Destabilizing Animation: Structures of Agency and Uncanny Animacy in Animated Media

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A Thesis
In
The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Film Studies) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Quebec, Canada

June 2020

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Destabilizing Animation: Structures of Agency and Uncanny Animacy in Animated Media

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Film Studies)

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the destabilization of a hierarchical ordering of human vs. nonhuman agency found in digital media which present a surge of "animacy" – perceptible qualities of "agency, awareness, mobility and liveness" (Chen 2012). It examines one webtoon (*The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* 2011) and two video games (*Undertale* 2015 and *Doki Doki Literature Club* 2017), which push at the boundaries of their respective media forms by channeling technical/computational forces (e.g. Javascript or memory storage) into character animation; "animation" in a doubled sense: both as the fusion of discontinuous instants afforded by the mechanical succession of images as well as the production of a social Other possessing qualities of life and agency (Silvio 2019). The result is a perception of agency (and thus animacy) that resists the categorization of both the character and the media object. Challenging dominant structures and theories of comic readership, video game play, or "database consumption" (Azuma 2009) respectively, these works argue against the control that the human operator is presumed both to have and to require as part of a framework which constitutes the works themselves as media objects. This thesis further argues that the structures critiqued and challenged by these works index a broader conceptualization of human action in the world, predicated on "animacy hierarchies" which are buttressed by binaries of human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, moving/still, subject/object, and will/determination. By adopting an animist logic, in which images/media/characters might *potentially* act in unforeseen ways, these works challenge and destabilize such binaries.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is only possible as the result of sustained feedback and support from many people whom I will attempt to list here.

First and foremost, I am indebted to my supervisor and mentor Marc Steinberg, who has consistently been a thoughtful, considerate, and encouraging presence throughout the completion of my degree. Marc's earnest, attentive, and critical feedback has been a constant source of constructive criticism that has pushed this thesis to be, I hope, more than a mash-up of fragmented thoughts. Marc's careful and practical disposition has been an invaluable counter-balance to my at-times obtuse ideas and my penchant for the obscure.

I would also like to offer my sincere gratitude to the wonderful, brilliant, and supportive faculty at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University, particularly to Joshua Neves, Masha Salazkina, Haidee Wasson, and May Chew, whom I have had the pleasure of learning directly from. The diverse methodologies and perspectives of these faculty members has been the foundation upon which my growth as a scholar over the past two years has taken place. I would also like to thank the professors for whom I have acted as a teaching assistant, Alison Loader as well as Donato Totaro, for aiding my professional development and inspiring me to make connections in ways I hadn't previously considered. Faculty outside of Concordia have had a significant impact on this thesis as well. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from Thomas Lamarre, whose ideas, approaches, and attitudes have influenced both this thesis and my values as a scholar. At Yokohama National University I had the opportunity to conduct research that has influenced this thesis, and I would be remiss not acknowledge the incredible support I received from Akiko Sugawa-Shimada there. Faculty at my undergraduate university, Trent University, have also been foundational to this research, with special thanks to Paul Manning and Liam Mitchell, whose courses and ideas initially sparked my desire to take up this project, and who have continued to offer me invaluable support in the time since.

This thesis has also only been possible thanks to incredible financial support. First and foremost, I must acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, who graciously awarded me with a Canada Graduate Scholarship to fund my studies. Next, I would offer my thanks to the joint-funded Mitacs-JSPS Summer Program that funded my research in Japan at Yokohama National University. Finally, I would acknowledge the financial support of Concordia University, that has aided me through a combination of a scholarship, a fellowship, and a travel award, as well as teaching and research assistant positions.

I fail to imagine a world in which I could have successfully completed this thesis without the continual support of my fellow colleagues and friends at Concordia University. I am especially grateful to those who took their time to read, review, and provide feedback on my work regularly throughout the writing process: Claire, Patrick, Miles, and Max. I also wish to offer thanks to those students in the PhD program who have both given me opportunities to explore my ideas and have also been models for better scholarship: Jacqueline, André, Aurélie, Marco, and Kristen, to name a few. I also wish to offer thanks to the welcoming and intellectually stimulating folks at TAG (Technoculture, Art and Games) for their continued support. In this area, the biggest thanks to my "otaku" colleagues and friends, who have shared this challenge with me most closely: Alex and Victoria.

Last, but certainly not least, I must acknowledge the support of my friends and family in Peterborough, Ontario. My closest friends have continued to push me, and have also continued to believe in me, since long before I began my post-secondary education, and their enthusiasm has always been a primary motivator for me; thanks to Mack, Alex, Jack, Kyle, Hannah, and Ren. My biggest source of comfort and of motivation has come from my family however, without whom I would not be the person I am today; thanks to Brittany, Dallas, Carter, Dad, Katt, Darren and Mike.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, who has instilled in me the values of kindness and selflessness, and whose care and support is the cornerstone of any success I find.

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Introduction

Halfway through the battle with Providence, the final boss of the Japanese Role-Playing Game *Bravely Second: End Layer* (Square Enix, 2015), the godlike and monstrous being cryptically alludes to the possibility that its quartet of playable characters are not in control of their fate: that they are being observed, monitored, and even controlled. Perhaps, I think as I challenge the boss, it refers to some grand architect behind the events of the drama I have watched unfold over the 40+ hour narrative. But then, as it carries on with its villainous monologue, the camera angle shifts so that its giant singular eyeball can look directly at the entity it refers to. It looks at me, the player. It notes that the one that really has agency, the one that the characters of the game must really defeat in order to survive, is me. The screen goes white, and the game exits to the title menu. Confused, I attempt to reload my save file, to select 'Continue', but each press of a button, no matter which button it is, moves my cursor closer towards only one option: to delete my save file. Providence is right; this is the way to really take the control I have away.

And yet, the Providence boss fight was not even the first time I played through an event involving a similar shattering of the fourth-wall in a game. The year before *Bravely Second: End Layer* released in North America, the massive indie-game hit *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) had released, and in it, the character Flowey likewise refutes my agency as a player by outright erasing my save file and taking it over as his own. Two years later I continue to see a similar series of events play out with *Doki Doki Literature Club*'s (Team Salvato, 2017) character Monika, who begins reshaping the game to her will as she refutes my agency as a player. More than ever, video games seem to be asking me to think about the relationship that I have with them and their characters as a player, to ask myself if there are better ways to exist in relation to them. But perhaps more importantly, those games always seem to make this argument by *coming to life*: Providence can actually see me, Flowey seems to sense my presence, and Monika asks me if I can hear her. And though I begin this discussion with video games, many other examples of interactive media seem to be springing to life to take control out of my hands and declare their own lives – as real, yet nonetheless fictional, *nonhuman agents*.

What do these acts of conjuring a sense of fictional characters, and the media they inhabit, as truly alive, these acts of *animation*, actually do? Is there more to them than their mere surprise

value? Do they have anything to say beyond a simple trick? What value is there in asking me to treat a fictional god, or a flower, or a girl, as something other than an object that exists to be manipulated by myself as a human agent? Perhaps the answer is that of an imminent critique of certain structures, structures that more broadly characterize my way of being in the world, structures that are not unique to video games and other interactive media but just so happen to extend to them as well. Perhaps in addition to being about the way I view characters in games as chess pieces, or monsters in games as resources to be collected, they are about my failure to recognize and anticipate *nonhuman agency* more broadly. Perhaps by changing the way I play, or view, or read, these works want me to rethink my relationship to nonhumans, to the world at large, in different terms.

The objective of this thesis is to understand these moments of "coming to life" and to develop an analytical framework that accounts for them and their disruption of human agency. I explore this through the use of three examples, each of which come to occupy their own chapters: one Korean webtoon, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* (Horang, 2011), and two North American produced Japanese-style video games, *Undertale* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*. I characterize these "coming to life" moments as "animation", both because they at times are (or contain) animation, but also because they themselves as media "come to life." Moreover, each example is selected not merely because they demonstrate the agency of particular nonhumans but because those demonstrations allow for the transformation of general concepts derived from certain theories of media: in comic theory, game theory, and character theory respectively. In other words, they inject a sense of animacy not only into a particular piece of media but also into the theorization of certain media forms more broadly. Each subverts the expectations of their human operator, and the way that that operator positions themselves in relation to the media object. At the same time, they argue that they, as media objects, can do more than they might otherwise be theorized to be capable of. Thus, this thesis centers the mediality of each object, such as Javascript triggers, memory, and data reading. The media that I examine channel these computational forces into the experience of characters. In doing so, they not only achieve an uncanny animacy, but do so in a way that reveals what is already uncanny about the potentials of their respective media forms.

This thesis begins by looking at how these works establish a "normal" relationship between human operator and media object. It considers how each example produces its sense of

"life," and how the prior construction of the human participant as active, agential, and "animate" plays a role in that production. It then asks what framework the production of "life" in that which otherwise is framed as passive, available for manipulation, and "inanimate" destabilizes, and which binary oppositions in particular. The thesis concludes by considering what remains in the wake of such a destabilizing moment. At stake is the degree to which these moments of destabilizing life support or refute frameworks for being in the world that are inherently at odds with one another.

Age of Animation

In *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan*, anthropologist Teri Silvio claims that "We are entering an Age of Animation."[1] This is not just because animation is increasingly the dominant form of media that is consumed globally, from CGI blockbusters to video games; it is also because "our attention is increasingly turned toward the *idea* of animation."[2] Topics such as posthumanism and artificial life abound in our cultural consciousness. Silvio adds that animation "in the narrow sense (a kind of cinema or video)," (which we might expand to include forms like comics) "is popular because animation in the broad sense (giving objects lives of their own) is good to think with – specifically, to think through what is happening right now in the intersections of technology and capitalism, of the global and the local, of *the human and the nonhuman*."[3]

Silvio is not the only one to claim that thinking of animation is increasingly relevant to our current cultural moment; Deborah Levitt likewise contends that we are entering into an age of animation, what she terms "the animatic apparatus."[4] In the animatic apparatus, "the status and limits of life are everywhere at issue."[5] Specifically, life is increasingly imaged and reimaged

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[1] Teri Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. Emphasis not present in original.
[4] Deborah Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. (John Hunt Publishing, 2018.)
[5] Ibid*., 3.* I characterize comics as something of a fringe case with respect to the narrow definition. While the images of comics are not "animated" in a literal sense, they afford a sense of movement in a different way. Moreover, many forms of comic art employ the conventions of cinema. As Thomas Lamarre points out, *manga* has been "construed as a way of 'doing film' on paper." Thomas Lamarre. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life." *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 115.

(biometrics and new forms of bioproduction) just as images themselves are increasingly alive (as in artificial life, or media ecologies). At the same time as we are being asked to grapple with previously invisible forms of liveliness in nonhumans, we are producing more and more of it in both science and art.

Theories of animation in the digital age have most heavily focused on animation "in the narrow sense," as Silvio refers to it, most of which have been focused on the study of comics, animated film, video games, and the like.[6] Some of this scholarship has focused on differentiating animated media from its counterpart in "live-action" media, both in terms of techne and in terms of philosophical disposition.[7] Perhaps one of the most influential in this regard has been Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Machine*, and especially the typology of cinematic (into depth) and animetic (sliding layers) movement. Many other animation scholars, such as Azuma Hiroki and Ian Condry, have focused on the shifts in the production, consumption, and distribution of animation in the digital age.[8] The globalization of animation and anime are increasingly relevant topics covered by scholars such as Marc Steinberg, Alexander Zahlten, and Anne Allison.[9]

Part of the project of Silvio's book is to put forth an anthropological theory of animation which is focused on animation "not as a specific technology but as a broader category of human, cultural action."[10] This is, in other words, animation "in the broad sense". Silvio offers a definition of animation in this sense as:

> *the construction of social others through the projection of qualities perceived as human—life, soul, power, agency, intentionality, personality, and so on—outside the self and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction.*[11]

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[6] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*, 7.
[7] See Alan Cholodenko. "Still Photography?." *Afterimage* 32, no. 5 (2005): 5.
[8] See Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York and London; New York University Press: 2006), Azuma Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. (U of Minnesota Press, 2009), and Ian Condry. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story.* (Duke University Press, 2013*)*
[9] See Marc Steinberg. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. (U of Minnesota Press, 2012), Alexander Zahlten. "Media Mix and the Metaphoric Economy of World." In *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*. Edited by Daisuke Miyao. (Oxford University Press, 2014),and Anne Allison. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Vol. 13. (Univ of California Press, 2006).
[10] Ibid. 4.
[11] Ibid. 19.

What constitutes animation according to this definition is, for Silvio, dependent on projection and perception, and thus begins and ends at the (presumably human) self; I will return to this. It is also culturally specific: it "can be considered animation only if the object onto which [qualities perceived as human are] projected is culturally defined as not having those qualities."[12] This projection isn't necessarily a matter of religion and belief; both perceiving "a rock as 'alive" as well as "ventriloquizing what you think your cat is thinking/saying" are equally acts of animation. Other examples of Silvio's anthropological definition tracking outside of the "overtly religious sphere" include, for example, "Marx's theory of the commodity fetish."[13] This moves Silvio's focus from a set of technologies to a general investment of agency: "icons, effigies, talismans, fetishes, and natural objects."[14] What is useful about this definition for this project is the set of qualities Silvio isolates, particularly in that it foregrounds a link between animation and agency, rather than movement. A central question this thesis asks is: under what conditions does one perceive agency with regard to animation? Where this thesis diverges from Silvio's definition, however, is that it foregrounds the materiality of animation-as-agency, emphasizing things such as the transfer and processing of data; the media objects I analyze, and my theorization of them, acts as an explicit challenge to animation as originating from the human in something like an act of projection.

Generally, when one looks to the objects of animation in the narrow sense (films, comics, games, and so on), it is with an emphasis on their content: anthropomorphized animals, toys that come to life, or cyborgs and androids. That is, it is far less often that one considers the investment of media with agency in terms of its interaction with an operator: comics, games, or films, that are treated or perceived as having greater agency than another object of their same category. One less often claims that the media object itself feels more alive, that one comic or one video game feels more alive than the objects of its category, the way that the haunted video tape in *Ringu* (1998) feels more alive than any normal video tape.[15] Yet though they are neither fictional nor haunted objects (at least not in the most literal sense; the object of the first chapter does in fact present itself as haunted), that is precisely what I claim with the objects of this thesis, that *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* is more "alive" than most other webtoons, or that *Doki Doki Literature*

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[12] Ibid. 19.
[13] Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*. 37.
[14] Ibid., 36.
[15] Nakata, Hideo, dir. *Ringu*. 1998; California, United States: DreamWorks. DVD.

Club is more "alive" than most video games. Thus, though the end result is a perception of agency, that agency is not generated through the act of projection but rather the way that the object itself channels technical or computational forces to produce a sense of life and agency. One then needs a framework that can measure such a material difference, and thus here I turn to "animacy."

Animacy and Agency

This project requires a framework for a sense of "life" that is able to work within contemporary animated forms (i.e. the mechanical succession of images) without limiting "life" to movement forms. Perhaps the framework of "vitality" is a sensible alternative, but it is also one which may still carry a bias towards organic forms. My preference then is for "animacy," particularly as employed by Mel Y. Chen in *Animacies* (2012). Animacy is defined by Chen as "a quality of agency, awareness, mobility and liveness."[16] Animacy thus encompasses, but is not limited to, movement as its primary vector, it is "much more than the state of being animate."[17] Animacy is, in sum, the degree to which any object feels like an "animate" subject. One might imagine that, according to certain ontologies, a rock has an infinitesimally small degree of animacy, whereas a plant might be characterized as having a slightly higher degree. Though they are non-organic, automata might be characterized as having a higher degree of animacy than a plant, and yet very few things are, supposedly, perceived to have a higher degree of animacy than humans.

Animacy (or vitality, or aliveness) is also best understood as emergent, as something that arises in relations between things. That is, animacy is not a property possessed by a particular category (human, animal, object) but is more focused on how any specific thing acts, or can act, in relation to other things. As such, animacy often becomes, like power relations, a negotiation, and at times a tense one. This makes animacy a more apt framework for the discussion of a construction of lifelikeness that is intractable from its relation to a particular type of user, reader, viewer, player, or *animator.* Daniel Stern, Levitt notes, likewise conceives of "aliveness" in similar terms, as an "emergent property."[18] Levitt notes that "[v]itality is conceived both as a

[16] Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*. (Duke University Press, 2012), 2.
[17] Ibid. 4.
[18] Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus*, 91.

property of living systems and as *an experience*."[19] Another way to put this is in terms of what Levitt refers to as "vitality e/affects," which are "produced in systems and patterns of relation."[20] What constitutes artificial life, for instance, perhaps in contrast to "mere" artificial intelligence, is not an inherent property but the emergence of "the *behavioural* characteristics of natural living systems."[21] Animacy is thus a particularly suitable framework for a phenomenon in which media enact an emergence of the behavioural properties of the humans that interact with them, such as saving, reloading, rewinding, or scrolling.

As a project interested in exploring the investment of the virtual nonhuman character/media assemblage with a sense of soul and vitality, this project takes some inspiration from the vital materialism of scholars such as Jane Bennett. Bennett famously draws from Deleuze and Guattari's work on assemblages and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory in order to form a concept of "thing-power," or the way that things come to possess agency by virtue of their patterns of relation as part of an assemblage. This project aligns more with what Bennett refers to as "traditional" vitalism rather than vital materialism and thing-power in two noteworthy ways, however. [22] First, and more superficially, it looks less at a complex web of relations and more at a particular and isolated engagement between the human and nonhuman, each of which can also be conceived of as assemblages in their own right but are more generally treated as singular actants here. More importantly, it evokes traditional vitalism in that it does "posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body."[23] My examples in this project do posit certain technical/computational forces as animating forces that are clearly distinct from the media/characters which it animates. It is at the very least worth making clear that this animacy or vitality which I refer to here is not a rejection of Bennett's formulation, but rather works in tandem with it. That is, a rock, or in my case a game/character assemblage, has its own vitality and thing-power by virtue of its implication in an assemblage, but also has the capacity to be *further animated* by an animating force which is distinct and itself moves through different bodies, both human and nonhuman. We might say that the former is an "always on" vitality, and the latter is a "*potentially* on" vitality, or animacy. What is important for my purposes about

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[19] Ibid. 90. Emphasis not present in original.
[20] Ibid. 90.
[21] Mark A. Bedau. "Artificial Life". 2016. https://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/artl. Quoted in Russell Belk, Mariam Humayun, and Ahir Gopaldas. "Artifical Life". *Journal of Macromarketing*. 2020, 1. Emphasis not present in original.
[22] Jane Benett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.
[23] Ibid.

vitality as put forth by Bennett however is that it does not just refer to "the capacity of things… to impede or block the will and designs of humans" but also their capacity to "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[24] In other words, vitality is also about agency.

In this project's objects of analysis, agency and animacy become two ways of viewing and understanding the same phenomena. Agency here refers to the capacity for action itself, and animacy is the affect that is produced when that agency is demonstrated; wherever agency is demonstrated, animacy becomes perceptible. Chen's definition of animacy explains why this is the case, as agency is one factor among others in the production of animacy. And agency, for its part, is theorized in similar terms to animacy, as emergent. As Betti Marenko notes, "[a]gency is not something that objects *have*. Rather, agency is something that *emerges* out of encounters with things."[25] Bennett also suggests that "actant" and "operator" might rightly substitute "for what in a more subject centered vocabulary are called agents."[26] If agency and animacy are nearly congruous, and agents and operators are likewise interchangeable, it follows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that struggle over the operation of an animated object is also a struggle over relations of animacy. Perhaps this becomes transparent in the image of a puppet fighting back against its operator, but it may be less obvious in terms of the operator of, for instance, a computer program. Silvio notes that "[w]hen we move from the study of animation as art and techne to the study of animation as religious practice [or more broadly as the investment of objects with animacy], we make a parallel move from the illusion of life to the investment and perception of agency."[27] Again, we might rightly substitute here the "perception of agency" for the "perception of animacy," and thus also the perception of qualities associated with certain users, operators, puppeteers, *animators*. However, media objects that already fit the definition of animation in the "narrow sense" can still themselves be perceived as having agency not normally attributable to an object of their category. The examples I choose are both art and techne, and furthermore they are not tied to any religious practice. Nonetheless, I argue that their animation is

[24] Ibid., xiii.
[25] Betti Marenko. "Neo-Animism and Design: A New Paradigm in Object Theory. *Design and Culture.* 2015, 228. Emphasis not present in original.
[26] Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*, 9.
[27] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 36.

at least in part a matter of perceiving agency and animacy, even if they are also animation in a more traditional sense, as a medium.

Chen's exploration of animacy originates with "Michael Silverstein's idea of an 'animacy hierarchy'," initially used to mark different ways that subjects and objects, ranked in order of their degree of animacy, were treated linguistically.[28] For Chen, animacy hierarchies become a conceptual framework, primarily developed and internalized via Western philosophy, for categorizing and ranking different types of entities based on their presumed or perceived level of animacy. Chen notes that "[a]nimacy hierarchies in Western ontologies are about kind: they assert that *this group* is affiliated with *these properties*."[29] However, they are also "simultaneously ontologies of affect," or, in other words, "animate hierarch[ies] of possible acts."[30] Chen's work demonstrates the way that linguistically, animacy hierarchies are found everywhere across issues of race, gender, climate, and security. Thus, the work of disrupting or destabilizing the conceptual formation of animacy hierarchies is not only a philosophical project but also a political one. The examples that I turn to in this thesis may not seem particularly political at all; they are popular, commercial, and seemingly non-political in terms of content or tone. Nonetheless, I claim their political potential lies in their destabilization of conceptual animacy hierarchies, and that it is worth understanding that in this sense they are not disconnected from broader political issues of domination, manipulation, and power.

Animism

If the production and perception of animacy and agency in categories of beings that would otherwise be conceived of as without such qualities destabilizes animacy hierarchies, it may be correct to say that the result is a push towards animism. According to Silvio, there has been a "long history of comparisons between animation in the narrow sense and religious animism."[31] Animism is defined by Devin Proctor as "the recognition of some animating presence in non-human entities," one which is often conceived of as a "spirit" or "soul", though that need not

[28] Chen. *Animacies,* 24. Silverstein's ideas originated to explain different "case-markings" with regards to subjects and objects between ergative languages and accusative languages.
[29] Ibid. 127.
[30] Ibid. 190, 3.
[31] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*, 37.

necessarily be the case.[32] Animism has a history of being rejected by the world of Western science as primitive and as premodern, with even those celebrating its presence in animation, such as Sergei Eisenstein, referring to it as "pre-logical."[33] Phillipe Descola was perhaps the first to take seriously the notion of animism within anthropology. Descola notes of animism that "it projects human characteristics onto nature," something which would seem consistent with Silvio's definition of animation.[34] Naturally of course, Descola's definition seems to presuppose that those characteristics are essentially human to begin with, something both animism and Silvio's definition of animation might likely refute; Silvio adds the addendum that "qualities perceived as human are not necessarily uniquely or exclusively human."[35] The demonstration that certain qualities, or rather that certain agencies, are not uniquely human is precisely what the objects of this thesis do, and in part why I characterize them as "animation". They take qualities and capacities presumed to be unique to a human operator (scrolling, saving, reloading, reassembling) and channel them into the nonhuman actant. Thus, this thesis likewise offers a challenge to conceptions of user, operator, or *animator* functions as belonging essentially to human actants.

This is hardly the first project to take as a core principle the relationship between animation and animism. After all, as previously mentioned, the connection, at least within Western scholarship, dates at least as far back as Eisenstein, who sees in animation "the most direct manifestation of… animism!"[36] Animism's relationship to animation is studied in a way that treats the former more seriously today, especially through scholars such as Thomas Lamarre. As Silvio notes, there are also a number of ethnographic studies focusing on the relationship between animism and puppetry.[37] However, even in many of these cases, where animism seems to factor into animation is primarily on the level of content, and only occasionally on the level of form. The former is unsurprising, given that so much animation depicts anthropomorphic animals, cyborg humans, and inanimate objects springing to life. What is under-represented, in

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[32] Devin Proctor. "Cybernetic Animism." In *Digital Existence: Ontology, Ethics and Transcendence in Digital Culture,* ed. Amanda Lagerkvist. (Routledge, 2018), 227.
[33] Sergei Eisenstein. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Vol. 3. (Seagull Books Pvt Ltd, 1986), 41.
[34] Jensen, Casper Bruun, and Anders, Blok. "Techno-animism in Japan: Shinto Cosmograms, Actor-Network Theory, and the Enabling Powers of Non-human Agencies." (*Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2. 2013), 89.
[35] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 19.
[36] Eisenstein. *Eisenstein on Disney*, 43.
[37] Ibid. 7.

my view, is the study of the animistic principle in media objects not in terms of content or even form, but in terms of negotiations of agency. This is, in part, where this project comes in.

Animism resists a hierarchical ordering of things according to animacy, and thus agency, that is prevalent in other ontologies. For example, while animism is of course not absent from the West, much of Western philosophy has supported a comparatively naturalist framework. In the West, "a religious and scientific bias against animism is evident," and as such, neither religion nor science can accommodate its presence.[38] Thus, "[w]ithin a naturalist ontology," as Paul Manning and Illana Gershon put it, "animation becomes problematic, difficult to accommodate to the overarching ontology, as an '*uncanny*' category that seems to point to animistic ontological premises that have been superseded by naturalism."[39] Animation imbued with animistic principles thus operates as a critique of naturalist ontologies that are comparatively more dominant in the West.

The relationship between animism and the uncanny is also hard to overlook. The connection between the two is made explicit in the work of the figure most associated with the latter term, Sigmund Freud. Freud notes that his analysis "[leads] us back to the old *animistic* view of the universe."[40] He claims that this is part of "a phase corresponding to the animistic phase in the development of primitive peoples," which takes place within an individual, forging an association between animism and a lack of development. Lingering on Freud is mostly unhelpful, not only because of the framing of animism as primitive, but also because of the unnecessary connections it inevitably draws with sexuality and castration. However, it is also worth briefly considering the work that Freud, in his essay on the uncanny, is responding to, that of German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch. Jentsch frames the uncanny as "intellectual uncertainty," but his example is the most telling: "doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate."[41] Freud claims that Jentsch's explanation of the uncanny is insufficient, but ultimately does not eschew this notion itself. Thus, the common denominator between Freud and Jentsch remains a general sense that animacy is permeating to, or receding from, categories of beings that it ought to be located

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[38] Belk et al, "Artificial Life", 6.
[39] Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon. "Animating Interaction." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3. 2013, 131. Emphasis not present in original.
[40] Sigmund Freud. "The Uncanny," In The Uncanny. Translated by David McLintock. (Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 1919; 2003), 147.
[41] Jentsch, Ernst in Freud, "The Uncanny," 135.

in, at least according to what Manning and Gershon refer to as a naturalist ontology. Japanese roboticist and philosopher Masahiro Mori, who coined the phrase "the uncanny valley," expresses a similar relationship between the uncanny and animacy. He addresses humanness, movement, and healthiness as factors determining a thing's relation to the uncanny.[42] Of course, this is not universal. After all, we (mostly) do not get a sense of the uncanny from the inanimate objects that come to life in something like *Toy Story*. Nonetheless, that a significant dimension of the uncanny depends on degrees of animacy dis/appearing in ways that are less compatible with a dominant ontology is evident. For example, the shifting of a doll's eyes or the movement of a zombie is uncanny precisely because of the incompatibility with a perceptual framework which renders both dolls and corpses inanimate. It is also in this focused sense that I employ the term "uncanny" in this thesis.

Unlike what Freud and Eisenstein imply, animism is, of course, not a thing of the past. This is not only because many of those animistic traditions they refer to survive until this day across the world, but also because new animistic principles and practices continue to emerge. At a moment when the material conditions of the environment seem so charged with vivacity, and perhaps even *anim*osity, towards its human inhabitants, many have turned to animism for answers. One must acknowledge that this animism, which is often referred to as "new animism studies" or neo-animism, is often being practiced by those same peoples that previously colonized and dismissed animists and animism.[43] At the same time, it is equally problematic to ignore that what is new about new animism are the circumstances under which it emerges and not the ideas themselves. As Thomas Lamarre puts it, "the new animism should not be construed in terms of a rupture or definitive break with the old animism, even though it is by no means smoothly continuous with it."[44] Betti Marenko summarizes neo-animism as follows:

> *Nineteenth-century positivism – with its pragmatic and rational view of social phenomena, and its faith in techno-scientific progress and empirical methods – saw*

[42] Mori, M., K. F. MacDorman, and N. Kageki. "The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]." IEEE Robotics Automation Magazine 19, no. 2 (June 2012): 98–100.

[43] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 36. Figures associated with new animism studies include Phillipe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Nurit Bird-David.

[44] Thomas Lamarre. "Animation and Animism" In *Animals, Animality, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehrer. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 287.

> *animism as a failed epistemology, an error or, at best, an immature stage in the development of individual and society. Current notions of animism, on the other hand, question the boundaries between the social world (human) and the material world (nonhuman), as well as the animate and the inanimate. Neo-animism prompts us to rethink our relationships with the world, and where the frontier between human and nonhuman, living and non-living, might be located.*[45]

Again, much like animacy theory for Chen, the function of new animism is to trouble a smooth divide between living/dead, animate/inanimate, and human/nature. Lamarre adds that "the new animism is intended as an anti-imperial form of knowledge and practice."[46] Much as the study of animation drew from discourse on animism, "the new study of animation draws on many of the same sources as the new animism."[47] In thinking animation in terms of agency in addition to movement, it is my intention to situate my work here within such a continuity between animation and animism, and a politics of anti-imperialism as well.

One of the major challenges involved with theorizing animation in relation to animism is the potential for the latter to drift back towards anthropocentrism if one sees the animating agency of nonhumans in strictly human terms. Lamarre points out that "[t]his is a risk whenever 'person' and 'human' become conflated: animism may slide into anthropomorphism, and anthropomorphism into anthropocentrism."[48] Again, locating humanness in nonhumans must be distinguished from the recognition that certain properties are not essentially human, in this case, personhood. Because "animism requires a distinction between human and person," Lamarre separates anthropomorphism from what he calls *personation*, "the genesis of persons" as well as the "*relatedness* arising with them."[49] In this thesis, I routinely refer to the way that media/character assemblages take on the properties of the human, but I treat this as a matter of personation rather than anthropomorphization. The examples this thesis deals with are not moments of perceiving the human within the nonhuman, but rather moments of seeing that

[45] Marenko. "Neo-Animism and Design", 225.
[46] Lamarre, "Animation and Animism", 287.
[47] Ibid., 289.
[48] Ibid., 290.
[49] Ibid., 291, 292.

particular properties, and particular types of action, can be achieved through a nonhuman operator.

Animators – Puppeteers, Operators, Users, Gods

With all of this in mind, I want to specify the way in which I use the term "animator" in this thesis, in a way that is purposely vague. The traditional sense of an animator – for example that of a studio animator – is not strictly the image I wish to conjure, though it is not necessarily exempt from my usage here. An animator, for my purposes, is a subject who "brings to life" an object, which most often entails a relationship of control and agency over that object. Puppeteers, and their digital successors, the operators of virtual avatars, are two examples of this. Video game players, controllers in hand, are already thought of as puppeteers, and that what they control is often called an "avatar," reinforces their own godliness.[50] In this sense, game players are animators too. Cosplayers, who use their body to bring to life a fictional character, would be yet another example. Of course, being human is not a requirement of animators in this sense, (algorithms for example can also fill this role) which is something this thesis foregrounds. For reasons I will continue to elaborate in the chapters that follow, players and readers are two additional examples. In short, this is because their object arrives to them still and "dead," and it is through their will that the object is brought to life. In sum, animators are puppeteers, operators, and, according to some, gods.[51] The relationship invoked intentionally employs almost parental overtones, as it is at once one of life-giving and control. The animator-animation nexus is also a site of animacy relations, and thus of agency negotiations. These relations also become hierarchical, as an animator is presumed to possess more animacy and agency than that which they animate. None of this is to reify or celebrate the godliness of this group of animators, but rather to establish how the media objects of this thesis operate as a critique of and challenge to this view of the animator. They disrupt the locus of "animator"-ness which destabilizes the presumed animacy hierarchy between readers/players, as more "animate" subjects, and

[50] Silvio *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*, 47.

[51] I should point out two things here. First, it is not the case that many animators (in the traditional sense) think of themselves as gods; just as often they might think themselves as channeling the characters they animate. Second, and more importantly, my objective in setting up animators in this way is not to reify the godlike nature of the animator, but rather to demonstrate how the materiality of the objects of this thesis challenge the very concept.

"inanimate" media objects, as objects situated on an animacy hierarchy.

Methodology

This project engages in a series of close readings of a particular set of actions: scrolling, reading, saving, reloading, rewriting, operating, *animating*, and how those actions move between and are contested by humans and nonhumans. In these readings the question I attend to is, "who animates?" In this regard, I am particularly influenced by Deborah Levitt's methodology, in *The Animatic Apparatus*, of "media ethology."[52] Ethology is derived from the study of the behaviour of animals, but rather than track the behaviours of a particular species, ethology tracks a single behaviour across different species. Here, I am doing something similar with the behaviours of reading, playing, using, operating, *animating*. Levitt points out that "ethology is an inquiry into the *how* – rather than the *who* – of things."[53] This approach draws from Deleuze and Guattari's approach to ethology, following from Spinoza, in asking *how* ("what can a body do?") rather *what* ("what is a body?"); in attending to behaviours not ontology. Media ethology, then, "is a consideration of how we make sense (meaning) of sense (sensation) as these emerge together – and constitute one another – at the spectator-screen nexus."[54] Part of the objective then is to discover where "we find media – as technics and as aesthetic practices – developing lives of their own?"[55]

The close readings of this thesis are also informed by a particular set of philosophical questions, which aligns with what Teri Silvio calls "animative reflexivity". Silvio notes that "animative reflexivity focuses on the split between animator and animate, on questions of uncanny ontology – not just the illusion of autonomous life, but the possibility that it might not be an illusion."[56] Silvio however locates animate reflexivity primarily in the content of something like an animated film: the cybernetic bodies of the *Ghost in the Shell* (1995-) series or the toys of the *Toy Story* (1995-) films, or the cartoon character in *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) or *Duck Amuck* (1953). This thesis is to some extent concerned with animative reflexivity in a similar sense to those last examples, but it pairs with an animative reflexivity that centers around both

[52] Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus,* 5.
[53] Ibid., 5.
[54] Ibid., 5.
[55] Ibid., 29.
[56] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 35.

media form as well as the relation between media and user. In the example that I opened with, for example, the drama involves the investment of the character Providence with agency, but the system itself also takes on that agency; it is both Providence and the game *Bravely Second* that threaten to erase my save file and nullify my agency.

These close readings are then situated with debates in specific areas – in comic theory, game theory, and character/database theory respectively. This thesis examines how these theories position the human operator as an active, agential, and "animate" subject bringing to life an "inanimate" object; in other words, how they position the human as an animator. Moreover, that positioning is at times theorized to constitute the media form; comics, for example, are only comics if the reader is active and has agency. Through the close readings of these three media objects, I examine how an uncanny animacy is used not only to subvert the control the human is presumed to possess, but also importantly to challenge media theories that position the user, viewer, reader, or player as possessing agencies necessary to "breathe life into" inanimate media objects. I choose these three objects not strictly because they are exemplary or unique, though in many ways they are also that; I choose them because their uncanny animacy bleeds beyond them as singular instances, infecting all webtoons or all video games with a sense of agency.

Chapters

In the first chapter, I explore how the reader-comic hierarchy is destabilized in the 2011 Korean horror webtoon *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* by artist Horang. Using the theory of comic artist/theorist Scott McCloud, who likens the act of reading comics to an act of in-between animating, I position the reader of comics as a second-order animator that puts into motion a pre-determined sequence by virtue of their own animating agency: moving from panel to panel, turning pages or, in the case of webtoons, scrolling on a webpage. Using a Javascript trigger in order to temporarily hijack and "take over" that function, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* simultaneously produces animation in the sense of continuous movement (i.e. "the narrow sense"), afforded by the mechanical succession of images, and in the sense of an uncanny agency (i.e. "the broad sense"). Drawing from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman as applied by Paul Manning and Illana Gershon, I suggest that this agency is that of an "uncanny animator," an animator which is not uniformly present, but always retains the *possibility* of taking operative control away from the reader, which is simultaneously the possibility of becoming an animate

subject. *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* also alters the expectations of the reader such that the categorization of its media form – a webtoon – is entirely threatened. Thus, the animacy of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* is, in this chapter, something which builds on debates within comic theory, as the categorization of webtoon images on the whole becomes ontologically uncanny. Much as *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* limns the boundaries of animate/inanimate, it simultaneously limns the boundaries of comic/animation. It is not merely a matter of combining the two, such as placing animated movement within comic panels; panels always have the potential to themselves merge in such a way as to produce fluid movement.

The first chapter merges the uncanny "coming to life" with character animation, in the "narrow sense." However, character animation is already not the only form of movement that imparts a sense of life to characters. In defense of limited character animation, scholars such as Marc Steinberg have pointed instead to the way that the character image moves across media, worlds, and by extension through society as part of the "media mix," particularly as associated with the media ecology of Japan. The second chapter takes as its starting point a common video game structure which is representative of the underlying logic of "media mix." It explores how the player-video game relationship is destabilized by the production of animacy in Toby Fox's 2015 hit indie-game *Undertale.* It begins by developing a conception of the function of the player, drawing on the work of game scholars Alexander Galloway and Liam Mitchell, as someone that exists to "animate" a set of diverging worlds and their contents towards an end goal of exhaustion. In video games, players have a world-traversing agency, continually saving, reloading, and restarting in order to achieve desired (or even undesired) events and endings. *Undertale* destabilizes this player agency by introducing the characters of Flowey and Chara, who also demonstrate temporal agencies thought to be exclusive to the player. I turn to a concept popularized by Japanese media cultures, *kyara,* which generally refers to characters unbound by their original narratives, to explain the particular sense of animacy produced. In effect, *Undertale* produces a condensed "*kyara"* within the likewise condensed "media mix" logic of the video game. *Undertale* thus operates as a critique of a positioning of player and game that maps them onto what I have referred to in this thesis as an animator-animation relationship. Through the close reading of *Undertale* in this chapter, I use *Undertale* and its animacy to build upon debates in game theory, while also drawing connections with character and media theory to understand the affect produced by *Undertale*.

While remaining focused on games, threads introduced surrounding character and media theory in the second chapter become centralized in the third chapter. In the objects of the first two chapters, animacy is produced both on the level of what is visible (i.e. character animation or character movement across divergent worlds), but it is also a matter of the animacy of the system: triggers being activated or information being secretly stored. The third chapter brings this structure to the forefront by examining the agency of the player in the 2017 *bishōjo* game by Team Salvato, *Doki Doki Literature Club*. In contrast to the "narrative consumption" with an end-goal of exhaustion in the second chapter, it instead focuses on the player as they engage in "database consumption" with an objective of reassembling to suit personal preference. It develops a construction of the player of the *bishōjo* game based on the theory of Azuma Hiroki, who describes the function of the player as reassembling elements of a database to suit their preference. *Doki Doki Literature Club* destabilizes the relationship between players and elements by producing animacy on the level of the system, in file folders and text files, and by relocating the functional role of such reassembling to one of its central characters, Monika. The game thus operates as a critique of Azuma's database consumption and its implications for character and media theory. Building on theories of *kyara* from the second chapter, I explore how *Doki Doki Literature Club* also imparts a sense of an "uncanny character encounter" that is itself analogous to what Japanese media cultures call "2.5D." Lastly, I consider how *Doki Doki Literature Club*, though in fact the other objects of this thesis as well, achieve their animacy in part through a channeling of the force of computing into characters.

These disturbing, uncomfortable, destabilizing surges of animacy reveal structures that both index and exacerbate particular attitudes towards the world and the human's relationship to it at large, particularly in the second and third chapters. The moments of connection they afford, in which the human sees their thought-to-be essential agencies enacted by some Other, though disturbing (or perhaps *because* they are disturbing), demonstrate the degree to which those structures make possible our positioning of humans as animators of the world, and our framing of the world as to-be-acted-upon by humans. This positioning extends to interactions with and theorization of media as well, something which is challenged by the uncanny animacy these objects possess. It is ultimately that framing which I see challenged in the objects of this thesis, a framing which occludes the life of nonhumans and generates potentials for their manipulation, not only in the virtual worlds of webtoons and video games, but also in the world at large.

Chapter One

Javascript Ghost: The Uncanny Animator of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*

When was the last time a comic surprised you? *Really* surprised you?
Scott McCloud on *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*[57]

I was just as surprised as Scott McCloud was when I first read *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost,* a viral Korean webtoon by the artist Horang (real name Choi Jong-ho) four years after its 2011 release, on my iPad.[58] That last detail may seem irrelevant, but in fact it had major ramifications on that initial viewing experience, as I will soon elaborate. What made *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* surprising had little to do with its content, narrative, or style. Rather, it radically transformed the relationship that I thought I had with it as a media object, what I thought reading a comic (or webcomic or webtoon) inherently meant.

The story, based on a popular Korean urban legend, follows a schoolgirl walking home alone late at night. The girl stumbles upon a strange woman in dirty pink pajamas with tattered hair, who appears to be acting strangely. Frozen, the girl watches the woman, whose head spins around unnaturally to reveal a bloodied smiling face and lifeless eyes. The schoolgirl is petrified as the terrifying entity before her asks: "WHERE IS MY BABY?" Hoping to get the woman as far away from her as possible, the girl points off into the distance. The schoolgirl then attempts to flee the situation, but the voice of the woman rings out: "SHE IS NOT HERE!!!" Barreling on twisted and contorted arms and legs, the woman lunges at and attacks the girl; everything turns to black. The schoolgirl later learns that her neighbour found her passed out and took her home. The story concludes by stating that in 2007, a 33-year-old woman by the name of Mrs. Cho, having

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[57] Scott McCloud. 'BOO!'. *ScottMcCloud.com*. August 23rd, 2011.http://scottmccloud.com/2011/08/23/boo/?fbclid=IwAR0YLxOtPEjx0Gv3i_oxr0iKh2lUXhIHo3JbWUZNwhWn9xwR8SUMKp7goKE.

[58] 'Webtoon', a portmanteau of 'web' and 'cartoon' refers to a Korean media form that is distinct from webcomics. So-young Sung. "Webtoon fever catches on overseas" *Korea JoongAng Daily* (2019). http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2943855

lost custody of her two-year-old daughter, committed suicide in Bongcheon-Dong, Gwang-Ak-Gu, Seoul, and that she had been spotted wandering around several times since.

After the first reading of what I initially deemed to be a rather conventional ghost story, I was more confused than anything else. What had been most notable about the webtoon was that at two points there was a series of several unusually incremental "moment-to-moment" panel transitions, using a great number of panels to depict the movement of the ghost.[59] Had the goal been to create what would be experienced as fluid movement, I deemed that the creator ultimately failed; the ghost seemed slow, and the technique did nothing but remind me that I was reading a comic. Later that night, I read *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* for a second time. I sat at my computer, in a dark basement room, scrolling through the sequence of events, analyzing each panel meticulously.

The schoolgirl is walking alone
she sees the ghost
it turns around, and --

I nearly fell out of my chair.

Mrs. Cho *moved*, came to *life* even. It took me a moment to process what had happened. Her eerie, smiling, bloodied face, having returned to a state of stillness, lingered on the screen. I put my hand back on the mouse and began to scroll down again slowly and anxiously. The story continued as normal, until those words appeared once again: "SHE IS NOT HERE!!!" Then it happened again: Mrs. Cho and her contorted figure lunged at the screen, jumping through the frame of the panel as if her momentum would carry her out of the webtoon where she had been confined. The movement was not "in my head" as it had been before, it was really there. I finished the webtoon, sat back in my chair, and waited for my heart rate to settle. I later learned that the "trick" of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* didn't work on tablets and mobile devices.

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[59] Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* (New York: William Morrow ,1993),70-72. As an aside, it's worth point out that the ghost also moves beyond the boundaries of the frame. Nead characterizes the frame as the divide "between the living and the dead". This is a separate technique from what I discuss in this chapter, but it is worth noting that these different techniques are working together. Lynda Nead. *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900.* (Yale University Press, 2007), 48.

Figure 1 This is an example of how The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost *appeared on mobile devices (here taken as screenshots from an iPhone) These three screenshots show different moments in the scroll. When functioning correctly however, the viewer will not see these individual frames/panels but will only see them fused in continuous motion.*

My reaction to *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* was one of many highly similar reactions. In 2011, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* went viral, both in Korea and internationally. Many popular internet personalities on platforms such as YouTube posted videos of themselves or their friends reacting to reading the webtoon.[60] The popularity of these reaction videos, and that many of them essentially took the form of a "prank", speaks to the novelty of the technique. Specifically, the technique of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* relies on a categorical assumption regarding webtoons as media form; the appeal for eliciting reactions was the sheer unthinkability that comics, which are supposed to be a sequence of *still* images, would be moved by anything but the hand of the reader. So how did those images actually move?

[60] "The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost". *Know Your Meme*. 2019. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-bongcheon-dong-ghost.

The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost uses Javascript triggers at two key moments in the narrative, once when the ghost first reveals her face, and again when the ghost attacks the protagonist.[61] These triggers, activated when the reader reaches a certain point in the webtoon, prompt an auto-scroll; the webtoon quickly scrolls through the aforementioned incremental moment-to-moment transitions, resulting in moments of animation within the webtoon. Critically, the webtoon does not simply insert moving image media formats (such as GIFs) into the webpage that hosts the webtoon.[62] Each panel of *The Bongcheon-Dong* is still laid out spatially on the webpage that features it, as any other comic. Thus, while it is shocking that the images of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* move, it is arguably that the webtoon *scrolls*, taking over the controls used to read it, that is a greater source of unease. On the one hand, this action is implicitly contextualized as part of the agency of Mrs. Cho; she can move within and outside the webtoon. On the other hand, regardless of whether the reader has comprehension of the mechanics of the movement, the relationship between viewer-reader and image becomes destabilized in an intractable way. In what follows, I characterize this as a destabilization of both a still/moving image binary, which here refers both to the fusion of discontinuous panels as well as an animate/inanimate binary, which maps degrees of liveness onto the reader and the webtoon respectively.

In this chapter, I explore the way in which *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* unsettles the status of the webtoon image, such that the reader's relationship to and expectations of those images becomes fundamentally rewritten. It achieves this through an act of animation; "animation" in two senses: both a commonplace sense of the fusion of discontinuous frames/panels as continuous movement, as well as an expanded sense of the production of an agent possessing qualities of animacy. Specifically, it relocates and reflects the function of the human which engages with it as a particular type of animator. As a result, the animation that *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* employs results in a destabilization of structures of both agency and animacy. Here, I tend to use the terms "role" or agent, but I employ them interchangeably with such terms as actor, actant, and function. I argue that the nature of the agent that is brought to life in the webtoon is that of an "uncanny animator", which in short refers to the "bringing to life," or

[61] On other applications/websites, such as WEBTOON (perhaps the most popular webtoon platform), the webtoon seems to make use of GIFs rather than Javascript (I have not yet confirmed this). The result is a very different effect.

[62] Horang actually released a webtoon earlier that same year, *Ok-Su Station Ghost*, that used a technique more approximate to a GIF (a looping image format)

animation, of an actant which animates the webtoon, or an animator. This layered act of animation, I argue, produces a space wherein both the media object (*The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*) and its contents (i.e. the character Mrs. Cho) are always *potentially* animated. The result of this is that the space that is produced can be likened to an animist ontology, in that the webtoon can possess qualities of lifelikeness and humanity. In sum, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* prompts us to reconsider the relationship between comics and animacy, by foregrounding the way in which the webtoon as media form participates in the destabilization of what Mel Y. Chen calls an "animacy hierarchy." The stakes of this analysis are the ways in which *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* in particular, and via its unique mobilization of movement, webtoons as digital media form more generally, have the potential to destabilize animacy hierarchies and open up a space in which the nonhuman (the webtoon) can be considered "animated." This in turn produces a different reading experience of all webtoons, bleeding beyond the confines of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* to infect all webtoons subsequently.

Webtoon as Media Form

Before delving into the specifics of *The Bongcheon-Dong* Ghost, it is helpful to provide some brief context for webtoons as a media form, given that despite being popular in Korea for two decades, they are still in a process of obtaining a wider global circulation. When the term "webtoon" was first popularized in Korea in 2000, its meaning was more approximate to what today in the West and elsewhere are called webcomics: comics, often not of an episodic serial format, which use the conventional layout and panel structure of print comics, but are created and distributed by digital means.[63] In the past two decades however, the meaning of webcomics and webtoons has drifted apart; the latter developing formal and stylistic conventions that clearly distinguish them from "digital comics" in other regions.[64] Webtoons are published as vertical strips which in theory extend *ad infinitum*. They treat the screen of the computer or smartphone as a window through which the webtoon is viewed, and which can be moved vertically but not horizontally. The same year that the term "webtoon" was first coined, Scott McCloud released *Reinventing Comics* (2000). In it, he describes the concept of the "infinite canvas": that rather

[63] Dal Yong Jin. "Digital Convergence of Korea's Webtoons: Transmedia Storytelling." *Communication Research and Practice* 1, no. 3, 2015: 193.
[64] Ibid, 197.

than think of the screen as a page, comic artists could instead allow it to act as a window, freeing them from the limitations of the page structure, and allowing them to use the direction of panels in different ways depending on the stories they wanted to tell.[65] The webtoon form has been understood as a popularized realization of some of the possibilities of this principle.[66] Several formal properties of webtoons are worth drawing attention to here. First, they are "infinite" vertically but not horizontally. Second, each webtoon is generally hosted on a single webpage, and thus the media form does not rely on the page structure characteristic of comic *books.* Third, as a result of these two things, the eyes of the reader are generally fixated on their computer or mobile screen as a single point rather than, as an alternative, scanning across pages or panels in traditional left-to-right, up-to-down fashion. I point this out because this allows the comic *strip* of the webtoon to share several properties with a film *strip*, something which *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* uses to its advantage to produce motion.

However, what is perhaps most important to highlight with webtoons as a media format is that they are a natively *digital* format. That is to say that the relationship between webtoons and digital media is not merely one of distribution, something potentially overlooked or under emphasized by those who consume webtoons. In many cases, much of the presence of comic art as it exists digitally is framed as essentially "print comics, but hosted online", and this is even more true in many regions outside Korea, in places where natively digital formats have not gained widespread popularity. That is not to say that artists outside of Korea have not experimented with integrating the moving image into comics (McCloud has a number of examples of this), though in certain areas of the world, particularly certain Western territories where *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* circulated widely (e.g. in North America), it remains rare.[67] More importantly, even with the consideration of these examples, still and moving images continue to be thought of as separate elements that can each be categorized as such. Digital media, such a conception holds, merely affords the opportunity to mix these elements in the space of a single comic, not to destabilize the relationship between the two altogether. Thus, the

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[65] Scott McCloud. *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form*. (Harper Collins, 2000), 222.

[66] Heekyoung Cho. "The Webtoon: A New Form of Graphic Narrative." *The Comics Jounal*. 2016. http://www.tcj.com/the-webtoon-a-new-form-for-graphic-narrative/.2016. The infinite canvas is also mentioned on the Wikipedia entry for 'webtoon'. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webtoon. It is also worth pointing out, however obvious, that the "infinite" canvas is still limited by the computer's ability to load the webpage itself.

[67] McCloud. *Reinventing Comics,* 209.

general tendencies regarding the presence of comic art online construct a set of expectations about what "digital comics," are and can be, something which *The Bongheon-Dong Ghost* subverts by virtue of its demonstration of certain technical affordances. However, that subversion is not simply a matter of revealing a hidden technicity of the webtoon image, but also, as I will demonstrate, a matter of rewriting the reader's own relationship to the images of webtoons altogether.

Comic Readers as Animators

In *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud develops a comprehensive theory of comics which details the mechanics of comic readership, and in particular celebrates the active role that the reader plays in the production of illusory movement. For McCloud, the thoughtful juxtaposition of images produces movement that is not yet in motion, something which is put into motion by the movement of the reader's eyes across "the gutter", the space between panels[68]. For example, the reader of a comic views an image of a closed eye juxtaposed with an open eye, and by reading the images in sequence, fuses them together, transforming them in order to perceive them as the continuous movement of an eye opening. In other words, the movement of the reader's eyes across panels, and their ability to fuse together the action of the panels into a continuity, puts the sequence into motion, or in other words *animates* it, analogous to the way that a projector animates a film. The reader is a "collaborator"[69] with the comic creator(s), an "equal partner in crime," their role being that they effectively bring an authored, and hence pre-determined, sequence into a flow of movement and time.[70] It is critical that McCloud sees what he calls closure, "observing the parts but perceiving the whole", as a *voluntary* process, one which also constitutes comics as a form.[71] In McCloud's most telling analogy, he likens the comic reader to an in-between *animator*, claiming that their role is filling in the gaps between key frames or key panels.[72] Of course, this is not to say that comic readers are animators in every sense of the term. They do not exactly fit the archetypal image of the studio animator; they do not give shape to comics, nor are comics their invisible thoughts given visible form. Nonetheless, at

[68] McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 66.
[69] Ibid., 65.
[70] Ibid., 68.
[71] Ibid, 63,67. "Comics is closure!"
[72] Ibid., 88. Emphasis not present in original.

least as McCloud defines them, comic readers are animators in this specific and mechanical sense, and the important point is that this categorizes them as a more active agent in comparison to the viewer of film or television.

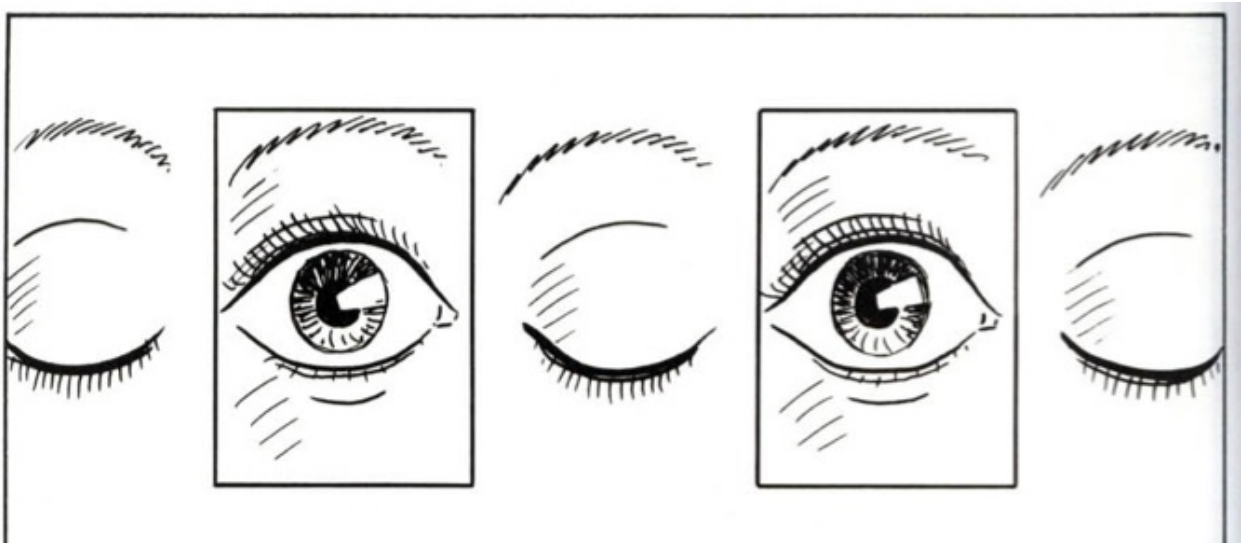

Figure 2 The reader fuses together discontinuous panels into a continuous motion, performing work similar to that of an in-between animator. Image taken from https://understandingcomics177.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/mvmnt2mvmnt3.jpg

The relationship between the reader, creator, and comic bears some implicit similarities with the way in which Paul Manning and Illana Gershon, in "Animating Interactions" repurpose a participant framework for communicative acts put forth by sociologist Erving Goffman to suit theory on animation.[73] Such a framework can be used to clarify the relationship between the primary actants in traditional comic readership. Goffman's framework identifies three roles: animator, author, and principal. He would eventually add a fourth role to these: the figure. Bracketing the "principal" and "figure", of particular interest to this analysis are the "animator" and the "author". While Goffman's analysis is of acts of communication, the roles he identifies are in some ways suitable for mediation in general, and thus have salience for thinking animation. Manning and Gershon note that whereas an author is the actant "who selects the words that constitute the utterance", the role of the animator is "largely about producing the sounds that constitute the utterance."[74] They use the example of quoting the lyrics of a song, in which the author is the one who wrote the song, and the animator is the one quoting it. One can easily see

[73] Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon. "Animating Interaction." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 .2013, 111.
[74] Ibid.

how this maps on to McCloud's reader-as-animator; writing a lyric is to creating a comic as quoting a lyric is to reading a comic. In some ways this is fairly obvious, but the division of these roles will become central to understanding the full effect of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*.

To further expand this framework, I turn to the analysis of Thomas Lamarre. Lamarre opens *The Anime Machine* (2009) with an unexpected object: the speeding train. His reason for doing so, however, becomes quickly apparent. In his example, the passenger of the train is viewing animation in an unconventional way, by observing a series of thoughtfully juxtaposed images on an outside wall through the train window, from within the train. Due to the high speed of the train, these moments become fused together and, to the passenger viewing the image from within the train, they appear to be moving. For Lamarre, the force of animation is intimately intertwined with the affordances and limitations of the speeding train. What effectively forms the critical difference between this example for Lamarre and the way that film produces movement is that "it is the movement of the viewer not the movement of the film that transforms the series of static images into a moving picture."[75] In Lamarre's account, difference is constituted on the basis of *what* is being moved (the image or the viewer), and yet ironically what arguably matters most is what becomes the most invisible: the movement of the train. The train is the equivalent of the "speaker" or "animator" in Manning and Gershon's example. I bring attention to this example as both a particularly transparent illustration of the location of the act of animation in the nonhuman actant as well as a demonstration of the invisibility of that same actant as the motion it generates is channelled into the image itself. Extending Goffman's framework to include not only sequences of sounds and words, but also of images, it becomes possible to think Lamarre's train example in these terms. Specifically, the one who created the set of images to be placed on the wall is the author, and the train itself becomes the animator.

Needless to say, the same lines could be drawn between, say, the authorship of a film strip and its animation by means of the projector.[76] The limitations of Goffman's model, and where it will require some additive elements here, is that it accounts only for the roles involved on the side of the "sender", and not the roles that exist on the receiving end. I propose that we might transform what is useful in this case about Goffman's framework for thinking animation by

[75] Thomas Lamarre. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. (U of Minnesota Press. 2009), xiii.
[76] In terms of authorship, Lamarre's train example might be a simpler example than that of film, because most film is shot with a camera, which fragments the role of authorship.

identifying the following roles: author, medium, viewer, and animator. Of course, these don't have to be four distinct actants; this is important because any role can also double as the role of the animator. The animator may, in different arrangements, simultaneously be the author, the medium or, as Scott McCloud identifies it for the case of comics, the viewer. Lastly, as Lamarre's example illustrates, the animator may also be a separate entity entirely. Using Goffman's framework, the "author" of the comic and the reader-as-"animator" adopt different and collaborative roles in an act of animation. The author produces a set of "dead" elements assembled in a particular way, as if unspoken words on a page, and the reader reads them "to life." Under the framework which I have developed here, McCloud's reader is both the "viewer" as well as the "animator"

In comics then, the *role* of animating, of putting a sequence of images into motion for the reader, is the reader themselves, and they are also the one who thus has control over time and movement. The reader can slow down, speed up, or stop the motion of the comic altogether at any moment they please. They thus take on a dual role of processing (animating) and receiving (viewing). Other animation technologies can be construed as similar on this basis. In fact, this has at times been the case, with different genealogies of media forms and technologies being formed on the basis of how its user engages with it. For example, Donald Crafton draws a line through different genealogies of animation technologies precisely on this basis: "viewer mode of attraction" vs. "player mode of attraction."[77] We might characterize his distinction as one in which the animator is the media technology itself, reducing the role of the viewer to merely that of receiving (viewer mode), and one in which the animator is the viewer themselves, allowing them to take on a more active role (player mode).

The role of animator does not need to be confined to a single entity, nor to a human one. In some cases, the animator can be an external human agent (the Japanese art of *kamishibai* is a good example) or an external nonhuman agent (Lamarre's train). [78] The animator role can also be itself an assemblage made up of any combination of humans and nonhumans (e.g. projector + projectionist). Importantly, and consistent with Goffman's framework, there is no reason to suggest that the animator role cannot itself *become mobile* during the course of a single act of

[77] Donald Crafton. "The Veiled Genealogies of Animation and Cinema." *Animation* 6, no. 2. 2011, 99.
[78] Kamishibai is a Japanese form of sequential art which was particularly popular in the early-to-mid 20th century. In kamishibai, a series of panels are manipulated through a frame by a presenter. Kamishibai then also consists of a series of panels/frames, but is distinguished in that a human presenter "animates" it.

animation; the act of quoting a lyric could, naturally, be divided among speakers. However, this analogy does not port easily to discussion of animation; the actant or assemblage that generates animation does not tend to shift over its course, generally as a technical necessity. Thus, the viewer typically approaches any experience of animated media (broadly speaking and including comics) with consistent expectations regarding the animator role. And, in the case of comics, they implicitly understand that they fill this role themselves. By contrast, in film, they are aware that this is largely the role of projector/projectionist but may participate in the intentional occluding of this role in order to experience the "illusion". In any case however, this role is typically treated by the viewer as having some stability.

In sum, the reader of a comic is conceptualized as an active agent that transforms still images into moving images according to their will. The comic reader is an *animator.* And this role is treated with such stability that it constitutes comics as a form; if the reader is not doing this, they are no longer reading a comic. For the most part, this stability of the animator carries over even as comics become remediated as webtoons. That is to say, though the reader may recognize many of the distinct formal properties of webtoons (i.e. vertical layout, lengthy panels), and the way in which they deviate from the conventions of other forms of comics, the anchoring point for the reader is that they are able to presume that the webtoon should, and can, be read as any other comic, that they will read it *as the animator.* And certainly, in practice this tends to be true for most webtoons. The impact of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* however, is not to simply "reverse" the viewer-as-animator model, and to say, make the experience more analogous to viewing a film, but rather to destabilize the role altogether, through the production of both its animation (the image which moves) and a particular type of animator (that which moves the image). It does not wholly relocate the human-like role of animator in the nonhuman webtoon, but rather unsettles the ability to locate such a role at any moment. Hence, I refer to the animator of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* as the *uncanny* animator, one which is always potentially the animator, but never the *sole* animator, their role never being stable across time.

Animation as Techne, Animation as Animacy

What is clear from the characterization of the comic reader according to those like Scott McCloud is that they are an active agent in the process of animating comics; comic panels are still images, but the reader can transform them into moving images. This relationship is co-

constitutive; the agency of the reader is possible and necessary because of the status of comic images. Thus, the status of the image, as is somewhat obvious, is categorized as "inanimate." However, this is primarily to say that the comic is "inanimate" within the framework of what anthropologist Teri Silvio refers to as animation in the "narrow sense."[79] The narrow sense, for Silvio, thinks of animation in terms of a set of techniques and technologies – and I will add, foregrounds *movement* - and is the way that animation has been predominantly theorized in the twenty-first century.

The "narrow sense" of animation evokes a sensibility linked to the technicity of images associated with particular animation technologies, here largely referring to "a kind of cinema or video."[80] Generally speaking, while it has roots that intertwine with spiritual or theological thinking, it has been historically distilled and secularized to refer primarily to properties of movement, rather than properties of life (though naturally it is often movement that resembles life). Donald Crafton outlines a doubled sense of the term animation, one theological and one secular, originating from Romance language (*animer, s'animer)* and Latin (*anima, animationem).*[81] The theological meaning invokes a sense of bestowing life, being alive, or being lively, whereas the secular only means to be moved or changed.[82] In roughly the past five centuries, use of the term "animation" moved away from "being alive". Certainly by at least the 19th century, there was "no suggestion of a magical coming to life" in popular discourse on new animation technologies[83]. Current popular definitions of animation continue this trend, such as Norman McLaren's definition of "the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between frames" or Tom Gunning's definition of animation as "the transformation of stillness into motion." [84] Most contemporary uses of animation as a term then either situate it as a sub-category or super-category of film and video.[85] Comics, as outlined in the previous section, seem to

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[79] Teri Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan*. (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 3.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Crafton, "The Veiled Genealogies of Animation and Cinema", 97.
[82] Ibid., 98.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Tom Gunning. "Animating the Instant: The Secret Symmetry Between Animation and Photography. In *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Redrobe Beckman. (Duke University Press, 2014), 51. Norman McLaren in Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, xxiv.
[85] Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 33. Silvio argues that "most academic theorizing of animation has taken place within film and media studies". One of the central debates around the definition of animation within film studies stems from claims made by Manovich (that making films in the digital age is an act of animation) and Cholodenko (that as an illusion of movement, all cinema is animation). Some scholars, such as Crafton, have strongly argued

occupy something of a liminal space on the periphery of these definitions. It is possible to frame them as animated in this sense only with the active agency of the reader, who themselves manipulate the "invisible interstices," McCloud's "gutter" that lie between panels, transforming stillness into motion.

Animation "in the narrow sense" is not the only way of framing the status of an object however, nor need it be the only one relevant for categorizing *media* objects. That is, animation also retains meaning in what Silvio calls "the broad sense," which refers instead to the investment of objects with qualities of life, which may include, but are not limited to, movement.[86] While this definition continues threads of the theological or magical sensibilities that fall away in the diverging definition above, it need not be rendered strictly in those terms. That is, it need not be a question of classifying objects as "alive" per se, though it certainly *can* be, but it is more broadly the investment of objects with agency. Teri Silvio provides a concise definition as part of a proposal for an anthropological approach to animation studies. Silvio defines animation as:

> *the construction of social others through the projection of qualities perceived as human—life, soul, power, agency, intentionality, personality, and so on—outside the self and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction.*[87]

Two examples Silvio provides help solidify this definition: (1) perceiving a rock as "alive," assuming one does not tend to culturally treat rocks as alive, and (2) "ventriloquizing what you think your cat is thinking/saying."[88] In the second example, though one does not believe the cat can speak, or is actually speaking, they project onto it the act of speaking. For Silvio, this process of animation is about the construction of *alterity*. Were one to, for example, ventriloquize a rock, they transform that rock into an Other, bringing it into a different sense of life and a different capacity for interaction.[89] On the one hand, what is useful about Silvio's definition is that it

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against these positions. Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. (MIT press, 2001). Alan Cholodenko. "Still Photography?." *Afterimage* 32, no. 5 (2005): 5.

[86] Silvio. *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 3.

[87] Ibid., 19.

[88] Ibid., 19.

[89] Silvio's "animation studies" is meant to offer an alternative and compliment to the paradigm of "performance studies". Silvio found that questions that previously elicited detailed responses from stage performers (e.g. "how

centers a particular set of qualities, a set which is intrinsically similar to what Mel Y. Chen calls animacy: qualities of "agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness."[90] We might thus characterize Silvio's definition as a matter of investing objects with animacy. This affords productive comparisons between something like *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*, and the ghost that it attempts to conjure a tangible sense of. What types of aesthetic experience afford a sense of a ghostly presence, and how are those qualities similar to the formal properties of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* itself? On the other hand, that the definition begins with the act of "projection" seemingly centers human action and intention. What then might an "animation" which includes both movement and agency, yet does not center the human and depend upon projection, look like?

Shunsuke Nozawa, in his discussion of *seiyū* (voice actors) in Japan, borrows the term "ensoulment" (i.e. "practices of ensouling matters") from Victoria Nelson to refer to what Silvio calls "animation."[91] Also drawing from discussions of "soulful bodies" in animation within the work of Thomas Lamarre, Nozawa asks the question: how do characters get ensouled?[92] Without ignoring that much of its use is idiomatic, ensoulment could reasonably substitute for Silvio's animation. In Nozawa's example however, it is not an act of projection on the part of the *seiyū*, but rather the channeling of their material voice, and thus their animacy, that constructs the animated character as a figure of alterity such that they are perceived by the viewer as animate, not just in terms of movement, but in terms of animacy. Here I borrow "channeling" from the way in which it is used by Thomas Lamarre to describe animation as technical forces experienced as vitality (this is something I will return to in Chapter 3).[93] Ensoulment also captures something of a categorical transformation, something similar to what Lamarre calls "*personation*" or "the *genesis* of *persons.*"[94] It captures the moment in which an inanimate object becomes a human or nonhuman person, or in this case when the comic stops feeling like a comic and starts feeling like

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do you get into character?") did not do so as well for puppeteers, as the process did not involve introjection and identiy but rather projection and alterity.

[90] Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*. (Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

[91] Shunsuke Nozawa. "Ensoulment and Effacement in Japanese Voice Acting." In *Media Convergence in Japan*, eds. Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin. (Kinema Club, 2016), 173. Victoria Nelson. *The Secret Life of Puppets*. (Harvard University Press, 2009), 30.

[92] Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, 228. Nozawa. "Ensoulment and effacement in Japanese voice acting.", 170.

[93] Thomas Lamarre. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life." *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 114.

[94] Lamarre, Thomas. "Animation and Animism" In *Animals, Animality, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehrer. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 292. "*Personation,* then, is a specific mode of dividuation: dividuation that addresses the *genesis of persons* (human and nonhuman) in the specific context of animism and animation as well as the *relatedness* arising with them."

a ghost. To map a shift from the animacy of a "normal" comic to the animacy of a ghost, one would need to understand what the animacy of a comic is. Within that broader set of objects which channel animacy, or have it projected onto them – talismans and fetishes, but also puppets and automata - where might one supposedly situate comics?[95] Are comics and the bodies they feature, for example, more akin to automata, requiring only an initial spark to remain animate, or to puppets, requiring the continual presence of the animating hand of a puppeteer?

The discussion to this point makes it evident that the latter is the case; comics would be more analogous to puppets. They are inherently "inanimate" objects, but they can become "animate" by virtue of being invested with the continuous agency of the reader. As such, McCloud's reader-as-animator is *also* an animator in this sense. Without overlooking that the materiality of comics is not irrelevant to its reader, that things such as panel structure and the flow of lines contribute to its perceived motion, there remains a sense that, much like "ventriloquizing your cat," the reader is continually projecting movement onto the comic. This allows the reader to conceptualize comics as having a particular degree of animacy, but also to situate them relationally as part of what Chen calls an "animacy hierarchy". Chen provides a comprehensive analysis of the "idea of an 'animacy hierarchy'" which originates from Michael Silverstein.[96] They note that such a hierarchy frames certain subjects as possessing a greater degree of qualities associated with life, humanity, and agency.[97] Chen claims that "animacy is much more than the state of being animate" in that it also denotes "an hierarchy of possible acts."[98] Comics are situated as part of a similar hierarchy which defines them by what they *cannot do*, and what their reader can do to them, just as puppets are defined by the existence and capabilities of puppeteers. Readers are "animate" subjects that bring to life, that animate, the "inanimate" class of objects that are comics. In challenging the theorization of the comic reader

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[95] I am inspired to ask these questions by other scholars who make productive comparisons between a lineage of artificial life – puppets, automata, artificial life – and media forms. For example, Deborah Levitt in *The Animatic Apparatus* makes a productive comparison between the artificial life forms featured in Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence* (2004) and the way in which the film itself is reflexive about itself as a form of artificial life. For Levitt, this prompts comparison between the two. In response, I am prompted to think how the comic as a form of artificial life differs in terms of animacy when compared to film. Deborah Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. (John Hunt Publishing, 2018), 49.

[96] Chen. *Animiacies,* 24.

[97] Ibid., 24.

[98] Ibid., 4,3.

as animator, the destabilizing acts of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* likewise challenge the logic of animacy hierarchies in turn.

Uncanny Animation, Uncanny Animator

The destabilizing act that *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* performs on the perceptual framework of the reader-comic relationship occurs on two levels: destabilizing both the still/moving binary, which corresponds to animation "in the narrow sense" as well as the inanimate/animate binary, which corresponds to animation "in the broad sense."[99] The latter is achieved through the agency of the Javascript command that hijacks the scroll function and wrests control from the reader, rendering them a mere viewer. But moreover, that agency is *channeled into* the fusion of discontinuous instants afforded by the mechanical succession of images. Thus, the two layers of animation become inseparable; a computational force becomes experienced as animacy and as movement. This is a construction which allows the comic to draw parallels between the two; the activation of the Javascript trigger is likened to a dead thing (the ghost) haunting the webtoon.

In the first sense, the destabilizing effect is, naturally, most palpable in the time *after* the first Javascript trigger is activated. This unsettling permeates through the remainder of the webtoon (and beyond): *from the time it demonstrates its capacity to move, every approaching panel has the capacity to be animate*. Even as an image comes into view on the computer window or mobile screen, seeming initially to be arriving as a still image, continuing to scroll might at any point spring the image into movement, a proverbial minefield of animation. And yet perhaps even more importantly, this sensibility permeates beyond this singular subversive webtoon; *any* webtoon might, without warning, begin to move as *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* does. As a result, though most of the images in *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* may ultimately be experienced as still, the images of comic panels in webtoons cannot be wholly categorized as still; so long as they are webtoons, they might *potentially* move. The destabilizing act bleeds beyond *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* itself, shifting the horizon of expectations in terms of animation for all webtoons. This emphasis on potentials and tendencies, rather than rigid classification, is not unlike an animist ontology.

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[99] Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands,* 3.

In the second sense, what evokes the uncanny in *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* is not simply an oscillation between stasis and movement, but the construction of a competing animator; one whose presence/absence mirrors and is tied to the status of the image. Returning to Silvio's definition of animation as the production of a social actant, this is one way in which *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost "*animates": bringing to life *another* animator, the occluded Javascript, experienced only as the ghost itself. Though it is still the reader-viewer that is perceiving the animation, an act of projection (i.e. McCloud's sense of "animating" comics) is *replaced with* an experience of the materiality of the Javascript, its computational force becoming experienced as a production of life. However, that production of life is not stable, it exists in the *uncanny* boundary between inanimate/animate.

Here, I employ a focused sense of the uncanny that is not in all senses, as would most often be the case, Freudian. Ernst Jentsch, writing over a decade earlier, and to whom Freud is responding in his famous essay, uses a central example: "doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate."[100] Freud expands Jentsch's concept of "intellectual uncertainty", making an association (albeit problematically) with "the old *animistic* view of the universe… the idea that the world was peopled with human spirits."[101] Animism as a common denominator between the uncanny and animation comes full circle with Sergei Eisenstein, who is credited as the first in a lineage of linking animation with animism (like Freud he also characterized animism as primitive). [102] Masahiro Mori, who coined the term "the uncanny valley", likewise saw degrees of lifelike-ness and motion as the qualities that determined the elicitation of the uncanny.[103] What I draw out

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[100] Jentsch in Sigmund Freud*. "The Uncanny," In The Uncanny.* Translated by David McLintock. (Penguin Classics.New York: Penguin Books*, 1919; 2003.),* 135.

[101] Ibid, 147. Emphasis not present in original. What I claim is problematic about Freud's account is that he locates animism as belonging essentially to the past, declaring it as not only a "phase in the development of primitive peoples" (147), but also further associating it with the infant mind.

[102] Sergei Eisenstein. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Vol. 3. (Seagull Books Pvt Ltd. 1986), 43. "The animated drawing is the most direct manifestation of… animism!" With regards to the "primitive" connotation: Eisenstein refers to "man brought back, as it were, to those pre-stages that were traced out by… Darwin." 10.

[103] Masahiro Mori., K. F. MacDorman, and N. Kageki. "The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]." IEEE Robotics Automation Magazine 19, no. 2 (June 2012): 98–100.

99. For Mori, the more something which is clearly not alive resembles a human, the greater the sense of the uncanny. He notes that a whole robot would be more uncanny than a single prosthetic hand (100). Movement amplifies the position of something on his graph, with the deepest point of the valley only being accessible when something resembling a living creature but known to be inanimate begins to move. Interestingly, health is also a factor for Mori, which is interesting given Chen's focus on the supposed lower animacy of disabled bodies in *Animacies*.

from these definitions, and how I employ the term here, is that a significant dimension of the uncanny is founded upon moments wherein one experiences entities that which would traditionally be classified as having a certain degree of animacy as in fact having much more or much less, or perhaps more specifically, being unable to definitively categorize them on such a hierarchy. *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* becomes uncanny in precisely this way, in part because in one sense it resists categorization in terms of movement, as mentioned, but also because in a second sense it resists categorization in terms of animacy.

To provide clarity on this second sensibility, the ensoulment or investment of animacy, I will use an illustrative example. The film *Killer Toon* (2013) opens with a scene in which a webtoon editor, alone in an office building late at night, is attacked and killed by a ghostly presence. The sequence begins with a webtoon being opened on the editor's computer. It is presumed that the one who opens the file and begins to scroll through the webtoon is the editor herself, until the camera pans up to reveal that she is approaching her desk with a cup of coffee. The scrolling itself acts as the initial indicator that there is an animate presence (the ghost) in the room with the editor, which is followed thereafter with many more familiar ghostly signifiers: lights turning off, strange noises, and so on. There is of course more to this sequence than the opening and scrolling, but importantly it is the scroll itself that acts as the initial signifier that the ghost is *currently* present; when it stops, that presence becomes uncertain. The *Killer Toon* example effectively presents something very similar to the subversion found in *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost,* albeit without both its sudden and shocking jump-scare quality as well as without the fact of its images being fused into continuous motion. The webtoon, in *Killer Toon*, is an example of animation "in the broad sense," becoming invested with agency and ensouled with a sense of presence, but not "in the narrow sense," in that it is still perceived by the woman as a sequence of still images. But, importantly, the one doing the animating is not the reader in either case, it is some other nonhuman presence: the webtoon itself and the Javascript trigger, or in the case of *Killer Toon,* a ghost. The Javascript in *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* substitutes for the ghost in *Killer* Toon: both afford the perception of their animacy through their interaction with the webtoon. The lone signifier of an animate presence is the single act of the scroll, the demonstration of the webtoon reading itself.

Figure 3 The editor returning to her desk to find the webtoon reading itself in Killer Toon

What is evident in the example of *Killer Toon* is the "construction of alterity" that is central to Silvio's definition of animation. An Other, the ghost, is produced. Again, this is not a matter of the projection of the editor alone in the room but rather the experience of the force of a nonhuman animator. *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* does this as well, imbuing the webtoon with a sense of agency and turning the webtoon itself into an Other that the reader must struggle against, one which is *uncanny* because it is there, and then not: acting, and then not. However, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* also merges the investment of the webtoon with perceivable agency, like that which is depicted in *Killer Toon*, with the transformation of still images into moving images. Thus, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* becomes animated in a doubled sense: as both the transformation of stillness into motion as well as the transformation of an "inanimate" object into an "animate" actant. However, these senses are layered on to each other as part of a single act of perception. The destabilization of the still/moving image binary becomes a matter of an inanimate/animate binary. Thus, by virtue of the movement it generates, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* destabilizes its status as inanimate in both "the narrow sense" and "the broad sense", rewriting it into an uncanny space between the binary each sense centers around. This also supports and is supported by a linking of the webtoon and the character Mrs. Cho; as Mrs. Cho comes to move the webtoon becomes imbued with agency, or vice versa. Mrs. Cho is *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*, and *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* is Mrs. Cho.

Given that the reader-comic relationship is co-constitutive, it is naturally the case that a destabilization of the status of the webtoon as media object invokes a parallel destabilization of the classification of the reader themselves. That is, the reader is no longer able to conceive of themselves as analogous to a puppeteer. And yet, they are not able to settle into the role of a passive viewer either; the destabilization affords a different mode of readership altogether. This mode, as unsettling as it may be for the reader to participate in, is geared towards *potentials* rather than to certainty. It is cautious, and it recognizes the agency inherent to the media form as it encounters each image, even if that form does not continually demonstrate what it holds the potential to do. And while it may be the case that such tension and uncertainty eases up over time, as the reader continues to read webtoons that don't suddenly and shockingly spring to life, they can never outright eliminate the possibility that webtoons might move, and that they might *be moved*.

Thus, webtoons like *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* afford a mode of interaction that stands outside of the presumed relationship between reader and comic, itself predicated on a form of animacy hierarchy. Its sudden surge of the uncanny, of categorically uncertain animacy, opens onto an "animist" mode of readership that is, unlike the hierarchical ordering of animator-animation, compatible with it. I characterize this mode as "animist," primarily due to its emphasis on potentials (for movement, for animacy) rather than rigid classification. Though animism is frequently defined as the recognition of souls in nonhumans, that also might be broadened to refer to a more generalized "animating agency", as Lamarre puts it.[104] Thus, the recognition of the potential for animacy, the agency of the webtoon and the potential movement of its images, resists animacy hierarchies enabled by a naturalist framework, and buttresses a push towards animism. As a result, though also as a result of newfound theoretical interest in animation, animism itself has seen a resurgence, which some such as Lamarre have labelled "new animism."[105] Given that this is the case, it seems fitting to suggest that the underlying principles of something like new animism might be found in the very structures of something like *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost*.

Conclusion: Lingering Potential

[104] Lamarre, "Animation and animism". 284.
[105] Ibid., 287.

In sum, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* operates as a critical response to a disposition which sees the reader as a type of puppeteer, operator, or animator, bringing the comic to life according to their will; a disposition which positions the reader as one that projects motion onto the otherwise "inanimate" webtoon. The uncanny, animist, destabilizing subversion of *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* unfolds across two registers. On the one hand, the status of the image as still/moving is destabilized, which transforms the webtoon into something which might spring into motion at any moment. At the same time, the status of the webtoon as inanimate/animate is destabilized, as the webtoon "brings to life", ensouls, or animates an animator, the Javascript channeled into the image of the ghost. This experience of the material technicity of computational forces channeled into the ghostly image overtakes the role the reader themselves presumes to take on, nullifying their act of projection and replacing it with a qualitatively different experience of animation. This makes the webtoon difficult to categorize within a system that defines media objects according to the active reader, operator, or puppeteer, that manipulates them in a particular way. It creates a media blur; one that destabilizes both the media form of the webtoon and the position of the webtoon reader. This situates the webtoon as not only itself being unreceptive to animacy hierarchies, but as more generally, working to destabilize animacy hierarchies altogether.

For this reason, even though *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* continues to be somewhat novel to this day, this is not a matter of a single exceptional webtoon or artist. *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* merely reveals the already uncanny potential of webtoons as a particular digital media format. By virtue of their natively digital architecture, webtoons cannot be reduced to what is visible on the surface. To make the takeaway clear, *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* introduces webtoons as media form into a project of destabilizing animacy hierarchies. Once *The Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* reveals the potential of the format, it becomes impossible to rule out the possibility that any webtoon (especially if it is a horror webtoon) might suddenly spring to life. This activates a space wherein the media *object* and its media *environment* are always potentially ensouled, not unlike an animist ontology. The uncanny animator always lurks in the background.

Chapter Two

"Filled with Determination": Animacy Through Temporal Agencies and World Divergence in *Undertale*

> *"The power to reshape the world… Purely by your own determination. The ability to play God! The ability to SAVE."*
>
> -Flowey, a character from *Undertale*

I am sitting alone in a dark room in front of a computer screen playing a video game. Something strange is happening. The game closed, but I didn't close it. I double-click the icon on my desktop: *Undertale*. The game's intro starts to play normally. Suddenly, the screen glitches. I am met with the screen where I can load my save file. But it is not *mine*. Last time I checked it *was* mine, but something happened. Something *is* happening. And someone, or something, is doing it. Something is out of my control, and not simply because I am bad at playing the game. At this point, I am not sure *I* am the one playing the game at all.

What does it mean to be the "player" of a videogame? What does a player *do*? What is the relationship that a player has to the characters and worlds of videogames? These are questions asked by Toby Fox's meta-fictional *Undertale*, a game marketed as "the friendly RPG [Role-Playing Game] where nobody has to die."[106] *Undertale* released in late 2015. Though it is an indie game made primarily by creator Toby Fox in the United States, *Undertale* is arguably a Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG). Whether or not JRPGs can be made outside of Japan, or whether those games are merely "JRPG-like" remains a point of contention, but for simplicity I refer to *Undertale* as a JRPG here.[107] *Undertale* is directly inspired by 1995's *Earthbound* (*Mother 2* in Japan) and *Shin Megami Tensei*, which themselves follow in the traditions of series such as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy,* all Japanese games that had previously set many of the standards and expectations of the genre. *Undertale*'s wholesome exterior belies its true imperative, which is ultimately to deliver a poignant critique of, on the one hand, the structural design of the JRPG genre in particular and video games more generally as well as, on the other

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[106] Undertale Trailer [Video]. Available at: https://store.steampowered.com/app/391540/Undertale/

[107] For more on this, see Mia Consalvo. "Much Ado about JRPGs: Square Enix and Corporate Creation of Videogames". *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2016.

hand, the dispositions, attitudes, and function of the *player* in them. *Undertale* achieves this not simply through its narrative and dialogue, but more importantly in the way that it displaces the functional role of the player and their particular agencies, constructing, "bringing to life," or *animating* an Other that takes on those functions and those agencies.

One of the many things that makes *Undertale* truly special however, is that in certain ways, it does not *act* like most videogames. Relying on the conventions of the JRPG, and the assumptions that the player is likely to bring with them into the game experience, from something as simple as what an acronym (e.g. LV) might stand for to as abstract as to how they should understand and treat the NPCs (Non-playable characters) that live in that world, *Undertale* enacts an unsettling of conventional engagement with both the JRPG in particular and videogames more broadly. One of the most striking ways that this is achieved is through a mode of presenting animacy: qualities of humanness, lifelikeness, awareness, and so on; and to which we might add "playerness", a set of functions thought to constitute the role of the player.

In this chapter, I detail the way in which *Undertale* produces, ensouls, or "animates" a figure of alterity, an *Other*. This is achieved through the transfer of a set of roles, functions, or types of agency and mobility traditionally thought to be characteristic of the player as a human, "living", animating subject who possesses a greater degree of animacy than the nonhuman, "dead" and inanimate fictional characters and worlds that they bring to life. Building on Alexander Galloway's typology of "operator acts" vs. "machine acts", I argue that *Undertale* forces a transformation of such a typology by presenting something which blurs the distinction between the two types of acts. These two types of roles are in part established through particular temporal agencies granted to the player, such as the "save" function, and the subsequent capacity to both redo (to reload) and to do things differently. The save mechanic, and the subsequent proliferation across divergent worlds that is directly afforded by that same mechanic, are two unique agencies thought to be inherent to the player. On this latter agency of divergence, I take a somewhat novel approach by presenting this Other as a certain type of *kyara* within the videogame as a condensed "media mix" system. *Kyara* refers to a type of pre-narrative character state typically associated with characters in the media mix and is most generally associated with Japan. Framing certain strains of theory of *kyara* in terms of a mode of agency which involves the adoption of divergent roles and the proliferation through divergent worlds, I draw a crucial link between ways that both players and characters move across media and worlds. In short, this

allows *Undertale* to produce a sense of *kyara* which also feels life-like particularly because it acts as some reflection of the player themselves. In doing so, *Undertale* enacts animation through the production of an agent, the genesis of another "player" in a particular sense, which challenges the human player's status as both the only player, and as a player at all.

The Player as Animator, Operator, God

What does the player of a video game do, and in what ways does that role constitute video games as such? When it comes to understanding a video game player, one must note that understanding both "play" and "games" can be both misleading and incomplete; not all of what constitutes either can fully explain the specificity of what it means, and both concepts produce implications that don't necessarily map on to the role of "player". Much of the characterization of video games, and thus of the player, have emerged in the search for some "purity" of video games to distinguish them from other media forms such as film and television. Brendan Keogh notes that for Alexander Galloway, "this purity is in the centrality of 'action' for videogames: The player *does some-thing.*"[108] For Galloway, the emphasis on action is constitutive of video games as a media form: "*video games are action.*"[109] In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway develops a typology of actions to distinguish between the function of the human "operator" and the nonhuman "machine," between which the video game emerges.[110] For Galloway this typology has four major categories: diegetic and nondiegetic operator acts, and diegetic and nondiegetic machine acts.[111] Machine acts includes things such as the actions of hardware, but also the actions of something like "non-player characters" (NPCs).[112] Galloway does not privilege one type of action over another, noting the "active participation of operators *and machines"* as well as adding that "[t]he two types of actions are ontologically the same."[113] Though the two types, operator acts and machine acts, are not substantially different, specific

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[108] Galloway in Brendan Keogh. "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games." *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 1 (2014): 6. Keogh questions this however, stating that "every medium demands an active bodily engagement from the audience – a book needs a reader willing to turn pages in the right order no less than a videogame requires a player to press buttons at the right time"[108]. Keogh, "Across Worlds and Bodies", 8.
[109] Alexander R. Galloway. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Vol. 18. (U of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.
[110] Galloway initially refers to the "machine" as the "electronic computational device," though throughout his discussion it is evident that "machine acts" describes an assemblage of hardware, software, and things like non-playable characters. Galloway. *Gaming,* 1.
[111] Ibid., 38.
[112] Ibid., 12.
[113] Ibid., 2, 5.

actions are bound up with one or the other. This is all rather sensible; for instance, machines do not generally perform operator acts, such as the diegetic act of moving a character through a level or the nondiegetic act of employing cheat codes. One could argue however that Galloway's typology leaves out the possibility for certain kinds of things (i.e. players/machines) to perform specific actions.[114] Even at face value, the dichotomy is not solely of action (i.e. operator vs. operated) but rather maps actions on to categories of things (human = operator, machine = operated).

Obviously, one cannot blame Galloway's typology for assuming that it is the player who will play, but this structure of categorization is arguably also underpinned by the logic of an animacy hierarchy, what Mel Y. Chen calls "an animate hierarchy of possible acts."[115] Chen notes that "[a]nimacy hierarchies in Western ontologies are about kind: they assert that *this group* [operator/machine] is affiliated with *these properties* [different available actions]."[116] Here, it is telling that Galloway selects the term "operator", invoking something analogous to a puppet-operator relationship. Scholars such as Christopher Bolton and Deborah Levitt have suggested that the animated film is the successor to the marionette, but Galloway's typology suggests that the videogame is perhaps in more ways a continuation of this puppet-operator relationship.[117] For Galloway, most nondiegetic machine acts either enable or disable the player, but largely the machine's capacity to act is limited to the degree to which they allow the human action of the player to move through them. Nondiegetic operator acts, on the other hand, involve a much greater degree of animacy, and a much greater degree of control over the animate status of the machine.

Galloway's emblematic example of a what he calls a nondiegetic operator act is the action of pausing a game, an act "that sets the entire game into a state of suspended animation."[118] Pausing is only one of many temporal controls offered to the player, and while such controls are

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[114] Moreover Galloway suggests, understandably so, that the objectives of operators and machines are distinct. For example he notes ""winning *Metroid Prime* is the operator's act, but losing it is the machine's." The machine cannot win *Metroid Prime* because, after all, it is not an operator. Galloway. *Gaming,* 5.

[115] Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. (Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

[116] Ibid., 127.

[117] Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus,* 41. "The marionette and it's successor, the animated film…". Christopher A. Bolton. "From Wooden Cyborgs to Celluloid Souls: Mechanical Bodies in Anime and Japanese Puppet Theater." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10, no. 3 (2002): 729-771.

[118] Galloway. *Gaming, 12*.

not unique to videogames, their centrality is certainly amplified when it comes to games. Though the worlds of games include, for example, idle animations such as simulated weather (what Galloway calls an "ambience act") which are not necessarily subject to the player's in-game agency, in general the player has unprecedented control over time.[119] Liam Mitchell, in *Ludopolitics*, puts it as such:

> No other medium claims to offer such comprehensive control over temporality. Saving and reloading, dying and respawning, speedrunning or cheating; slowing it down, speeding it up, replaying it, pausing it entirely: videogames involve *the manipulation of time in the service of mapping and mastering digital worlds*, and this act of manipulation indexes an attitude that extends to the mapping and mastering of the world in general."[120]

Some of the operator acts which Mitchell outlines may sound familiar, but in relation to, say, video, novels, or comics, a certain set of these stand out as novel, namely, the operator act of "saving and reloading" (Galloway refers to both pausing and "loading or saving" as "setup actions").[121] Generally speaking, most narrative-driven games involve continual choices that the player can make that result in some form of divergence, from the simple divergence of success vs. failure to much more complex branching narrative paths. Temporal control in games is not just about speed (fast-forwarding) or direction (rewinding) but is also about divergence. Most often, videogames present a plural but finite set of narrative possibilities. Thus, the ability to save and reload becomes the temporal mechanism by which the player is able to reclaim control over these divergences. It might be used simply to "correct" a mistake, to undo a death, but it might also be used to "decontextualize" and "recontextualize" a player entirely, allowing them to play a different role.[122]

Mitchell's account of the player is crucial, because it links the mode of the player to a logic of *exhaustion*. Mitchell invokes Heidegger's mode of viewing the world as "standing reserve", wherein that which exists in the world is revealed as "resources" primary available for human consumption or use. This particular way of viewing the world forecloses those same

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[119] Ibid., 10.
[120] Liam Mitchell. *Ludopolitics: Videogames Against Control*. (John Hunt Publishing, 2018), 16.
[121] Galloway, *Gaming*, 13.
[122] Shunsuke Nozawa. "Characterization." *Semiotic Review* 3, 2013: 13.

resources from being viewed in alternative ways, for example "as the locus of spiritual practice, as an incomprehensible and inhuman wild, or as something that cannot be characterized as some *thing*."[123] For Mitchell, the dominant structures of play invite the player to think of game worlds as "dead" standing reserve, to see them first and foremost as means to an end. Notably, this is not just true for the virtual objects in the virtual game world, such as virtual forests that can be cut down to make virtual lumber, but also for the set of narrative possibilities that exist within the game. For Mitchell, players are predominantly conditioned to seek out all the events in the game which they might possibly view. If a choice in a game presents branching narrative paths (NPC lives vs. NPC dies) they will likely seek to view *both* of those paths.[124] Characters and events are, in some sense and to varying degrees, often reduced to "sets of numbers" and "lines of dialogue", and the objective of exhaustion is to see them all.

To put it somewhat differently, players not only enter into a godlike relationship with the virtual world of the game, but they also act as a particular type of god. Mitchell's claim is effectively that the player has a particular relationship to the game world in terms of what Marc Steinberg calls incompossibility. In *Anime's Media Mix,* Steinberg discusses incompossibility with regards to divergent narratives found in the media mix, a system which revolves in part around narrative divergence, and is most generally associated with Japan. Though Steinberg's discussion includes, but is not focused on, video games, the system which he discusses traces its roots, in part, and perhaps this particular logic most centrally, to both table top role-playing games and video games.[125] Steinberg notes that Kadokawa Tsuguhiko's model of the media mix was based on his "interest in role-playing games", and specifically on the idea that "each replay will be different."[126] Tellingly, Steinberg notes that when speaking of the multiplication of worlds, "Ōtsuka [Eiji] compares this to the logic of a video game, wherein '[e]ach individual 'play' using the same video game will offer up a different development depending on the player

[123] Mitchell. *Ludopolitics*, 37

[124] While Mitchell's analysis primarily centers around games with some degree of finitude, those which *can* be exhausted, it is quite comprehensive within those parameters, which covers a majority of videogames as a form. Completely "linear" games with a single ending (e.g. *The Last of Us)* are not occluded from his view. They are simply easier to "exhaust".

[125] I separate role-playing games here to include games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, which are not videogames but have had an impact on both videogames and the media mix that cannot be ignored.

[126] Marc Steinberg. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. (U of Minnesota Press, 2012), 181.

and the game."[127] For these reasons, I characterize the narrative system of the video game as operating as a condensed media mix, as adhering to its logic, but on a smaller scale.[128]

Steinberg borrows the terms compossibility and incompossibility from Gottfried Leibniz to explain how its system of narrative is distinct from that of transmedia storytelling, in which a single narrative "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole."[129] In contrast to transmedia narratives in which "the presupposition [is that] the whole is singular, and consistent", the media mix is characterized by "the multiplication of narratives and the corresponding *multiplication of worlds.*"[130] Incompossibility, for Steinberg, is not strictly inconsistency. Steinberg's defines the two terms as follows:

> Two persons are said to exist in a *compossible* or convergent world insofar as a series of events in one person's world matches the other's. Two persons are said to exist in *incompossible* worlds if within one person's world events exist which do not exist in the other's.[131]

Steinberg adds:

> Incompossibility – contradictory coexistence – would involve not merely the difference between Adam the sinner and Adam the nonsinner, that is, two divergent Adams, but would also involve the divergence between an Adam who did not sin and the world in which Adam sinned or a common world in which *my* Adam sinned and *your* Adam did not."[132]

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[127] Ōtsuka in Marc Steinberg. "Condensing the Media Mix: Multiple Possible Worlds in The Tatami Galaxy." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 75.
[128] Of course, video games are themselves also nodal points within the media mix, but this is less relevant here for my purposes.
[129] Jenkins in Steinberg, "Condensing the media mix", 74.
[130] Steinberg, "Condensing the media mix", 74, 75 76.
[131] Ibid., 77.
[132] Steinberg. *Anime's Media Mix,* 186.

Incidentally, the phrasing Steinberg uses is itself very reminiscent of video games, as when players retell their different experiences as "*my* character did *x*, but *your* character did *y*." The divergence of narrative in video games is defined by incompossible worlds. Here, I employ a sense of "world" as narrative world (largely consistent with how it is used by Steinberg), in that even if they share the same setting and characters, the variation in which "Adam sinned" and "Adam did not sin" would be two divergent and incompossible worlds. Steinberg adds that for Leibniz, what ensures the existence of a common world is God, the "guarantor" of compossibility, or "a world without contradiction."[133] They are "the divine knowledge that chooses the best of all possible worlds."[134] This may seem to accurately describe the player at first glance. However for Mitchell, the player as god is anything but; rather, their aim is to select all worlds: a world in which their Adam sinned *and* a world in which their Adam did not, a world in which "all of the possibles coexist", or perhaps more accurately a world in which all of the possibles exist *at some point.*[135]

Access to these incompossible worlds also affords the player the opportunity to be vicariously contextualized, through their player-character, in a number of respective ways, particularly in a game like *Undertale* with a "blank-slate" player-character. This is most commonly expressed by the sentiment that "player characters have multiple lives."[136] For instance, one might play as a hero who saves other characters, and then begin a new playthrough where they play as a villain, and attempt to kill those same characters, inherently changing the nature of the player-character. These player-characters, of course, are referred to within video game media cultures as "avatars", a term which highlights the god-like relationship (and thus animacy hierarchy) between players and game worlds.[137] Whether one primarily associates these recontextualizations with the player themselves, or the character they control, largely depends on whether one frames control of the character in terms of performance (character as an extension of one's identity), or in terms of animation (character as figure of alterity).[138] In either case, what

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[133] Ibid., 185.
[134] Steinberg. "Condensing the Media Mix", 77.
[135] Lazzarato in Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 184.
[136] Mitchell. *Ludopolitics*, 84.
[137] Teri. Silvio *Puppets, Gods, and Brands*: *Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (University of Hawaii Press), 47.
[138] See Teri Silvio. "Animation versus Performance". *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019).

this points to is a mode wherein the player exists as some constant behind a series of performances/animations. We might liken them to an actor inhabiting different roles, bringing multiple characters to life. Put differently, the player is the "meta-narrative nodal point" that sits "behind" the continuous "decontextualizations" and "recontextualizations" of the player-character.[139] This relationship of the player to incompossibility is crucial, positioning their agency such that they are able to see, remember, and move across incompossible worlds. The action of resetting the game affords the player access to mobility across roles, a mobility which the non-player characters don't have similar access to. The game, after all, cannot remember, for instance, that the player "sinned", and so they retain the agency to recontextualize themselves as a "non-sinner".

In sum, the predominant understanding of the role of the player, or "operator" is that it is defined by two types of agency: a multi-directional *movement through time*, established through the capacity to save/reload, and a subsequent *movement through worlds*, also afforded by that same set of temporal controls. As Mitchell notes: "[t]urning back time… is the means the player employs to move through the levels [and worlds], as well as the logical extension of that brand of totalizing, goal oriented behavior that regards objects, animals, and people as mere things."[140] To put it simply, the dominant mode of the player (saving/reloading and an end-goal of exhaustion) and the animacy hierarchy of the game (player-as-animate, game-as-inanimate) are co-constitutive. Mitchell does not characterize games in this way in order to place a particular value judgment on them universally; rather, his point is to emphasize that *some* games can work against these tendencies. For Mitchell, the most fruitful subversions of the Heideggerian "standing reserve" mode of viewing the world are found in "single player, story-driven games *that thematize time.*"[141] Here, I argue one step further: videogames that thematize time can be subversive by putting temporal control in the hands of nonhumans to produce *animacy,* that which is denied of the game and its machine by virtue of a dominant temporal relationship. This animacy can be understood as systemic, in that it is the game system itself that takes on these traits. Moreover, time is crucial to the subversion of this dominant mode of play because it is so crucial to building it up. It is through the gifting of a mode of temporal control to the player that

[139] Azuma in Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 190. Nozawa, "Characterization".
[140] Mitchell. *Ludopolitics*, 96.
[141] Ibid., 55.

they are able to view the set of possible narrative sequences in the game world as a resource to be deployed towards the end-goal of exhaustion. For Mitchell, as for myself, one of the most poignant works to subvert this mode is 2015's *Undertale*.

Undertale

Undertale is a game which both destabilizes and explicitly thematizes the dominant relationship that the player has to the game, though those themes are initially somewhat veiled. *Undertale*'s background exposition is simple: humans and monsters once lived peacefully together until eventually the two races found themselves at war and monsters were subsequently banished to the underground. The unnamed and androgynous player-character, named by the player, falls into the underground, which acts as something of a metaphor for the player themselves entering into the world of the game (notably, the entire game takes place within the underground). The player-character must find their way back up into the human world. To do this, they need to acquire seven human "SOULs", which can be used to cross the barrier back into the human world. However, the barrier itself is guarded by Asgore, the king of the monsters, who has an intense distaste for humans. The scenario is as evocative of the JRPGs of the late 80s (*Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy)* to mid 90s (*Earthbound, Chrono Trigger)* as the aesthetics, and players familiar with that genre are likely to feel right at home.

The first character the player meets in *Undertale* is Flowey, a talking yellow flower that offers to aid the player. The player enters into a first-person "battle screen," again reminiscent of *Dragon Quest* or *Earthbound*, in which Flowey instructs the player on how things work in the world of the monsters. Normally, the player moves around as their avatar, but on this screen they are represented by a small red heart-shaped icon, referred to as a SOUL (this and other game terms are capitalized in *Undertale*).[142] Flowey teaches the player how to move around in this form. Flowey then scatters little white "friendliness pellets", which he instructs the player to collect. The moment the player comes into contact with one of these "friendliness pellets", their HP (hit points – a marker of how close the player-character is to dying/failing) drop to 1; Flowey has tricked them. Twisting his face into a menacing grin, Flowey chides the player for their naivete. "In this world, it's kill or be killed!" he declares.

[142]"SOUL". *Undertale Wiki.* https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/SOUL.

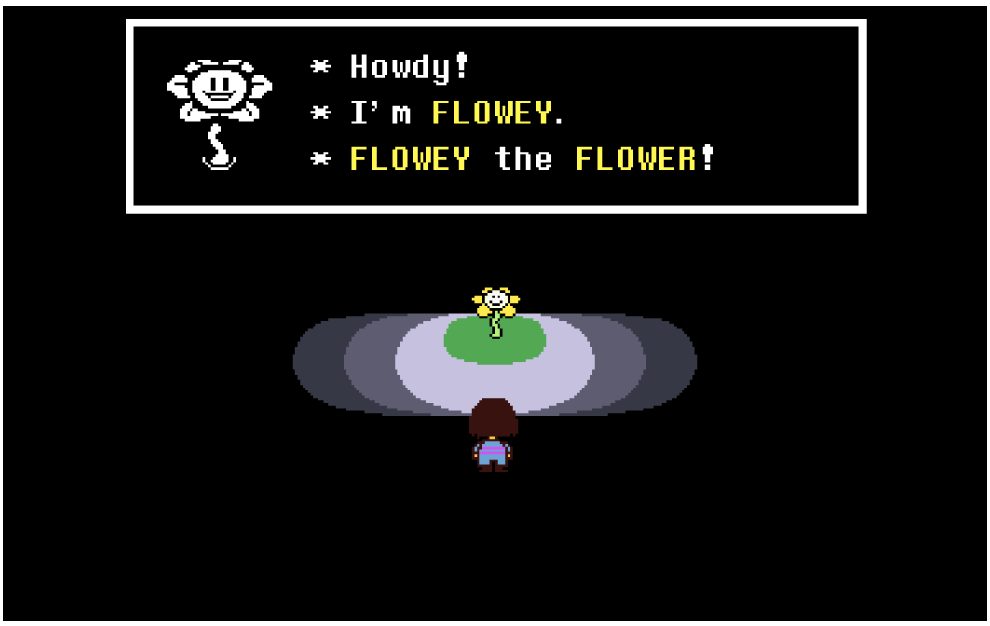

Figure 4 The player's introduction to the character Flowey

The player is rescued from the demonic Flowey by a graceful and maternal goat-like creature named Toriel. Toriel is a personification of the tu-*torial* (pun very much intended) of the game; she quite literally holds the player's hand throughout many of the first areas. Most importantly, she teaches the player how to survive an encounter with a monster in the underground; to use the ACT command in various ways (offering a compliment, flirting, etc.) until the player can spare the monster by selecting the MERCY command. Eventually, Toriel brings the player back to her house, where she offers to care for the player and keep them safe. The player, however, conscious of the goal they must reach, will no doubt choose to leave the safety offered by Toriel, at which point she will try to stop them from wandering out in the dangerous world of monsters. The game heavily suggests that one cannot pass Toriel using the ACT or MERCY commands (though in fact this is possible), and so the player is likely to resort to using FIGHT. Many players, if not most, kill Toriel, and Flowey reappears to remind the player about his philosophy of the world, that in this world, in this game, by virtue of the *system itself*, it's "kill or be killed". Cue the title screen: *Undertale*.

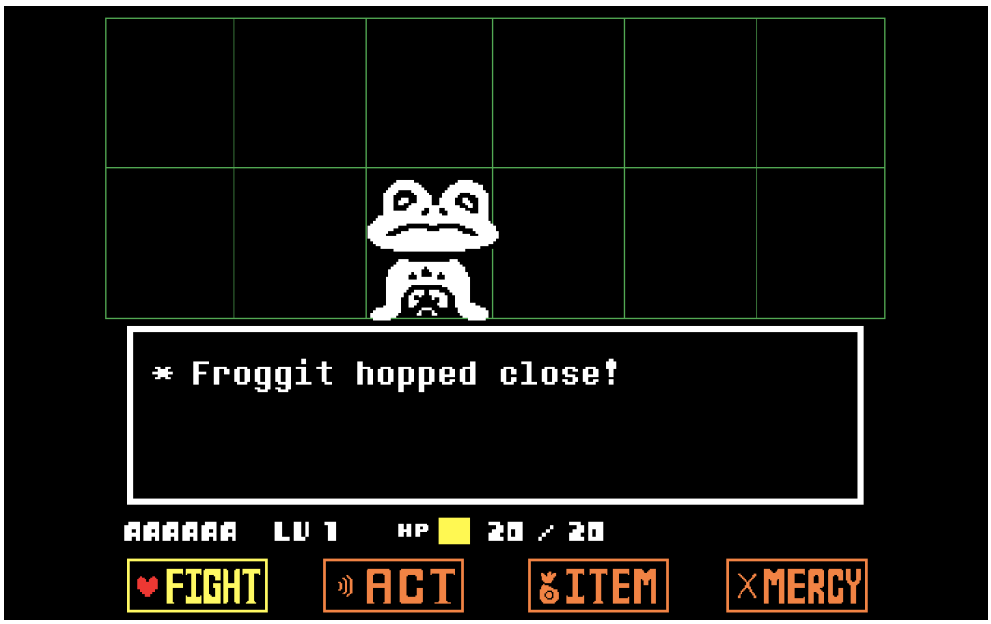

Figure 5 The typical appearance of the battle screen in Undertale

By the end of the tutorial, Flowey has taught the player to kill the monsters, and Toriel has taught the player to spare them. Sparing the monsters, however, does not result in gaining "EXP" which allows the player to improve their "LV" and become stronger (based on convention, players will assume these are acronyms for "experience points" and "level" respectively, but as it turns out, they refer instead to "execution points" and "level of violence").[143] Thus, the player has been instilled with two diverging ways of viewing the monsters that inhabit the game world, either as interaction partners to be befriended, or as resources to be killed and consumed in service of becoming stronger and achieving the game's ultimate goal. In other words, they can view them as "dead" resources or as "living" communication partners. What the player chooses to do in this regard will impact the ending of the game. Though there are a number of meaningful choices that the player can make that can impact the ending, such as whether to befriend characters or kill them, there are generally three possible endings to *Undertale*: "neutral", "true pacifist", or "genocide", each of which has minor variations.

Along the way in *Undertale*, the player will find many "SAVE" points, at which the player can record their progress, and from which the player can resume if they happen to die or

[143] In a JRPG, "EXP" and "LV" would typically be acronyms for "Experience Points" and "Level", but it is revealed late in *Undertale* that they in fact refer to "Execution Points" and "Level of Violence"

wish to reload. At each SAVE point, a text box appears in which the player is told, in a manner of variations, that they are filled with "determination." At first, these statements are taken to be descriptive of the mood of the player-character, who is increasingly filled with courage as they progress on their journey. Over the course of the game, however, it is gradually revealed that determination is a specific and diegetic force in the world of *Undertale*. Should they pursue the "true pacifist" ending, they will eventually need to explore the "True Lab" of the character Dr. Alphys, and here they may stumble upon a journal entry on determination:

> "*I've done it. Using the blueprints, I've extracted it from the human SOULs. I believe this is what gives their SOULs the strength to persist after death. The will to keep living. The resolve to change fate. Let's call this power... "Determination".*" - Entry Number 5, True Lab[144]

Determination, in *Undertale*, is "de-*termination."*[145] It is the human (i.e. the player's) capacity to "persist after death", to save and reload, to do things over, and to try again. In other words, *Undertale* contextualizes the unique temporal agencies offered to the player within the medium of videogames as a part of its world and its narrative. Determination is both diegetic and nondiegetic. It is also what constitutes the human as such, as protected by some technology which "tends toward the defiance of death through the exercise of control."[146] Determination is furthermore what places humans, in the world of *Undertale*, higher in terms of an animacy hierarchy; humans are further away from death itself. And determination itself is also afforded by their animacy, by their human "SOUL."

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[144] "Determination". *Undertale Wiki.* https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Determination

[145] Neither *Undertale* nor Toby Fox have explicitly stated that this play on words was intentional, but it is widely theorized to be the case among fans.

[146] Mitchell. *Ludopolitics*, 15.

Figure 6 A reference to "determination" at the first SAVE point in the game. The message is typical of subsequent SAVE point messages.

At the end of the "neutral" ending of *Undertale,* the player reaches Asgore, the king of the monsters, who has collected six human SOULs and only needs one more, the player's, in order to cross the barrier into the human world. After a fierce battle, the player stands victorious, and is able to choose to kill or spare Asgore. The choice is irrelevant; in a surprise twist, Flowey arrives to land the killing blow on Asgore. Absorbing the six human SOULs previously in Asgore's possession, Flowey stands as the final challenge to the player. But Flowey, now with *human* SOULs inside him, (i.e. a nonhuman channeling supposedly human characteristics) possesses a power that the player has never been challenged by to this point in the game: determination.

Flowey chastises the player for sparing monsters in the underground along their journey, for failing to adhere to his philosophy that in this world, "it's kill or be killed." Flowey then does something that no player would expect; he *closes the game*. Assuming the player is playing on a computer (the game was only later ported to home and handheld consoles), they will be brought back to their desktop and must restart the game. When the player re-opens the game, something is amiss: the text and images of the game display improperly, appearing to be a glitch. The player's save file is replaced with Flowey's save file, who appears to have maximized his LV and the in-game timer. Should the player load the file, they will find themselves in a completely dark area; if they wander north, they will find another SAVE point. When they attempt to SAVE their game, the text will state that their SAVE file has been erased. The dialogue box cracks and shatters "as

though it is being rammed and the dialogue box exists in the playing world; not just as user interface," revealing a massive Flowey. [147]

Figure 7 Flowey after he has taken over the player's SAVE FILE

Tormenting the player, Flowey threatens: "forget about escaping to your old SAVE FILE." The cute Flowey disappears and a monstrous Flowey assembled from photo-realistic plant, human and machine parts descends upon the screen, known officially as "Photoshop Flowey." Letting out a maniacal laugh, Flowey begins his assault, against which the player has little hope of surviving. At every turn, as the player's hit points are gradually chipped away, Flowey continually *saves the game*. Should the player fail against Photoshop Flowey, and they almost certainly will, a scrolling text box filled with Flowey's laughter fills the screen and once again Flowey closes the game.[148]

On the one hand, the action of Flowey closing the game could be construed as a particular type of nondiegetic machine act, what Galloway would call "the death act"; the most emblematic

[147] "Photoshop Flowey", *Undertale Wiki*. https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Photoshop_Flowey.
[148] Of note: controls such as the "Esc" function, which would normally allow one to exit the game, do not work during this text box sequence. The player is forced to wait for it to end.

of which is the "game over."[149] Notably, Galloway also calls the death act "the *disabling act",* and both terms, "death" and "disabling," suggest that animacy is also at play.[150] However, though the death act "[puts] the gamer into a temporary state of disability and submission," the key word here is *temporary.*[151] Players, it seems, are always further away from death itself, they can always become "de-terminated". Yet by removing the capacity for the player to save and reload, Flowey returns the player to a state wherein they are once again susceptible to the passage of time and ultimately to death, not able to stand outside the flow of time and manipulate the passage of time for those within it. As Mitchell states, "the passage of time is the most immediate index of our fundamental lack of control."[152]

On the other hand, the statement "Flowey closes the game" does not necessarily need to be, within Galloway's typology, framed as a either a nondiegetic act, nor as a machine act. The game makes it abundantly clear that Flowey is not just misbehaving as inanimate object, but rather is also behaving correctly *as a player*: saving and reloading, maximizing stats, exerting temporal control.[153] Flowey continually performs operator acts. Flowey resists the logic of operator vs. machine, because he is in fact a nonhuman player character. And by virtue of being an operator, demonstrative of the agencies that constitute such a role, Flowey also becomes more animate. Flowey has taken the form of agency known in *Undertale* as "determination", and in doing so, has become the player themselves. Agency itself, *Undertale* reveals, becomes mobile. Photoshop Flowey's visual design conveys the complexity of the amalgamation that Flowey has become. Its plant-like features signify Flowey as the character within the game. Its human-like features signal the human function of determination/player which it has absorbed. Its machine-like features signal that it is the game itself: Photoshop Flowey *is Undertale*.

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[149] Galloway. *Gaming*, 28, 31.
[150] Ibid., 31.
[151] Galloway. *Gaming,* 31.
[152] Mitchell. *Ludopolitics*, 54.
[153] Galloway does make a reference to a game "playing itself," but it is in reference to what he calls an "ambience act" (e.g. simulated weather). It thus refers more to a game playing itself as if it were another media form entirely (e.g. a film) and does not refer to playing as an operator, with the goals of an operator in mind. Galloway, *Gaming*, 10.

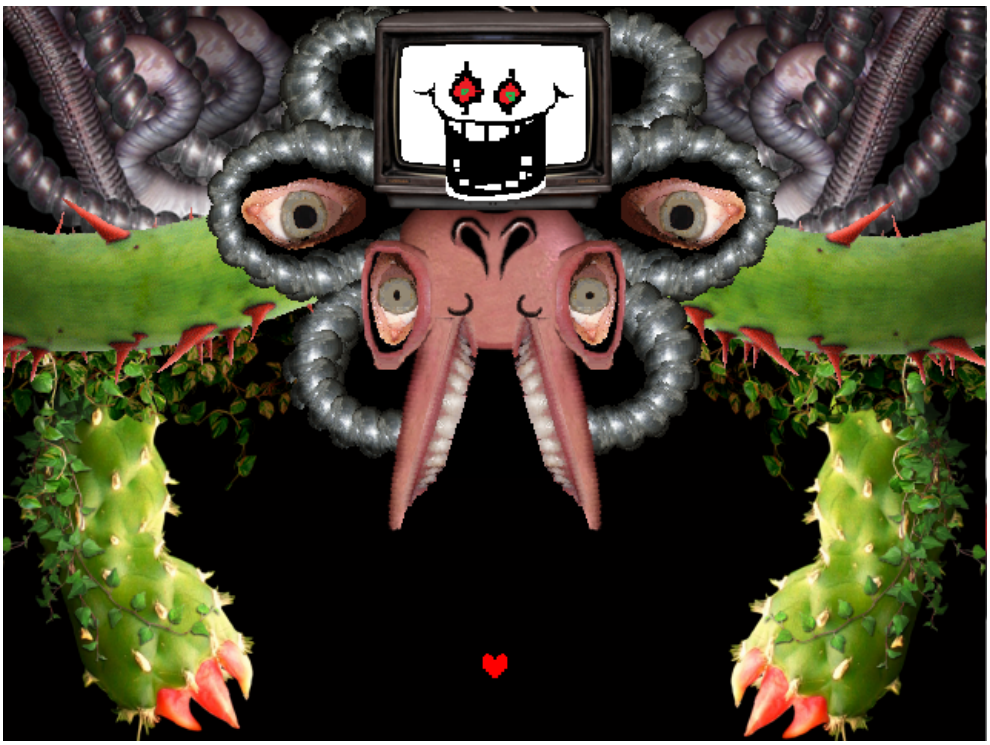

Figure 8 Photoshop Flowey, which is stylistically different from anything else seen in Undertale

So long as the player stays determined (both by staying motivated and by continuing to play), they can emerge victorious against Photoshop Flowey, as eventually the SOULs of the other six humans will come to the player's aid. Defeating Flowey leads to the end of the game, but Flowey hints that the player could use their SAVE file to achieve a better ending. This is where things *really* begin. If the player does any investigation, they will easily learn that *Undertale* has multiple endings, one of which is labelled the "*true* pacifist" ending. Given that *Undertale* is a relatively short game, clocking in at roughly 4-5 hours (JRPGs often span 20-70 hour adventures), they will likely be motivated to begin again and achieve this ending, sparing every creature over the course of the game and meeting certain other criteria. The design of *Undertale,* as well as hints offered by the neutral ending, push the player to seek out a better ending, or at least a very different one.

At the risk of some over-explanation which delves into the convoluted, I wish to detail what lore is revealed in these two additional endings, as it is highly revealing of how *Undertale* thematizes the temporal agencies attributed to the player. For the sake of ease, I will make the takeaway clear at the onset: a separate entity, unbeknownst to the player, is "animating" Flowey. In the "true pacifist" ending, the player will learn that Flowey's true identity was that of Asriel,

the son of King Asgore and Toriel. Asriel, because he was a monster, was killed by humans, which sparked the hatred that King Asgore carried for them, and which motivates him to impede the player-character's progress. Asriel perished in a field of golden flowers, and when Dr. Alphys experimented with infusing one of these flowers with "determination," Asriel was subsequently reanimated in his new floral form. The posthumous Asriel becomes Flowey.

But Flowey is not *only* Asriel, something which is revealed if the player achieves the final ending, the "genocide" ending. If the player attempts to start another new game after achieving the "true pacifist" ending, Flowey speaks directly to the player. He tells the player that all of their friends are now safe, and that the only threat remaining to them is the player themselves, who has the power to reset everything. Against the protests of Flowey, the player may choose to seek out the "genocide" ending, in which they must meticulously kill every monster in the underground until they reach maximum LV. At the end of the "true pacifist" ending, Asriel recognizes that the player's avatar is an individual distinct from the player themselves. Asriel asks the avatar what their name is, and subsequently learns that their name is Frisk, *not* the name given by the player at the start of the game. The "genocide" ending reveals that the character the player *actually* named when they began the game was the first human to fall into the underground, who in the game's files is known as Chara. The player only meets Chara at the very end of the "genocide" playthrough. In its eerie final screens, they deliver to the player this message:

> *Greetings. I am Chara. Thank you. Your power awakened me from death. My "human soul". My "determination". They were not mine, but YOURS. At first, I was so confused. Our plan had failed, hadn't it? Why was I brought back to life? You. With your guidance. I realized the purpose of my reincarnation. Power. Together, we eradicated the enemy and became strong. HP. ATK. DEF. GOLD. EXP. LV. Every time a number increases, that feeling… that's me. 'Chara'. Now. Now we have reached the absolute. There is nothing left for us here. Let us erase this pointless world, and move on to the next."*

Chara is a distinct character within the narrative of *Undertale* but also extracts and embodies the function of the player: possessing a "human soul" and "determination", motivated by reaching "the absolute" (i.e. achieving exhaustion), and also initially being connected to the player in some way. In the game's lore, when Chara fell into the underground, they were adopted by Asriel and

his family. Eventually, Chara became sick, and their only wish before their death was to see the golden flowers of their village on the surface. Absorbing Chara's SOUL, a Chara-controlled Asriel carried Chara's body back into the human world, leading to the event in which Asriel died. In sum, Flowey was in fact a reincarnated Asriel ensouled by Chara: a *nonhuman* monster ensouled by a *human* animating force within, a force which enables and compels him, both diegetically and nondiegetically, to act like a *player*. Flowey narrates this process in which he gradually becomes the type of player Mitchell describes, one motivated by exhaustion:

> *But as I left this mortal coil… I started to feel apprehensive. If you don't have a SOUL, what happens when you…? Something primal started to burn inside me. "No," I thought. "I don't want to die!"… Then I woke up. Like it was all a bad dream. I was back at the garden. Back at my "save point." Interested, I decided to experiment. Again and again, I brought myself to the edge of death. At any point, I could have let this world continue on without me. But as long as I was determined to live… I could go back. Amazing isn't it <Name>? I was amazed too. At first, I used my powers for good. I became "friends" with everyone. I solved all their problems flawlessly. Their companionship was amusing… For a while. As time repeated, people proved themselves predictable. What would this person say if I gave them this? What would they do if I said this to them? Once you know the answer, that's it. That's* ***all they are****. It all started because I was curious. Curious what would happen if I killed them. "I don't like this," I told myself. "I'm just doing this because I HAVE to know what happens." Ha ha ha… What an excuse! You of all people must know how liberating it is to act this way.[…]You understand, <Name>. I've done everything this world has to offer. I've read every book. I've burned every book. I've won every game. I've lost every game. I've appeased everyone. I've killed everyone. Sets of numbers… Lines of dialogue… I've seen them all."*

Flowey's speech mirrors that of the player themselves, who after "[solving] all their problems flawlessly" (the true pacifist ending) eventually becomes motivated by exhaustion and "[c]urious what would happen if [they] killed them." What is noteworthy in Flowey's speech is the emphasis on artificiality, and thus on animacy, that is at play. Once Flowey recognizes a particular animating force existent within himself and absent within other inhabitants of his

world, he is able to justify his manipulation of them because they are merely numbers, or merely dialogue, that's "all they are." This is the result of Flowey being animated by Chara.

Undertale knows that players are likely to achieve each of its endings in a particular order: "neutral", "true pacifist" and then "genocide". As most players will recognize that they are playing a JRPG, where killing monsters is central, they will likely first achieve the "netural" ending, having killed at least some monsters, even if they quickly recognize the game's "point". Because the "true pacifist" ending is the only truly happy ending, and because it is only a slightly longer time investment than neutral with much in terms of narrative rewards, the game will most likely convince its player to achieve it next. However, the "genocide" ending is extremely meticulous, empty, long, difficult, and even boring. The only motivation for pursuing the "genocide" ending, against all of the ways that the game discourages it, is the promise of some small amount of narrative divergence, the knowledge that the game has not been entirely exhausted yet. The player who seeks out a "true pacifist" ending might in fact be Leibniz's God: they recognize that a "better" world exists, and they seek it. The player who continues on to obtain the "genocide" ending is not motivated by compossibility but by exhaustion. They are a different god. They are Chara.

At the end of the "genocide" ending, Chara asks the player if they would like to erase the world. If the player refuses, Chara asks the player why they ever thought they were in control and erases the world anyway, closing the game yet again. If the player re-opens the game, they are faced with nothing but a black screen, representing the world they have destroyed, and nothing will change for a lengthy ten minutes. Should they wait long enough, Chara will offer to restore the world, but only in exchange for the player's SOUL.

Most players would feel inclined to stop playing *Undertale* at this time, as exhaustion has seemingly been achieved, but if they decide to play again, something quite interesting happens. Even if the player resets their save file, the game *remembers* that the player sold their SOUL to Asriel. As a result, subsequent playthroughs in which the player tries once again to complete a "true pacifist" playthrough are permanently altered, leading to what fans have dubbed the "soulless true pacifist" ending. This ending is nearly identical to the previous "true pacifist" ending, save one critical difference. In the final moments of the game, Chara will briefly appear in place of Frisk, indicating that Chara has been in control the whole time, and signaling further that they may continue on to the "genocide" playthrough, their very presence spelling out an

irreversibly morbid end for the game's NPCs.

In fact, this is only the most extreme example of the many ways in which *Undertale* retains memory, or meta-knowledge, of the player's actions between playthroughs. As another example, should the player exit and reload after having killed Toriel in the introduction of the game in order to spare her, Flowey retains the meta-knowledge of when the player killed her:

> *I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. Ha ha ha ha… You naïve idiot. Do you think you are the only one with that power? The power to reshape the world… Purely by your own determination. The ability to play God! The ability to "SAVE."*

One might say that Chara as a character embodies the memory *Undertale* retains that the player cannot erase: a matter of, in the words of Galloway, "[incorporating] this nondiegetic force into the story line."[154] The player who completes a "genocide" run of *Undertale* is forever haunted in any subsequent run by a Chara that retains the meta-knowledge of what the player has done (i.e. that they have completed the "genocide" playthrough). Moreover, once Chara is "activated", they too move across worlds as an entity which precedes and participates in the narrative each time it is reset, retaining the meta-knowledge of what has come before, just like the player has done previously. Chara thus also embodies the *movement through time* and *movement through worlds* that, supposedly, characterizes the player. Those agencies become mobile and shift from the player to Chara, as well as to *Undertale* itself. The character replaces the player *as* a player, as an operator, as a god.

Chara and *kyara*

In the Japanese translation of *Undertale*, the name of the character Chara is translated as *kyara* (キャラ). In Japanese, *kyara* is a contraction of *kyarakutaa* (character). But the two terms also have nuanced differences, with *kyara* being deeply associated with a particular type of mobility.[155] Considering this, Chara turns out to be quite aptly named, given how Chara is used

[154] Galloway. *Gaming,* 33.

[155] These nuanced differences have developed over time. Initially, "the short form kyara was […] just owed to 'the most recent abbreviation fashion'", but it has now "assumed rather unique connotations and meanings". Aihara 2007: 121; in Lukas RA Wilde. "Kyara revisited: The Pre-narrative Character-state of Japanese Character

within *Undertale*. *Kyara* is understood in a number of ways. At times the central features of *kyara* are thought to be a matter of visual design, an example of which being what Debra Occhi calls "wobbly aesthetics."[156] More often however, *kyara* indexes some portability across media. Natsume Fusanosuke argues that "*kyara* appear as they do because they are designed to be mobile across media, time, and space, which allows them to be used for many purposes."[157] Shunsuke Nozawa adds: *Kyara* are "fantastic beings – appearing here, reappearing there."[158] *Kyara* are not just animate in the sense of "their animation on the screen" but more importantly in terms of "their portability across the media mix, their 'movement in society'."[159] However, a number of descriptions of *kyara* point further to a sense of animacy. Debra Occhi, as one of these examples, notes that "*Kyara* are *animated* as in they embody [in the words of Teri Silvio] 'qualities perceived as human – life, power, agency, will, personality, and so on."[160] In sum, setting aside visual design, *kyara* are constituted in part by a particular agency, the ability to move across media and worlds. Notably, this is quite similar to the way in which the player, and subsequently Chara, moves across incompossible worlds. And as a result of this agency and this movement, *kyara* are suggestive of life, they are perceived as relatively more animate.

The concept of kyara is generally considered to originate with Ito Gō, who expresses a similar sentiment to that of Occhi, noting of *kyara* that they also produce a heightened sense of animacy, what he characterizes as a "life force" and a "presence."[161] This way in which *kyara* exist in the world is directly informed by the media mix in general, and incompossible worlds in particular. Itō notes that "the essence of the distinction between *kyarakutā* and *kyara* is based on the imagination of possible worlds."[162] In reference to Hello Kitty, one of the most popular *kyara* worldwide, Lukas RA Wilde refers to that phenomenon as such: "as if there was a decontextualized entity '*behind*' all her contextualized instances."[163] Thomas Lamarre says that

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Theory." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5, no. 2 ,2019, 222.

[156]Debra J. Occhi. "Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with their Anthropomorphic Forebears." *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 1 (2012): 109.

[157] Fusanosuke in Sandra Annett. "What Can a Vocaloid Do? The Kyara as Body without Organs." *Mechademia* 10 (2015): 170.

[158] Nozawa. "Characterization", 8.

[159] Nozawa in Paul Manning and Ilana Gershon. "Animating Interaction." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 115.

[160] Silvio 2010, 427 in Occhi, "Wobbly aesthetics, performance, and message", 111.

[161] Itō in Wilde. "Kyara revisited", 242.

[162] Itō Gō in Wilde. "Kyara revisited", 229. Emphasis not present in original.

[163] Wilde. "Kyara revisited", 224.

for Itō, this implies that *kyara* are "ontologically prior to *kyarakutaa.*"[164] Nozawa expresses a similar sentiment, thinking of *kyara* as "creatures of in-between-ness", another way of saying that they extend beyond their individual incarnations.[165] The sensibility is that, like a celebrity who is most often only experienced in some role, there is the presumption that if a *kyara* can inhabit a plurality of roles, there must be an existence which is *a priori* any particular role. This is palpable in the "soulless true pacifist" ending, in which Frisk turns out to be operated by Chara for the duration of the game; it is as if Chara has finished playing the role of Frisk. Frisk is a *kyarakutaa* to Chara's *kyara.* Of course, this is also quite similar to the player as they exist "behind" the avatar they control.

In many ways then, there is a sense that something is "behind" a *kyara* in the same way that the player themselves are "behind" any role they play in the game. That is, both function as some form of what Azuma calls a "meta-narrative nodal point."[166] If it is not yet apparent, both the player and *kyara* bear a similar relationship to incompossible worlds. Both possess a particular mobility which affords them the potential to move across and call into being incompossible worlds wherein they adopt diverging roles. Just as players have access to multiple character lives, Azuma notes that "if we can imagine the existence of multiple lives, we have a kyara."[167] Unlike the media mix however, the player tends to presume that they are in control of the way in which these worlds are brought to life. What typically holds the media mix together is not any singular authorial body, but rather the function of character. As Steinberg puts it: "the character takes the place of Leibniz's God."[168] Thus, it stands to reason that if *kyara* are largely defined by the media mix, and that, as stated above, the videogame both serves as model and condensation of the media mix, that something which is mobile across the divergent worlds within a single videogame might also take on many of the same properties, and operate on the same logic, as *kyara*.

Sandra Annett, in her essay on Hatsune Miku and other "vocaloids", frames *kyara* not in terms of what they are, but what they *do.*[169] Taking a Deleuzian approach, she positions *kyara*

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[164] Thomas Lamarre. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life." *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 129.
[165] Nozawa, "Characterization", 8.
[166] Azuma in Steinberg. *Anime's Media Mix*, 190.
[167] Azuma in Wilde. "Kyara revisited", 229.
[168] Steinberg. *Anime's Media Mix,* 188.
[169] Annett. "What can a Vocaloid do?", 168. "But instead, let us take Deleuze and Guattari's approach and ask, What do *kyara* do? How are they fabricated? What comes to pass?"

within the framework of the "Body Without Organs." She thinks of *kyara* as "surfaces that facilitate the play of desire", but what is central to her analysis is the conceptual challenges involved in pinning down *kyara*.[170] That is to say that much like Deleuze describes affect, one cannot possess *kyara*, but is traversed by *kyara*. Annett thinks *kyara* not as a quality a body possesses, and thus not as a matter of ontology, but rather as a matter of process. For Annett, this is about "becoming-*kyara.*"[171] Chara of course fits the description of a character imbued with *kyara*-ness, but they are also something of a personification of *kyara*-as-affect in this sense. Chara moves through bodies just as *kyara* does, first linked to the player, and then inhabiting and animating Flowey from within, enabling him to act as the player previously had.

Undertale's formulation then is this: Chara/*kyara* is a particular agency or mobility which affords the movement across incompossible worlds. Chara/*kyara* as agency is thought to be possessed by the player, who can move both themselves and others across worlds and into different roles. In Undertale, this agency becomes a tense site of negotiation, as it is contested between the player and the nonhuman character. In both the movement and meta-knowledge of Chara, as well as the encounter with Flowey/Photoshop Flowey, the player experiences this agency as it moves from them to a nonhuman participant who is not themselves, an Other. The game, naturally, occludes most visual representation of its computation outside of the save mechanic and the divergent worlds which it is capable of producing. Due to this, though the agency is a computational force - the memory of the system - this participant is experienced only as the characters whom that agency is channeled into, Chara and Flowey. As a result, the agency of the character (Chara/Flowey), of the game (*Undertale*) and of the system (memory) all blur together, becoming indistinguishable from one another.

In sum, the player traditionally acts in a way that is somewhat analogous to *kyara*, through a process of contextualization (Frisk is a non-sinner), decontextualization (reset game), and recontextualization (Frisk is a sinner). In *Undertale*, that dominant mode is externalized as Chara, a nonhuman other which proliferates across the worlds that the player calls into being and is not subject to the decontextualization of the human player. The *kyara* function subsequently becomes unavailable to the player, as any post-genocide playthrough forecloses the mobility of the player across social roles, as it is now Chara that operates different versions of Frisk across

[170] Ibid., 169.
[171] Ibid., 170.

divergent worlds. Chara's (and Flowey's) mobility supersedes that of the player, enacting a subversion of animacy hierarchies. The result is twofold: on the one hand, Chara/ Flowey as recontextualized entity becomes increasingly mobile through worlds, but on the other hand, divergence itself becomes flattened, such that all mobility across worlds can be framed as an interaction between the player and an equally animate *kyara* "behind" all instances of those worlds.

Conclusion: Machine Operator Acts

Galloway's typology of video game action categorizes a majority of actions and processes occurring in games, while also giving due attention to the importance of machine action to the medium. Nonetheless, it does not account for instances in which the operator, the player, is the machine itself. It would have been difficult to foresee the emerge of the particular actions taken by *Undertale*, actions which destabilize the binary of operator vs. machine. *Undertale* demonstrates the mobility of agency itself, such that those agencies thought to be inherent to the human operator are transferred to and demonstrated by the nonhuman machine. "Non-player character" ceases to be an apt description of the character Flowey, as he continually behaves like, and performs actions seemingly exclusive to, the player. With some additions, Galloway's typology could accommodate this; I would propose to refer to these types of actions as "*machine operator acts*". What this would reveal, however, is that the machine/operator binary must be further broken up: into human vs. machine, and operator vs. operated, with the possibility for all combinations being recognized.

Moreover, Chara both thematizes and embodies a particular role comprised of two intertwined agencies, a specific temporal agency (saving/reloading) and the subsequent affordance to facilitate a divergence of worlds, characters and roles (*kyara*). Chara/*kyara* is presumed to be the specifically human function that places the player higher in terms of an animacy hierarchy than both the media object they interact with (*Undertale)* and its elements (characters/worlds). The construction of the player in this way, in the case of the "normal" game and dominant player-game relationship, arguably produces a mode of viewing the virtual world as "standing reserve", wherein all incompossible worlds and characters become "mere things" to be consumed and discarded. *Undertale*'s meta-fictional narrative, through Chara, extracts this role, separating it into its constitutive components and relocating it in the nonhuman assemblage

of *Undertale*/Flowey/Chara. *Undertale* does not just establish a competing player, but rather an Other which competes for the role of player-as-god. This Other, through its demonstrated proliferation across worlds, subverts the presumed animacy hierarchy as it signals something beyond or "behind" the text that a player who seeks to "bring to life" all incompossibles to a point of exhaustion cannot ultimately "possess."

In the words of Galloway, "[v]ideo games render social realities into playable form."[172] If this is the case, if video games are an index of some broader way of viewing the world and that which is in the world – generally as "dead" and primarily available for human needs – then something like *Undertale* can implicitly carry certain philosophical and political themes, by positioning itself against views of the world as "standing reserve." Through projecting a certain animacy, something which acts much like the player themselves, *Undertale* can make highly visible the often-naturalized mode of play that relies on a rejection of that same animacy. In doing so, it can open up and imagine new possibilities for interaction, that might do some work to subvert those philosophical tendencies which become condensed in videogames on a broader scale.

[172] Galloway. *Gaming*, 17.

Chapter Three

"Just Monika": Destabilizing Database Consumption in *Doki Doki Literature Club*

"An exception has occurred."
"File 'game/script-ch5.rpy', line 307
See traceback.txt for details."

The screen is filled with grainy static. The background scenery is replaced with nothing but the above message. I wonder what it means. What I thought was just a standard *bishōjo* game has taken a gut-wrenching dark turn. A central character has died, and the protagonist looks on in horror. But then, much stranger things begin to occur. I exit the game and navigate to the folder located on my computer containing the game's files, looking for a file which would detail the error report. There it is, where it had not been before: "traceback.txt." I open the file. There is nothing but lines of code that are incomprehensible to me. I scroll down, and back up, and then I see it. A message:

"Oh jeez… I didn't break anything, did I? Hold on a sec, I can probably fix this… I think… Actually, you know what? This would probably be a lot easier if I just deleted her. She's the one who's making this so difficult. Ahaha! Well, here goes nothing."

In this space that is both part of the game and external to it, I am experiencing something else's agency. This thing – I assume it's a character – can write files, rewrite files, and delete files. And yet, this space, of files and folders, should be a space that I, as the *player*, control. Sure, maybe I am not tech savvy enough to do what it is I want to do, but in theory only *I* am the one who should be able to fix it, to manipulate the system to produce the artificial drama that I consume. And yet, how artificial can I really say this drama and these characters are when they themselves can reach outside its boundaries in order to actively construct it? This unsettling of my own agency as player, and of the boundary between fiction and reality, is the central performance of the *bishōjo* game *Doki Doki Literature Club*.

Doki Doki Literature Club (henceforth abbreviated as *DDLC*), is a metafictional *bishōjo* game (beautiful girl game) released in 2017 for Windows and Mac OSX.[173] It was created by Team Salvato, led by American game designer Dan Salvato. *DDLC* is most visually similar to Japanese visual novels such as *Clannad* (2004) and *Fate/Stay Night* (2004): a first-person perspective, alternating character poses on static backgrounds, and a *bishōjo* (beautiful girl) game aesthetic.[174] There are a variety of names for these types of games: visual novels, novel games, dating sims, *bishōjo* games (or *otome/bishōnen* games, which often feature beautiful men/boys and are primarily marketed towards women) each of which carry their own specific nuances. Here I will employ the term *bishōjo* game, as it emphasizes conventions shared with anime and manga that are present in *DDLC*. The game was released at a time when low budget *bishōjo* games produced outside of Japan were able to take advantage of the increasingly accessible publishing tools available on platforms such as Steam. Many of these games make an effort to emulate certain *bishōjo* anime and game tropes that have come to define the genre, often also adopting a Japanese high school setting. *DDLC* follows suit while also pushing that envelope in a parodic nature; though it was not initially released in Japan, *DDLC* presents itself as a *translated* Japanese *bishōjo* game.[175] This becomes explicit at one point in the narrative when the characters note that a pun made by one of them "makes no sense in translation."[176]

Using the abundance of Japanese-style *bishōjo* games available on Steam as camouflage, *DDLC* in fact smuggles in something much darker than its generic signifiers would suggest. *DDLC* turns out to be a subversive psychological horror experience, in which the game, itself

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[173] What are known as *bishōjo* games domestically are often known as "dating sims" outside Japan. See Patrick W. Galbraith. "Bishojo games: 'Techno-Intimacy' and the virtually human in Japan." *international journal* 11 (2). 2011. It is also worth noting that defining dating sims *as* games is complicated, as they at times feature incredibly minimal interaction. Emily Taylor notes that they might rather be called interactive *anime/manga*. Emily Taylor. "Dating-simulation games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture." *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29 (2007), 198.

[174] It is worth noting that the most direct sources of inspiration for DDLC were games with certain psychological horror elements, such as *Yume Nikki* (2004) and *Eversion* (2008) and not *bishōjo* games themselves. Reddit AMA with Dan Salvato: "DDLC was mostly influenced by non-VN games, such as Yume Nikki and Eversion. I've played Tsukihime, Fate/Stay Night, Steins;Gate, 999, and portions of other games like Umineko, Clannad, and some others." Accessed at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/DDLC/comments/7dvb70/hello_my_name_is_dan_salvato_i_created_doki_doki/

[175] This is deliberate. In response to u/Gamecrashed during an AMA on Reddit, Salvato comments "Yes, it was deliberately written to sound like a translated visual novel"

[176] In the sequence, Natsuki makes a pun based on the name of the character Monika in which the crux of the joke relies on the term *ika*, which in Japanese means "squid". Monika comments, saying both that her name is not pronounced that way, and that the joke makes no sense in translation.

part of the fictional narrative, begins to break down. In an interview for Siliconera, Salvato notes that "*DDLC* is not *supposed* to be a horror game. The whole idea is that it's a normal dating sim game where things go wrong once you start playing it."[177] For practical purposes, I will henceforth refer to what Salvato calls the "normal dating sim" as the *game,* and the "things [going] wrong" as the *metagame.* This generic normality of the game is reflected in the promotional materials for *DDLC*, such as its download page, which never present it as a horror game because within the fiction, it isn't one. The only indication that it will not adhere to the genre it presents itself as is a content disclaimer before the title screen of the game for those who are easily *disturbed*, something which would be generally unnecessary for a game of its variety.

The "game" *DDLC* is a *bishōjo* game in which a male protagonist is asked to join a high school literature club with four other members, all of whom are female, and three of whom can be romanced throughout the course of the game. The main events of the metagame *DDLC* revolve around the remaining female character, the club president of the literature club, Monika. In the first act of the game, Monika has an "epiphany."[178] Monika becomes self-aware. This is revealed gradually over the course of the game, with more subtle dialogue hints ("tell me you can hear me") eventually evolving into unambiguous fourth wall breaks ("You do know I'm aware that this is all a game, right?"). She recognizes that she is a two-dimensional character looking out into the three-dimensional world of humans, that her "friends" in the game are not sentient, and most importantly that she is the only one of the four non-playable characters in the game that is not a romantic option for the player – "No matter how many times you play. It's all the same." Monika finds herself doomed to live in a world that systematically prevents her from having a meaningful connection to what she perceives as the only other person in it. *DDLC* then follows what Deborah Levitt would call Monika's "Pinocchio narrative" in which over the course of the remaining acts, Monika attempts to become more "human."[179] Monika, having fallen in love with not the player-character, but the *player* themselves – the only other entity she can see with awareness that resembles hers – attempts to reprogram the game so that the player will want to spend time with her. An in-game poem of Monika's has her preparing to "brandish [her] pen."

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[177] Alistair Wong. "Doki Doki Literature Club! Developers Talk About the Horror Of Losing Control". [Interview]. *Siliconera.* https://www.siliconera.com/doki-doki-literature-club-developers-talk-horror-losing-control/

[178] Monika: "I guess you could say that I had some kind of epiphany recently."

[179] Deborah Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. (John Hunt Publishing, 2018), 33.

This takes on a double meaning, as she will try to reach the player through poetry (i.e. through the narrative) while also writing and rewriting code to reach the player in a different way (through the system). Monika is a writer in two senses: she is a poet, and she is a programmer.

In this chapter, I analyze the way in which *DDLC,* through the use of the character Monika, destabilizes a paradigm in which players of *bishōjo* games exercise control over the contents of the game (i.e. the girls) as a result of their comprehension of the system. Here, I characterize the typical player, whom *DDLC* anticipates, according to Azuma Hiroki's postmodern theory of *otaku* (roughly analogous to geek or nerd) who obtain agency by reassembling the elements of systems according to their will. In what follows, I detail how *DDLC* subverts such a paradigm of control, by transferring the capacity to reassemble elements from the human player to the nonhuman character of Monika. Inseparable from the subversion and relocation of agency, *DDLC* also stages an uncanny "character encounter" that brings a parallel set of animacy relations into play. By employing such an encounter that destabilizes the divide between reality and fiction, *DDLC* threatens the "recognition of artificiality" that makes the agency of the player (Azuma's otaku) possible. At the end of the chapter, I argue that this animacy is afforded through the channeling of computing into the character image, what I call a "computational-animist" force, drawing off of the work of Thomas Lamarre. In sum, I argue that *DDLC* employs a narrative that subverts the logics of agency and animacy conceptualized by Azuma and embodied by Azuma's player, culminating in an immanent critique of these logics. *DDLC* thus acts as a challenge to Azuma's attribution of agency to the player, by foregrounding the agency of the system as it channeled into the animation of the character Monika; in doing so, in foregrounding the materiality of *DDLC* as software, *DDLC*'s uncanny effect bleeds into all software games, any of which can enact a similar agency at any time.

Often, *DDLC* is characterized as a subversion of the *bishōjo* game and genre, but is generally considered within, at times, a strictly representational logic. This logic recognizes that *DDLC* purposefully arranges itself as generic in order to make some claim, but perhaps adds that it fails to do so. It is certainly true on some level that *DDLC* can be read as genre parody; no doubt the game offers some commentary on the implausible *bishōjo* anime/video game generic structure in which every female character falls effortlessly in love with an often characteristically unlikeable male protagonist. However, an analysis of *DDLC* that confines itself to a representational logic might reduce what *DDLC* acts as a critique of, missing how *DDLC* offers a

broader immanent critique of the relationship between users, operators, consumers, or what I refer to throughout this thesis as "animators" and the contents (characters, images, narratives) that they manipulate and consume. This relationship is mapped onto a representational gender dynamic but cannot be wholly subsumed by it.[180] The game suggests that this is the case: as Monika herself puts it: "Sometimes asking what a poem [what becomes the game's allegory for an artificial simulacra] is *about* isn't the right question."[181] That is, the "right question" might be instead what a poem *can do*. Furthermore, Monika makes a clear distinction between humans and characters that inhabit different dimensions when she nearly lets her secret slip in Act 1 by noting that "humans are not two-dimensional creatures" (she corrects herself to say "one-dimensional"). Thus, an analysis of *DDLC* should, as mine will here, attempt to address the play of forces that cannot entirely be coded.

Double-Layer Consumption and the Agency of the Player

In the previous chapter, I established that the player of a video game can be conceived predominantly as a particular type of animator, with a god-like relationship to the virtual environment in which they bring to life a finite set of diverging narrative sequences. This involves a positioning of the contents of the game (characters, narrative, world) as a Heideggerian standing reserve to be deployed towards some end-goal, most often the goal of *exhaustion*. However, this relationship is further complicated by the fact that players have a layered understanding of the game, as both coding (what is presented) and code (information). That is, digital games are combinations of text, images, narrative, characters, and world, but are also bundles of data, algorithms, and *code*. Or, in other words, as Alexander Galloway puts it: "[v]ideo games are games, yes, but more importantly they are software systems; this must always remain in the forefront of one's analysis."[182] Often, understanding the game on both of these

[180] It's worth pointing out that Salvato is not motivated by a disdain for the visual novel, though that doesn't mean it could not still be read as criticism. However, during his Reddit AMA, Salvato answers the question "why a visual novel?" with "I love visual novels and I've wanted to make one for years. Also, it's the kind of game that's small enough in scope for one person to make". I worry this might be received as a denouncement of the idea of performing, for example, a feminist critique, which is not my aim. Such critiques are vital, but a disproportionate amount of analysis of *DDLC* seems dedicated to its generic parody/critique, and whether it succeeds or fails, given how much the game thematizes what are explicitly human/nonhuman interactions.

[181] Emphasis not present in original.

[182] Alexander R. Galloway. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Vol. 18. (U of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6

levels, and making actions based specifically on that layered understanding, is crucial to gameplay.

In *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Azuma Hiroki develops a theory of postmodernism which takes *otaku* (roughly analogous to nerd or geek) culture as its central point of analysis. In it, he outlines how otaku culture, thought, and behavior is explained by and also epitomizes the postmodern condition. Central to his analysis is the increased proliferation of derivative works (e.g. fanfiction), and the diminished status of the original in favor of copies, or simulacra (copies without originals). For Azuma, modernity is defined by the desire for the "grand narrative," which corresponds to both the totality of the narrative across individual works (e.g. across transmedia storytelling) as well as the ideological worldview behind those works.[183] Postmodernism, by contrast, involves a shift in agency that de-emphasizes the importance of the author in favor of the consumer; something which is consistent with the dramatic increase in derivative works Azuma is witnessing from the 1970s onward. Otaku, who exemplify the postmodern condition for Azuma, do not desire the "grand narrative" but instead simultaneously desire "*the surface outer layer within which dwell simulacra,* i.e. the works," what he calls "small narratives," and "*the deep inner layer within which dwells the database,* i.e. settings," which he calls the "grand nonnarrative."[184] This effectively illustrates a shift from consumers desiring access to narratives which they have no control over to a desire instead for an aggregate of individual elements from which they can form their own narratives according to their preference, even if they are seen as comparatively "artificial". Taken together, this is what Azuma refers to as the "double-layer structure" of postmodernity.

I will point out here that though Azuma refers explicitly to "otaku", his analysis is more broadly about a set of consumers, users, or operators, to which otaku are exemplary, not qualitatively unique. It is because these users understand the double-layer structure that they acquire agency; as Azuma notes, "once [otaku] are able to possess the settings, [they] can produce any number of derivative works that differ from the originals."[185] In this case "the settings" need not refer only to, say, the code of a game, but is more broadly a compendium of

[183] Azuma Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. (U of Minnesota Press, 2009), 31.
[184] Ibid., 33, 38.
[185] Ibid., 33.

things such as characteristics or genre features; taken together, elements.[186] Thus, how consumers "dissemble, analyze, and reassemble," might look very different depending on what the "elements" are, such as reconfiguring elements of a narrative (e.g. characters and setting) to produce fanfiction, or reconfiguring certain *moe*-traits (affective character traits such as cat ears or maid costumes) to produce derivative characters.[187] The important point, in either case, is that the emphasis is on the agency of the user. The conceptual framework is important here; it is because of an increased recognition of the artificiality of the elements of fiction that consumers can write a dead character back to life or produce "non-canon" fanfiction, satisfying first and foremost an immediate desire without feeling a sense of confliction with incompatible narrative events.

The logic of the double-layer structure is not limited to derivative works, however. In particular, Azuma notes that such a structure, wherein the user extracts simulacra from the database based on their own preferences, "perfectly matches the logic of the Web."[188] For him this is because of "the dichotomy between 'the visible' and 'the invisible'"; the visible being, for example, the appearance of a webpage, and the invisible being, in the same example, something like HTML code (which itself becomes visible, but for the sake of simplicity this is something I will return to later).[189] This dichotomy also presents the double-layer structure. In actuality, Azuma turns out to be more interested in computing and the digital than in the Internet per se, noting that these features he points to are "not unique to the Web, but [are] common in the computer world."[190] Namely, and important for my purposes, it is also true of computer games. He notes that we "operate a computer [or console] by 'looking at' the desktop [or television, or monitor] and behind that programs and binaries exist as the 'invisibles'."[191] Much like with the Web, the user can engage with settings in a direct fashion, ranging from viewing game assets in

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[186] This is similar to Saussure's distinction between langue and parole, with langue being a database or compendium of possible "sayables" and parole being what one actually says. Incidentally, this bears resemblance to Erving Goffman's disctinction between "author" and "animator", which was discussed in Chapter 1. One might say that an author constructs an element (an utterance according to Goffman, a sayable according to Saussure) and an animator brings that element into being (turning it into speech/parole). What Azuma adds, then, would be to focus on the way those elements might be reassembled; the animator takes on an additional role of reassembling. See Ferdinand de Saussure. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin Eds. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. Columbia University Press, New York (1959; 2011).

[187] Ibid., 94.

[188] Ibid., 102.

[189] Ibid., 98.

[190] Ibid., 100.

[191] Ibid., 100.

file folders to opening and even editing source code. Importantly, though Azuma does note that the players of these games "have the hacker's mentality," the consumption of the settings or database is not limited to such things as modifying or hacking games. As Azuma notes, "[t]he double layering of the consumption of the drama and the consumption of the system is a precondition for computer games."[192] Engagement with the nondiegetic system elements of a game is part of "normal" or "standard" gameplay as well. As Alexander Galloway puts it, "[t]hese activities may be intimately connected to the narrative of the game, yet they exist in an informatic layer once removed from the pretend play scenario."[193]

For Azuma, it is also a specific type of game, and thus a specific type of player, that is particularly interesting and also exemplifies the double-layer mode of consumption: "novel games" or what I call here *bishōjo* games. This is because, according to Azuma, "the novel games… contain the double-layer structure of the simulacra and the database within the works themselves."[194] This is true because there exists an aggregate of settings (settings, character images, the girls themselves), from which various small narratives (i.e. individual dramas involving dating the girls) are extracted. In other words, each playthrough could be thought of as its own "derivative work." And consistent with all other examples of database consumption, for Azuma this is all according to the will of the user. While the player of a dating sim is "overwhelmingly passive" (because they are mostly reading text and only occasionally making impactful decisions, and not, say, testing their reflexes in killing zombies), the settings of the game (text and images) are nonetheless "given several different roles, *according to the operation of the player*."[195]

In the case of *bishōjo* games one is oscillating between participating in a fantasy of social relations with game characters (simulacra) and rendering those characters as "inanimate" elements of a program (database). That same oscillation is found in the objectives of the player as well, as both part of the drama ("get <character> to fall in love with me/my character") and part of the system ("raise points scored through dialogue choices to *x* to open path"). While the user does desire the "small narrative," they must also engage with a system which is intractably

[192] Ibid., 110.
[193] Galloway. *Gaming,* 14.
[194] Ibid., 108.
[195] Ibid., 76, 83.

intertwined with the drama in order to produce the small narrative of their choice.[196] This complicates Azuma's notion that the consumption of the drama and the consumption of the system "coexist separately from each other."[197] That is not to say they are not separate to some degree, but the consumption of the system is also deeply intertwined with the consumption of the drama. If for example the player is constantly taking actions meant to improve their relationship with one character over another, they are consuming the drama but also using the system to continually refine that drama to suit their preference.

Desire is also intractably two-fold in this sense, the desire to make visible, to possess, and to master the system and the settings is intertwined with the desire to consume the "small narrative" as the conditions necessary to produce its preferred iteration. Given the gender dynamics of the *bishōjo* game, it may be tempting to map this onto the logic of the "male gaze," and to align "making the girl visible" with "making the settings behind the girl visible." There are a few issues with mapping one onto the other in this way. For one, it ignores the way in which *otaku* themselves, according to Patrick Galbraith, "[challenge] binaries – man/machine, man/woman."[198] Moreover, it ignores the way in which "[t]he instability of gender appears at the level of identification" in *bishōjo* games.[199] However, that is not to say that there is nothing resembling a "gaze" at play. Rather, it might be correct to say that the two are underpinned by a shared mode of desiring, subjectivity, and agency: making visible, mastering, possessing, and reassembling.

As mentioned, part of what makes the user capable of reassembling and exerting their agency is their recognition of the *artificiality* of the simulacra. That is, because they recognize that the "small narrative" is an aggregate of "just" settings (characters, backgrounds, lines of code), they can manipulate it. What is at stake then is not just gender dynamics but also animacy. As mentioned previously in this thesis, animacy refers to qualities of "agency, awareness,

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[196] It is possible to imagine a scenario in which the database would be consumed effectively separately from the drama, but this would involve, for example, each "route" being a wholly separate narrative, none of which contain choices for the player to make.

[197] Ibid., 84. "In other words, in otaku the desire for small narratives and the desire for database coexist separately from each other"

[198] Patrick W. Galbraith. "Bishojo Games: 'Techno-Intimacy' and the Virtually Human in Japan." *International Journal* 11 (2). 2011. Para. 4.

[199] Ibid, para. 15. It should be stated that there is a significant difference in the way that one's mastery is employed in either case. In particular, the objective of the otaku is not to reduce the *bishōjo* to an object devoid of interiority but to engage with them as a soulful body in a way which requires empathy. As Galbraith puts it, "[t]his is not a man simply manipulating a machine, but a complex interaction requiring empathy." Ibid, para 26.

mobility and liveness."[200] That is not to say that in either modality – narrative consumption or database consumption – characters and worlds are not fictional, of course, but that there is distance between the degree to which each is experienced as real, as "living" or "animate." There is thus a direct correlation between the attributed degree of animacy and the agency afforded by that attribution. If, somehow, that agency were to be threatened, it seems likely that the result would feel comparatively "real."

In sum, players in general and *bishōjo* players in particular, as database consumers, engage with games according to a logic wherein they, as an "animate" subject with agency manipulate an "inanimate" aggregate of settings or elements in order to produce small narratives. This is where *DDLC* comes in. In its first act, *DDLC* uses generic characters, scenarios, and systemic structures, to encourage its player to adopt a modality of database consumption within the singular act of play (rather than, say, being particularly ripe for fan fiction – although it is also that). In the acts that follow however, *DDLC* performs the breakdown of its own system structure, a sliding of narrative into the space of the database, and an uncanny character encounter, that radically destabilizes the conceptual framework that the player requires in order to continue to operate in such a mode. Due to its particular mobilization of computing however (particularly in a moment I will detail in the third act of the game), its effect bleeds to all software games, as what is revealed to be uncanny about *DDLC* is what is already uncanny about the medium, the occluded agencies of the very invisible layer that supposedly gives players agency.

Act 1: The Player's Mastery and Manipulation of the System

In the first act of *DDLC,* the game establishes the familiar genre traits and tropes of the *bishōjo* game that condition its player to act in specific ways. From its download page (on its own website or on platforms such as Steam) to the start menu of the game, *DDLC* presents itself as a run-of-the-mill *bishōjo* game.[201] It shares many surface-level audiovisual similarities with the genre, including upbeat music, a bright colour palette with heavy use of pastel pink, and characters that evoke the "Heisei *bishōjo* style:" simple cute character designs with large eyes.[202]

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[200] Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. (Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

[201] There are actually two notable exceptions to this. First, the game tags on platforms like Steam include not only tags such as "anime" and "cute", but also "psychological horror" and "dark". Second, the game opens with a warning for those who are easily disturbed. This content warning is primarily included as a safety precaution.

[202] Patrick W. Galbraith. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*. (Duke University Press, 2019), 250.

After naming the male player-character, the story begins. The protagonist is on their way to the high school they are attending on what is presumed to be a Japanese street, and is greeted by their childhood friend Sayori, who asks them about which school club they will be joining. As she herself is the vice-president of the school's literature club, Sayori pressures the protagonist to join her club, to which the protagonist reluctantly agrees. The protagonist is quickly introduced to the other three club members: Yuri, Natsuki, and Monika. Those familiar with tropes common to both *bishōjo* anime and games will immediately recognize in these characters specific archetypes: Sayori is the *osananajimi* (childhood friend), Natsuki is a *tsundere* (cold and mean, but secretly hiding affection), Monika is the popular girl, as well as the club president, and Yuri is the *dandere* (quiet and shy). The setting, scenario, characters, and visuals are all intentionally generic, allowing the player to feel a sense of familiarity with the game and develop a certain set of expectations, not just about how the story will unfold, but also about what the general *systemic* structure of the game is.

Figure 9 Four of the main characters of DDLC. From left to right: Sayori, Natsuki, Monika, and Yuri.

At the end of each in-game day (which is roughly 20-30 minutes of play), the player is tasked with composing a poem to share with the club on the following day. Depending on how the poem is written, different members of the club will become interested in the protagonist. Writing is simple: the player selects one word at a time from a rotating list to compose the poem

(nothing resembling an *actual* poem ever manifests). During these sections, the player can see on the left side of the screen a small set of *chibi*-style icons for three of the girls in the club: Sayori, Natsuki, and Yuri.[203] Each word selection will cause one of the icons to jump up in joy, indicating that they will be more responsive to the poem on the following day. At the level of system (i.e. the "invisible layer"), these words raise a hidden affection value with each girl, by one to three points. On the following day, the player is rewarded with a cutscene between the protagonist and whichever girl received the highest value at the end of the poem-creation sequence. The player may not understand the specifics of the system (i.e. how the game keeps track of points) but the visuals stress a direct connection between player action and how the girls will *think* and *behave* in the narrative. In other words, the game encourages a strong awareness of the game as system, emphasizing that player actions directly manipulate the behavior of characters because they are first-and-foremost part of that system. They are, after all, "just" database elements.

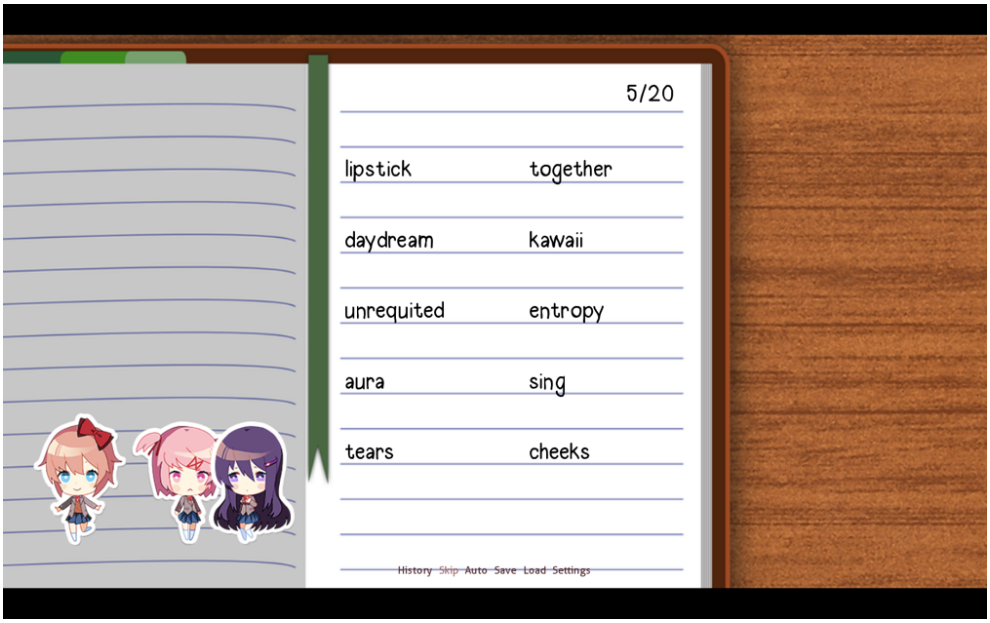

Figure 10 The poem-writing minigame/mechanic. The character icons on the left side move around and jump up in joy if the word primarily increases their own affection value.

Through a combination of genre, design, and feedback, the game has conditioned in the player an understanding of the characters of the game as "just data." Moreover, they understand

[203] *Chibi* refers to a visual style characterized by small and cute characters with non-realistic proportions: large heads and short limbs.

their relationship to that data to be that of someone who can freely manipulate it. *DDLC*'s own way of allegorizing this, which becomes foregrounded in the following acts, is that of manipulating a "mental state," as if the player is actively rewiring neurons in the brains of the girls. If the player simply selects the correct buzz word a satisfactory number of times, as if stimulating the correct part of the brain (the comprehension and manipulation of a system), affection towards the player will be produced, and they can spend time with the virtual girl as reward. Within the structure of the game's own allegory, the player is practically psychopathic, something which doesn't become perfectly explicit until the following act.

The cycle of creating and sharing poems, and then hanging out with different girls in the literature club progresses for four in-game days (1.5-2 hours of gameplay), until the club is tasked with preparing a presentation for an upcoming culture festival. Around this time, the protagonist begins to notice that there is something notably off with Sayori. He decides to make a visit to her home to check up on her. Sayori is reluctant to be transparent about her feelings with the protagonist, which is likely to be interpreted as flags indicating that Sayori has romantic feelings for the protagonist. The reality is much more unexpected and is the first major indication of the game breaking from its firmly established generic mold. Instead of expressing hidden romantic feelings, Sayori reveals that she has been struggling with overwhelming depression. The game briefly returns to familiar form after this notably off-beat moment, but not soon after does the issue once again resurface. The next time however, Sayori does actually *also* make a confession to the protagonist. She declares that she does in fact love the protagonist, that those feelings are deeply intertwined with her depression, and that she has a hard time making sense of these feelings that seem to control her. The player is then offered the choice of whether or not to reciprocate Sayori's feelings. These types of decisions are few and far-between, and so the player is likely to assume that their selection will be the cause of significant narrative divergence. In actuality, there are some minor variations to the outcome of this choice, but both choices inevitably lead to the same conclusion.[204] This is significant, as contrary to the expectations of the player, and against the desire of a database consumer, the "metagame" of DDLC is a completely linear and singular narrative.

[204] For my analysis here, what is most important is that this subverts the position that player action can freely control the informatic makeup of characters. However, this doubles as what many consider to be an effective representation of and commentary on the challenges of dealing with depression and mental illness.

The next day, the protagonist notices that Sayori did not join him on his walk to school, as she usually does. Monika scolds the protagonist for not having Sayori with him. When the protagonist suggests that she does not know the full story, Monika hints that she may know more than he might assume. Monika then shows the protagonist a pamphlet prepared for the culture festival that contains a copy of everyone's poem. The protagonist then notices Sayori's poem, the contents of which are unlike any the player has read to this point:

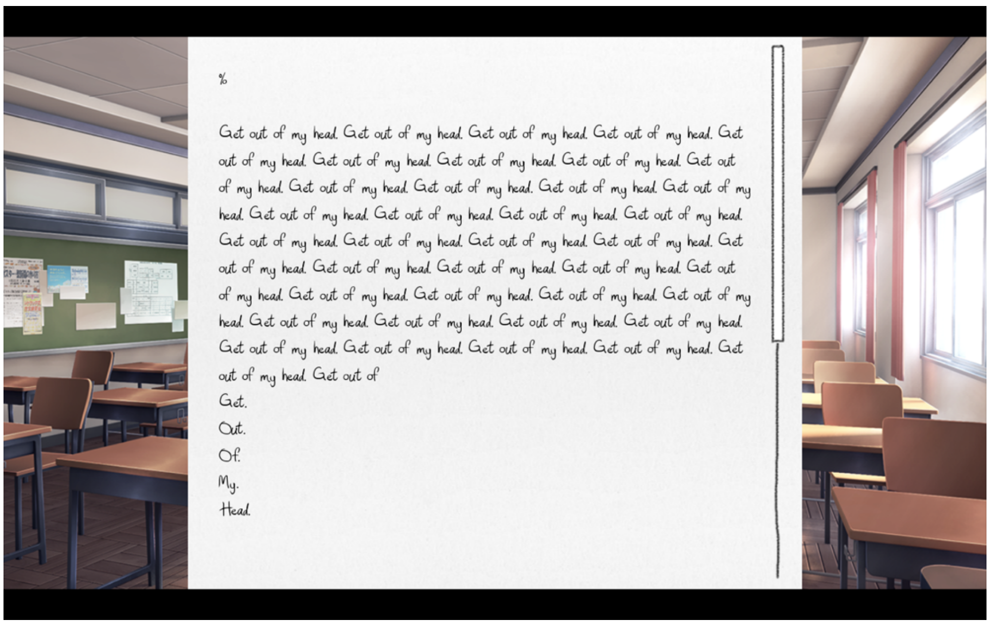

Figure 11 Sayori's poem written for the culture festival. It signals that some external force is affecting Sayori's 'mental state'.

Something is "in Sayori's head," a foreshadowing of the fact that something is manipulating her on the level of the database, which may be the player, or may not. All in a single moment that follows, *DDLC* lifts the veil, exposing itself as a psychological horror game. As the protagonist enters Sayori's room, they are met with a sudden and devastating image that would likely never find its way into a *bishōjo* game: Sayori has hanged herself in her bedroom. Seconds later, strange things begin to occur. The typically upbeat and cheerful soundtrack slows and distorts; the background fades and is replaced with grainy static and lines of coding error messages. As this occurs, the protagonist comes to the realization that whatever choice they made was not one that was considerate of Sayori's feelings. He despairs over the permanence of his current situation, wishing there were anything within his power to allow him to go back and do

things differently. Of course, the player knows that in fact there *is* a way to go back; they can reload their previous save file. When the player does so, they are met with an error message stating that a specific game file cannot be located, and that a new game will be started.[205]

Act 2: Monika's Mastery and Manipulation of the System

A new game begins just as the old one had, with the protagonist waiting to walk to school with his childhood friend. However, oddities begin to occur. In place of any mention of Sayori's name is a string of glitched text, and when Sayori would appear on screen, a glitched black box incorrectly displaying fragments of other characters appears instead. This failure to extract and display the correct elements is both a palpable reminder that these characters are "just" settings, but also that contrary to their expectations, this may give the player even less agency, not more. It is quickly apparent to the player what has happened. It is not just that Sayori has died, but whatever pre-narrative existence she had has been lost as well. That is to say, Sayori did not simply die on the level of a particular "small narrative," she died on the level of the database itself. This is a shock to the expectations of Azuma's player; it is precisely because of the constancy of database elements that the player can allow themselves to consume a narrative in which Sayori commits suicide without fear of consequence. That the drama is no longer restricted to a single layer is emphasized by the fact that a "tangible" file, named "sayori.chr," has *actually* been deleted. If the player navigates to the file named "traceback.txt" referenced in the error message that appeared during Sayori's death, they can find a message hidden amongst lines of code (the one appearing at the beginning of this chapter). Though they do not know it yet, Monika has been manipulating Sayori's character file. As per the "mental state" allegory, Sayori is programmed or designed by default to have mild self-esteem issues, but by manipulating the values associated with that trait, by "rewriting her", Monika purposefully pushes Sayori into depression. Frustrated with the fact that the player is spending time with Sayori in spite of her influence, Monika then deletes her character file outright, leading to her in-game death and the subsequent loss of any trace of her existence. What has happened here is quite significant: narrative development has transitioned to the system, to the database. In doing so, the player

[205] This of course is a repeat of a theme introduced in Chapter 2 with *Undertale*, the removal of the save function as a tool that provides the player with agency over a set of divergent outcomes.

experiences the first instance of their control over the drama being threatened, by foreclosing ways in which they might “reassemble”.

Figure 12 DDLC fails to load assests (images or text) tied narratively to the file sayori.chr, which has been deleted.

Monika fixes the bugs that have appeared, restarting the game yet again. This time, the protagonist walks to school, noting that they have always walked alone. Notably, this is a reversal of the protagonist of an example that Azuma claims narrativizes the postmodern structure (*Yu-No* 1996), in which the protagonist retains some memories across timelines; here, instead, Monika remembers, and the protagonist forgets. Monika asks the protagonist yet again to join the literature club. From here, events proceed largely as they had the first time around, progressing through the same four in-game days. Yet bizarre glitches continue to occur: character portraits warping and morphing, incorrect images being loaded, and text displaying incorrectly, as only a few examples.[206] It is worth noting that many of these glitches are randomized, meaning that saving and reloading will not reproduce them exactly. This contributes to the sensibility that this is a pre-narrative system issue. Also, of note is that these more typical computing glitches are also mixed with the jarring injection of “glitches” that introduce dark and realistic imagery: photorealistic eyes, mouths, and blood. These visuals are at times associated by fans with

[206] A full list of the glitches is available at: https://doki-doki-literature-club.fandom.com/wiki/Easter_Eggs

"creepypasta", a specific type of Internet horror story. While creator Dan Salvato notes no direct inspiration from creepypasta, *DDLC*s second act shares with creepypasta these "faux-realist semiotics" that point to a shared goal of "producing a 'liminal' space of contact between a diegetic world of prosaic realism [which would be the world the player inhabits] and an other world or an otherworldly element."[207] Thus, alongside the breakdown of the database, there is also an introduction of uncanny animacy, something I will return to later on.[208]

Over the course of the second act, Monika is continually "rewriting" or "reassembling" the game. This is true first and foremost in the sense that she is reprogramming the game, accidentally producing the myriad glitches the player witnesses. She is also rewriting character dialogue, which appears unceremoniously pasted on top of the dialogue box. Monika also makes increasingly transparent efforts to communicate with the player directly. After reading one of her poems, Monika says "Tell me you can hear me." The message "please help me" then appears not in her dialogue box, but as a help menu icon, a space presumed to be nondiegetic and thus part of the system. She creates another file in the game folder titled "CAN YOU HEAR ME.txt."[209] If the file is opened, another message is found, indicating once again that Monika is acting outside of the boundaries of the game:

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[207] Paul Manning. "Monstrous Media and Media Monsters." In *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*, eds. Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. (Utah State University Press, 2018), 168,176.

[208] Reddit AMA with Dan Salvato. u/50ShadesOfSenpai asks: "2.) Has this game been inspired by creepypasta in anyway? What are your favorite creepypasta?". Salvato responds: "I don't read much creepypasta so there probably isn't much influence there.". Accessed at: https://www.reddit.com/r/DDLC/comments/7dvb70/hello_my_name_is_dan_salvato_i_created_doki_doki/

[209] It is worth noting that both of these things imply that Monika has a voice – a sign of animacy - despite the game (mostly) not featuring voice acting.

Figure 13 One of Monika's attempts to communicate with the player directly. This message does not appear in the text box at the bottom, where character dialogue usually appears, but appears as a help menu message.

> *"There's a little devil inside all of us. Beneath their manufactured perception – their artificial reality – is a writhing, twisted mess of dread. Loathing. Judgment. Elitism. Self-doubt[…].Such a deplorable, tangled mass is already present in every single one of them. That's why I choose not to blame myself for their actions. All I did was untie the knot."*[210]

Monika's words hold a double meaning in line with the "mental state" allegory; the "devil inside all of us" is not just the negativity in them able to manifest but is also the system that lies behind the simulacra they inhabit, the aggregate "mental states" from which the player tries to extract narrative affection, or the aggregate narrative possibilities, even when they include death. Here, Monika seems to be justifying her previous and current actions, refusing to take responsibility for manipulating Sayori and the game. The possibility for suicide always existed inside Sayori, and all Monika did was move her towards that possibility, or "untie the knot." This is remarkably similar to the players own rejection of responsibility predicated on the artificiality of the scenario and the fact that it can be reassembled in other ways. Monika is also able to justify

[210] It is worth noting that because it is not explicitly stated that this message is written by Monika, that it could also be framed as Team Salvato/Dan Salvato speaking about the characters of *DDLC*.

her actions because she sees her "friends" the same way that the player sees them: as artificial, as "just" elements of a system, and ultimately as inanimate objects to be manipulated. Another in-game poem of Monika's, "Hole in Wall 2.0", further demonstrates how she understands the animacy of her "friends":

"*Are there others in this room? Are they talking?*
Or are they simply poems on flat sheets of paper,
The sound of frantic scrawling playing tricks on my ears?
The room begins to crinkle.
Closing in on me.
The air I breathe dissipates before it reaches my lungs.
I panic. There must be a way out.
It's right there. He's right there.

Swallowing my fears, I brandish my pen."

Here again we find a double meaning in which poetry is aligned with coding. That her friends are "simply poems on flat sheets of paper" indicates that Monika sees her friends as simply a combination of lines of code and flat images. Poems and writing, however, are more representative of "elements of systems": lines of programming, yes, but also character portraits, sounds, music, and so on. As mentioned at the onset, Monika is a writer in two senses: she is a poet, and she is a programmer. She engages with the simulacra through poetry, and with the database through programming. She is a mirror image of the player, but also proof that the function of the player need not be performed by a human.

With the absence of Sayori, the majority of in-game scenarios begin to revolve around the shy bookworm Yuri. Sensing this, Monika sets her sights on Yuri, likewise intensifying the darkest aspects of her personality – "rewriting her" - in an effort to drive the protagonist and the player away from her. Yuri becomes increasingly obsessive and self-loathing, and she also starts to develop a habit of cutting herself. Eventually, Yuri makes a confession to the protagonist just as Sayori had, noting that she can't control the feelings inside of her. Regardless of how the protagonist responds, Yuri suddenly and unexpectedly stabs herself in the chest and falls dead. At

this point, the game is completely broken, and the dialogue box is filled with nothing but endlessly looping glitched text. Nothing changes if the player reloads their save file, uses the "skip" function to skip ahead in the dialogue, or even if they close and re-open the game. Nothing changes until a certain amount of time passes and Monika returns.

To sum it up, in Act 1 the player is permitted to operate according to the logic of Azuma's database consumer, extracting and reassembling system elements into their preferred simulacra. This mode is radically destabilized at the end of Act 1, but the result is not simply a forced shift back toward narrative consumption. The narrative events across each reset or adjustment remain incompatible. What changes from Act 1 to Act 2 is that it is now Monika that fills the role of, and thinks and behaves like, Azuma's player. First, she constructs animacy relations, figuring her simulacra and those who coexist within it as artificial; they are "simply poems", simply lines of code, or elements of a system. Because these characters are merely elements of a system, and thus not "animate" like her, she is free to manipulate them and to reassemble them without consequence. To this end she reloads the game, rewinds the game, rewrites dialogue, and creates and deletes files. Monika, and only Monika, has access to the database and what it affords. Concurrently, the player no longer has any complete access to the system and to the database, meaning that they cannot continue to characterize Monika herself as "just" elements (images, dialogue, lines of code). The entire experience becomes framed as a struggle for control over the database between two actants, the player themselves, and that which cannot be reduced beyond "just Monika."

Act 3: "Just Monika"

Monika apologizes for leaving the player alone with the dead body of Yuri for so long, noting that she hadn't realized she had broken the game so badly. Acknowledging none of her efforts to this point have succeeded, and perhaps gaining some expertise with manipulating the game, Monika deletes both Yuri and Natsuki, as well as much of the game's setting, and resets the game. When it begins again, nothing remains but Monika and the hollowed-out shell of a classroom; beyond the windows in the background there appears to be nothing but an endless void. Monika now addresses the player directly. She claims there is no need to bother with the game's scenario anymore, it is all artificial, and thus it can all be skipped. Monika also

acknowledges the artificiality of the protagonist, noting:

> "*After all, I'm not even talking to that person anymore, am I? That 'you' in the game, whatever you want to call him. I'm talking to you,* [my character name]*. Or do you actually go by Cole or something?"*

This is a crucial moment in *DDLC*. Here, the game reads information – the user's name – directly from the computer that they are playing on. The game makes a gamble that this is a space in which the user, because that information is supposedly private, has opted to use their own name. If the trick succeeds, it will appear as if Monika has managed to go beyond seeing the player's character, to seeing and addressing them directly.[211] On some level however, whether the trick succeeds or not (for example if the name stored on the computer is *also* not the user's actual name), this remains an uncanny moment. What *DDLC* has made visible, regardless of whether or not it guesses the player's name correctly, is that it is actively reading information considered "outside" of the game. More importantly, Monika shows a desire to go beyond the protagonist, as simulacra, and to locate the pre-narrative element that precedes it, namely, the player themselves. This of course mirrors the desire the player themselves shows for the database. The desire to go beyond the simulacra to make visible and understood a pre-narrative set of elements in order to subsequently manipulate and reassemble them becomes turned on the player. What was previously the player's agency to make visible the pre-narrative existence of the *bishōjo* character (i.e. *bishōjo* as database element) becomes mobile and transfers to Monika, who employs it to make visible the pre-narrative existence of the player.

[211] If the name stored on the computer matches the name the player gave themselves, Monika will not include the last line during this part.

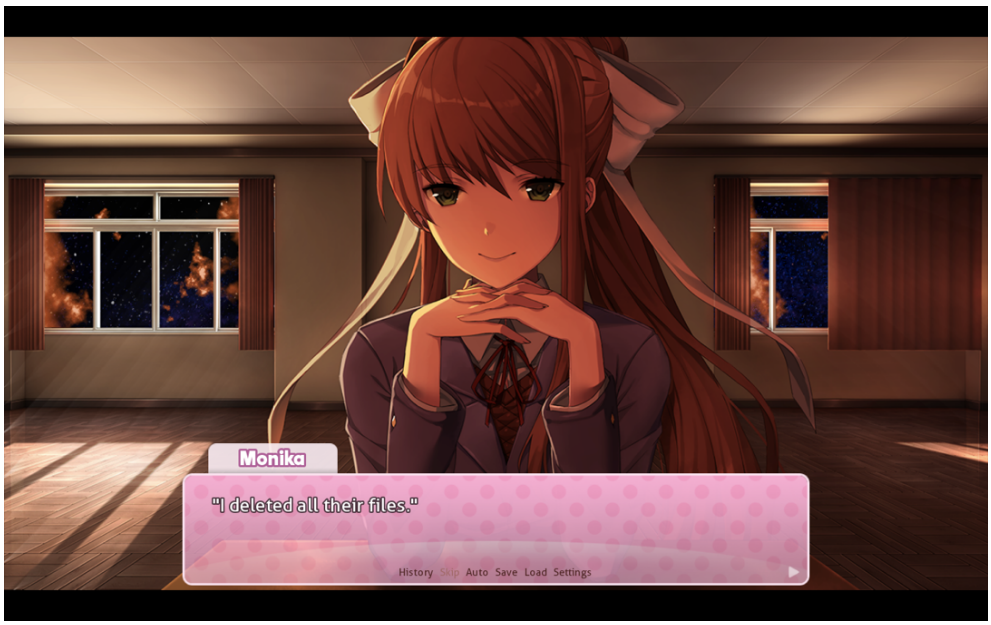

Figure 14 The never-ending "date" with Monika.

From here, the game is effectively a never-ending date with Monika. If the player closes and reopens the game, nothing changes. They are met immediately by Monika, and they cannot access the game's main menu. The game simply picks up from where it was closed. There is nothing else; the game has become "just Monika". If they want, the player can do nothing but converse with Monika for what is seemingly an indefinite amount of time. However, Monika also unwittingly offers a clue as to how the player can exit this situation. Excitedly explaining her methods to the player, she notes how easy it was to delete her fellow literature club members by navigating to a particular file folder. This makes the player aware that they can very well do the same to Monika. They can delete her. In a manner that recalls the player's reaction to "Psycho Mantis" from *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), the player must (or can) take an action "outside" of the game to proceed.[212] They can navigate to the "characters" folder in the game's files, and delete the file named "monika.chr." Betrayed and horrified, Monika lashes out at the player as her character image glitches and her name is replaced with glitched text, just as Sayori's had been. Defeated, and after berating the player for their display of cruelty, Monika restores *DDLC* to its default state, sans Monika.

[212] Psycho Mantis is a boss from *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) that has the ability to "read minds". In order to defeat Psycho Mantis, the player must switch their controller to a different controller port, thereby avoiding his powers.

The Uncanny Character Encounter

In his chapter "Monstrous Media and Media Monsters", Paul Manning details what he terms an "ostensive character encounter" in urban legends and folklore; "ostensive" because they "attempt to act out or *show* the (legend) narrative," in his case the Internet urban legend knowns as Slender Man, "in real life."[213] Manning is focused on the pro-filmic realism (hence "ostensive") of Slender Man, but the logic of "character encounter" can be applied more broadly. Manning borrows "character encounter" from Shunsuke Nozawa, who uses the term to describe the prevalence of characters with social functions in Japan (e.g. as cultural ambassadors). While Manning's analysis is focused on monsters, he contextualizes them as "a species of 'character' defined by its portability, its ability to move across a series of linked genres or media forms."[214] It is this broader analysis of characters that is relevant for my purposes here.

Manning argues, following Nozawa, that what is crucial to understanding the logic of character encounter is the distinction between characters "that are still embedded in, subordinated to their original narrative worlds and consumed as part of them", what Japanese media cultures call *kyarakutaa*, and those "that have become detached from their original narrative contexts and are 'portable' to new narratives and media forms…thus taking on a life of their own and imparting a feeling that they truly exist and actually live," or, what Japanese media cultures call *kyara.*[215] Two points are important about *kyara*: (1) that they move or act outside of their narrative worlds, and (2) that this affords them some sense of life, or animacy. Whether through phenomena such as media mix, narrative divergence, or mascot characters, the logic of *kyara* focuses on movement outside of narrative media and world. Character encounters thus adhere to a *kyara* logic as they impart a sense of life by demonstrating the character unbounded by their media and world.

For Manning, there is a particular variety of character encounter worth consideration, what he calls the "weird" character encounter. It is worth pointing out that Manning notes the term "weird" could be substituted for the term *uncanny*, which I have used instead in this thesis.[216] Manning notes that:

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[213] Manning. "Monstrous Media and Media Monsters", 155.
[214] Ibid., 155.
[215] Ibid., 160.
[216] Ibid., 178.

> "[t]he 'weird' works by producing a liminal space of destabilizing […] contact […] between worlds of media and real life that are understood at the same time as being wholly opposed…"[217]

This uncanny character encounter creates a blur between the level of the simulacra and the level of the database, which is narrativized as a blur between the fictional world of the game and the real world of the player. Though Monika is "experienced as something that is part and parcel of the medium," she has the capacity to see and act upon the "real world" of the database.[218] Though she is a fictional character, of course, the player cannot position her within the "small narrative" as being *as* artificial as is required according to Azuma for their mastery. The destabilizing potential of the uncanny comes from its capacity to present something categorized with less animacy (here, media characters) as having much more, and thereby disrupting the boundaries of such a classification system. This logic holds for the uncanny character encounter: a disruptive moment in which something classified as "not real" *seems* as if it were.

The *kyara/kyarakutaa* distinction provides a preliminary framework for understanding what separates Monika from her comparatively "empty" friends; that Monika can travel to, or at least leave traces of her presence in, a space that is deemed "outside" or the medium that she is a part of may be an indication of her *kyara*-ness. But what of that space itself? Here, another term popularized by Japanese media cultures can provide insight, what is referred to as "2.5D." "2.5D" is often used in reference to cultural phenomena such as stage plays based on existing manga, anime, and video games, "pilgrimages" to famous manga/anime locations, or real-life demonstrations of character voices.[219] Most importantly it demarcates the common conceptual territory of "an interstitial dimension between '3D' reality and '2D' fantasy."[220] Here, "2D" refers not simply to images in two dimensions but rather to the fictional or virtual world in general, with "3D" being reserved for "our" world. "2.5D", then, refers to moments and spaces of

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[217] Ibid., 156. I have omitted the terms "indexical," "immediacy," and "hypermediacy" from this excerpt, as they are relevant for Manning's discussion of the pro-filmic realism of Slender Man, but less relevant for my discussion of Monika.
[218] Ibid., 164-65.
[219] For examples of contents tourism see Akiko Sugawa-Shimada. "Playing with Militarism in/with Arpeggio and Kantai Collection: Effects of Shōjo Images in War-related Contents Tourism in Japan." *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 53-66. See also, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada. "Rekijo, pilgrimage and 'pop-spiritualism': pop-culture-induced heritage tourism of/for young women." In *Japan forum*, vol. 27, no. 1, (Routledge, 2015), 37-58.
[220] Shunsuke Nozawa. "Ensoulment and effacement in Japanese voice acting." *Media Convergence in Japan*. 2016: 170.

"contact" between these two worlds; for example, in addition to stage plays, "contents tourism", where fans travel to destinations featured prominently in manga, anime, and video games, is also an act of "2.5D." What becomes noteworthy of *DDLC* is that it enables a sense of *kyara* – of heightened animacy – by turning the space of the database into the space of 2.5D. One thing emphasized in that process is that that space, the space where one opens a "traceback.txt" file, already bears an ambiguous relationship with its location in the real world, "not completely virtual 2D but not entirely actual 3D, either."[221] In other words, *DDLC* foregrounds the way in which the system, the "invisible layer" is already both uncanny, and already defined by its "2.5D"-ness, simultaneously part of the game and part of the real.

To sum up, uncanny character encounters involve a character that is *of* its medium (e.g. Slender Man and the Internet) being encountered "in real life" (or, in Manning's case, in a photograph). This is where *DDLC* comes in. In short, *DDLC* repurposes the double-layer structure of Azuma in order to perform an uncanny character encounter using Monika. In part, this is afforded by the ambiguous status of the layer that is the desktop, file folders, and files; do they belong to the real world or the virtual world? That is, when one is, for instance, viewing "traceback.txt", they are simultaneously "within the work" and also outside of it, or at least outside of the simulacral layer. Put differently, in the case of the double-layer structure, much like the work might contain its own derivatives, it likewise contains its own "outside." This is of course most apparent in the case of the digital media of which Azuma notes the double-layer structure is present. The importance of this is that *DDLC*s uncanny character encounter enables a *kyara*/ 2.5D sensibility to happen not on the Internet, or in a public space, or in another work in a different medium, as would typically thought to be necessary, but *within the work itself*. This is not simply a fourth-wall break, though it does also fill that role. More specifically however, it is one layer moving to and exerting agency upon another layer that results in a shift in agency.[222] This also explains how a particular merging of two sensibilities occurs: that of a puppetized character regaining their own agency and *also* being a manifestation of an unseen force.

The Computational-Animist Life Force

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[221] Shunsuke Nozawa. "Characterization." *Semiotic Review* 3, 2013: 177.

[222] This is not to say that what I identify in *DDLC* is not a fourth-wall break, or that other examples of a fourth-wall break do not shift other types of agency in specific ways. Rather, this is to say that the common sense of a fourth-wall break is not able to fully describe how agency is repositioned in *DDLC*.

It is the dimensions of this particular "force" that will be my final point of analysis in this chapter. Thomas Lamarre addresses the relationship between such a force and its channeling, albeit of a different variety, in his three-part analysis of speciesism in wartime Japanese animation. Setting aside the focus of his analysis (the transposition of race or nations onto species within Japanese wartime animation), in the third part Lamarre briefly moves away from an analysis of representation to that of the materiality of animation, a consideration which bears commonalities with my focus here. Lamarre's structure can be summarized as follows: what he calls the "plasticity" of character animation (drawing from what Sergei Eisenstein calls "plasmaticity") is the result of the force of the moving image being channeled into character animation (rather than, as an alternative, spread out across the frame/page). It is this idea of "channel[ing] the force of the moving image into characters" that I find useful and interesting here.[223] What other types of forces can be channeled into character images or characters? The force, for Lamarre, cannot be entirely captured within a representational logic: "Plasticity does not *represent* the force of the mechanical succession of images. It affords an actual experience of it…. As a consequence, a technical force is now as experienced as… vitality, as life itself."[224] The commonality I point to here is obviously not plasticity as such but rather the experience of a technical force as vitality; plasticity is only one manifestation of the channeling of the moving image, to which Lamarre also notes *kyara* is another. He "insist[s] that the sense of existence and life of *kyara* ultimately derives from a channeling of the force of the moving image into animated characters."[225]

Under the rubric of "channeling of technical forces into characters", I would argue that *DDLC* does something similar with the force of computing, which manifests in a particular way thanks to the double-layer structure and the logic of character encounter. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this is in the glitch aesthetics introduced in Act 2. Setting aside that the various glitches in *DDLC* are pre-programmed and are performed, (that, in other words, they aren't "really" glitches) it is not the mechanical succession of images but rather the exchange (and breakdown) of computing, failed attempts to extract from the database, that becomes palpable in the audiovisuality of the glitch. Especially in a *bishōjo* game, with its static

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[223] Thomas Lamarre. "Speciesism, Part III: Neoteny and the Politics of Life." *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 113.
[224] Ibid., 114. Emphasis not present in original.
[225] Ibid., 129.

backgrounds and swapping character portraits, it is easy to see how this force becomes channeled into the character image. In *DDLC,* the game attempts to substitute one character portrait, one element, for another, and yet fails to do so because the element itself has been lost. The glitch, we might say, as action on the simulacral layer that disrupts the impermanence afforded by its artificiality, is incompatible with the way in which Azuma's player positions the media; glitches take place within the simulacra but point to the "real" of the computational force that subtends them.

As noted, Lamarre characterizes the channeling of the force of the moving image into character animation as an experience of life, stating:

> *Such an experience is not, as so many commentators would have it, an illusion of life. It is a real experience of a force wherein the technical and the vital are inseparable. We might call it techno-animism or techno-vitalism, provided we do not take the "ism" to imply that this is first and foremost an ideological construction or illusion. It is a new experience of life.*[226]

While it is true that an "experience of life" is an apt description of the perception of this force as it is channeled, an "experience of animacy" might provide a more granular understanding of how that experience is produced and maintained. Recalling Chen's definition of animacy, that it refers to qualities of "*agency*, awareness, *mobility* and liveness" it becomes easy to see that whereas the channeling of the force of the moving image produces an experience of character movement, the channeling of computing produces an experience of character agency, both of which result in the perception of animacy.[227] When framed in these terms, it becomes easy to understand why *DDLC*s glitch aesthetics are paired with the faux-realist "creepypasta" visuals of human eyes, mouths, and blood, why that can mix so readily with lines of error code and warped character portraits.

Building on Lamarre, I propose to refer to the experience of the force of computing as a vital force a "computational-animist" force. Importantly, the visuality of glitches are not the only manifestation of this force, just as plasticity is not the only manifestation of the force of the

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[226] Ibid., 114.
[227] Chen, *Animacies*, 2. Emphasis not present in original.

moving image. For example, the moment in which Monika reads the player's name from their computer is yet another manifestation of the same force, a sign that information is being accessed or exchanged on the database layer, the force of computing channeled into her character. Of course, the computational-animist force could be applied to a wider range of instances wherein the force of computing is channeled into a sense of an Other, a person, a character. For example, Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri might be two entities which share this quality with Monika. The way in which the channeling of a computational-animist force aligns the agency of the system with the agency of character is evident in Salvato's discussion of *DDLC*: at different times he notes that *DDLC* involves "a *character*… tak[ing] control of the game" and also "that the *game* starts taking control."[228]

Of course, in something like a *bishōjo* game, this force is still being channeled during "standard" gameplay, where it becomes less visible. Yet it is in tandem with the uncanny character encounter that this becomes very destabilizing for Azuma's model of the player. That is, the conceptual framework of Azuma's player does not afford the possibility for the simulacra to have an effect on the database layer. Thus, to see the force channeled from the database into the simulacra and *back* into the database, through the action of Monika, produces a destabilizing surge of animacy. The simulacral layer, and Monika herself, cannot be *as* artificial as the player understands them to be, because they can cause change on the level of the database, which is relativized as part of the "real." Taking an action on the level of simulacra can, at least as *DDLC* performs it, have consequential impact on the database: files being deleted, information being accessed, or games being rendered unplayable.

Act 4: The End

At the end of *DDLC*, after Monika is erased, the game is restored to its default setting, with the only thing missing being Monika herself. The player is free to begin a new game, where they will yet again be introduced to a literature club made up of Natsuki, Yuri, and the new club president, Sayori. After some repeated introductions, Sayori asks for a moment alone with the protagonist. Sayori then addresses the player directly, telling them that she knows what they did,

[228] Alistair Wong. "Doki Doki Literature Club! Developers Talk About the Horror Of Losing Control". [Interview]. *Siliconera.* Accessed at: https://www.siliconera.com/doki-doki-literature-club-developers-talk-horror-losing-control/. Emphasis not present in original

and thanking them for saving everyone from Monika. It turns out that Sayori, like Monika before her, has become self-aware. Thus, Sayori has the potential to be animate as Monika did, an affirmation not of the uniqueness of Monika but of the capacity for characters to have the "computational-animist" force channeled into them.

DDLC ends on a rather bleak note. After seeing the possibility of her journey being repeated by Sayori, Monika, who retains some sort of existence despite being erased, deletes the entirety of *DDLC* and the literature club, stating that it "is truly a place where no happiness can be found."[229] None of the characters achieve a happy ending, and in the end the entire game is deleted (to play it again one would need to reinstall the game). Ultimately, *DDLC* does not offer a solution to the introduced problem of player agency in the database structure. The answer is not a return to an authorial structure, nor to anything else that might follow on the heels of Azuma's mode of database consumption. Rather, it is my contention that *DDLC* functions as an immanent critique of this modality. Having said that, *DDLC* evokes a moment of connection through the use of the uncanny character encounter that not only offers a critique of the database consumption modality, but also destabilizes Azuma's model of it.

DDLC does not offer an exit from the database consumption which it critiques, but it nonetheless achieves two important outcomes. Most importantly, *DDLC* acts as a challenge to the aspect of Azuma's theory that positions the user as one that masters and reassembles elements of a database. It accepts that reassembling occurs but presents an alternative in which agency (database comprehension, extraction, and manipulation) is not a category of action reserved for the human user but is located in the nonhuman character and inaccessible for the user. In addition, it destabilizes the framework wherein the simulacra and the database are separate and artificial, the framework which acts as the premise buttressing the player's consumption, through the performance of an uncanny character encounter enabled by a channeling of the force of computing. It is entirely important that this is achieved both by working within the double-layer structure, while also revealing the failures in the way that it is conceptually held together by both the player and Azuma's model. It is precisely because of the double-layer structure, and the fact that its core binary cannot be wholly engaged with on separate terms, and that the simulacra

[229] Monika adds that "it continued to expose innocent minds to a horrific reality – a reality that our world is not designed to comprehend." This could also be read as thematically in line with the preference for "doll consciousness" that Levitt notes of *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence,* thereby completing Monika's journey from a "Pinocchio" to an "Anti-Pinocchio". Levitt. *The Animatic Apparatus,* 33.

cannot be wholly detached from the database, that *DDLC*'s particular mobilization of a computational-animist force and a character encounter involving it unsettle the expectations of the player, not only for *DDLC,* but for all software games, which because they are always also software, may also, like when Monika reads the player's name, act in unforeseen ways.

Conclusion

At the onset of this thesis project, I asked the question: what do media that spring to life *say* by virtue of their uncanny animacy? At times, doing so has felt like a grand exercise in delusion. To speak of the life of plants, rivers, and mountains is one thing, but to speak of the life of webtoons, video games, and fictional characters is something else entirely. What if, however, both of those things were held together by the same underlying structures? What if my engagement with media objects, and my categorical rejection of their animacy, both indexed and supported a particular structure of action in the world? These destabilizing animacies, what were so often articulated as merely "breaks in the fourth wall," might have more value than immediately meets the eye if that is the case. Even if they fail to open onto alternative structures of action in a world of nonhumans, might they at least do the basic work of revealing those existing and dominant structures?

I want to briefly touch on two things that have been left under emphasized in this thesis. The first is the centrality of the digital and computational to the construction of animacy in these examples. It is not by chance that this thesis focuses on webtoons and video games, two natively digital media forms, rather than say, film or television, which would be more traditional with regards to the study of animation. In each example, a computational force is experienced as a vital force, as animacy. The Javascript triggers of *The Bongcheon-dong Ghost* becomes experienced as the animacy of Mrs. Cho. The memory storage that the player cannot access becomes experienced as the animacy of Flowey and Chara. And the failure to access database elements becomes experienced as the animacy of Monika. These computational forces are often invisible, hidden in the informatic layer that is not directly visible to the user, and they are often dormant, only periodically bursting into spontaneous activity. By presenting these forces as forces of animacy, these works forge a connection between the two, suggesting that life moves through the world and through the bodies within in it a very similar way.

The second thing is the relevance of the horror genre. Throughout, my characterization of animation has been as an act which "brings to life," ensouls, or animates a figure of alterity, an Other. The Other is, of course, an important figure in works of horror. The psychoanalytic framework of the Other has been a dominant way of framing the horror genre for a number of decades. The monsters of the horror genre have been frequently read as allegorical representations of what has been repressed or oppressed in society, from sexuality to the working

class to different ethnic groups. For example, in the words of Robin Woods:

> *central to [horror] is the actual dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed/the Other, in the figure of the Monster. One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression.*[230]

The objects of this thesis follow something of a typical horror structure: a state of normalcy is established, there is an uncanny disruption to that normalcy, and eventually a restoration of that normalcy. Here, for the most part, the challenge to the agency of the player is overcome or defeated: Mrs. Cho disappears, Flowey is defeated, and Monika is deleted. However, it would be wrong to merely read this as any glorification of the "normal" state of things established at the onset. Similarly, those works which feature such allegorical monsters do not advocate for the continued oppression of that which they represent merely because the monster is defeated and a "happy" ending is obtained. Their disruptive challenges to dominant structures make those structures visible and illustrate the continuation of those structures to the detriment of that which is oppressed. The conditions for the monster to re-emerge remains, and attention is drawn to that fact.

One could read the monsters of this thesis in allegorical or representational terms, as one might do for the monster of a horror film, in which case the task is not difficult; Monika is indicative of the oppressed woman, and Flowey, as an emblem of all things natural, represents the environment. This is not at all incorrect, but perhaps both cases point to a broader form of structural oppression that is not reducible to misogyny or environmental devastation. Flowey is but one monster among an eclectic group of many, and both him and Monika, despite the appearance of the latter, must constantly remind the player that they are not human. That *Undertale* and *Doki Doki Literature Club* in particular both hold a mirror up to the player both to remind them of their humanity and to argue that they do not possess unique agencies because of it suggests that what is really at stake are a broader set of oppressions predicated on a broader set

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[230] Robin Wood, The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," *Horror Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 28.

of binaries. These binaries are those which allow for the construction of animacy hierarchies which make *nonhumans* available for manipulation by *humans*: living/dead, animate/inanimate, moving/still, will/determination.

I characterize what these works argue in their formal structure as that of a series of immanent critiques – of structures that hold together readership or playership as such – because they largely do not open onto alternative principles for organizing these forms of interaction, at least not explicitly. Nonetheless I have suggested that by virtue of conditioning their users to see the media objects with which they interact in terms of potentials rather than of clear-cut categories, there is a gesture away from animacy hierarchies and towards principles of animism. My own suggestion is that we might see these acts of animation as aligning with the objectives and principles of what is referred to as "new animism". That is not to say that the injection of these principles itself truly opens up ways to read or play differently. While these principles can certainly shape a user's perceptual framework and horizon of expectations within the media environment of a webtoon or a video game, any clear imagined way of reflecting those principles in that user's interaction remains elusive. Unsurprisingly, I continue to, for example, consume the narratives of games towards the objective of exhaustion, or reassemble database elements to suit my personal preference. Despite this, these moments of connection, though confrontational and violent in their narrative contexts, achieve something on a much broader scale by revealing categories so often associated with human action to not be exclusively human.

This thesis has explored the agency of human readers, viewers, players, or operators in a particular focused sense, agencies that constitute and are constituted by the rendering of media objects and their contents as dead, still, artificial, and inanimate. As I take this topic in new directions in the future, I intend to further explore and challenge the championing of things such as player agency. Certainly, within popular discourse with regards to video game consumption, player agency remains a vaunted principle. For example, "anti-consumer" is an increasingly popular neologism employed as a critique against games as products within video game discourse. And while it is most often used quite justifiably against harmful and exploitative practices within the industry (e.g. against an increasing number of manipulative gambling mechanics within games), there is also the possibility that it at times supports the principles which suggest that everything in virtual environments should be subject to manipulation according to the player's will. With a careful eye to the way in which the structures of something

like player agency are extensions of broader structures of human action in and upon the world, perhaps it is possible to suggest new principles for framing such agency.

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