The Cute as Uncanny: How Doki Doki Literature Club! Subverts the Dating Sim Genre

Megan Pan

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her final paper for a class called "'Too Cute!': Race, Style, and Asiamania," Megan Pan analyzes a dating simulator video game, Doki Doki Literature Club! The game, accessible by smartphone app, takes a strange and unexpected turn as it is played. The essay uses this twist as its motivation to examine its theoretical and cultural implications. Its claim, that "by very nature of its cute demeanor," the game "manages to subvert the expectations of its supposed genre and ultimately reveal its true colors as a brilliantly executed metafictional psychological horror," is a strong example of the lexicon term* **thesis**.

Excerpt

For all intents and purposes, the 2017 visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (DDLC) looks to be like any typical dating simulator video game. Loading up the game presents the player with a bright pink loading screen, the game's title emblazoned in whimsical block text circumscribed by colorful hearts, accompanied by a jaunty flute and piano melody in the background (see figure 1). Four cartoon female figures, dressed in schoolgirl blazers and short pleated skirts, greet the player with glimmering doe eyes; arranged in poses and with expressions suggesting at their respective personalities, these girls are presumed to be the dateable characters within the scope of the game who can all potentially be romanced at the player's desire. From the game's very onset, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* appears to be innocuous, nonthreatening, harmless—after all, how can anything this blatantly *cute* be anything other than benign? In fact, it is by very nature of its cute demeanor that DDLC manages to subvert the expectations of its supposed genre and ultimately reveal its true colors as a brilliantly executed metafictional psychological horror.

At the onset of the game, the narration and gameplay of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* appear to be simple and straightforward, like any other romantic visual novel. The player takes on the role of the game's protagonist, a male high school student in Japan who joins the newly formed Literature Club after meeting the cute girls in its membership (see figure 2). In subsequent minigames, the player character has the ability "write poems" by selecting certain words that will appeal to different girls, allowing him to pursue separate romantic routes with each of the characters within the greater narrative arc of the visual novel (see figure 3). The four non-playable characters fall into common archetypes within the genre of dating simulators: "Sayori, the

youthful bundle of sunshine who values happiness the most; Natsuki, the deceivingly cute girl who packs an assertive punch; Yuri, the timid and mysterious one who finds comfort in the world of books; …And of course, Monika, the leader of the club" (DDLC, game description on Steam). For the first hour or so of gameplay, the story proceeds as one would expect, featuring romantic vignettes between the player character and the girl(s) of choice, peppered throughout with ebullient banter between all the characters, all vying for the protagonist's affection. All seems well until finally, the player goes to visit Sayori at her house one morning before school… and discovers her dead body hanging from the ceiling. From then on, the story embarks on a twisted turn, in which glitches begin to appear in the game's script and characters begin to behave erratically and sometimes violently.

Eventually, the game reveals itself to have been masterminded by none other than the club president, Monika, who has gained sentience of both her role as a scripted character in a visual novel as well as of the player beyond their role as the protagonist (in other words, not as the in-game character but instead as the actual human seated in front of the computer playing the game). In a metafictional breach of the fourth wall, Monika admits to manipulating the behavior of other characters in the game by modifying their script and code, which is reflected in the actual game files themselves. Out of both her despair at realizing the truth regarding the fictional world in which she was trapped as well as her desire to win the affection of the player, Monika had driven the other girls to their gruesome ends before deleting their character files until she and the player were the only ones remaining. In this manner, DDLC is an undermining of the typical dating simulator not only in its departure from the stereotypical cutesy imagery and lighthearted romantic narrative that are characteristic of the genre but also in its subversion of the traditional power dynamic of dating simulators, in which the dateable characters are generally pursued objects of desire programmed to deliver affection, and instead conferring a greater sense of agency for the in-game characters while turning the spotlight on the culpability of the player themselves in this relationship. This paper aims to demonstrate how, by capitalizing on the perceived effects of the cute aesthetic, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* succeeds as a psychological horror in its creation of the uncanny, while calling to question the burden of emotional labor and on whom it typically falls in traditional dating simulator games. First, reading Sianne Ngai's "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," we delve into the theorization of cuteness and note how its application to DDLC serves in establishing the semblance of harmlessness. Following this observation, we proceed with an exploration of Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny" and compare the relationship between the cute and the horrific in DDLC with that between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* (i.e. the canny and the uncanny). Finally, we examine the issue of "emotional labor," as coined in James Kim's

"Petting Asian America," with regard to a one-sided transactional romance in dating simulators, addressing the ways in which DDLC subverts this notion and as such is a maverick departure from the genre.

Please note: the following figures may contain content that some might find disturbing.

Figure 1. The title screen of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (from left to right: Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki, Monika). Screenshot capture by author.

Figure 2. A scene from the initial storyline of the game. Screenshot capture by author.

Figure 3. The minigame in which the player writes poems that can appeal to different girls. Screenshot capture by author.

Author Commentary

Megan Pan

Truthfully speaking, this paper was born out of a simple desire to procrastinate via video games over winter break. Though it is a bit embarrassing to admit, dating simulators have always been one of my favorite video game genres—something about the straightforward gameplay, the lighthearted storytelling, and the cute anime girls who wanted to be my friend just really sparks joy. However, as I was playing through *Doki Doki Literature Club!* for the first time, I was struck by the ways in which it was everything that a dating sim *wasn't* supposed to be: sinister, convoluted, and actively working to *disturb* the player rather than to enthrall them. I found myself contemplating how such a cute–horror dichotomy was constructed as well as the question of who really has the agency in dating simulators, and it was this genuine fascination that prompted me to write my paper on DDLC.

From there, as I subjected my ideas to various iterations of intellectual kneading and began mixing in ingredients from different scholarly sources, a thesis gradually started to take shape. I was fortunate enough to have a friend with whom I was able to share my enthusiasm for the game as well as the nebulous thoughts floating around my head, and from our casual, back-and-forth text conversations, I was able to arrive at a better idea of what my stances were on my topic. Following that, I combed through the array of readings from the class (which was, if anyone is curious, Professor Cheng's English course "Too Cute!" focusing on the aesthetic of cuteness) in search of sources that spoke to my argument; ultimately, I landed on three essential concepts: Sianne Ngai's theorization of *cuteness*, Sigmund Freud's definition of the *unheimlich* (i.e. the uncanny), and James Kim's coinage of *emotional labor*.

After compiling all my initial thoughts and scholarly research together (in a document titled "doki doki outline"), all that was left was to put my ideas into structured words and actually start writing the paper. Although I wrote in chronological order, beginning with the introductory paragraphs before delving into the essay's body, I found myself returning to my thesis to fine-tune elements of my argument as I went along, discovering more nuances in what I wanted to say as I performed close analyses of the primary source through the multiple lenses of the scholarly articles. In other words, the thesis as it exists in the paper's current iteration had not been fully formed when I first began writing, but rather developed along with the essay itself as I was able to better process and understand the separate components of my ideas in order to synthesize them into one comprehensive argument.

Overall, I genuinely enjoyed the experience of writing this paper, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to explore a topic that I truly love. Thank you for kindly indulging me by reading my work, and I wish for you the same joy in any future writing endeavors.

Editor Commentary
Tess Solomon

In this paper, Megan analyzes a dating simulator video game, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (DDLC). The game, as she describes, begins to purposefully glitch as it progresses, often in dark and morbid ways. The incongruity between these interludes and the aesthetic of the game, which at first seems to be innocent and malleable, was striking to the author when she first encountered it. Through careful examination of the game, Megan arrives at the conclusion that it is this very incongruity that allows the game to subvert the expectations of the player and call those expectations into question.

She begins with a very strong introduction, first orienting her reader effectively by putting them in the position of the player. She includes the details of "a bright pink loading screen, the game's title emblazoned in whimsical block text circumscribed by colorful hearts, accompanied by a jaunty flute and piano melody in the background," giving the reader appropriate context for the paper even if they are unfamiliar with dating simulator games. She does not yet reveal the ways in which the expectations activated by the setting are subverted, but she does set up the potential reasons the creators might have had for complicating the normal simulator narrative: "these girls are presumed to be the dateable characters within the scope of the game who can all potentially be romanced at the player's desire." Thus, when she asks her motivating question, "[H]ow can anything this blatantly *cute* be anything other than benign?" she has already invited the reader to consider a tension between the apparent harmlessness of such games and the "presumed" ability of the player to "romance" these cartoon characters at his or her desire.

It is precisely this tension that Megan claims the game brings to the fore with the help of three scholarly sources that she introduces at the end of the excerpted section. In particular, the relationship between the cute and horrific that she maps onto Freud's categories of the canny and uncanny is particularly pivotal for her larger claim about power dynamics in dating simulators. As she claims in the third paragraph of the excerpt, DDLC undermines a typical game of this kind by subverting those encoded power dynamics. Instead of perpetuating them, she writes, the game confers "a greater sense of agency for the in-game characters while turning the spotlight on the culpability of the player themselves in this relationship."

Megan does a good job of orienting the reader towards an untraditional primary source, an app game. She spends the time that she needs summarizing what it looks like and how it works without giving the reader too much detail. She is able to articulate her argument in her first

paragraph and then, as we have seen, restate it with more nuance and more detail later on, after she has charted the aspects of the game upon which she will focus. These three paragraphs are exemplary of the lexicon term "thesis." Megan demonstrates an effective way to build an argument through a fascinating analysis of a source.

Works Cited

Cheng, Anne Anlin. Introduction. *Ornamentalism*, Oxford UP, 2019.

Doki Doki Literature Club!. Steam version for macOS, Team Salvato, 2017.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, by Freud, translated by James Strachey, Hogarth Press, 1953, pp. 219-52.

Kim, James. "Petting Asian America." *MELUS*, digital ed., vol. 36, no. 1, Spring 2011.

Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, vol. 31, no. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 811-47. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/444516. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

Bios

Megan Pan '22 is a comparative literature concentrator from Short Hills, New Jersey, with certificates in theater, creative writing, and Asian American studies. On campus, she acts in various department and student theater productions, helps run the East West Theater company, and sings with the Princeton University Glee Club. She has been described by friends as the human equivalent of an Azumarill. She wrote this paper as a sophomore.

Tess Solomon '21 is an English concentrator from New York City. She is pursuing certificates in German and cognitive science. She is editor-in-chief of the *Nassau Weekly* as well as a Writing Center Fellow. She wrote this as a junior.