours of playtime, and the act of reading is therefore central to visual novels. In line with this, Kamei-Dyche therefore lists visual novels among objects of contemporary Japanese reading practices.[147] Visual novels are also often discussed in comparison to other forms of Japanese popular (multimodal) entertainment such as *manga* and *anime*, as they often bear similarities in art style.[148] The comparison with *manga* in particular is not unwarranted: though *manga* are also extremely popular media for reading in Japan, many dispute the validity of *manga* as textual media in contrast to long-form texts and highlight the risks for readers' reading comprehension skills, as *manga* rely heavily on visual storytelling rather than long, complex textual narratives.[149]

Similar research on visual novels, on the other hand, is incredibly scarce, and this disparity seems to be rooted in the fact that it is difficult to categorise visual novels as strictly literature or strictly games. Though visual novels seem to present themselves as a more

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[144] Azuma, *The birth of game-like realism,* p. 197.
[145] Ibid., p. 199.
Original text: 異例に単調で受動的な経験である.
[146] Ibid.
Original text: プレイ時間の大半を、銃を撃つわけでもなければ宝物を探すわけでもなく、この画面を前にしてシナリオを読んで過ごす.
[147] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.
[148] For example, see R. Crawford, 'Half Game, Half Comic'; D. Cavallaro, *Anime and the Visual Novel: Narrative Structure, Design and Play at the Crossroads of Animation and Computer Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).
[149] Steele, Zhang, and Song, 'The Impact of Manga on Japanese Students' Reading Habits'.

technologically enhanced counterpart to traditional print literature, as Azuma and Kamei-Dyche have noted, others argue that the interactive nature and multimodality of the genre notably goes against literary conventions such as 'linear progress and chronological historicity'.[150] This is a debatable claim for a number of reasons. First and foremost, visual novels indeed depict linear stories, albeit within the context of forking routes resulting in different events and different endings. It is also possible to revisit certain chapters or reload a save point in the visual novel to make different choices. This would be somewhat comparable to rereading certain chapters of a print novel, even though some lines of dialogue and the overall ending of the story might differ depending on the reader's choices.

The interactivity in visual novels, then, does not preclude their consideration as literature: this interactivity is integral to the medium that visual novels are read on. Espen Aarseth contends that interactive fiction on electronic devices, or 'cybertexts', should instead be approached as 'ergodic literature', meaning that they require 'nontrivial effort […] to allow the reader to traverse the text'.[151] Aarseth goes on to argue that ergodic literature is not by definition different from traditional literary texts for three reasons: one, 'all literature is to some extent indeterminate, nonlinear, and different for every reading'; two, 'the reader has to make choices in order to make sense of the text'; and three, 'a text cannot really be non-linear because the reader can read it only one sequence at a time, anyway'.[152] Following this logic, visual novels may even be considered more accurate representations of linearity than traditional print literature: when reading print literature such as a novel, for instance, one might inadvertently skip passages of text or skim some pages before reading the text exactly in the way it is presented on the page, which, to an extent, invites non-linear reading. In visual novels, however, the reader is presented with only one or two lines of text at a time until they press a button to 'turn the page' and show the next portion of text, which prevents the reader from reading ahead or reading the text in a different order than it is presented. The voice-over of the lines that many visual novels feature, then, make sure that the reader picks up on every word. One could also reason that the technological potential of the devices visual novels are read on contributes heavily to an immersive reading experience, similarly to (if not more than) print literature like genre fiction. Aside from reading the text on-screen, the reader is pulled into the story because of its visual aids, realistic audio, and interactive elements, as these elements altogether allow the reader to imagine the scenarios depicted better than

[150] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p, 4.
[151] Aarseth, *Cybertext,* p. 1.
[152] Ibid., p. 2.

would be the case with text only. As Aarseth notes, 'images, especially moving images, are more powerful representations of spatial relations than texts, and therefore this migration from text to graphics is natural and inevitable'.[153] When combining text with the power of images and audio, it becomes even easier for the reader of a visual novel to imagine the setting of the story, and especially what its characters look and sound like. It is therefore no surprise that multimodality has become so prevalent in contemporary digital media: multimodal media such as visual novels may require less cognitive effort to process than a complex literary text would, and therefore may be easier and more entertaining to read. This ergodic approach to visual novels would justify their consideration as a form of literature and a reading experience in a more general sense.

Though there exists no elaborate academic discussion on visual novels as textual media per se, there have been similarly ambiguous cases of interactive fiction in the past. Firstly, there are the so-called 'Choose Your Own Adventure' (CYOA) novels. These novels allow 'you' (the reader) to decide the progression of the story through branching storylines: the reader reads an introductory piece of second-person monologue, and is subsequently prompted with a number of choices and the corresponding page numbers where they can continue reading to find out the consequences of said choices.[154] Similarly to visual novels, this abundance of choices leads to believe that CYOA books are non-linear in narrative structure, yet this is not the case as 'each of the reader's decisions lead to another linear narrative sequence with another set of options' rather than providing no structure whatsoever.[155] The original series of CYOA books were published in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States by a subsidiary of Random House, and sold more than 250 million copies worldwide.[156] Some argue that the success of the CYOA genre among youngsters in the United States stemmed from the 'American notions of agency, liberty, subjectivity and selfhood' and the rise of neoliberalism in the late 20th century, as CYOA books naturally emphasise free choice and agency over the plot progression.[157] Whereas the hype surrounding these CYOA books has died down due to the rise of video games, filmic CYOA stories have gained considerable popularity in recent years. Online personality Markiplier gave new life to

[153] Ibid., p. 102.
[154] E. Cook, 'Rearing Children of the Market in the "You" Decade: Choose Your Own Adventure Books and the Ascent of Free Choice in 1980s America', *Journal of American Studies* 55 (2021), pp. 418-45 (p. 419).
[155] D.P. Mundy and R. Consoli, 'Here Be Dragons: Experiments with the Concept of "Choose Your Own Adventure" in the Lecture Room', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 50 (2013), pp. 214-23 (p. 216).
[156] Cook, 'Rearing Children of the Market in the "You" Decade', p. 418.
[157] Ibid.

the genre on YouTube by writing and producing a handful of elaborate CYOA films since 2017, which have since garnered tens of millions of views. [158] Another recent example is *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,* an interactive film instalment of a dystopian thriller series on Netflix*,* in which the viewer decides on the fate of a programmer adapting a CYOA book into an adventure game.[159] In terms of these branching storylines and the viewer/player/reader's authority over the progression of the story, CYOA works could be considered to walk the line between games and literature/film in similar fashion to visual novels.

Secondly, there are the comparatively recent 'hypertext fiction' and adventure games. Hypertext fiction rose to popularity in the early 1990s and could be considered the successor of CYOA books, with a liberationist premise comparable to that of CYOA fiction: it

> turned the reader into an author, liberating and empowering the reader to construct the text, as well as his/her own identity, and representing an anti-hierarchical and hence democratic replacement of the hierarchical and therefore elitist linearity of print.[160]

Hypertext in itself can be defined as 'non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader—best read at an interactive screen'.[161] It is most commonly applied on the Internet, where it serves to link different pieces of text in different places on the Web together. In hypertext novels, this interconnectivity is employed in a literary sense: they constantly offer a wide range of choices for the reader to traverse a text and the reader thereby becomes the author by 'turning an act of reading into a process of selecting text nodes, generating "new texts", and designing one's own path during a reading'.[162] However, Mangen and Van der Weel note that though hypertext fiction was once considered the future of reading, it quickly fell out of favour because of its failure to incorporate the defining characteristics that make literary reading enjoyable in a psychological sense. Literary reading is regarded as a pleasurable pastime precisely because the reader expects that they cannot change the course of events in a book, and the reader follows along in a trance-like state under the pretence that they are merely an observer at the mercy of the author's will.[163] This

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[158] For example, see M. Fischbach, *A Heist With Markiplier*, YouTube video, 30 October, 2019, <https://youtu.be/9TjfkXmwbTs> (9 June, 2022).
[159] For example, see B. Ivars-Nicolas and F.J. Martinez-Cano, 'Interactivity in Fiction Series as Part of Its Transmedia Universe: The Case of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*', in *Narrative Transmedia,* ed. by B. Peña-Acuña (London: IntechOpen, 2020), n.p.
[160] Mangen and Van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?', p. 167.
[161] T. Nelson qtd. in Mangen and Van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?', p. 167.
[162] Mangen and Van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?', p. 168.
[163] Ibid., p. 170.

pleasure is lost in hypertext novels, as it is essentially up to the reader to author and 'finish' the text in order to read it.[164] Still, some academics argue that the concept of hypertext fiction should not yet be dismissed altogether: Pope, for instance, argues that hypertext fiction could still be a pleasurable and immersive reading experience so long as there is 'flow', a concept from game theory denoting the

> finely balanced condition in the player where effort and reward are so closely matched that the reader acts seemingly effortlessly, though in fact highly absorbed through the game, using cognitive *and* motor skills.[165]

Pope therefore vouches for a more 'ludic' (game-like) approach to reading in order to revive the potential of hypertext fiction, so that the reader may be 'beautifully captivated by the narrative, with no conscious awareness of the effort of reading'.[166] For this to happen, we should more closely consider the game-like aspects of hypertext fiction and the like, rather than focusing solely on its literary characteristics: in other words, 'we need to allow "play" back into reading'.[167]

This 'play' seems to be present in adventure games, which is a heavily text-based form of ergodic literature that emerged around the same time as hypertext fiction. Aarseth defines the formula of adventure games as stories derived from popular fiction genres, which include a plot tree with various endings, an elaborate background story, a map in which the player moves around and manipulates objects, talks to other characters, and reads on-screen descriptions and dialogue.[168] In order to progress through the story, the player inputs text commands that describe their next desired action. Aarseth argues that the pivotal difference between hypertext and adventure games lies in the 'nature of the aporias' presented in these genres. In hypertext novels, it is often unclear what the reader has to do or what problems to solve due to the excessive opportunities for personal input, and the reader therefore simply explores 'actively and non-trivially', without much guidance, in order to make sense of the narrative.[169] However, in adventure games, 'the aporia is local and tangible, usually a concrete, localized puzzle whose solution eludes us', and so the player has to read carefully

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[164] S. Kitromili, J. Jordan, and D.E. Millard, 'What Authors Think About Hypertext Authoring', *Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (2020), pp. 9-16 (p. 9).
[165] J. Pope, 'A Future for Hypertext Fiction', *Convergence* 12 (2006), pp. 447-65 (p. 455). Emphasis in original.
[166] Ibid., p. 456.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, p. 100.
[169] Ibid., p. 125.

and negotiate with the narrative by making choices in order to 'achieve a desirable unfolding of events'.[170] However, already in 1997, Aarseth notes that text-based adventure games were falling out of favour because commercial adventure game developers became more concerned with graphic interface rather than textual entertainment due to the rapid technological development of the gaming industry at the time.[171] Still, the contemporary visual novel genre bears great similarity to hypertext fiction and text-based adventure games: the reader progresses through the plot by reading the text, and responds to events in the story through dialogue choices in order to reach a desired ending. It should therefore not be overlooked that the visual novel genre, in all of its similarity to CYOA, hypertext fiction, and text-based adventure games, is a well-loved object of leisurely reading in present-day Japan, even though its predecessors have fallen out of favour. In order to explain the immense popularity of this genre, the ludic aspects of visual novels must therefore also be considered.

Even though there are plenty of clues that would lead one to deem visual novels textual media, visual novels are still seen as substantially different from 'regular' novels and as they are commonly 'played' on gaming devices, they tend to be categorised as games nonetheless. This is likely also related to an outdated bias in academia that games are mostly goal-oriented and do not necessarily portray an extensive narrative and character development the way that traditional novels do.[172] However, some also argue that the interactivity of games precludes a one-on-one comparison with traditional novels as games use completely different strategies to create narratives.[173] In this light, Aarseth proposes that we should focus on a different distinction:

> The cybertext reader *is* a player, a gambler; the cybertext *is* a game-world or world-game; it *is* possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery. This is not a difference between games and literature but rather between games and narratives. To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories.[174]

To describe the difference between games and narratives in more concrete terms: it is commonly agreed upon that a game like Tetris does not portray a 'story', as the enjoyment of

[170] Ibid., p. 124; p. 125.
[171] Ibid., p. 128.
[172] Saito, 'From Novels to Video Games', p. 1.
[173] J. Juul, Games Telling Stories', *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* 1 (2001), n.p.
[174] Aarseth, *Cybertext,* p. 4-5.

this game is solely dependent on the player's motor skills and not on the player's ability to empathise with characters or become immersed in a narrative. The difference between games and narratives is, however, not so clear-cut in many contemporary video games, especially since 'games and stories seem to share a number of elements, namely a world, its agents, objects, and events', which are 'the cognitive building blocks of human reality, as well as of mediated representations of the same'.[175] Additionally, the interactive elements and mechanics of games may equally play a part in ludic storytelling. A term coined to describe interactive narrative storytelling in games is 'ludonarrativity', meaning that the enacted game mechanics, visual design, and the diegetic aspects of a game contribute to the 'story' of a game.[176] Aarseth advocates that games should not be seen as simply games, but rather media that can emulate any other medium, including films, board games and sports, and notably text and (graphic) novels, especially with the nearly photorealistic rendering capacities of contemporary gaming consoles.[177] Following this line of thought, visual novels could also be considered 'games' that emulate the experience of reading a novel, supplemented with graphics reminiscent of *manga* and an audial dimension that may remind one of radio play.

This creates a vicious cycle: visual novels are deemed too 'game-like' to be considered novels, yet they are simultaneously too 'novel-like' to be games.[178] But is it wise to define visual novels by the standards of *either* literature *or* game studies as it has been so far, and dismiss it as a frivolous and niche genre of Japanese popular media if it does not fit either of these two generic categories? Indeed, visual novels tread the line between novels and games yet simultaneously seem to belong to neither category, as they borrow some narrative traits of traditional textual media like 'regular' novels, but concurrently employ a degree of interactivity that is unique to the gaming medium. However, I argue that the generic labels of literature and games do not cancel each other out, but characteristics of both media categories are rather integrated effortlessly in visual novels. As has been shown in this section, approaching ergodic literature such as Choose Your Own Adventure novels, hypertext fiction, and adventure games as *strictly* works of literature has hampered their development and popularity in the long run, but one could also ponder whether these media may have been stepping stones to the eventual triumph of the visual novel genre in Japan—and *otome* in particular. Visual novels therefore warrant a tailor-made approach that

[175] E. Aarseth, 'A Narrative Theory of Games', in *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012), pp. 129-33 (p. 130).
[176] H. Koenitz, 'Narrative in Video Games', p. 4.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Kamei-Dyche, 'Reading Culture in Japan'.

combines the frameworks of the existing disciplines of Literature and Game Studies, and simultaneously pays mind to the technological affordances and reading practices related to the digital devices they are read on.

5 Case Study: *Otome* as Contemporary Ergodic Literature

'A [visual novel] is not a real video game. It is just a glorified PowerPoint slideshow…' reads an English-language remark on the state of the visual novel industry on the online forum Reddit.[179] This seems to be the image that the majority of foreign audiences have of Japanese visual novels, but the genre's success—particularly that of *otome*—in its country of origin suggest that visual novels are much more than 'just a glorified PowerPoint slideshow'. Visual novels bear striking similarities to older (Euro-American) interactive media for reading that have effectively become obsolete, such as Choose Your Own Adventure books, hypertext novels, and adventure games, as explained in the previous chapter. This leads to wonder what has caused the comparatively longstanding success of *otome* as a type of interactive and multimodal digital reading in Japan. The subgenre thereby revives the late-1990s to early-2000s discourse on interactive fiction, in a time when the fields of Literature/Reading Studies and Game Studies were still closely affiliated. In an attempt to clarify the generic ambiguity of *otome* visual novels, this chapter will present a case study on a corpus of *otome* visual novels and analyse them as an object of immersive reading practices.

The corpus of this case study includes 6 *otome* franchises: *Diabolik Lovers, Hakuōki, Amnesia* (the three of which were introduced in section 3.1), *Olympia Soirée, Ikemen Sengoku,* and *Sokubaku Kareshi*.[180] *Olympia Soirée* (2020) is an *isekai* (異世界, 'parallel universe') story revolving around a girl who is the sole survivor of the most important tribe of her world, and who must find a suitable partner among the other tribes in order to avoid the extinction of her people. *Ikemen Sengoku* is a historical *otome* in which a 21st-century office worker accidentally time-travels to 17th-century Japan and falls in love with an cruel warlord, which was published both as a free-to-play smartphone application in 2015 and a PlayStation Vita console game in 2017. Lastly, in *Sokubaku Kareshi,* the protagonist meets two mysterious male dateable characters by coincidence on her way home from work, and subsequently pursues a relationship with one of them by talking to them through a built-in instant messaging application. With the exception of *Sokubaku Kareshi,* which was published by Sony, these works were all developed by popular *otome* developer and publishing

[179] Balvaeir, 3 January, 2021 10:16AM, comment on No_w0n, 'The State of Visual Novels in Japan', *Reddit,* 3 January, 2021 04:51AM, <https://www.reddit.com/r/visualnovels/comments/kpd0fh/the_state_of_visual_novels_in_japan/> (21 June, 2022)

[180] It should be noted that I am referring to more recently released versions of some of the instalments of *Diabolik Lovers, Hakuōki,* and *Amnesia* rather than their originals for reasons related to console compatibility. These newer versions include additional content and upgraded graphical quality but include the same narrative contents as the original.

company Otomate, which has consistently dominated the *otome* market in terms of sales.[181] The works in this corpus were chosen on the basis of their longstanding success and positive reputation within the *otome* community,[182] as well the favourable reception of recent releases.[183] Each of these works showcases the textual qualities of *otome* visual novels its own unique manner, yet three salient *otome* characteristics can be deduced from these works: the indispensability of text for world-building purposes; the integration of visuals and audio as an enhancing factor of the immersive *otome* reading experience; and interactivity as a guiding factor to traverse the text rather than completely change the progression of the story. I argue that these characteristics altogether make *otome* a successful contemporary example of multimodal, interactive fiction, unlike its ergodic predecessors.

5.1 *Putting the Novel in Visual Novel: The Indispensability of Text in Otome*

As concluded in Section 3.1, text makes up the core element of any visual novel as the reader of a visual novel spends most of their time reading. This notion is extremified in *otome* visual novels in two ways: the regular presentation of lengthy monologues and longer passages of text that take up the entire screen, and the inclusion of booklets containing short stories or light novels as companions to the physical edition of an *otome* work. The works in this corpus evidence the indispensability of text to *otome* visual novels, the fact that *otome* visual novels essentially cannot exist without text, and the function of text as an entry point to the immersive multimodal reading experience.

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[181] KTPoison, 'Otome Game Database', *Install Base,* 22 January, 2022. <https://www.installbaseforum.com/forums/threads/otome-game-database.493/> (6 July, 2022)

[182] New additions to the *Diabolik Lovers, Amnesia,* and *Hakuōki* franchises are still regularly released more than 10 years later. For *Diabolik Lovers,* the last visual novel instalment was released in 2019, but 13 drama CDs pertaining to the franchise were released in the last year alone. The latest release for *Amnesia,* another franchise of over a decade old, was published in 2019 as well. For *Hakuōki,* the newest visual novel instalment will be released in late 2022.
See Rejet, 'CD Release Schedule', <https://dialover.net/> (6 July, 2022); PlayAsia, 'Amnesia for Nintendo Switch', <https://www.play-asia.com/amnesia-for-nintendo-switch/13/70csmz> (12 July, 2022); PlayAsia, 'Hakuoki Shinkai: Tenun no Shou [Special Edition] (Limited Edition)', <https://www.play-asia.com/hakuoki-shinkai-tenun-no-shou-special-edition-limited-edition/13/70ffst> (6 July, 2022).

[183] Notably *Sokubaku Kareshi, Ikemen Sengoku,* and *Olympia Soirée.*
See 4Gamer, '「束縛彼氏」は AI 彼氏に束縛される恋愛シムレーションゲーム。(*Sokubaku Kareshi* is a Dating Simulator Game in Which You are Tied Down by an AI)', 11 November, 2021. <https://www.4gamer.net/games/603/G060356/20211108036/> (17 May, 2022); Famitsu, 'オランピアソワレ (Switch)のレビュー・評価・感想情報 (Olympia Soirée Switch Review, Rating, and Information', <https://www.famitsu.com/games/t/36726/reviews/> (11 July, 2022); Famitsu, 'イケメン戦国◆時をかける恋 新たなる出逢い(PS Vita)のレビュー・評価・感想情報 (Ikemen Sengoku: A Love Across Time, A New Encounter PS Vita Review, Rating, and Information', <https://www.famitsu.com/games/t/33082/reviews/> (11 July, 2022)

Firstly, it is important to note that not all lines in *otome* visual novels are voiced. None of the *otome* in the corpus feature a voice-over for the protagonist, as the lack of a strong presence in the story is meant to facilitate the reader's self-projection onto the main character. A number of *otome* in this corpus also include additional unvoiced narrative: this particularly includes extensive unvoiced monologues and longer passages of text that take up the entire screen in contrast to the few lines usually presented in the on-screen text box. This characteristic appears most prominently in the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise.

Despite its rather unconventional premise of a high-school girl living with a family of abusive (yet dateable) vampires, it has consistently been one of the most popular *otome* franchises, and still is, even 10 years after its first visual novel instalment was released.[184] It is simultaneously one of the most thought-provoking *otome* franchises in this corpus in terms of its textual qualities, as *Diabolik Lovers* features the longest unvoiced passages of text out of all of the aforementioned works. Most instalments of the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise equip the same narrative structure. Each dateable character's route consists of three parts each divided into a prologue, six 'situation' chapters, four 'story' chapters, and an epilogue, and a total of three possible endings.[185] The prologues and epilogues each feature multiple long monologues of three to five 'pages' of text like the page shown in Figure 6 on the next page. These monologues give background information on the dateable characters' lives to prepare the reader for the events taking place in the next scene. The monologues in *Diabolik Lovers* therefore require the reader to pay close attention, as they are part of the story-building and help the reader to understand the characters' (often bad) behaviour—thus evoking empathy in the reader and heightening their immersion in the story. At the end of each story chapter, the reader is presented with a short monologue in which the protagonist reflects on the events in said chapter (see Fig. 7 on the next page).

[184] '【78 人に聞いた】乙女ゲームのおすすめ人気ランキング 40 選【ps4 で遊べるものも！】(We Asked 78 People About Their Otome Recommendations: A Ranking of the 40 Most Popular Otome, Also for the PS4!)', *Goo.ne.jp*, 17 December, 2021, <https://ranking.goo.ne.jp/select/8794> (21 June, 2022)

[185] The 'situation' chapters depict casual daily interactions that the protagonist has with one of the dateable characters, and in which the dialogue options given to the reader raise a 'love meter' with said character. The 'story' chapters, on the other hand, portray a linear storyline, in which the dialogue options either raise a 'sadism' or a 'masochism' meter. Altogether, these meters determine whether the reader gets a happy, neutral, or bad ending with a character, and whether they unlock a special 'after story'.

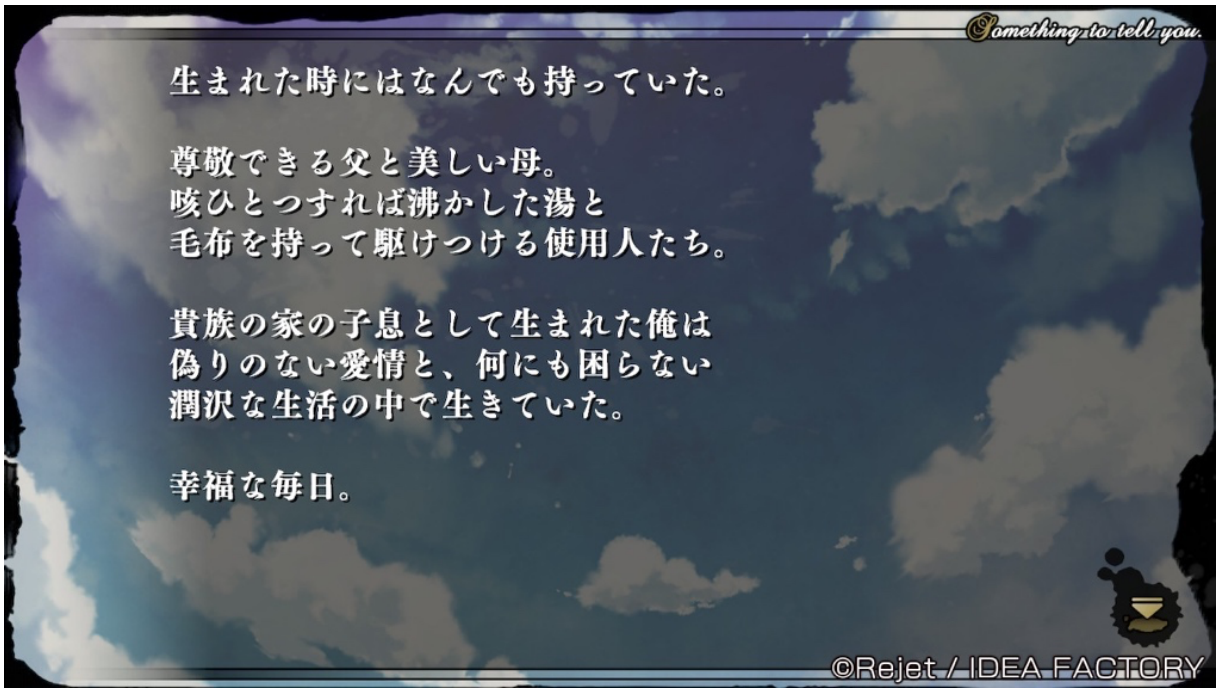

Fig. 6: One 'page' of a monologue in the prologue of a route in *Diabolik Lovers: More Blood.*[186]

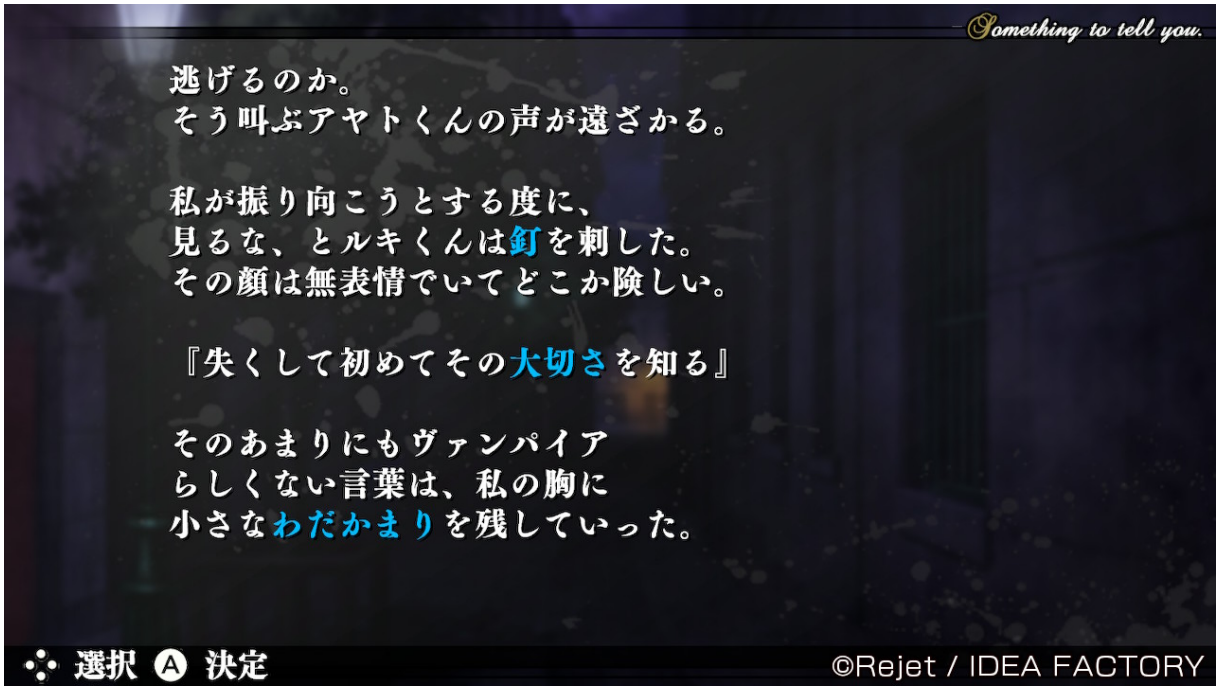

Fig. 7: The protagonist's monologue at the end of one of the story chapters of *Diabolik Lovers: More Blood.*[187]

[186] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Grand Edition.*
[187] Ibid.

In the monologue exemplified in Figure 7, the reader must choose the two 'correct' words from the three highlighted terms. The two correct words are the most applicable to the events that took place in that chapter. When the reader does this correctly, this increases their chances of getting the best possible ending. One could therefore see these monologues as an exercise to the reader's reading comprehension skills: the reader carefully reads through a chapter of the visual novel, chooses the two most representative words for the dateable character as a test whether they were paying sufficient attention, and the reader is subsequently rewarded with three secret 'heaven scenario' chapters if they do this consistently across all story chapters.

Although *Diabolik Lovers* is an extreme example in this case, other *otome* visual novels also occasionally feature longer pieces of text. Two prominent examples of this are *Hakuōki* and *Olympia Soirée*: these two works feature a dictionary function which present longer pieces of (informative) text compared to the lines presented in the text box. *Hakuōki* was one of the first *otome* franchises to implement this function as this franchise refers to real historical figures and events, and therefore often needs to explain complicated terms and the roles of the historical figures that appear in the narrative (see Fig. 8, below, and Fig. 9 on the next page). Aside from providing background information to benefit the reader's understanding of and immersion in the story, *Hakuōki* may therefore simultaneously educate its audience on Japanese history.

Fig. 8: An important term highlighted in purple in the protagonist's monologue in *Hakuōki*. The text on the top right of the text box shows which button to press to view the dictionary entry[188]

[188] Idea Factory, *Hakuōki: Shinkai Fuu no Shō.*

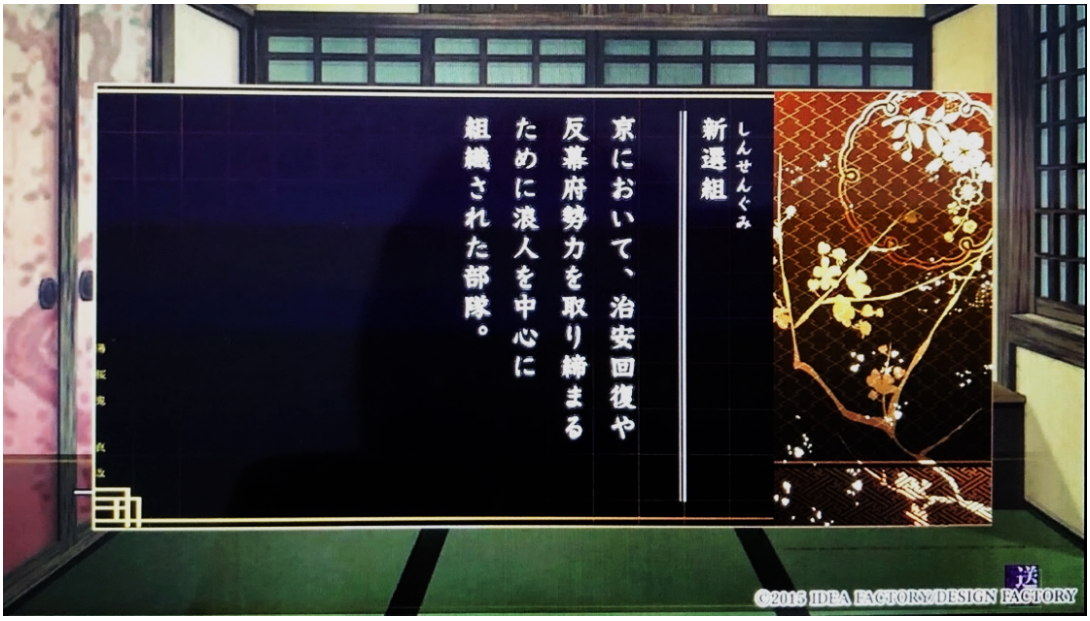

Fig. 9: The corresponding dictionary entry to the highlighted term in Fig. 8.[189]

Though *Olympia Soirée* is not based on true events like *Hakuōki* is, it uses an abundance of neologisms pertaining to the story that are not always explained in the running text. *Olympia Soirée* therefore equips a mechanic similar to *Hakuōki* that lets the reader tap highlighted terms and names throughout the narrative to instantly access a short explanation of their meaning (see Fig. 10, below, and Fig. 11 on the next page).

Fig. 10: The dictionary in *Olympia Soirée*.[190]

[189] Ibid.
[190] Idea Factory, *Olympia Soirée*, (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2020), Nintendo Switch.

Fig. 11: An example of one of *Olympia Soirée*'s 223 total dictionary entries.[191]

This mechanic is necessary for world-building purposes, as the plot is quite intricate and expansive: the prologue of *Olympia Soirée* alone takes around ten to fifteen hours of continuous reading before the reader is allowed to make their first choice—that is, the choice of which male character the reader would like to pursue a relationship with—and subsequently enters another phase of reading hours of text before being allowed to make the first dialogue choice.[192] However, the constant switching back and forth between the main text and the dictionary entries may simultaneously disrupt the reading process similarly to when the reader of a traditional print book consults a dictionary. It could be argued that this process does not require much effort and is thereby less distracting than for print books, though: when tapping a highlighted term in the text box, the reader instantly accesses the definition of that term only and does not have to look up the term herself, and just one push of a button lets the reader return to the story. When looking up a term in a dictionary or on the Internet, the reader would likely have to exert more effort and face more (hyperlink) distractions compared to the dictionary in one of these *otome* works. In this sense, the dictionary entries in *Olympia Soirée and Hakuōki* rather function similarly to footnotes.

[191] Ibid.
[192] This is the amount of time it took me to read the prologue in Japanese, including the dictionary entries appearing in the prologue. The average amount of time needed to read the same part in English is roughly the same. It is difficult to measure the exact number of words in visual novels, and the amount of time necessary for reading when using the auto-play function is therefore commonly used to measure the length of visual novels. This measuring method is borrowed from games, as gaming consoles measure the amount of time players spend on each game they play. For example, see HowLongToBeat, 'Olympia Soirée', <https://howlongtobeat.com/game?id=87225> (11 July, 2022).

Text is undeniably essential to the visual novel genre. However, this is extremely apparent in the *otome* visual novels discussed in this section: omitting the textual element of these visual novels altogether would render it impossible for the reader to understand the story, as even if the reader would listen to the audio track alone, terms might appear that go completely unexplained if one would not have access to the dictionary function as in *Hakuōki* and *Olympia Soirée.* A reader of *Diabolik Lovers,* then, would also miss crucial background information pertaining to the story and the often tragic backstories of its characters (thereby having less of an empathic connection to said characters) if not for the monologues in this *otome* work. *Diabolik Lovers, Hakuōki,* and *Olympia Soirée* therefore clearly signal the importance of reading in *otome* visual novels: they all feature an abundance of text in general, and particularly longer pieces of unvoiced text that provide background knowledge and are essential to the enjoyment of the story. In the case of the on-screen dictionaries, though, one could argue that this abundance of text and the necessity of reading might briefly distract from immersing in the story itself.

Secondly, some *otome* works in this corpus also provide textual elements along with (although outside of) the actual visual novel itself. Many deluxe edition physical copies of *otome* visual novels include printed informational booklets with details on its characters, sometimes minute details such as the characters' supposed height, weight, and blood type, as well as quotes or 'personal messages' to the reader. Again, the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise takes these booklets to a higher level in terms of textual contents. The deluxe editions of *Vandead Carnival* and *Lunatic Parade*, for instance, come with a booklet as well. However, aside from the character information, these booklets also contain two long-form 'exclusive novels' (書き下ろし小説, *kakioroshi shōsetsu*) of around 20 pages loosely related to the plot of the visual novel (see Figs. 12 and 13 on the next page). Though reading them is not a prerequisite to enjoy the visual novels themselves, these short stories serve to give the reader a taste of *Vandead Carnival* and *Lunatic Parade* before they read the visual novel in full. Short novels of this kind also appear in some of the franchise's fan books that are sold alongside each visual novel instalment.[193]

[193] Kadokawa, 'DIABOLIK LOVERS DARK FATE 公式ビジュアルファンブック(Official Visual Fan Book)', <https://www.kadokawa.co.jp/product/301503000561/> (2 July, 2022)

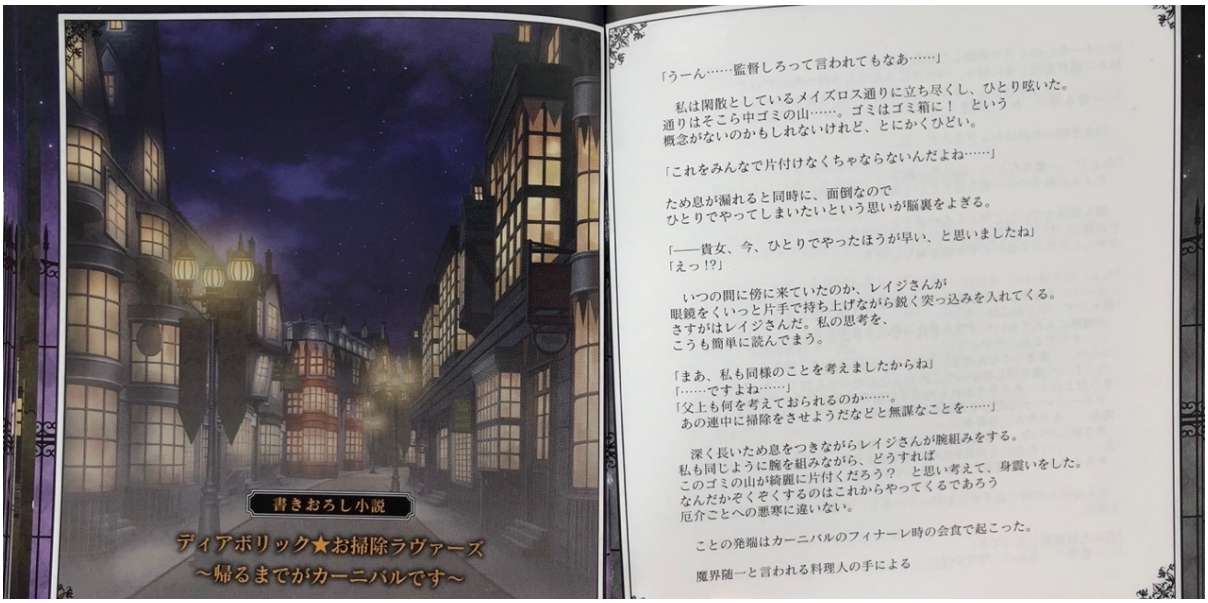

Fig. 12: First pages of the 'exclusive novel' included with *Vandead Carnival*.[194]

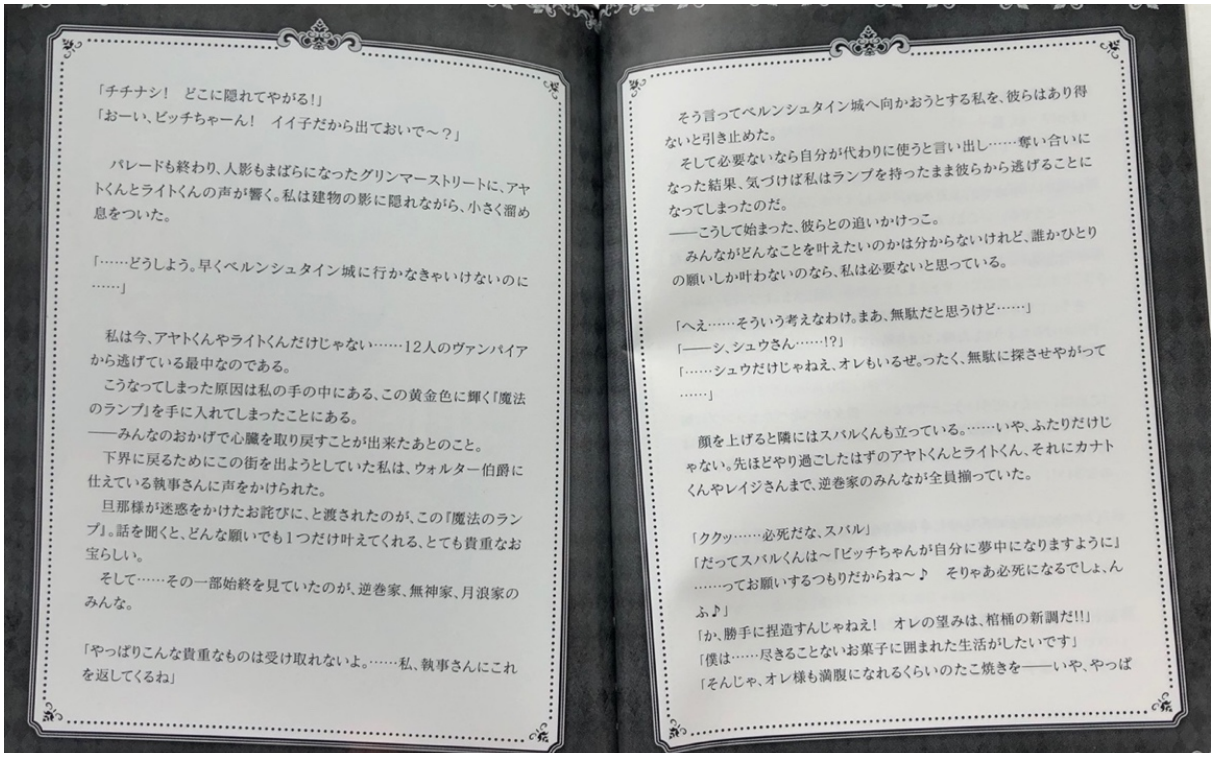
「チチナシ！　どこに隠れてやがる！」
「おーい、ビッチちゃーん！　イイ子だから出ておいで～？」
パレードも終わり、人影もまばらになったグリンマーストリートに、アヤトくんとライトくんの声が響く。私は建物の影に隠れながら、小さく溜め息をついた。
「……どうしよう。早くベルンシュタイン城に行かなきゃいけないのに……」
私は今、アヤトくんやライトくんだけじゃない……12人のヴァンパイアから逃げている最中なのである。
こうなってしまった原因は私の手の中にある、この黄金色に輝く『魔法のランプ』を手に入れてしまったことにある。
――みんなのおかげで心臓を取り戻すことが出来たあとのこと。
下界に戻るためにこの街を出ようとしていた私は、ウォルター伯爵に仕えている執事さんに声をかけられた。
旦那様が迷惑をかけたお詫びに、と渡されたのが、この『魔法のランプ』。話を聞くと、どんな願いでも1つだけ叶えてくれる、とても貴重なお宝らしい。
そして……その一部始終を見ていたのが、逆巻家、無神家、月浪家のみんな。
「やっぱりこんな貴重なものは受け取れないよ。……私、執事さんにこれを返してくるね」
そう言ってベルンシュタイン城へ向かおうとする私を、彼らはあり得ないと引き止めた。
そして必要ないなら自分が代わりに使うと言い出し……奪い合いになった結果、気づけば私はランプを持ったまま彼らから逃げることになってしまったのだ。
――こうして始まった、彼らとの追いかけっこ。
みんながどんなことを叶えたいのかは分からないけれど、誰かひとりの願いしか叶わないのなら、私は必要ないと思っている。
「へえ……そういう考えなわけ。まあ、無駄だと思うけど……」
「――シ、シュウさん……!?」
「……シュウだけじゃねえ、オレもいるぜ。ったく、無駄に探させやがって……」
顔を上げると隣にはスバルくんも立っている。……いや、ふたりだけじゃない。先ほどやり過ごしたはずのアヤトくんとライトくん、それにカナトくんやレイジさんまで、逆巻家のみんなが全員揃っていた。
「ククッ……必死だな、スバル」
「だってスバルくんは～『ビッチちゃんが自分に夢中になりますように』……ってお願いするつもりだからね～♪　そりゃあ必死になるでしょ、んふ♪」
「か、勝手に捏造すんじゃねえ！　オレの望みは、棺桶の新調だ!!」
「僕は……尽きることないお菓子に囲まれた生活がしたいです」
「そんじゃ、オレ様も満腹になれるくらいのたこ焼きを――いや、やっぱ

Fig. 13: First pages of the 'exclusive novel' included with *Lunatic Parade*.[195]

[194] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Vandead Carnival (Deluxe Edition),* (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2014), PlayStation Vita. Photos taken by myself.
[195] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Lunatic Parade (Deluxe Edition),* (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2016), PlayStation Vita. Photos taken by myself.

A full-length 'novelisation' (ノベライズ, *noberaizu*) of almost 280 pages has also been released for the first instalment in the *Diabolik Lovers franchise*, which retells the story from the third-person perspective of the protagonist as a separate character rather than putting the reader in her shoes.[196] Novelisations of other works in the corpus have also been released in the past, such as a series of novels pertaining to the plot of *Hakuōki*[197] and *Amnesia* character routes told from the perspectives of the male dateable characters.[198] However, *otome* novelisations are always later releases that are either supplementary to or a condensed version of the 'main attraction' that is the visual novel, often also including recognisable artistic renditions of the dateable characters on the cover. After all, such a monolinear novelisation cannot always account for all the different routes and dialogue options that appear in a multilinear *otome* visual novel, and for this reason the visual novel itself generally constitutes a more complete and much more time-consuming reading experience.

Moreover, much contextual information is also lost in these novelisations: a quick look at a sample chapter of the *Diabolik Lovers* novelisation, for instance, makes it seem as though it may be the literal script of the visual novel without the visuals and audio, as it contains short sentences consisting of predominantly dialogue, very little contextual information, and the protagonist's (sparse) inner monologue in brackets.[199] A reader unfamiliar with the characters' voice actors and artistic depictions of their looks may therefore struggle to imagine how these characters look, sound, and act, especially since *otome* works are often created with specific voice actors in mind to begin with.[200] In other words, the reader is supposed to know what the characters look and sound like and read a novelisation with the necessary prior knowledge obtained in the visual novels. If the reader wants to experience the full story first-hand, *see* and *hear* the characters and thereby have a better grasp of the context, and thereby become fully immersed in the narrative, she would have to read the visual novel itself.

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[196] '「DIABOLIK LOVERS」アニメ公式ノベライズが本日 6 月 27 日発売！今回は試し読み第二弾をお届け！(The *Diabolik Lovers* Anime Novelisation Will Be Released Today, 27 June! Read the Second Preview Snippet Here)', *Animate Times,* 27 June, 2014. <https://www.animatetimes.com/news/details.php?id=1403760556> (2 July, 2022)

[197] Hifumi Shobō, '小説薄桜鬼 斎藤一編一巻 (*Hakuōki* The Novel, Saitō Volume 1)', <https://www.hifumi.co.jp/books/lineup/9784891993221.html> (2 July, 2022)

[198] Hifumi Shobō, 'アムネシア レイター Shin ＆ Toma 編 (*Amnesia Later*: Shin & Toma)', <https://www.hifumi.co.jp/books/lineup/9784891993238.html> (2 July, 2022)

[199] 'The *Diabolik Lovers* Anime Novelisation Will Be Released Today'.

[200] M. Tsuruda, 'Believing in the Fans Invigorates International Growth of *Otome* Games', *Project Anime*, 1 November, 2021. <https://project-anime.org/2021/11/01/believing-in-the-fans-invigorates-international-growth-of-otome-games/> (28 June, 2022)

In short, text is central to the experience of reading an *otome* visual novel: without text, the reader would miss out on essential information pertaining to the narrative such as the protagonist's monologue, characters' backstories in *Diabolik Lovers,* and the explanation of complicated terms through the dictionary function in *Hakuōki* and *Olympia Soirée.* Short stories and novelisations have also been published as supplements to their original *otome* visual novel counterparts, as has been shown for the *Diabolik Lovers, Amnesia,* and *Hakuōki* franchises. Though text is central to the visual novel itself, these novelisations consisting entirely of text always point back to the visual and audial aspects of the original work: the reader of a novelisation may miss out on essential information about the dateable characters (most importantly, how they look and sound) if they are not familiar with the visual novel. The other modes equipped in *otome* visual novels, then, are supplementary to the text and yet are simultaneously indispensable to the reader's deepest possible immersion in *otome* works.

5.2 *A Rewarding Read: Integrated Visuals and Audio as Enhancers of Immersive Reading*

Having established *otome* visual novels as objects of reading based on their textual elements, it is now time to turn to their position as a medium for multimodal reading. Though text is the most important mode for conveying meaning in *otome* as argued in the previous section, *otome* audio and visuals are integrated seamlessly with the narrative and thereby strengthen the immersive reading experience rather than taking away from it. This happens in two ways: one, the visuals and audio serve to elucidate certain parts of the story and particularly give a sense of realism to the reader, thus enhancing the immersive experience; and two, the visuals and audio could subsequently be seen as a welcome 'reward' for the reader's efforts of traversing the text. In doing so, the visuals and audio in *otome* contribute to one meaningful multimodal whole.

Most importantly, the aptly integrated visual and audial modes enhance the immersive *otome* reading experience, and are sometimes used to create a sense of immersion that would not be possible with text alone. In terms of visuals, contemporary *otome* visual novels are celebrated for their high-quality graphics and picturesque artwork by renowned artists, and the success or failure to live up to this ideal may also influence readers' immersion in an *otome* narrative. A recent and popular example of this is *Olympia Soirée* (see Fig. 14 on the next page), an *otome* work released in 2020 that was highly anticipated and critically acclaimed simply because of its artwork: many reviewers attested to buying the work because they were fans of the illustrator or, even if they did not necessarily enjoy the story,

nevertheless listed the artistic value of *Olympia Soirée* as its saving grace.[201] This visual novel was elaborately illustrated by Satoi, a big name in the *otome* industry. Satoi has been a well-respected artist in the *otome* industry for over a decade, and provided the art for many instalments of the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise: the franchise's production company even received much criticism when it appeared that a different artist had replaced her.[202]

Fig. 14: CG depicting the protagonist of *Olympia Soirée.*[203]

While the visuals in *otome* works therefore clearly have artistic value that may strongly affect the reader's opinion of the work itself (and their immersion, if the reader strongly dislikes the art style), the visuals also serve the more practical purpose of helping the reader interpret and visualise what is going on in a scene as not everything is spelled out in detail in the text. The character sprites notably shape readers' perception of what the characters look like and how

[201] For example, reviewer Anzu says 'I was drawn in by Satoi's gorgeous illustrations, so I had been looking forward to the release date for a long time (さといさんの美麗な絵に惹かれて、発売をずっと楽しみにしていました)', and an anonymous reviewer says 'I love Satoi, so that's why I bought and played [*Olympia Soirée*] (さといさんが好きなので購入してプレイしました)'. See 杏 Anzu, '世界観が良かった (The Story-World Was Good)', *Amazon,* 1 June, 2020. <https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R1YUB7J269SMJ5/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B08346L5WT> (9 July, 2022); '個人的には良作、F D 期待 (I Personally Think It's Good, Hoping for a Fandisk', *Amazon,* 11 June, 2020. <https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R9OF7WF4ZD9VF/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B08346L5WT> (9 July, 2022)

[202] The *Diabolik Lovers* thread on the popular Japanese online forum 5Channel elaborately discussed the sudden changes in the quality of the illustrations in an instalment that was released in 2014. See 5Channel, '乙女@Diabolik Lovers スレ Part17 (*Otome* Diabolik Lovers Thread Part 17)', <https://kohada.5ch.net/test/read.cgi/ggirl/1384318528/> (28 June, 2022)

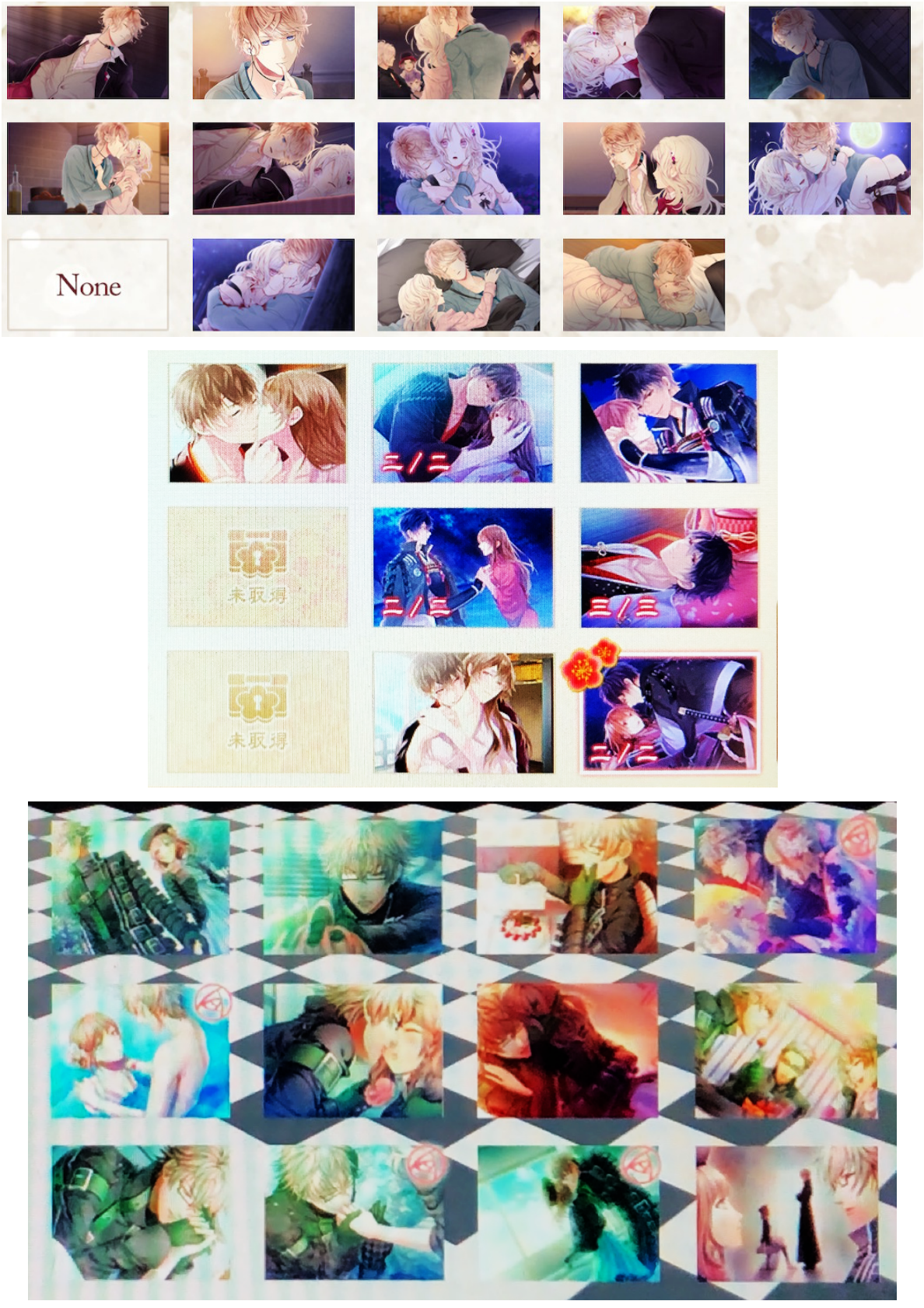
[203] Idea Factory, *Olympia Soirée.*

they feel depending on their facial expressions, which essentially simplifies part of the interpretive aspect of reading text alone. Similarly, the background images signal to the reader where the scene takes place and what the environment looks like. The *otome* in this corpus also include a wide array of artistic CGs which present the reader with a more elaborate depiction of what is going on during important scenes (see Fig. 15).

Fig. 15: A romantically themed CG in *Amnesia: Memories.*[204]

However, the reader still needs to focus on the text box and exercise their imagination to piece the story together since the visuals are static and do not change often, except for characters' blinking eyes and mouth movements in the more recent works in the corpus (*Diabolik Lovers, Ikemen Sengoku,* and *Olympia Soirée*). Additionally, CGs are only displayed every once in a few chapters, and even though they may be more detailed than the regular character sprites and background images, they are therefore by no means the main method of conveying meaning. Rather, CGs seem to function as a reward for the reader's efforts of traversing the text and making dialogue choices that lead to certain endings with their respective unique CGs. In *otome*, CGs provide an opportunity for the reader to indulge in a romantic or passionate moment in the story, or simply serve to demonstrate the 'handsomeness' of the *ikemen* characters, as can be seen in Figures 16, 17, and 18 on the next page.

[204] Idea Factory, *Amnesia: Memories*, (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2015), PlayStation Vita.



Figs. 16, 17, and 18: An overview of CGs for characters in (top to bottom) *Diabolik Lovers*, *Ikemen Sengoku,* and *Amnesia: Memories*..[205]

[205] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers Grand Edition*; Cybird, *Ikemen Sengoku*: *Toki wo Kakeru Koi, Aratanaru Deai*, (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2017), PlayStation Vita; Idea Factory, *Amnesia: Memories*.

The appealing presentation of the dateable characters in *otome* CGs in turn contributes to the reader's impression of these characters: as *otome* at its most basic level facilitates virtual relationships with fictional men, it is imperative for *otome* works to include aesthetically pleasing visual representations of the *ikemen* for the reader to 'fall in love with', so to say. Of course, the text presented in *otome* alone does not describe much contextual information aside from what each character (including the protagonist) has to say, and so the character sprites, CGs, and background images fulfil part of this purpose to aid the reader in interpreting the text. In other words, one could argue that *otome* visual novels are significantly different from other predominantly visual media such as *manga*, as the visuals are complementary to the narrative text rather than the primary mode of conveying meaning. That is not to say that the visuals are of lesser significance than the text: on the contrary, omitting the visuals from visual novels would likely make it more difficult for the reader to visualise the dateable characters as objects of their romantic affection.

The same seems to be the case for the audial aspect of *otome.* The voice-overs and sound effects notably give a sense of realism to the otherwise two-dimensional visuals, and the background music (or lack thereof) contributes heavily to the overall atmosphere of a scene, as well as the reader's immersion in the story. This is because visual novels are not meant to present an authentic, one-on-one replica of the real world, and sound is therefore used to 'supply some believability, allowing players to overlook static scenes and limited animation'.[206] The voice-acting by real human beings therefore carries the most weight in *otome* works among the aforementioned three audial elements. Like *otome* visuals, the voice-acting provides contextual clues as to a character's personality and mood, as well as their

> gender, approximate age and size… [which] form a good idea of the different speaker's mood and affective state, as well as more subtle cues as the [voice owner's] perceived attractiveness or dominance.[207]

The voice-acting keeps the reader attentive to the narrative and stimulates interest in the male dateable characters. It is therefore crucial to include at least some degree of appealing male voice-acting in *otome* visual novels, as the success of *otome* hinges on the empathy-inducing qualities and overall attractiveness of the dateable characters. In Japan, the keen interest in appealing voices driven by visual novels and related pop culture media has even been

[206] Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels', p. 170.
[207] M. Latinus and P. Belin, qtd. in Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels', p. 178.

labelled *koe fechi* (声フェチ 'voice fetish').[208] By contrast, the lack of voice-acting for *otome* protagonists encourages the reader's self-projection onto the protagonist-character, and imagine her own voice reading the lines instead.

As one of the few realistic aspects of visual novels, the voice-acting in *otome* is one of the driving factors behind the success of the subgenre. Many bigger *otome* productions feature famous Japanese voice actors and are often even made with certain voice actors in mind, meaning that certain characters are written specifically to suit the voices of these actors rather than the other way around.[209] There exists a lively fan culture surrounding Japanese voice actors, which makes the voice-acting one of the biggest selling points of *otome* visual novels: popular voice actors often appear in various works, which prompts their fans to consistently buy their newest works and in turn instantly boosts the popularity of said works.[210] A wide and dynamic array of voices also ensure that readers would find at least some *otome* characters appealing. New readers may find the voice-acting the most pleasing aspect of a given *otome* work, and existing fans may simply find joy in hearing their favourite voice actors in new, exciting settings.[211] Among the six franchises in this corpus alone, there are five well-established voice actors that appear in multiple works.[212]

Though all works in the corpus are fully voiced and use voice-acting to enhance the appeal of the dateable characters, the *Diabolik Lovers* franchise best encapsulates the importance of voice-acting for the success of *otome* works. This is the only franchise in the corpus that uses 3D audio, and maximises both the potential of this binaurally recorded audio and the skills (and reputation) of the actors who provide the voice-overs. In terms of plot, *Diabolik Lovers* is built around the principle of 'being verbally abused, having your blood sucked, and being whispered to close to your ears' by a vampire boyfriend, and headphones are recommended when reading one of this franchise's visual novels.[213] *Diabolik Lovers* pays much attention to facilitating an embodied dimension to the text in this case: because of the binaural audio, the reader can hear and guess where a given character might be relative to the reader's body (to the left or right side, in front or behind them, far away or up close, behind a

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[208] Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels', p. 178.
[209] Tsuruda, 'Believing in the Fans Invigorates International Growth of *Otome* Games'.
[210] Kim, 'Women's Games in Japan'.
[211] Y. Liu, 'What Do People Enjoy in Pay-to-Play *Otome* Games?', *Game Developer,* 23 May, 2022. < https://www.gamedeveloper.com/blogs/what-do-people-enjoy-in-pay-to-play-otome-games-> (8 July, 2022)
[212] So far as I can tell, Tomokazu Sugita (*Olympia Soirée* and *Ikemen Sengoku*), Kōsuke Toriumi (*Hakuōki* and *Diabolik Lovers*), Shōtarō Morikubo (*Hakuōki* and *Diabolik Lovers*), Yūki Kaji (*Hakuōki* and *Diabolik Lovers*), and Daisuke Hirakawa (*Hakuōki* and *Diabolik Lovers*).
[213] Rejet, 'About', <http://dialover.net/about> (16 May, 2022)
Original text: 耳元で罵られ、血を吸われ、囁かれる感覚.

door, and so on). Notably, each instalment features the voice actors performing violent and close-up sucking sounds close to the microphone on a regular basis in order to simulate the cathartic experience of being assaulted by a vampire in a safe, fictional environment. The so-called 'situation' chapters in *Diabolik Lovers* even seem to be solely dedicated to showcasing the voice actors' attractive voices as 'fan service' to the reader. These chapters usually amount to the protagonist doing something wrong and being 'punished' by being drained of her blood by the dateable characters, thus providing more exciting voice-heavy scenarios for the reader. The binaural audio is therefore an integral part of the story and a selling point for the franchise: without it, it would lose most of its immersive and cathartic appeal. Reviews of some of the franchise's instalments underscore the voice actors' performances combined with the unconventional theme as well:

> My favourite thing about [*Diabolik Lovers*] is the outstanding voice-acting. Many well-loved voice actors appear in this work, and say extremely sadistic things that make you feel really embarrassed (but they're *ikemen,* so it's fine).[214]

> I bought [*Diabolik Lovers*] because I like Satoi's art, and my favourite voice actors appear in it! […] The voice actors' voices are so sexy, so I would recommend it to anyone whose favourite voice actors are featured in this visual novel. When you read it with headphones in, the destructive power of [their voices] is incredible![215]

The voice-acting and audio design in *Diabolik Lovers* is therefore specifically intended to give a realistic dimension to the text and essentially make for a more immersive experience, with great success according to its reviewers. Additionally, to many *Diabolik Lovers* readers, hearing one's favourite voice actors making strange noises and whispering sensual things is simultaneously perceived as a 'reward', similarly to the function of CGs. This way, *Diabolik*

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[214] めいこさん Meikosan, '声優さんの演技力に舌を巻く作品 (The acting skills of the voice actors in this game left me speechless),' *Amazon.co.jp*, 18 August, 2018, <https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R11HIMKC0VRZTE/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B078JXKVW7> (6 July, 2022)
Original text: この作品の一番のポイントは「声優さんの演技力」です。好きな声優さんが多数出演しており すごいドSな恥ずかしいセリフ（※イケメンなら許される）を言ってくれます.

[215] ぷりん Purin, '声優さんが最高 (The Voice Actors are the Best),' *Amazon.co.jp*, 10 May, 2020, <https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R2FZ4VO5S0XHED/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B07WTCLHQC> (6 July, 2022)
Original text: さといさんの絵が好きなのと、好きな声優さんが出演されてたので購入しました！[…] 声優の声がすごーくセクシーなので好きな声優さんが出演されてたら購入お勧めします！！イヤホンで聴くと破壊力やばいです.

Lovers is an extreme example of the importance of appealing voice-acting as a prerequisite to an immersive *otome* reading experience in general, and highlights the seamless integration of the audial mode with the text and visuals in *otome* visual novels.

The use of audio in *otome* also has other benefits with regard to the reading experience at the most basic level. The combination of voice-overs with text can make visual novels an easy read because the reader reads along as the characters are speaking. This may benefit the reader's comprehension of the story, as has been similarly argued for readers of books while listening to an accompanying audio track.[216] The voiced lines only appear one line at a time and the reader cannot read ahead, which makes it easy for the reader to follow along, and realistic sound effects may also elucidate part of the context. In this sense, the visual novel format is also especially useful for (foreign) language learning and other educative purposes.[217] However, it could also be argued that the voice-over partly allows for multitasking, similarly to audiobooks. Japanese-speaking readers could push the auto-play button and listen to the dialogue while not watching the screen, but in this case the reader may miss out on unvoiced contextual information presented in the on-screen text box and thereby lose track of the story altogether. On the contrary, readers could also close their eyes during certain romantic scenes and imagine that the character is 'whispering sweet nothings' to them in real life, thus heightening the immersion in the narrative while not fully relying on the on-screen text.[218] It is therefore evident that audio plays a key role in *otome* visual novels as the element that on one hand evokes empathy for the characters and promotes the reader's absorption in the story, and on the other hand assists readers in reading the on-screen text.

All in all, the audial elements unify the multimodal whole that is the *otome* visual novel by providing realistic sound effects and giving 'real' voices to the two-dimensional *ikemen*. The multimodality of *otome* therefore evidently does not take away from immersion as traditional reading research assumes, but instead enhances the narrative and in some cases creates an even more immersive experience than the text could have provided on its own

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[216] Baron, *How we read now,* p. 177.

[217] Speaking from personal experience, trying to read Japanese visual novels as soon as I had a basic grasp of the Japanese language worked wonders for my vocabulary, reading speed, *kanji* recognition, and listening skills. Especially because the lines are read aloud, visual novels saved me the trouble of constantly having to look up the readings of *kanji* that I did not know, and helped me become acquainted with Japanese sentence patterns and informal speech. There are many sources that underscore the value of visual novels in foreign language learning: for example, see K.K. Lai and H.H. Chen, 'A Comparative Study on the Effects of a VR and PC Visual Novel Game on Vocabulary Learning', *Computer Assisted Language Learning* (2021), pp. 1-34; A. Putri et al., 'A3! Visual Novel Game as an Audio-Visual Media that Motivates Japanese Language Learning', in *Fifth International Conference on Language, Literature, Culture, and Education* (Amsterdam: Atlantis Press, 2021), pp. 67-74.

[218] Crawford, 'The Sound of Visual Novels', p. 179.

(notably in *Diabolik Lovers*). Aside from the text, the character visuals and voices are closely related, as the combination of these two elements helps shape the reader's interpretation of the character. Even though the text and visuals are two-dimensional, the characters' voices are 'real', and these factors guide the reader's internal visualisation of the events and make for a more realistic experience. The visuals and audio can also be seen as rewards for progressing through the story, in an aesthetically pleasing way or even in an erotic way, depending on the reader and the *otome* in question. This makes the visuals and audio indispensable elements of *otome* which are all perfectly attuned to the text in order to provide an immersive and integrative multimodal reading experience. The question that remains, then, is what role the interactivity of *otome* plays in this whole.

5.3 *Otome Ergodicity: Guided Interactivity and Non-Trivial Effort for Ultimate Immersion*

At first glance, the interactivity of the *otome* subgenre of visual novels bears great similarity to that of hypertext novels and text-based adventure games as explained in the previous chapter. *Otome* seems to be a compromise between these two genres in terms of interactivity: the narrative of *otome* provides more guidance to the reader compared to the liberal, unguided character of hypertext; yet unlike adventure games, *otome* visual novels do not include a map to move around in, opportunities to interact with characters by choice, or require the reader to input text herself in order to make choices to steer the narrative in a certain direction. Rather, the influence over the progression of the story is limited, and the interactivity in *otome* seems to be more symbolical in two ways. Firstly, non-trivial effort is required to traverse an *otome* visual novel in accordance with Aarseth's definition of ergodic literature. In this light, most of the effort required to read an *otome* work lies in the reader's imaginative skills, as the entirety of the meaning of the text is not spelled out, which is reminiscent of traditional novels. Secondly, the mechanics of *otome* visual novels enable many opportunities for self-projection onto the main character, which clearly contributes to the position of *otome* as a (hyper-)immersive reading practice in Japan.

Most importantly, though *otome* works offer some interactive opportunities, *otome* are not interactive in the sense that the reader has a significant impact on what happens in the story aside from what ending they achieve. This interactivity notably includes dialogue choices and minigames, but also the basic act of clicking a button to proceed to the next page of text. However, the overall influence of the reader's dialogue choices and interactive tasks on the plot is minimal and seems to be more of a guiding factor towards certain endings rather than a means for the reader to author their own story. While the reader can indeed

decide how the story ends through these dialogue choices, the selection of endings is mostly limited to a good, neutral, and bad ending for the works in this corpus. The subsequent few lines of dialogue that occur immediately afterward the reader's dialogue choice may differ per option, but the larger narrative often remains the same. In *Diabolik Lovers, Ikemen Sengoku, Hakuōki, Olympia Soirée,* and *Sokubaku Kareshi*, for example, the chapters of each character route are exactly the same for every read, no matter whether the reader is aiming for a good or a bad ending. *Amnesia* works slightly differently: in *Amnesia: Memories*, the reader reads a number of common introductory chapters in which the dialogue choices eventually put readers on different pathways in a character's route, with a total of four possible endings per route. When the reader ends up on one of these pathways, the story changes drastically and certain endings can no longer be achieved. *Amnesia* therefore bears slightly more similarity to the branching storylines of CYOA works, whereas the other works in the corpus have a more monolinear story with only subtle differences depending on the dialogue choices. Nevertheless, the reader generally cannot change the narrative contents of an *otome* work and is thereby still subjected to the hierarchy of reader and author. Immersion seems to be facilitated mostly by the enticing storylines, beautiful visuals, and attractive voice-acting that complement the text rather than the ability to decide on the progression of the story.

Some works also include auxiliary interaction with the dateable characters through minigames and opportunities to 'touch' characters using a touch screen, such as in *Ikemen Sengoku* and *Diabolik Lovers* (see Figs. 19 and 20 on the next page). As noted in the previous section, the reader is often rewarded with exclusive CGs or voice lines that they would not encounter in the story otherwise as a reward for engaging in this kind of interaction. These interactive opportunities in and of themselves do not influence the reader's progress in the storyline, but rather seem to serve as 'quality time' with the characters.

Fig. 19: A CG featuring a 'touch event' in *Diabolik Lovers: Chaos Lineage*. The black roses indicate where the reader should touch the screen to hear a 'hidden' voice line.[219]

Fig. 20: A 'touch event' in the smartphone *otome* game *Ikemen Sengoku* (the English translation).[220]

[219] Rejet, *Diabolik Lovers: Chaos Lineage*, (Tokyo: Idea Factory, 2019), Nintendo Switch.
[220] Images from Nyktoon-in-Otomeland, 'You're Spec-Tacular Touch Event: Kennyo Level 3', <https://nyktoon-in-otomeland.tumblr.com/post/637158026915250176/youre-spec-tacular-touch-event-kennyo-level-2> (16 May, 2022)

However, there are some exceptions to this limited interactivity in *otome*: some visual novels also incorporate immersive features enabled by artificial intelligence and virtual reality which require more conscious (and often costly) input from the reader. For example, the mobile *otome* game *Sokubaku Kareshi* contains both a visual novel component and an instant messaging function powered by AI, in which the reader may freely enter text and interact with one of the male dateable characters as though they were interacting with them in a regular chatting application.[221] This type of visual novel has been becoming increasingly popular in the *otome* community in recent years, as this makes the reader feel as though they are chatting with living, breathing *ikemen*.[222] The entire *otome* work is centred around this mechanic, and if the reader does not engage (sufficiently) in chatting with their AI boyfriend, they cannot progress their relationship with the character and continue with the visual novel component. The messaging function in itself may on one hand enhance the reader's immersion in the story-world, but simultaneously distract from the reading process of the visual novel component. To make matters worse, *Sokubaku Kareshi* is free-to-play,[223] but the reader has to pay for a subscription service to the app to be able to send more messages to their AI boyfriend. If the reader truly wants to converse with the character as freely as they would with someone in real life, they must pay a monthly fee of 6.400 Yen (approx. 44 Euro) to remove the restriction on the number of messages they can send.[224] This subscription plan also removes all advertisements from the application, which otherwise may be intrusive during the reading process. This is also the case for the free-to-play mobile version of *Ikemen Sengoku*. The reader cannot read all chapters of this visual novel at once, but either has to wait until the next day because of the limit on how many chapters can be read per day, or otherwise purchase tickets to continue reading instantly. Additionally, the 'most favourable' dialogue options cannot be chosen—and therefore the 'best' endings with their respective CG images cannot be achieved—without paying money. One English-language reader even mentions having invested 50 to 60 Dollar (approx. 47-57 Euro) for each of the fourteen dateable characters to get the best ending.[225] In comparison to the mobile version, the full

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[221] 4Gamer, '*Sokubaku Kareshi* is a Dating Simulator Game'.
[222] For example, see '【2022年】乙女ゲームアプリ おすすめランキング30選 (Top 30 Recommended *Otome* Games)', *MSY Group*, 8 February, 2020, <https://m-s-y.com/app/ranking/otome-game/> (4 July, 2022)
[223] Meaning that the app can be downloaded free of charge, but features advertisements and in-app purchases.
[224] Sony, 'Subscription', <https://sokubaku-kareshi.jp/s/skbk/page/subscription?ima=5602> (28 June, 2022)
[225] See Google Play Store, '*IkemenSengoku Otome Anime* Game', <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=jp.co.cybird.appli.android.sgk.en&hl=en&gl=US> (28 June, 2022).
The English-language review page in the Google Play store was the only place someone mentioned the concrete amount of money they had spent on this app, but the prices for the original Japanese edition are similar.

version of *Ikemen Sengoku* for the Nintendo Switch console—which does not require any additional payments to read—comes at approximately 50 Euro on its own.[226] Japanese reviewers of the app post similar opinions that it takes much patience and determination to get through the entire story without paying money, but that the free story is enjoyable nonetheless.[227] There are therefore pitfalls inherent to reading *otome* on smart devices: the paywalls and waiting periods pertaining to free-to-play *otome* on smart devices may naturally disrupt the reading process and the immersive experience of *otome* in general, as the reader is only allowed to read small portions of the story at a time free of charge. Additionally, advertisements that may appear if the reader chooses not to invest money (as well as intrusive notifications that may be displayed by other applications on the same smart device) could equally distract from the immersive reading process. *Otome* visual works released for dedicated gaming consoles, on the other hand, are purchased once and can subsequently be read without limitations. These dedicated consoles also allow for fewer distractions and little to no opportunities for multitasking, as their sole purpose is to run compatible games.

The immersive *otome* reading experience is then predominantly achieved by opportunities for self-projection onto the protagonist rather than influence over the plot progression. While immersion is on one hand achieved by the addition of visual and audial modes incorporated in these works as explained in the previous section, even the mechanics and system settings of an *otome* work could either make or break the reader's immersion in that work. *Otome* publishers clearly pay close mind to their audience's experiences and go above and beyond to ensure that nothing impedes readers' immersion in the story. This consideration extends to the technical mechanics of the visual novels as well, both within the narrative and outside of it. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, *otome* works allow readers to enter their own name at the beginning of the story. This change leads to subtle differences in the voiced dialogue: whereas the protagonist's default name is often read aloud when they are mentioned by the other characters, the name is often replaced with a more neutral term when the reader has entered their own name. These terms include 彼女 (*kanojo,* 'she/girlfriend'), 君 (*kimi*, 'you'), and お前 (*omae,* 'you there'). Some works feature specific nicknames to

[226] Otomate, 'トップ (Home Page)', <https://www.otomate.jp/ikemen_sengoku/> (2 July, 2022)

[227] See App Store, 'イケメン戦国 時をかける恋 女性向けの恋愛ゲーム・乙女ゲーム (*Ikemen Sengoku: A Romance Across Time,* A Dating Simulator/Otome Game for Women)', <https://apps.apple.com/jp/app/%E3%82%A4%E3%82%B1%E3%83%A1%E3%83%B3%E6%88%A6%E5%9B%BD-%E6%99%82%E3%82%92%E3%81%8B%E3%81%91%E3%82%8B%E6%81%8B-%E5%A5%B3%E6%80%A7%E5%90%91%E3%81%91%E3%81%AE%E6%81%8B%E6%84%9B%E3%82%B2%E3%83%BC%E3%83%A0-%E4%B9%99%E5%A5%B3%E3%82%B2%E3%83%BC%E3%83%A0/id979091969> (4 July, 2022).

referring to the protagonist: for example, every dateable character in *Diabolik Lovers* has his own unique (derogatory) nickname for the protagonist, and the protagonist of *Olympia Soirée* is generally referred to using the title 'Olympia' because nobody but Olympia herself knows her real name. By using these neutral terms that could apply to virtually any female reader rather than leaving in the protagonist's default name, *otome* works actively avoid breaking the reader's immersion. The same issue is accounted for when it comes to depictions of the protagonist: in all *otome* in this corpus, the protagonist is either not visible by default or the reader can opt to hide the protagonist's face during the story in the system settings if they wish to fully project themselves onto the protagonist-character. If the reader disables this setting, the protagonist's face will not be shown next to the text box, and in some works, the protagonist's face will be hidden, blurred, or face away from the reader in CG images as well. This is particularly clear in *Ikemen Sengoku,* as can be seen in Figure 21 below.

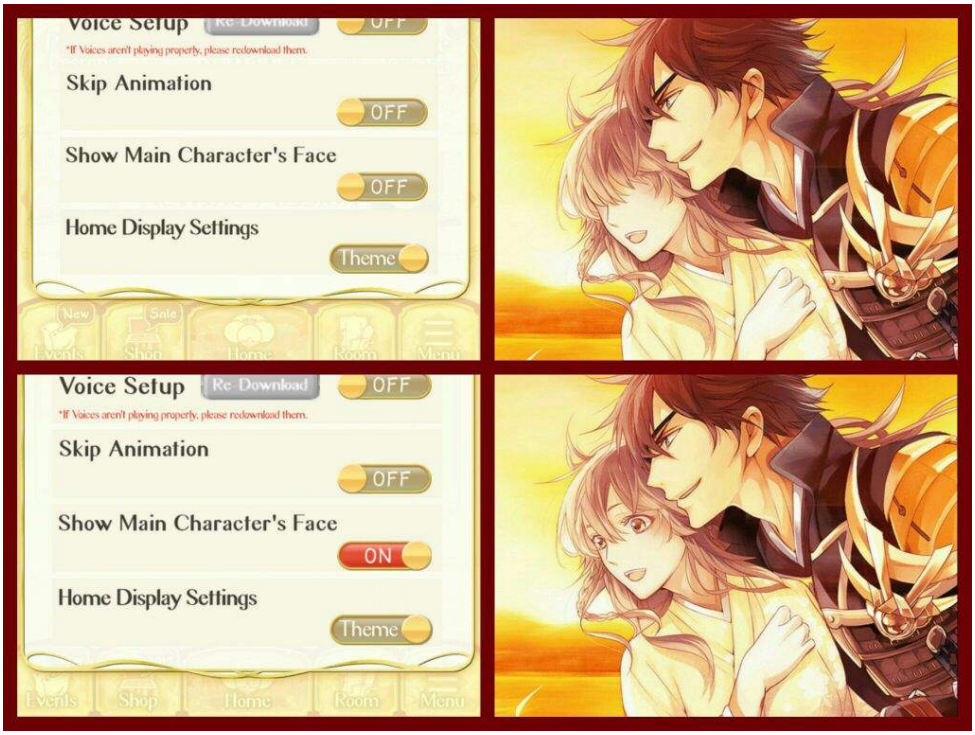

Fig. 21: Hiding and showing the protagonist's face in the mobile version of *Ikemen Sengoku* (2015).[228]

Otome production companies have even caught wind that loading screens might interfere with the reader's immersion. The loading screens in between chapters of many *otome* visual novels used to be completely black during the early years of their popularity, especially on

[228] Carlyne, 'Ikemen Sengoku: How to Recover MC's Eyes', *AminoApps*, 30 June, 2017. <https://aminoapps.com/c/otome/page/blog/spoiler-cg-ikemen-sengoku-how-to-recover-mcs-eyes/gd0l_1Yi6uPXVDmB3YvBevPapz1EzKgGYG> (25 May, 2022)

the PlayStation Portable (PSP) gaming console in the early 2010s. This seemingly innocent feature received much criticism from the audience, because these black loading screens caused readers to see a reflection of themselves in the screen of their device, which in turn hindered their immersion in the story.[229] In response to this issue, many recent *otome* works now use brightly-coloured backgrounds or images for loading screens instead. Immersion in the story is evidently considered a serious business from the production side of *otome* visual novels, which is exemplified by the thought given to readers' self-projection onto the main character. This goes hand in hand with the expectation among *otome* audiences that *otome* visual novels *should* facilitate an immersive experience, as these works are meant to substitute a lack of emotional and romantic fulfilment for many readers.

In light of the interactivity in *otome,* readers cannot 'become the author' of *otome* works, even when given a limited scope of interaction to steer the story in their preferred direction. There is therefore no true freedom of choice in these works, as all personal input occurs within the confines of the author's intended storyline(s). An *otome* reader is therefore still mostly subjected to the hierarchical author-reader relationship, contrarily to the liberal nature of hypertext fiction.[230] Instead, the interactivity in *otome* lies mostly in the reader's self-projection onto the protagonist-character through the text, audio, and visuals, and the reader's imaginative competence to use these modes to fill in the gaps in the story left by the limited amount of contextual information given. The physical effort required from *otome* readers is to 'flip the page' to display the next portion of text by tapping a button, choose between the dialogue options, participate in the 'touch events' and minigames, and even make micro-payments for works like *Sokubaku Kareshi* and *Ikemen Sengoku.* Still, the influence of the readers' efforts on the story is only minimal. In other words, the textual, audial, and visual modes are meant to keep the reader attentive to the story and the multimodality therefore seems to make up for the limited opportunities for interaction or true 'gameplay'.

To summarise, text constitutes the foundation of *otome* visual novels, as leaving out the text would result in a loss of contextual information and thereby make the story incredibly difficult to follow. Reading is therefore still central to the *otome* subgenre: reading an *otome*

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[229] A. Nogishi, '乙女ゲームのロード画面では、「自分の映り込み」に配慮して黒背景を禁止する例があった。複数タイトルの検証によって見えてきた、没入感への配慮 (Otome Games' Consideration of Players' Immersion as Evidenced in Multiple Titles: The Banning of Black Backgrounds on Loading Screens in Response to Players Seeing "A Reflection of Themselves")', *Automaton*, 13 August, 2021. <https://automaton-media.com/articles/newsjp/20210813-172284/> (25 May, 2022)

[230] Mangen and Van der Weel, 'Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?', p. 168.

work may not be an equally cognitively demanding practice as reading a traditional literary novel read in print, as *otome* visual novels generally display short, voiced sentences per line and as opposed to long, descriptive passages of text, and the visuals and audio in *otome* give the reader a head start in interpreting the text. However, *otome* undeniably provides an immersive experience, and possibly even more so than traditional immersive reading in novels because of the integrative multimodality: the visuals and audio are perfectly aligned with the text and serve to enhance the reading experience rather than distracting the reader. At the same time, the CGs and realistic voice-overs throughout *otome* works function as both rewards for the reader's efforts of 'playing the protagonist' and further enhancers of the reader immersion, which points to a state of ludic flow in *otome* works as well. Additionally, although *otome* works offer opportunities for interaction, this seems to be rather symbolic because of the limited influence over the plot. Aside from the different routes that can be picked, the content itself cannot be changed, and so *otome* visual novels retain the hierarchical author-reader relationship that is characteristic to 'traditional' literature. The reader is merely allowed to choose their preferred path through story within the confines of this hierarchical relationship. Rather than agency over the plot progression, the hyper-immersive experience enabled by the opportunities for self-projection onto the protagonist has the highest priority in *otome,* to the extent that even seeing one's own reflection in the console screen may pose a threat to this experience. In this sense, *otome* lends itself perfectly to fulfil the desire for escapist fiction among many Japanese girls and women. This in turn might explain the popularity of interactive fiction when it comes to *otome* visual novels, in contrast to hypertext fiction and text-based adventure games. As a result, *otome* consumers do not only *desire* but also *expect* an immersive experience from the visual novels that they read, and *otome* production companies actively take this desire into consideration when creating new works.

6 Conclusion: Towards A New, Digital Type of Immersive Reading

The question posed at the outset of this thesis aimed to shed light on the position of *otome* visual novels as a textual medium that is part of contemporary Japanese reading practices. The case study on the inner workings of *otome* that have become successful among a wide female audience in Japan allows us to draw three conclusions: one, pertaining to the implications of *otome* for reading; two, pertaining to the relations between media and society in Japan and beyond; and three, pertaining to academic discourse surrounding Literature Studies and Game Studies on a broader scale.

We live in an era characterised by an abundance of multimodal and short-form digital texts, and a decline in traditional long-form reading and the styles of reading associated with print. *Otome* visual novels are no exception to this development: the passages of text displayed on the screen are relatively short and lack the lengthy descriptive monologues that are characteristic to 'regular' novels. The reading process is also simplified in visual novels, as the majority of the narrative is both displayed on-screen, read aloud by voice actors, and accompanied by static visual aids. Whereas traditional reading research seems to assume that multimodality takes away from immersion, *otome* subverts this assumption completely. The textual mode is the main mode of conveying meaning in *otome*, and is *enhanced* by the integrated visual, audial, and kinaesthetic modes that altogether contribute to one harmonious semiotic unit rather than distracting from the text, in line with Heidi Peeters' concept of integrative multimodality. The different modes equipped in *otome* visual novels work together to serve one goal: reader immersion. This gives a new dimension to the concept of immersive reading: in fact, *otome* constitutes an immersive experience of which reading is an indispensable part, but not the only means through which the reader becomes submerged in the story. Visual novels therefore make for an easy and entertaining read, and tap into the younger generations' decreased attention span and motivation to read long-form texts.

On one hand, this suggests that *otome* provides more appealing and interactive storytelling for young Japanese women for whom 'simple' print novels may not provide enough excitement in the digital age. On a more positive note, however, the communicative power of this *otome* format (namely, the combination of text with integrated voice-overs, peripheral audio, visual aids, and interactivity) deserves further academic consideration, as it may benefit the reading proficiency of young readers with and without reading disabilities, as well as foreign language learners. Readers could in turn harness this proficiency when engaging in long-form reading outside of the visual novel itself. In this light, the *otome*

novelisations and 'exclusive novels' mentioned in Section 5.1 seem a particularly appealing entry point for *otome* readers' enjoyment of long-form reading.

The possibilities for hyper-immersion in *otome* visual novels also shed light on the intricate relations between media and society in Japan. Whereas the desire for hyper-immersion in fictional universes is not uncommon outside of Japan (think of merchandise such as Harry Potter wands and Lord of the Rings ornaments), the *affective* hyper-immersion that lies at the core of *otome* is uniquely tailored to the Japanese sociocultural context. *Otome* works utilise the integrative multimodality enabled by the digital devices they are read on to make the virtual romance feel as real as possible for its users. This subversive purpose is reflected in the sociocultural impact of *otome*: many Japanese readers use *otome* as an escapist practice, or even an alternative to real-life emotional and romantic satisfaction. *Otome* therefore seems to be the next step in the longstanding escapist trend in girls' and women's literature in Japan, which is inherently connected to Japanese gender relations. This specific sociocultural context highlights possible difficulties of transposing *otome* works to foreign audiences, as a commercial success similarly to that in Japan is far from guaranteed when readers access *otome* from an entirely different cultural framework. It should be noted that this thesis does not fully take into account the reception of *otome* visual novels abroad, as well as *otome*-like works of non-Japanese origin, but such iterations indeed exist. Some popular *otome* works have been translated into English (for example, *Hakuōki, Amnesia, Olympia Soirée,* and the mobile version of *Ikemen Sengoku*), and have gained some traction among niche audiences outside of Japan. Even *Diabolik Lovers,* which has not been officially translated, has a dedicated non-Japanese community on the social medium Tumblr in which fans share their own translations, post fan fiction, and discuss their favourite characters.[231] The *otome* subgenre has also grown tremendously in South Korea and China in recent years.[232] The reception of the *otome* subgenre of visual novels in relation to non-Japanese reading cultures therefore warrants further investigation.

Despite all that we could learn from *otome* as an object of both textual and sociocultural research, the fact that visual novels cannot be defined by the conventions of either literature or games per se has likely led to the genre being overlooked in academia. As stated many times throughout this thesis, the visual novel genre in itself revives bygone

[231] For example, see Dialovers-Translations, <https://dialovers-translations.tumblr.com/> (15 July, 2022).
[232] For example, see K.B. Wagner and M. Liang, 'Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: *Otome* Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women', in *Transmedia in Asia and the Pacific,* ed. by F. Gilardi and C. Lam (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 129-56.

discussions on interactive fiction with its abundance of text and opportunities to participate in and negotiate with the text. As the fields of Game Studies and Literature Studies began to separate around the turn of the century, most academic literature on interactive fiction like CYOA, hypertext, and text-based adventure games argued that such media lacked the elements that make (notably print) literature enjoyable and immersive, and thereby had no future as part of our reading habits. However, this stubbornness has caused academics to lose sight of the forms of ergodic literature that have thrived as *otome* visual novels have in Japan for decades. We should therefore no longer juxtapose games and literature as generic labels that cancel each other out, but we should rather broaden our horizons and reconsider the benefits of the combination of multimodal text and ludic elements for a variety of purposes, including leisurely reading and education. This thesis may thereby also function as a catalyst for research on other genres of visual novels (such as crime/thriller franchises) as textual media, as such works may create ludonarrative immersion in different ways than their dating simulator counterparts.

Though the largest part of consuming an *otome* visual novel is spent reading, its multimodal and ludic aspects allow for a better comprehension of and deeper absorption in the narrative than its text alone would. The unique qualities of *otome* therefore call for closer cooperation between the fields of Literature Studies and Game Studies, as well as a reconsideration of ergodic literature among textual scholars. For all we know, we may have yet to discover the joys of allowing ‘play’ back into reading.

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