JUST MODIKA: PERILS OF MODDING IN DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB

Perils of Modding in Doki Doki Literature Club
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Abstract

Game modifications, or mods, often provide a way for fans and gamers to interact with game content and characters beyond the limitations of the developer's original work. However, when modders invent new content and storylines for independent activist or art games, they can disrupt the developer's intended message. This is the case with two mods, *Monika After Story* and *A Brand New Day* that were created for the popular independent game, *Doki Doki Literature Club* (*DDLC*). The unmodded version of *DDLC* is a psychological horror game that critiques both the cultural hegemony that drives the dating simulator (dating sim) genre and the concept of player control over narrative games. Both mods restore the dating sim's original tropes to the narrative by allowing the player to "save" all of the doomed characters or continue to romantically pursue the game's antagonist, Monika. To complicate the relationship between the game and its fans, developer Team Salvato has released a policy expressly prohibiting mods created with the intention of replacing the original game; all *DDLC* mods must be extensions of the experience to be played after the game rather than standalone products. Through this complicated relationship, the themes of psychological terror and loneliness present in the original game are replaced with heartwarming sentimentalism and even humor traditionally found in dating sims. Thus, both mods erase the activist message even as they provide solace to players who were initially disturbed by *DDLC*'s characters and themes.

Introduction

Doki Doki Literature Club (Version 1.1.0, Team Salvato, 2017) one of the most popular games of 2017, begins with a warning that it "is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed." The warning appears in stark contrast to the aesthetics of the title screen, which depicts a quartet of cute anime high school girls. They are the girls of the school's newly formed literature club—Monika, Natsuki, Sayori, and Yuri, each clad in the typical short pleated skirts and knee socks of the anime schoolgirl, and each with her own visual quirks like vibrantly-hued hair. It doesn't take long for the first-person main character to agree to join the club, not only because he is pressured by his childhood best friend, Sayori, and the club president, Monika, but because he sees an opportunity to build a relationship with one or more of the club's attractive members. After all, what could be better than membership in a club in which he has his choice of the four women who are competing for his attention? However, small hints reveal that this club is more than poetry-sharing and frivolous flirting. As the main character states just before the first club meeting, "And thus, today marks the day I sold my soul for a cupcake." With the game's initial warning in the back of their mind, the player can

do little but watch these hints slowly build into horror as the game reveals its true narrative: Monika is sentient and in love with the player. Monika's desire slowly becomes desperation, and she manipulates the game to psychologically destroy and then delete the other three characters and all settings aside from herself and a single, stark room.

However, Monika cannot remove all traces of the former club members. The player feels each friend's absence as glitches in the game. For example, when Sayori dies, the game restarts with a scene that is supposed to include her, but her name is replaced by randomly generated text. The player remembers her, because she has just died graphically, but the characters and narrative skip over her as though she never existed, even though ghosts of her presence remain. There is no mourning her loss; the ease with which she is expunged emphasizes that Sayori is a collection of coded lines to create a digital entity. The game removes each character in this way, and the sense of solitude the player experiences increases. There is no way for the main character to save his friends, and there is no closure when they are gone. As the "game" continues to its conclusion, the gamer feels a prevailing sense of loneliness that cannot easily be allayed. The lack of memories and absence of mourning speaks to the ephemeral nature of the digital, and the player's lack of control over the narrative outcome highlights the fact that gamers have little control over games in general, even when those games purport to offer myriad possibilities.

As an art game and cultural commentary on the relationship between games, players, and code, *Doki Doki Literature Club* (*DDLC*) subverts the traditional tropes of the Japanese dating simulation and challenges players' perceived notions of control within visual novels and video games as a medium. In response, several fans have released mods that undermine developer Dan Salvato's intent, creating an experience that re-imagines the game as a more traditional and comical dating simulator, and allows players to regain their lost control. We take an interdisciplinary approach to address how two popular mods, *Monika After Story* (Version 0.8.2, ThePotatoGuy, 2018) and *A Brand New Day* (Version 1.0, Phathom, 2018), take away from the ethics of *DDLC*'s terrifying message that the gamer does not have any control. Therefore, these modifications provide a unique juxtaposition of a game designed to operate under serious and harrowing undertones in the era of interactivity by replacing them what fans prefer to see.

The Dating Sim

Though *Doki Doki Literature Club* presents many of the visual and narrative tropes of dating simulators (or dating sims), the story quickly breaks the standard tropes to reveal an activist angle that presents a challenge to the heteronormative conventions of the dating sim and perceptions of gamer control in video games generally. In this section, we define dating sims as a genre, and then discuss how *DDLC* positions itself within that genre. Little academic literature is written about dating sims, but there is fortunately enough to establish what the genre is. Dating sims are most well-known among Japanese gamers, and there are important distinctions between what comprises a dating sim and what constitutes the closely related visual novel. While the name "dating sim" explicitly defines the purpose of the genre, Roseanne Tompowsky (2013) provides three dominant sub-genres: bishōjo gēmu ("beautiful girl games"), otome gēmu ("maiden games"), and eroge ("erotic games") (p. 4). Bishōjo gēmu games are traditionally marketed towards male gamers, who are generally given the option to date multiple young women. Otome gēmu games are marketed towards women, and these may also include homosexual love interests. Eroge games are defined by their explicit pornographic content

(Tompowsky, 2013, p. 4). According to Emily Taylor (2007), "Dating sims remain confined, for the most part, to the Japanese video and computer game market. While uncommon in the American and European gaming market, they form a significant portion of the Japanese market, with the sales of some games surpassing one million copies" (p. 193). Taylor's article was published in 2007, so gamers now have easier access to visual novels or dating sims thanks to sites like Steam, Humble, and itch.io. However, not all dating simulators are easily ported, and popular video games with dating sim elements that make it to Western audiences generally combine genres, thus making the dating sim secondary to the intended genre (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015, p.10). For example, gamers might be familiar with some conventions of the dating sim thanks to the Japanese role-playing game (RPG) series *Persona*, in which the player can gain ranks with characters (or "social links") by spending time with them and giving them gifts they might like; though *Persona* also has complicated battle mechanics and a storyline that doesn't revolve around dating, the relationship between the main character and female character can become romantic once it reaches a particular level, and the choice of who to date is often carefully considered. One might say that *Persona*'s social link system is a dating sim inside of an RPG, even if a social link includes rewards that benefit the combat system.

DDLC is actually an American game, though the aesthetic and mechanics follow many of the same conventions as Japanese dating sims. In *DDLC*, the player controls a high school male character who is coaxed by his longtime friend and next-door neighbor, Sayori, into joining a newly founded literature club at school. The club has three other members, all of whom are female. In a traditional dating sim storyline, the player would, through dialogue and interactions like gift-giving, woo and eventually date the club member of their choice. Emily Taylor (2007) describes this particular type of simulator as "bishōjo" and postulates, "The gamer plays a male character who interacts with various female characters as well as secondary characters such as family members, neighbors, and teachers" (p. 194). One of the primary goals of this particular genre is to establish interpersonal relationships with other characters in the game. Most of the time, they happen to be young women, as is the case in *DDLC*, in which the player never actually interacts with any characters beyond the four club members. In a dating sim, if the gamer wants to establish a relationship with the character of their choice, they have to keep track of characters and what they might like, so they can curry favor with them. In *DDLC*, this favor mainly shows up in the words the player chooses to include in their poems, which they write each evening and share the next day as part of the Literature Club. Certain words are weighted to impact club members. Yuri, for example, is a romantic who likes dramatic words like "effulgent," whereas Natsuki likes cute things and favors words like "fluffy." There are also some dialogue interactions that influence the story, in which the player decides who to spend time with when preparing for an upcoming festival. This emphasis on remembering character types and tailoring interactions to make particular characters happy is a key quality of dating sims, and one that separates dating sims from visual novels, in which there is less opportunity to influence the character relationships and story.

Taylor (2007) identifies a few other tropes of dating sims. From a visual standpoint, for example, location, background art, and character poses are mainly static and are reused throughout the story. These poses can often serve as cues for the characters' emotions (Taylor, 2007, p. 194). This reuse of game content is one way in which visual novels and dating sims are alike. In *DDLC*, much of the action occurs in the classroom where the club meets, at least until the end, when Monika transports the player to her room for eternity.

The final trope of dating sims is that the options presented to the gamer are usually binary and trivial. As Taylor (2007) observes, "Interestingly, any life-changing decisions in the game, such as whether the main character will donate a kidney, are often not decided to the game player" (p. 194). Thus, the dating sim relies on trivial decisions to lend a semblance of narrative control to the gamer, while the main plot points are pre-determined. According to Brent Ellison (2008), a game can present trivial decisions as more important than they actually are by using branching dialogue, a common and well-known narrative tactic in role-playing games like Bioware's *Mass Effect* (2007) and Bethesda's *Fallout* (2008) series. Ellison states, "One common technique employed to give the player a greater illusion of freedom is to have multiple responses lead to the same path. . . .Therefore, branching dialogue usually curves back in on itself such that while an individual choice may immediately produce a unique response, the rest of the conversation is typically not unique to that choice" (2008, p. 1). Based on this trope and some of the ways designers implement it, we can posit that in a dating sim (as in most games) the player has little actual control over the story. From a generic standpoint, it might be more accurate to call *DDLC* a visual novel posing as dating sim, as it ultimately uses the tropes of the dating sim to highlight the lack of control players have in games in general, breaking with the dating sim genre to present a more activist message.

The Dating Sim and Activism

In many ways, *DDLC* adheres to generic conventions of the dating sim genre. However, as the player progresses through the story, they find clues that indicate the narrative might be more subversive than they first thought. The first is subtle, as some of the words that excite the chibi caricatures (Japanese slang for short) when the gamer composes poetry seem out of place given the initial upbeat tone of the game. Eventually, the young women begin to divulge troubling information in explicit or implicit manners: Sayori is clinically depressed, Yuri likes knives and cuts herself, and Natsuki's father is abusive. The young women either share this information with the player-character or reveal it in poems of their own. These poems are prophetic because the main character's romantic interests become increasingly mentally ill, committing disturbing acts such as self-mutilation and suicide. Further, the club president, Monika, reveals to the player that she has been tampering with the game's code to increase the stress of the characters and enhance social divisions within the club. In a fourth-wall-breaking confession, Monika states that she is in love with the person playing the game—not the main character—and has deleted all other characters so the player must date her, and only her, forever. In doing so, she emphasizes that she is the sole romantic choice by coining the popular fan phrase, "Just Monika." To succeed in the game and reach the "true" ending, the player must go so far as to access the game's source files and delete the Monika character.

The revelation that one of the characters is self-aware is important for a few reasons. First, the player realizes that, unlike in the conventional dating sim where the focus is on the player's freedom to influence the outcome, they are not driving this narrative. The choice of which character to date is really no choice at all because the game is rigged. Second, the game draws attention to the problematic and gendered nature of the dating sim as a purveyor of heteronormative culture. Emily Taylor (2007) asserts that "dating-sim games will remain remarkable windows into Japanese popular culture, social expectations, gender relations, and the meanings of work and leisure in contemporary Japan" (p. 206). This point is confirmed by Roseanne Tompowsky (2013) who notes that even if there are some exceptions, many Japanese dating sims rely on gendered language (p. 53). However, despite following the visual conventions of a Japanese dating sim, *DDLC* was designed by an American,

Dan Salvato, a point that might explain some of the irreverence toward the generic structures as evidenced by some direct American localization. For example, Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki are Japanese names, but Monika is unmistakably Western. Salvato himself never seems to comment on the fact that the genre he borrows most from has its roots in Japanese culture, though he does admit to being heavily influenced by the visual novel. We can only speculate on some of the cultural influences that may have led him to make design and narrative choices with the aim of subverting the dating sim. However, in a reddit "Ask Me Anything" thread, Salvato (2017) mentions some of his motives: "I wanted to help demonstrate the capabilities of interactive fiction, providing some kind of experiences that only a video game could provide. I wanted to disturb people and make them think about life and uncomfortable things. And I just wanted to make a decent story with characters worth caring about." With this in mind, it appears his goal was to create an engaging interactive narrative that showed the strengths of the genre but at the same time questioned and poked fun at some of its norms to invoke a state of discomfort and a reflection on other issues brought up in the game, like mental health. The genre's place in Japanese culture, however, does not seem to have been critiqued or considered.[i]

In the traditional dating sim, several female characters vie for the attention of a single male character. In some examples, as is the case with one of the mods we discuss below (*A Brand New Day*), the game promotes the realization of the harem fantasy, in which the male character does not have to choose a single romantic interest, but can date all female characters. Though we might view this trope as a healthy promotion of queer or polyamorous relationships, the way in which the fantasy is handled more often than not privileges male desire. Even games with socially conscious messages, like the *Persona* series, very rarely allow for anything outside the heteronormative standard, though there are more examples of queer characters and relationships in the visual novel genre as evidenced by the sub-genre yaoi ("boy's love") that features prominent male romantic relationships.

Given these tropes, it is hard to imagine the dating sim as an activist genre. However, despite not having an activist message in the sense that it encourages a particular political action for a candidate or issue, we argue that the game contains activist messages in two ways: narrative and procedural. Firstly, regarding *DDLC*'s success as an activist narrative, it fits the definition of what Susana Ruiz defines as Games as (Politicized) Art. For Ruiz (2015), "This lens argues that the still contested framing of games as art offers a productive lens for understanding games as part of the legacy of politicized and experimental art, rather than a culturally legitimizing function." As discussed above, the dating sim's generic emphasis on the male main character wooing several attractive female characters at once legitimizes (to use Ruiz's term) the hegemonic practice of male dominance over women, particularly because women in dating sim narratives are often required to exchange their attention and affection for gifts from the male main character. The genre thus emphasizes a sense of entitlement that leads many men to believe that women must "put out" either sexually or romantically if they accept gifts. Part of the blame for this expectation falls, however, upon game procedure. In his discussion of political and activist games, Ian Bogost (2006) defines procedure as related to, but not limited to, computer science, as well as, ". . . tied to authority, crafted from the top–down, and put in place to structure behavior and identify infringement. Procedures are sometimes related to ideology; they can cloud our ability to see other ways of thinking" (para. 8). In this sense, *DDLC* opens the dating sim genre to new ways of thinking by overturning those procedural tropes. In the game, it does not matter who the main character woos or whether they choose the appropriate and affection-garnering

responses. Monika becomes the romantic interest regardless of the player's behavior via the in-game choices, and *DDLC* becomes more of an activist game than was immediately apparent.

One additional classification of activist games comes from Mary Flanagan (2009), who writes, ". . . they are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through game mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone" (p. 13). Certainly, *DDLC* is an entertaining and memorable experience, and that allowed it to reach more players than most activist games. However, its themes, narrative, roles, goals, and characters work with experimental game mechanics and interactions (such as requiring the player to delete portions of the source code to progress) to highlight the problems of the dating sim and leave the player with a decidedly non-dating-sim-like outcome. The outcome was so contrary to the norm that many players, as we identify below, preferred the modded versions for their return to the safety of dating sim convention. As Flanagan (2009) describes, "Subversion is an action, plan, or activity intended to undermine and institution, event, or object" (p. 10). *DDLC* offers all the entertaining aspects of a dating sim, then slowly takes them away via its experimental game mechanics, making it an activist game not only in the sense of Ruiz's politicized art games, but through the use of ideological procedure as identified by Bogost and subversion as defined by Flanagan.

DDLC accomplishes these goals even while it does not explicitly ask the player to consider the role of the dating sim as a culturally legitimizing function that promotes the hegemony, and it does not ask the player to stop playing the more traditional dating sims, but it does stand as a critique of the generic norms. It is an activist text through its ability to question and, via subversion, defy that culturally legitimizing function in several ways. First, the game denies the player basic affordances of not only the genre, but the medium of games. As the story progresses, the player slowly loses these technological affordances, like saving and loading the game, to Monika. This loss takes from the player one of the pleasures of the dating sim, and of video games in general, the ability to return to a previous point in the narrative and see what would have happened if they had chosen a different option or path. After a certain point, this option is not possible in *DDLC* without completely deleting the game and starting over. In her discussion of video game narrative structure, Shira Chess (2016) argues that games as a genre have the ability to create a queer narrative structure—one that privileges small moments over the singular climax of Freteg's pyramid. Chess (2016) writes, "Video games offer alternative pleasures because they exist in the space of narrative denial, reveling in a dilatory narrative middle where satisfaction is both immanent and impossible" (p. 92). Removing affordances like the ability to save the game creates a more seemingly static narrative over which the player has little control, but the addition of elements like the need for the player to find and delete Monika's character file to view the game's ending actually enhances the queer elements of the narrative, or at the very least upholds its illusory impact as such a profound act of rebellion is still very much a part of the visual novel's code. Only by leaving the story can the player realize its full potential.

Furthermore, unless the player deletes Monika, they are trapped in a room with her, scrolling through her dialogue endlessly until they chose to delete the game file. The setting is akin to purgatory and demonstrates a complete lack of narrative action or climax. The game visually represents the unraveling narrative through the introduction of "glitches" into some of the stock scenes and

character portraits discussed earlier, disrupting the steady flow of images and poses that the player has likely gotten used to reading as visual cues. This subversion of the standard game narrative affordances and signposts dovetails with a second way in which *DDLC* subverts the dating sim genre, the removal of choice, or at least the removal of the perception of choice. While there are some ways in which the player has control over the order of the events in the narrative, it is quite clear by the end of the game that Monika is in control. In a twisted way, the game questions the norms of the dating sim by privileging female pleasure over male desire and choice. Self-aware Monika refuses to play her role and allow the main character to choose a partner. Rather, she wants him for herself. Though she becomes unquestionably evil in her quest to win the main character, her victory removes male pleasure as the narrative focus.

That said, the trope of the dangerous and oversexualized example of feminine artificial intelligence is one way in which *DDLC*'s Monika might fail in an activist sense. As we will discuss below, both *Monika After Story* and *A Brand New Day* remove Monika's grip on the game world and reinstate male desire as the primary narrative driver, returning the game to the comfortable norms of the dating sim. Finally, the game deals with themes of abuse and mental health. Sayori, for example commits suicide visibly and graphically as part of the narrative, and the player learns in the process that she has long struggled with depression. A focus on mental health not only overturns common dating sim tropes, which keep its characters focused on cute and light anime themes, but places it more clearly in the realm of activist games, where themes of mental health are more common. Though we will not specifically discuss this theme, we will examine how *A Brand New Day* covers any serious discussion of mental health and self-care with a more "cute" version of the narrative.

Mods and Doki Doki Literature Club

For purposes of our analysis, we focus on two mods created for *DDLC*—*Monika After Story* and *A Brand New Day*—that inhibit the game's themes and take away from the political and activist elements of the story. It is important to note that, perhaps because of this, the creator of *DDLC*, Team Salvato, has put forth a rather strict policy against mods and fan content in general. In relation to mods, Team Salvato's (2018) policy states, "You may NOT create, copy, or distribute any fan game that is designed to be played in lieu of the official *DDLC* game. Any fan games, including mods, that 'replace' *DDLC*, or imply that it should be played before the original, are forbidden. This includes mods that add new content to the *DDLC* base game, including, but not limited to, new art, new scenes, new visual effects, or voice acting. Fan games may ONLY be created with the assumption that the player has already completed the original *DDLC* game, and is looking for fan content" (Team Salvato, 2018, para. 16). Based on this statement, it seems that Team Salvato acknowledges that modding the game takes away from the message and reinstates the troublesome dating sim norms. Both mods that we discuss follow Salvato's protocol by explicitly stating that they are supplementary fan content, and are not intended to be played before or in lieu of the original game.

We define mods as user-generated content that alters or modifies an extant video game. The legality of video game modifications is a tinderbox in economic and legal discourses, but many video game developers tend to turn a blind eye as long as terms of service are not violated (as evidenced by Salvato's "guidelines"). Alexander Unger (2012) provides four classifications of mods, which are mutators/tweaks, add-ons, "mods," and total conversions (p. 518). Mutators/tweaks are minor changes that will not impact the game beyond slight aesthetic or gameplay dynamics like game

speed or weather (p. 518). Add-ons produce slight modifications like armor, maps, game patches, and new companions (p. 518). "Mods," as defined by Unger's taxonomy, "try to establish a new fraction, setting, or narration" (p. 518). Finally, total conversions ultimately produce a brand new game despite utilizing an existing game or engine (p. 518). Team Salvato expressly forbids the creation of total conversion mods: "Any mods must NOT be distributed as a complete game. They should contain only the files that are necessary to install the mod (usually files that are added to the *DDLC* game folder)" (Team Salvato, 2018, para. 25). Therefore, *Monika After Story* and *A Brand New Day* exist because they are meant to be added to the original *DDLC* game folder after the original game has been played. Even though both mods do not drastically alter the game like a total conversion mod would, both change the original *DDLC* in manners that are divergent from Salvato's creation.

Monika After Story

In this mod, the player can spend eternity with Monika in her room, but the game adds additional features and mini-games so the player does not have to simply sit and listen to Monika talk for hours. However, Monika is initially hesitant to spend eternity with the gamer because they deleted her in the original game. Monika even asks the gamer, "Do you really want to torture me until I kill myself?" Eventually, Monika forgives the gamer for deleting her and is happy that they ultimately returned to her. *Monika After Story* allows the player and Monika to do things like play chess, pong, and piano, and sing songs. There's also a calendar feature that allows Monika to help the player remember important dates. According to Unger's taxonomy, *Monika After Story* could qualify as an add-on or "mod"; though it does not add significant narrative elements or any new settings, it adds several mini-games and interactions with Monika.

A Brand New Day (ABND)

This mod allows the player to live out the fantasy of the harem ending, in which they may date all of the characters, and would quality as a "mod" mod according to Unger's taxonomy. It creates a humorous story out of the horror of the original *DDLC* by replacing jump scares with jump humor. Jump scares, both visual and aural, are central to the original game, which is further proof that the mod destroys the game's original intent. In the unmodded game, for example the player learns one of the characters, Natsuki, has an abusive father. In the original game, the player never meets him, but in the mod, the player meets a hilarious version of him that has Natsuki's trademark pink pigtails. Of course, in the lighthearted mod, the player saves Natsuki from him. It is possible that this mod would not be so funny if the original game were not so horrifying and dark. Part of the allure is in its ability to turn *DDLC* into a more conventional dating sim, allowing the player to be with and interact further with characters who were harshly and suddenly removed from the original game. For example, in the mod, Yuri clumsily hits her head at a point where, in the actual game, she stabs herself repeatedly in the chest. In the mod, of course, she is not permanently injured; in the game, she dies slowly, and the main character sits with her lifeless body from Friday afternoon, when the incident occurs, until Monday when school resumes.

With their focus on fulfilling player fantasies and reinstating some amount of player control, both mods succeed in removing some of the more groundbreaking messages in the *DDLC* narrative, but they also raise some questions about the underlying game structure. If the player wishes to see the unmodded *DDLC* narrative through to the end, they must follow Natsuki's final advice and "delete

her." That is, they must access the game files and delete Monika's character file. Likewise, if the player wishes to install a *DDLC* mod, they must access the game files and add the mod's files. In a way, Team Salvato asks the player to tamper with the files, essentially modding the game for the purposes of the narrative, then limits how much the player can mod the game for the purposes of fandom; this feels like a mixed message at best and hypocrisy at worst. However, what happens after the player deletes Monika in the unmodded game might indicate why the rules are so heavily in favor of limiting the amount of mods for the *DDLC*.

After deleting Monika in the unmodded game, the player finds that she still has control of the game, so tampering with the files did not actually give the player any control. Thus, by asking the player to exercise developer-like control and then taking that control away, the game becomes somewhat of a commentary on the life of coded artifacts themselves. The player has little control over the life of the narrative, and the designer has little control over the life of the game, even if they seek to limit tampering by players and fans. Like Monika, the code and narrative can take on a mysterious life of its own, reappearing in new projects and interacting in unexpected ways.

Why Mod a Game with a Message?

Independent and activist games are often not modded, perhaps because they are created by the independent developer community, which also creates the majority of mods. The lack of choice as a trope in activist games might also discourage the practice of modding artistic and activist texts, as they often have defined and purposeful messages and storylines, whereas AAA titles might encourage deeper development in some characters and areas. One example of this tendency is the 2006 activist game *Darfur is Dying* by interFUEL, LLC. The game explores the refugee crisis in Darfur, putting the player in the shoes of a refugee to show how difficult and dangerous simple tasks like gathering water become in a refugee camp. As the game's description states, "The content and the creative are woven together throughout the game, beginning with the first phase where the user selects an avatar to forage for water. Upon success or failure, they learn that their chances of succeeding were predetermined by their gender and age" (Games for Change, 2006, para. 2). While different characters might have varying strengths and weaknesses in the RPG genre, these differences are often stated up front. In an activist game, players might not learn the impact of their choices until it is too late to change, lending them little actual agency.

DDLC's unorthodox nature likewise raises questions about player agency and allows it to be viewed through a plethora of lenses. On one hand, it is a free game that reached over a million downloads in the first few months of its release (Salvato, 2017). It is also a horror game that operates under subtle undertones in which the real horror lies in not only taking agency from the gamer (and explicitly calling choice a farce), but repeatedly challenging the player's sense of immersion in that the game uses technological "glitches" to advance certain events in the story. Additionally, and even though it is outside the scope of this paper, *DDLC*'s cult following has allowed it to jump from relative obscurity, since it is an indie game with no corporate backing, to an international phenomenon. With all of these components in mind, should a modder choose to mod *DDLC*, they may be offering more "choice" so to speak, but the game's central message is its lack of choice. If this central message is dismantled and the game becomes something else entirely, any activist or political artistic connotations that can be derived from the game are also dismantled.

As stated above, fans might choose to mod or play a modded version of *DDLC* because mods like *A Brand New Day* allow them to have what the game otherwise denies: relationships with Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki in addition to Monika. *ABND* has a significant following on reddit, and is updated fairly often. As one gamer states: "Just played the newest version. The mod is awesome so far! I get the whole 'everyone still has problems, but you can save them' idea now. You've put a lot of effort into this, it really shows. I can't wait to see what's next in release Beta 2 ;)" (lennieplop60, 2017). As this player identifies, the ability to "save" the characters is enticing, because it is undeniably difficult and disturbing to watch them die gruesomely in the unmodded game after growing attached to them. An ending in which the main character helps them each overcome their troubles and illnesses is satisfying for players who want the game's narrative to match the dating sim aesthetic. Additional comments support this desire. Of *ABND*, another player writes, "Overall, I really, really appreciate the effort put into it. The vanilla game left me amazed but severely heartbroken, and it's people like you that help fix that, and also keep the *DDLC* community alive. THANK YOU" (MRorPA, 2018)! For this player, the mod helped ease the sadness caused by the unmodded game, perhaps because it keeps the beloved characters alive and happy.

Furthermore, mods provide world-building for a universe that fans feel needs to be developed and continued. As fandom scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) argues, "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (p. 116). Fan responses to *ABND* support Jenkins' remarks, with one player stating, "I recommend you it from the bottom of my heart. Since it's a Demo still, you'll have a crap ton of content… If you don't play it in a straight maraton like I did for 9 hours.. That's right, 4 hours more than the original game" (JAMMITY ® FriskyNicks, 2018), and another player writing, "I really like this mod, It basically extends Doki Doki with a cool new story, I like the incorporation of The third eye theories. The dialogue feels realistic and i like the sound effects in certain areas, they really add to the humour. 8/10" (Darkupri, 2018). In these cases, the mod becomes a way for the players to spend more time with the characters if they feel the game ended prematurely, did not have a happy ending, or was too short.

To revisit one of the most absurd (and hilarious) twists in the *ABND* mod, Natsuki's father has a featured role. The source of Natsuki's pain in *DDLC* is a modded creation known as Dadsuki, who bears a striking resemblance to Dio Brando from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. Players of the mod then read about a ridiculous narrated fight to the death in which the protagonist emerges victorious. Such an inclusion speaks to the world-building nature of transmedia storytelling. However, while *DDLC* certainly has memorable characters and a twist, those alone do not define the experience that Salvato perhaps intended. At the center of what is a psychological thriller exposing the illusion of control in games while masquerading as a dating sim is a prevailing sense of loneliness that is meant to stay with the gamer. Sayori commits suicide no matter what the protagonist attempts, and then Monika mercilessly erases her from the game as she is forgotten by everyone. Natsuki snaps her neck during what many gamers call the most unsettling scene in the entire game, and her storyline ushers in Yuri's without any say from the gamer. Yuri, too, stabs herself in front of the gamer-player, who is forced to wait with her decomposing corpse. Finally, Monika transports the gamer to her eternity room, but there is an oppressive feeling that it can't last if the gamer wishes to see the "game" to its "proper" conclusion. This is to say nothing about her own sense of loneliness as she reveals she is aware that she is a video game character. Yet Monika's room is hauntingly peaceful, much like save rooms in *Resident*

Evil in which no harm can befall the player-character. Ironically, the only true moment of respite in such a jarring game is disrupted when the gamer decides to erase Monika's character file, thus deleting her as she says goodbye. Even when the gamer performers mundane tasks, such as walking in school hallways or writing poetry, there are no other traces of life in this universe. All characters eventually leave the gamer, producing a sense of loss that isn't easily replicable in interactive media where even the game's primary antagonist reveals that she loves the gamer because they are the only real thing in her existence. Arguably, this sense of loss is what truly defines *DDLC*. As a parallel example, this sense of dread is akin to the fog in a series like *Silent Hill*: if removed, the entire complexion of the game changes because the element is that integral to its design.[ii] When a video game like *DDLC* is modded, gamers are allowed to bypass this oppressive sense of loneliness. While they may feel better about these new endings (and maybe themselves), the atmosphere that allowed such initial experiences to germinate is not allowed to exist in these fan-inspired creations. There is no *Silent Hill* without fog, and there is no *DDLC* without existential dread.

Because dating sims often have multiple endings that support multiple playthroughs, the mod fulfills the desire for exploring myriad relationships outcomes in dating sim fans. In other words, as *ABND* demonstrates, gamers might get new dialogue, locations, events, and scenarios from mods, but—at least in the case of *DDLC*—the story's original intent is lost in the shuffle. And it does seem that at least some fans are unhappy with mods like *ABND*. In this case, the mod forces the harem ending while the unmodded game forces the "Just Monika" ending. As SlappyThePoptart on reddit writes, "I'm enjoying the mod so far but I have one huuuuge problem with it. It's *Doki Doki Literature Club*, not Doki Doki Harem Club. Why is MC flirting (and hugging, and kissing, and dating) everyone? Is it impossible for him to 'save' them without romance" (SlappyThePoptart, 2018)? By subverting the game's themes, the mod is actually playing right into them. The player still has no actual control over who they date, and, thus, players will still be unhappy with the outcome when the choice that they see as "appropriate" is taken away.

In the case of *Monika After Story*, modding removes Monika's agency and adjusts her behavior by adding more topics of conversation to her dialogue and mini-games the player can do with her. This mod is not as sweeping as mods like *ABND*, which updates most of the game's narrative. In *Monika After Story*, the narrative remains the same, but the player has more opportunities to interact with Monika rather than delete her. As coltsfanca on reddit states, "Just beat the game last night and, having just seen this for the first time, I love this so much. It took my [sic] a couple days to even have the guts to delete Monika in the original game and now I can replay the game and don't have to!" (coltsfanca, 2017). This mod is meant for players who would choose to "date" Monika in the unmodded version of the game, but it raises questions about who actually has control over the narrative. Monika, who has recently become sentient, cannot share simultaneous control over the narrative with the gamer—so who is actually playing this game? If we don't mod, it's Monika who ultimately determines the outcome, even if we try to delete her. If we do mod, we are asserting our dominance as the player to choose our own ending. Choosing the desired outcome via installing mods in the case of *DDLC* becomes a further act of rebellion because the developer does not fully condone their creation.

Conclusion

Modding an activist game like *DDLC* can lend the gamer a sense of closure and a respite from the

feelings of loneliness and despair that the unmodded game creates. Modding *DDLC* can also reinforce the heteronormative or hegemonic structures that many fans of dating sims find appealing. However, *DDLC* is purposely meant to be unsettling. Though modding as a practice can help players create and find depth in games, or participate in world-building (albeit in a fanfiction sense at best), it is unnecessary and potentially disruptive to a game with such a defined and groundbreaking narrative. Resurrecting Monika from the dead or "saving" all girls are certainly creative endeavors, but both destroy and minimize the emotional impact of the original game to the point that it is reduced to the very conventions it was railing against. At present, *A Brand New Day* in particular leaves viewers with two final impressions (although the modding team is apparently still working on the mod). First, the girls all get drunk on wine and have a sleepover with the main character. Second, a faux April Fool's video was released in 2018 in which the girls kill the main character for attempting to date all of them. The absurdity of the scenario highlights how far fan fantasies can diverge from the intended message. Is it homage or depreciation? Fans and critics will be divided on this question. However, one truth remains: The tagline is "Just Monika," not "Just Modika."

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[i] Coincidentally, the concept of sentient artificial intelligence was explored in the 2012 Japanese video game *Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair*, which also pokes fun at dating sim conventions like gift-

giving and spending time with friends. It is eventually revealed that one character, a young gamer named Chiaki, is an AI being designed to monitor the other characters in the game. It is unknown if Salvato was inspired by *Danganronpa* when he developed *Doki Doki Literature Club*.

[ii] In fact, the 2012 *Silent Hill HD Collection* was panned by fans in part because the fog looked worse on the PlayStation 3, or it was removed entirely during key scenes.