



Citation: L. Bruno (2023) To (Sub)Serve Man. Role Language and Intimate Scripts in *Kioku no Dizorubu*. *Lea* 12: pp. 99-116. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-14474>.

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

To (Sub)Serve Man Role Language and Intimate Scripts in *Kioku no Dizorubu*

Luca Bruno

Università degli Studi di Firenze (<lucapaolo.bruno@unifi.it>)

Abstract

Japanese Adult Computer Games engage players in immersive narrative experiences centred on intimate interactions with anime-manga characters. Within these games, players are encouraged to develop parasocial phenomena as an integral aspect of the gameplay loop. The language employed during character interactions plays a pivotal role in shaping these parasocial phenomena, establishing specific roles, expectations, and the potential for their confirmation or subversion. This paper examines the systems of stylized character idiolects typical of anime-manga media – referred to as *yakuwarigo* by Kinsui 2017, 2003 – and explores how these linguistic elements embed gendered roles in the women-oriented video game *Kioku no Dizorubu*.

Keywords: Adult Computer Games, Fictoromance, Intimacy, Intimate Scripts, Japanese Game Studies

Introduction

Adult computer games in Japan represent a sizeable portion of Japanese video game production, averaging five-hundred releases per year (Koyama *et al.* 2019). Setting, themes and tone are manifold: adult computer games may feature narratives settings ranging from SF/Fantasy to fictionalized versions of present-day Japan; themes range from coming-of-age stories to postmodern fiction and grand-guignolesque horror; tone range from the lighthearted to the dramatic. They range from melodramatic stories meant to elicit deep emotional responses in users to pornographic depictions meant to provide masturbatory entertainment. They are also strictly one-way experiences, in which user imagination plays a foundational role.

What these works of interactive software – out of a decidedly non-exhaustive list – have in common, as adult computer games, is the featuring of developing character intimacy as the

focus of the in-game experience and the focal point of intended in-game player activity. Players are actively encouraged to immerse themselves in a fictional, anime-manga inspired context and form emotional connections with the anime-manga characters with whom they will navigate the game's world and storyline. To ensure that players comprehend their role within the game's world and appropriately respond to characters on an emotional level, the language utilized by the characters to address users and refer to themselves becomes paramount. This significance is particularly heightened when considering that most of these games are written, developed, and primarily targeted at a Japanese audience. Furthermore, these games operate within a (g)local context where Japan is at the center and the anglosphere is at the periphery, which in turn influences assumed gender roles and acceptable behavior within interpersonal relationships.

This paper aims to undertake a preliminary investigation into the utilization of gendered language in Japanese adult computer games (*adaruto gēmu*; Galbraith 2021a), specifically focusing on the analysis of *Kioku no Dizorubu* 記憶のディゾルブ (2022, Memories in Dissolution; Libre Palette). The analysis will delve into the ensemble of characters that can be pursued romantically within the game, with particular emphasis placed on how highly stylized gendered language constructs character identity and the roles played by characters and players within an intimate relationship. This emphasis will be realized through two concepts: role language (*yakuwarigo* 役割語; Teshigawara and Kinsui 2011; Kinsui 2017) and intimate scripts (Bruno 2023, 158-61).

Role language structures the existence of specific, synthetic idiolects in Japanese pop culture, which, while intelligible by Japanese speakers, are not direct reflections of spoken Japanese (Kinsui 2017, 8). Intimate scripts, descended from sexual script theory, envision the existent of similarly synthetic scripts for imagining intimacy with fictional characters as part of video games centered on character intimacy (Bruno 2023, 161). The study will explore how each character's distinct identity interacts with the narrative context of the game and what expectations can reasonably be anticipated in terms of envisioning character-based intimacy and the fictoromances/fictophilias (Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021) that may emerge from them. By examining the influence of gendered language, this study seeks to illuminate the nature of the intimate connections that emerge within adult computer games.



Fig. 1 – Screenshot from *Kioku no Dizorubu*.

This is how the game looks outside of reward images (discussed later). Image © Libre Palette 2022

1. Adult Computer Games, Intimacy, and Intimate Scripts

In *adaruto gēmu*, progression through the game relies on players forming, nurturing, and fulfilling intimate relationships with anime-manga characters. The development of intimacy between the player and the character hinges on how the characters address themselves and interact with users throughout the gaming experience. This aspect assumes particular significance when considering the gender-specific modes of communication inherent in the Japanese language, which serves as the primary medium for the narratives of most adult games. The utilization of language in this context establishes distinct roles, expectations, limitations, and boundaries that govern the interactions between users and characters. Teshigawara Mihoko and Kinsui Satoshi's concept of "role language", a form of "fictionalized orality" (2011, 38), offers a framework to understand the intricate connection between role language and intimacy within adult computer games. Role language entails specific idiolects based on a character's identity and/or recognizable attributes including gender or social status, which are not a general reflection of tangible, real-life conditions (Kinsui 2017, 125). This connection is closely tied to gendered roles associated with a character's biological sex and the specific types of intimate encounters presented within the game.

Japanese adult computer games are also known under a plethora of other descriptors, all tied to Japanese niche videogame production: these include terms such as visual novel (*noberu gēmu* ノベルゲーム), emphasizing the focus on reading and imagining (Hichibe 2006, 70; Koyama 2020, 218-19), *otome* game (*otome gēmu* 乙女ゲーム), focused on romance for women audiences (Kim 2009; Andlauer 2018), BL (Boys Love) game (*BL gēmu* BL ゲーム), focused on stylized same-sex romance (Okabe and Pelletier-Gagnon 2019), dating simulation (Taylor 2007), and romance simulator (Saito 2021), which focus on theme and mechanics. Regardless of the descriptor employed, *adaruto gēmu* emerge within the realm of niche Japanese video game production in a close association with the broader anime-manga cultural industry and its production and reception practices (Kacsuk 2018; Suan 2017; 2018). Adult computer game characters are meticulously designed with the explicit aim of eliciting profound responses in users through arousal emotional and sexual.

Players are nudged by settings, plots and narrative context/themes and encouraged by character visual designs to nurture feelings of affection and empathy towards the game's characters. By leveraging this cycle of emotional feedback, adult computer games guide players in cultivating responses that facilitate an emotional connection with characters, fostering anticipation and intimacy (see Bruno 2019, 49-50). Male-oriented works do so by producing appeals to sexuality, while female-oriented works deploy appeals to emotions. (Tosca and Klastrup 2019, 179-82; Galbraith 2021a; 2021b). Both male-oriented and female-oriented works do not make these appeals – sexual, emotional – in a vacuum; instead, they utilize them as a progression of significant plot events characterized by the gradual revelation of intimate – emotional, sexual, and/or spiritual – details. This process unfolds between the player, who assumes the role of the game's protagonist, and one or more of the romanceable characters within the game. Irrespective of the target audience, the game ultimately revolves around nurturing a genuine sense of care towards the characters, underscoring the significance of player actions and their repercussions. As emphasized by Patrick Galbraith, even though the character is merely a static, virtual image, they possess the ability to make demands of the player, the foremost being to not do harm (2021b, 144).

Intimacy in adult computer games thus points to matters of "emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality" (Giddens 2013, 94). It

is disclosure, “of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze” (100). It is also a “conduit of sexuality, which symbolizes union with the loved object” (Freeman *et al.* 2016, 4326), although not all intimacies are sexual and not all sexual intimacy may be intimate. It is about sharing – emotional states, feelings, common aspirations, and significant life events – between two (or more) persons or representation thereof (Berlant 1998, 281). Finally, intimacy is also an ensemble of cultural and social assumptions about what is intimacy, what is intimate and what happens in conditions of intimacy (Cooke 2013, 9). Adult computer games thus deliberately cultivate what is referred to as parasocial phenomena in communication studies – one-sided psychological states where a human media user interacts with a media character (Liebers and Schramm 2019, 5). Such emotional responses and modes of interaction are acts of unilateral response by media users towards media characters, articulated in a way that resemble relations with living beings (Schramm 2015; Hartmann 2016, 131-32; Liebers and Schramm 2017, 12). Analysis of these phenomena have led to the emergence of terms such as fictosexuality, fictoromance, and fictophilia (see Song and Fox 2016; Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021), described as a “strong and lasting feeling of love or desire toward a fictional character” (Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021, 10).

Adaruto gēmu integrate parasocial phenomena – as indicated by fictosexuality, fictoromance, and fictophilia – inside the feedback loop(s) that motivates players towards traversing the game. Narratives often incorporate diverse scenarios encouraging such phenomena: the protagonist rescuing or being rescued by other characters; forced cohabitation resulting from peculiar or humorous circumstances; the protagonist needing to provide or receive care from previously unfamiliar individuals. These situations aim to illustrate and evoke the gradual development of intimacy between the player, assuming the role of the protagonist, and the game’s characters. However, the elicitation of emotional responses is not solely a voluntary nor an exclusively reflexive process. Instead, it relies on specific media literacies connected to production and reception practices of anime-manga media (Kagami 2010, 158; Galbraith 2011, 222; 2021b, 74-75; Santos 2020b, 4-8). As such, they articulate a system of expectations, limits and implicit rules, mandating roles for users and characters in relation to narrative situations inside the game (Bruno 2022, 41-42).

The system generates what is essentially an “intimate script” mandating “what intimacy is, what is intimate, how to experience intimacy, and how to conduct oneself intimately” (Bruno 2023, 161). However, their activation necessitates precise contexts, roles, and anticipated sequences of actions to elicit emotional responses. A crucial factor in establishing conditions conducive to fostering parasocial responses lies in the way characters address players and refer to themselves. Through the utilization of language, the foundation is laid for creating contexts in which parasocial connections have the potential to develop. Consequently, this framework establishes roles and expected courses of action for users to interact with the characters and envision their responses within the game. It shapes the overall experience of intimacy by defining both expectations and limitations on imaginative possibilities, guiding users towards parasocial interactions. When combined with visual design and shared narrative/aesthetic conventions, it constructs gendered frameworks for cultivating intimacy, assigning quasi-essentialized roles for males and females (see Bruno 2022, 42).

For example, a character belonging to the *tsundere* anime-manga archetype – which can either be male or female in apparent biological sex – will engage in initial hostility towards the player-controlled protagonist, only to reveal actual affection as interaction deepens. The hostility exhibited by the *tsundere* character stems from inner conflicts and a youthful struggle to reconcile their fondness for the other with their self-perception. Consequently, any series of

interactions between the player and a *tsundere* character involves a certain degree of conflict, which ultimately leads to the character becoming emotionally vulnerable. Depending on the player's actions, this vulnerability may culminate in the character confessing their feelings for the protagonist, thereby advancing the storyline. Each step of this progression is marked by depictions of emotional revelation and/or increasing physical intimacy.

By employing such archetypal behavior to a degree where character types and their corresponding actions can be predicted, the game's creators craft an intimate script consisting of conditional statements (else-if statements). As a result, both the player and the character assume specific roles that are culturally influenced, shaping the dynamics of their relationship. Such scripts should not be taken as certainties, but rather as guidelines, and while their nature is indeed one of logical if-then statements, at least in principle, their presence is more important than their strict upholding. It is the presence – or the emergence – of such scripts within a game that can be expected to motivate users into traversing the videogame in a way that produces user-character intimacy. At the same time, the usage of such archetypal behavior, to the point where it is possible to predict character type and the array of possible actions they will take, generates the configuration of else-if-statements that compose an intimate script, with player and character taking specific (sub)culturally mandated roles. This is a driver for players to progress through the game and in doing so, develop a personal affection, which may range from imagined friendliness to imagined love, with various degrees of imagined physical interaction, up to and including intercourse.

2. Role Language and Intimate Scripts in Adult Computer Games

Role language, or *yakuwarigo* in the original Japanese, is, as per Teshigawara Mihoko and Kinsui Satoshi, a form of “fictionalized orality” (2011, 38). Fictionalized orality encompasses a range of idiolects, mannerisms, and speech patterns “associated with specific character types” (*ibidem*; see also Dahlberg-Dodd 2020). These roles are often intertwined with gender, particularly when it comes to a character's idiolect and their ways of addressing other individuals in a conversation, most notably the player who assumes the role of the game's protagonist. In contrast, the tendency in anime-manga media to establish a protagonist character's idiolect as the one closest to standard language (see Lippi-Green 1997; Kinsui 2017; Dahlberg-Dodd 2023) is particularly interesting: besides the commercial aspects, it aids in providing a seamless immersive experience by avoiding unnecessary friction. It also plays a crucial role in solidifying existing stereotypes and associated modes of address within the character of the adult computer game's protagonist.

The utilization of specific idiolects, pronouns, and mannerisms forms the foundation for the diverse range of experiences that can be expected and imagined, particularly in relation to the generally standard idiolects associated with protagonist or point-of-view (POV) characters across media. An example outside of software can be observed in spaces like maid and butler cafes, where servers adhere to specific scripts derived from anime and manga, thereby inviting patrons to respond accordingly (see Silvio 2010, 433-35; Sharp 2011; 2014; Galbraith 2019, 173; Sugawa-Shimada 2020; see also Thomas-Parr 2023). Building upon Teshigawara and Kinsui's perspective, Patrick Galbraith (2021b) envisions *bishōjo* games, a genre of Japanese adult computer games, as a form of “melodramatic imagination” (132, 294-95) that aims to evoke a myriad of complex emotional responses, akin to soap operas (see Blumenthal 1997, 53 cited in Galbraith 2021, 294). To achieve this, character – and in software, user – roles and potential avenues of imagination must always be clear about their pre-conditions and where

they may lead. Through this process, which can either reference pre-established conventions or create them as the game unfolds, an intimate script emerges, conditions the dynamics of in-game interactions and the resulting fictoromance.

An intimate script, in turn, produces its own set of assumptions and conditions based on the type of interaction depicted within the game, whether it be romantic, sexual, or parental, as well as the genders of the actants involved. Regardless of the mechanical framework that enables traversal through the game and the challenges it presents, intimate scripts assign actants to specific intimacy-related roles and establish acceptable behaviors for fostering intimate interactions. For example, they may determine whenever users may expect characters to take an active role in the relationship in the context of the game's overall plot. In Japanese adult computer games, the specificities of the Japanese language, further influenced by the gendered nature of personal pronouns and other forms of idiolect-based communication, extend an ulterior layer of influence over intimate scripts. Gendered roles, idiolects, and mannerisms, as exhibited by anime-manga characters, serve as one of the foundations for imagining, anticipating, and ultimately experiencing character-based intimacy. Consequently, the examination of how anime-manga aesthetics are employed to elicit emotional responses in users provides a structured avenue for analysis and comparison. One illustrative example involves exploring the use of personal pronouns when characters address players in relation to the game's own settings and narrative.

Let's say a female character employs the masculine-gendered Japanese personal pronoun *boku* to refer to themselves, while using *anta* to refer to the player-controlled male character. *Boku* is a masculine first-person pronoun, whereas *anta* is a colloquial variation of the second-person pronoun *anata* used to express either familiarity or rudeness (see Takahara 1992; Lee and Yonezawa 2008). The way in which players are addressed through the usage of *anta*, along with the character's choice to use *boku*, offers a range of possibilities for imagining and anticipating intimacy. At the same time, it influences the responses that players might be prompted to make and the kind of in-game choices that might be expected. For example, a female character using *boku* to refer to themselves may convey a self-perception of having interests typically associated with masculinity, such as fighting. The same character employing *anta* to address the player-controlled character conveys a sense of general rudeness, though not necessarily a sense of interpersonal distance. Consistent use – when prompted – and reception of character addresses establish a precedent in player minds. Building on precedent – across games, even – players is likely to act accordingly throughout the game, developing parasocial responses and fictoromance in concert with emergent expectations. This process is intricately intertwined with gender and sex of actants involved in a relationship, and it applies equally to the imagined relationships fostered within adult computer games.

Beyond characters, narrative themes, settings, and software mechanics lies the actual sex and genders of *adaruto gēmu* players. While they are encouraged, through the specificities of language, to follow the game's intimate script, this comes with the potential to clash with personal identity. Intimate scripts in Japanese adult computer games suggest – sometimes even implicitly mandate (see Tosca and Klastrup 2019, 188-89) – individuals of different sexes and orientations to assume specific roles, such as females being submissive and males being subservient (see Bruno 2022, 41-42).

This, undoubtedly, further influences the emergence of parasocial responses and fictoromance within adult computer games. Therefore, examining how characters address players, typically as part of their interaction with the player-controlled character, provides insights into the roles that may be implied or even required by the game's intimate script. In the case

of adult computer games that are originally written in Japanese, the gendered nature of the Japanese language becomes a lens through which we can observe how gender roles may have evolve. Examining adult computer games, and how intimacy is, first and foremost, imagined in a controlled and solitary environment presents potential that may not be found in more public, generalist media works.

3. *Role Language, Intimate Scripts, Character Intimacy: Developing a Methodology*

The study of adult computer games is challenging: it is unreasonable to draw strict, 1:1 connections between diegetic events and parasocial responses, even when there is strong evidence to suggest so. In fact, every instance where characters address players has the potential for parasocial phenomena to arise and fictoromance to develop and strengthen. Even the smallest moments, depending on the game's combination of art assets, plot, and software mechanics, can generate character interactions, whether it be through a single line of text or the visual presentation of a character's silhouette. Each of these fleeting moments holds the possibility for meaningful engagement. However, in certain works like *Tokimeki Memorial* *ときめきメモリアル* (Konami 1994), *True Love -Jun'ai Monogatari-* *TRUE LOVE -純愛物語-* (Software House Parsley 1995), or *Evenicle* *イブニクル* (Alicesoft 2016), there exists a clear distinction between game traversal and character interaction. On the other hand, the same cannot be said for most adult computer games (Galbraith 2021a, 76; 2021b, 27-28), where interaction is seamlessly integrated into the overall in-game activity, as exemplified by games like *Senren*Banka* *千恋*万花* (Yuzusoft 2016).

Approaching the study of adult computer games with the intention of identifying the potential emergence of parasocial phenomena and examining their relationship with language is, therefore, a matter of approximation. It is simply not possible to fully substitute for the user or predict the specific responses they will develop. Nevertheless, it becomes all the more important to consider when users may respond, particularly when language is taken into account. While the Japanese language does provide markers for changes in social positions through identifiable shifts in modes of address and the use of personal pronouns, it remains challenging to establish a direct connection between such shifts and the game's diegetic context. However, there is another aspect that can facilitate analysis: the inclusion of "reward images" (*gohobi-e*; Miyamoto 2013, 24) within the game.

Reward images are full-screen depictions of pivotal and emotionally charged moments within adult computer games storyline(s). They play a significant role in deepening the relationship between players-as-protagonists and one of the romanceable characters within the game (see Bruno 2019, 45-47). They portray increasing levels of intimacy, with sexual interactions being a common theme, particularly in male-oriented works. In addition to the reward images themselves, players are further rewarded with additional story content showcasing a deepening of the relationship. The unlocking of these illustrations – which can be later accessed from a gallery in the game's main menu – serves as a measure of game completion and creates what Andrea Wood describes as an "erotic scavenger hunt" (2011, 369) throughout the game. Some of these images – often showcasing sexual intercourse in pornographic fashion – may be teased on the game's cover and promotional site, providing prospective users with an idea of what the game is about and what kind of experience it wishes to provide. While it is certainly unwise to assume total consent and agreeable disposition to what takes place within the game, it provides a workable baseline given restricted (adult only, sold in specialist outlets) circulation of adult computer games in Japan.

Inside the game proper, reward images serve as feedback for successful progression, they can be utilized, at the very least, to establish a baseline from which to approximate the kind of player responses expected by the game for proper functioning of its aesthetic-narrative-software assemblage. What are these images depicting? What are the requirements – in the software and within the player’s disposition – to obtain and enjoy that image? What choices are required of players to get to that specific point? What conduct do said choices imply? How significant is the moment in the overall plot? (see Bruno 2023, 241).

By breaking normal game traversal, interrupting the flow of the game, reward images encase a “before” and an “after” (*ibidem*). They are, at least in the creator’s intent, watershed moments in the relationship between the player and one or more of the game’s cast of characters. By acting as watershed moments in the game’s story and diegetic developments, reward images can serve as reference points for the evolution – or at the very least, reasonable assumptions thereof – of player-character intimacy. Examining reward images as significant milestones in the game’s plot and diegetic developments opens the possibility of analyzing a character’s language usage “before” and “after”. It allows the exploration of player-character intimacy and its evolution as various stages, delimited by the watershed moments marked through reward images. Through comparative analysis, we can explore the modes of address, pronoun usage, and the degree of politeness or rudeness exhibited in relation to the intended progression of intimate relationships.

Key questions emerge: Who takes the initiative in initiating relationships within the game world? How does the player create the necessary conditions for the relationship to develop and progress? What forms of punishment or reward do players encounter based on their choices and actions during gameplay? These questions, when combined with an exploration of language and its gendered affordances, serve as the foundation for the case study approach adopted in this paper. Specifically, the focus will be on how each romanceable character in the game addresses the player-controlled protagonist. Modes of address will be examined in relation to factors such as character gender and sex, the protagonist’s own gender and sex, and how it may relate to the player’s own disposition(s). The exploration that follows, which concerns the women-oriented adult computer game *Kioku no Dizerubu*, is provided as an example of the methodology outlined above. This exploration is concise by necessity and cannot hope to be anywhere near comprehensive. Nevertheless, it seeks to be a methodological demonstration, breaking new ground in how videogame software such as *adaruto gēmu* may be approached while accounting for its specificities.



Fig. 2 – Screenshot from *Kioku no Dizerubu*.
This is a reward image implying a growing level of intimacy with the player.
Image © Libre Palette 2022

4. *Kioku no Dizorubu: Female Subservience to Male Characters*

Kioku no Dizorubu is a women-oriented (see Kim 2009; Andlauer 2018) adult computer game featuring heterosexual intimate relationships. In women-oriented *adaruto gēmu* players – presumed to be female – are put in the shoes of a female main character in a specific narrative situation, ranging from high school to science fiction and fantasy epics. Player characters in adult computer games take on a diverse array of occupations and societal roles, ranging from timid high school students, as seen in *Gakuen Club -Houkago no Himitsu-* 学園CLUB～放課後のヒミツ～ (*Gakuen Club*; OperaHouse 2015) – to merciless assassins – as it’s the case with *Nero E Rosso -Kane no Tame ni Kane wa Naru 2 nEroErosso* ~金のために鐘は鳴る2 (*Nero e Rosso - The Bell Chimes for Gold 2*; Otusun Club 2017). Regardless of the setting or the protagonist’s specific role and occupation, the game’s storyline invariably unfolds in a way that involves the protagonist engaging with several characters of the opposite sex, fostering the development of intimate bonds.

In similar fashion to male-oriented adult computer games, guiding the game’s progression to strengthen the bond with a character enables players to steer the narrative towards the fulfillment of an intimate relationship. By making appropriate choices when prompted, players can deepen the bond with a character and direct the game’s story to culminate in a conclusion that aligns with that character’s journey. Each character’s individual story, in turn, contributes a unique perspective to the overarching narrative. It is only by playing through all character stories that players may experience the full breadth of the game’s plot (Tosca and Klastrop 2019, 176).

Kioku no Dizorubu can be collocated as a visual novel video game, a form of interactive software that requires players to navigate a story by making decisions at crucial points throughout the game. The game places players in the shoes of Shirota Aoi, a young woman grappling with dissociative personality disorder. She becomes aware of her condition after a series of incidents where her perception blacks out while conversing with others, only to regain awareness and find herself engaged in sexual intercourse with the person she was talking to. Although Aoi recognizes that she must have somehow given consent to the act, she is unable to recall how or when she arrived at that point.

The opening of the game, which introduces Aoi’s condition, with a depiction of sexual intercourse with one of the game’s characters, Numaoka Nobuhiko, is carefully crafted – combining prose, images, and sounds – to intentionally evoke arousal, while also deploying a sense of estrangement: the music is set to a slow, pulsating rhythm; the actors vocal performances are deployed – also through the aid of binaural audio – to be suggestive and seductive; the relationship is immediately portrayed as adulterous office romance – Numaoka is Aoi’s married office manager, willing to divorce her wife to be with her.

It is implied that during her dissociative events, Aoi experiences a shift in attitudes, altering her pre-existing views on intimacy and sex, which were previously left unexpressed but seemed to align with prevailing portrayals found in *shōjo* and *josei* (girl and women-oriented anime-manga) media. Following the shift, she seems to lose the capacity to consciously withhold consent to sexual intercourse, and her attitude towards intimacy and sex undergoes a transformation marked by a newfound lack of inhibition. Inability to consciously withhold consent is meant in the sense that she is depicted, first implicitly, then explicitly, as being overcome by desire – which, as part of the dissociative episode, is ego-syntonic – making her willing, rather than an actual inability to say no.

The game story, following the opening, is deployed as an erotic thriller, a hunt for the cause for Aoi’s condition following her diagnosis and a recommendation from the diagnosing

psychiatrist to avoid overly stressful situations. Subsequent to the initial setup, Aoi, alongside players, encounters the game’s ensemble of characters: Akira, an understanding queer individual receiving treatment at the same clinic; Ishizuki Ryōichi, Aoi’s younger and infatuated co-worker; and Shirota Kei, Aoi’s overprotective older brother. These characters are dispersed across five possible story paths, with an additional chapter named “truth” (*shinjitsu* 真実) and an epilogue. The pivotal moment for players arises when Aoi experiences another dissociative episode and feels compelled to confide in someone. At this juncture, players must choose which character to confide in, or they can decide not to share with anyone, and each choice leads to a distinct ending (see image 3 and 4). Upon unlocking all endings, the truth and epilogue chapters become accessible from the main menu. Each story path sheds light on the interactions between Aoi and the four characters, alluding to moments of intimacy, though not all story paths culminate in sexual intercourse – for example, choosing Akira, even though set up to be a somewhat suspicious encounter at the clinic, will make his story path end on a comforting note in non-sexual, non-romantic intimacy.



Fig. 3 – Screenshot from *Kioku no Dizorubu*. Story path selection in *Kioku no Dizorubu*.

From left to right: Kei, Ishizuki, Aoi, Numaoka and Akira.

Image © Libre Palette 2022



Fig. 4 – Screenshot from *Kioku no Dizorubu*. Each of the story paths when highlighted for selection.

Note how the shift between color and grayscale may encourage a sense of unease.

Image © Libre Palette 2022

After players have become acquainted with all the characters and experienced Akira's comforting demeanor, Kei's overprotective tendencies (with no sexual intercourse depicted or implied), Numaoka's obsessive possessiveness, and Ishitsuki's naivety (which may lead to a threesome involving him and Numaoka), they gain access to the truth of the matter: Aoi and Kei shared an incestuous relationship years ago, resulting in an aborted pregnancy. Aoi has suppressed this traumatic experience, and it serves as the root cause of her dissociative episodes. Consequently, her brother Kei becomes morbidly overprotective, transforming into an unhealthy obsession. The culmination of this disturbing development occurs in the epilogue, where Aoi is subjected to violation by Kei, while a helpless Numaoka witnesses the distressing scene, presented from a first-person perspective in the game's reward images.

Beyond the problematic plot development, which regrettably cannot be fully explored within the confines of this paper, it is noteworthy how, despite Aoi being portrayed as an adult Japanese woman, she, along with players, lacks complete agency – the “power to initiate action” (Schlosser 2019) – in her interactions with the game's four characters. For instance, Numaoka is depicted as embodying dominant heteronormative scripts often found in *shōjo*, *josei* media, and women-oriented adult computer games, where males take an active role in male-female romantic interactions (see Ting 2019). On the other hand, Akira's story path does not lead to sexual intercourse but rather focuses on emotional and non-romantic intimacy, positioning him as a paternal figure to whom Aoi can confide, even amidst the ambiguity of their relationship. In contrast, Ichizuki places himself in a subservient position to Aoi, casting her in a para-maternal role during their interactions. Lastly, Aoi's brother, Kei, assumes a role where he treats Aoi as his subordinate little sister, and the full implications of this dynamic become apparent as players delve deeper into the game's stories, getting closer to uncovering the truth behind Aoi's experiences.

Kioku no Dizerubu produces agential ambiguity coming from dominant, heteronormative Japanese social norms as portrayed by *shōjo* (girl-oriented) and *josei* (women-oriented) manga. The paradox is further intensified by situating Aoi's dissociative episodes around themes of sexual intimacy, wherein she gains agency in matters of sexuality but experiences a loss of agency on personal and social levels. Similarly, players of the game find themselves bereft of agency, unable to refuse and in fact separated from their immersion as Aoi, as her condition makes her sexual desire in synch with a changed disposition towards sexual intercourse. At the same time, it is important to note that *shōjo* and *josei* aesthetics are “increasingly removed from social representation” (Berndt 2019, 1-2) and closer to fantasy spaces of gendered, female, and feminine revelry (Andlauer 2018). *Shōjo* and *josei* aesthetics mediates and convey meanings (Monden 2019), modes of address (Antononoka 2019; Unser-Schutz 2019), agency (King 2019; Norris 2019) in fantasy spaces (Andlauer 2018). However, it should be noted that while these depictions may not entirely mirror real-life Japanese girls and young women, they do impose a specific set of behaviors and potential actions in media reproducing them.

Particularly in the context of sexual encounters, the shift from a baseline passive state mandated by *shōjo/josei* conventions to a state where sexual agency becomes feasible challenges the validity of these conventions. At the same time, by integrating *shōjo/josei* aesthetic codes into interactive video game environments, players and character agency are conditioned, dictating the range of actions or reactions players, players-as-characters, and in-game characters are expected to adhere to concerning the game's narrative settings, plots, and mechanical systems (such as navigation, feedback, and interaction) – all under the influence of *shōjo/josei* femininity. *Kioku no Dizerubu* uses the tenets of *shōjo/josei* femininity as the baseline against which players – assumed to be familiar with *shōjo/josei* aesthetics – are given a sense of deep disorientation.

When Aoi experiences one of her dissociative episodes, she undergoes a transformation that deviates from her typical portrayal as a *shōjo/josei* protagonist. Consequently, her language and way of addressing other characters change, giving rise to distinct modes of communication. As a result, two different sets of role language emerge within Aoi's character, accompanied by two distinct intimate scripts that players, assumed to be women, must engage with (see table 1 and table 2). These variations are evident in the diverse manners in which characters express themselves and, in turn, relate to both girl and women-oriented anime-manga productions, as well as Japanese pornographic media. These two patterns of role language and their accompanying intimate scripts intersect with those originating from the game's cast of characters, each with their own specificities. This leads to distinct types of fictoromances and roles which players are called to fill.

For instance, Numaoka's character is coded with an idiolect that exudes forcefulness and reinforces heteronormative gender roles prevalent in Japan. During the game's opening sex scene, one of his lines as the dramatic tempo builds up is "it looks like you really like being stimulated here"¹ per le citazioni in giapponese: non è necessaria la traslitterazione; , positioning himself as the dominant figure in the sexual encounter. This is emphasized by his use of non-inflected verbs, indicating a social standing above the protagonist (see table 1), which reverberates through the fictoromance between players as Aoi and Numaoka. In contrast, Akira, the second character with whom Aoi can develop an intimate connection, is visually and linguistically portrayed as a cross-dressing man. He employs an *onekotoba* オネエ言葉 register (feminine language used by homosexual men) in his speech, while his visual appearance includes makeup on eyelashes and lipstick. Akira's introduction showcases him using sentences such as "what would the matter be?"² and "thank you for your kind help"³ (see table 2), aligning more closely with the prescribed feminine language in Japan, commonly known as Japanese Women Language or JWL (see Ide 1982; Inoue 2003; Nakamura 2014a; 2014b).

Contrasting both Numaoka and Akira are Ishizuki Ryōichi, Aoi's younger co-worker and Kei, her brother. Ryōichi uses an idiolect that presumes a position that places Aoi – and players with her – in a sort of maternal or elder sister role (see table 3). This role, which is remarked also by Aoi referring to Ryōichi with the *-kun* suffix, which may imply a sense of closeness but also an inferior position in relation to the speaker, encoding a lower degree of respect afforded (Oshima 2023, 170, 174-76), which is maintained through all interactions between Aoi and Ryōichi. This, while of course infantilize Ryōichi, while making Aoi devoid of a role as fully-fledged, independent adult, and recasting her into dominant heteronormative social norms in Japan. Ryōichi is not a full adult, but rather something resembling a childish, immature figure to Aoi's elder sister position, with a subsequently charged fictoromance. Finally, the apparent plain language employed by Aoi's brother Kei is one that apparently suggests a position of equality (see table 4). This is quickly turned over as details of his manipulative behavior come to the fore, as apparent warmth reveals darker trauma.

The utilization of such idiolects directly influences the parasocial phenomena intentionally incorporated into the gameplay experience. Additionally, it is also crucial to recognize that in romantic relationships within this game, Aoi's role never assumes equality with the other characters. Instead, the diegetic context compels her to occupy other positions: she becomes a mistress seduced by Numaoka, a child seeking solace from Akira, a little sister under her brother's dominion, and a motherly/elder sister figure admired by Ishitsuki. That these interactions are

¹「白田さんはここが弱いみたいだね」。 Unless otherwise stated, all translation are mine.

²「どうしたのかしら？」.

³「助かったわ、ありがとう」.

predicated on a presumption of general fictiveness stemming from their status as an anime-manga media does not invalidate the fact that the experience intended in *Kioku no Dizorubu*, as a media work oriented towards women, is that of experiencing a subservient role towards other men.

The game entails a predetermined inclination for women subjects, embodied by the players as Shirota Aoi, to adopt a passive role in shaping her emotional journey. When players are given the option to confide Aoi's struggles with any of the game's characters, it leads Aoi, along with the players, to communicate from a subservient position rather than an equal one. The only alternative is to withhold such confidences altogether, yet this choice fails to alter the course of actions suggested in the truth and epilogue chapters.

Ultimately, the game's truth reveals Aoi's vulnerability to her brother and the experience the game creators aim to convey centers around themes of (re)discovery of trauma and brotherly betrayal. These experiences are underpinned by the diverse role languages expressed through each character, fostering a series of parasocial phenomena intended to evoke specific emotional states and responses. While *Kioku no Dizorubu* is a game designed for mature, women audiences and not intended for widespread circulation, the aesthetics it employs, although "increasingly removed from social representation" (Berndt 2019, 1-2), unmistakably suggest a particular set of gendered social, intimate, and sexual dynamics. These dynamics position the woman subject and players in a subordinate role compared to their male counterparts.

Conclusions

This paper has offered a concise introduction to approaching adult computer games as video games that revolve around establishing, developing, and experiencing intimate bonds with characters. Through an examination of parasocial phenomena, intimate scripts, and the emergence of fictoromances, the paper provides a brief exploration on how role language may influence the range and nature of parasocial phenomena and fictoromances that shape an adult computer game's intended experience. In the case of *Kioku no Dizorubu*, despite its narrative aiming to disconcert players, assumed to be female, by strategically removing agency concerning sexual intercourse and intimacy, it still relies on the portrayal of the main character – a female coded as feminine – as subservient to a male character, whether it be the domineering Numaoka or the submissive Ishitsuki. Aoi's – and players' – actions within the game world are essentially limited to choosing which male character to seek help and comfort from. And it is asking for help from a position of social inferiority that unlocks higher levels of intimacy.

At the metanarrative level, the progressive completion of the game does allow increased intimacy with the character of Aoi, until the nature of her trauma is revealed as part of the truth and epilogue chapters. However, this progressive journey also involves a rediscovery of Aoi's enthrallment to her brother, placing her in yet another submissive role with even less agency. Remarkably, the agency granted to players throughout the game's advancement is subsequently denied upon unearthing the truth and experiencing the epilogue, as the game's actual conclusion – with an implicit collocation of all other endings as mere "what-ifs" – precludes any possibility of Aoi finding solace like she does in Akira's story path. The role language, in conjunction with intimate scripts throughout the game intensifies these developments by aligning player imagination accordingly. Encouraging – implicitly mandating – that fictoromance(s) develop across specific lines with Aoi and players in a subservient position. Role language serves as an integral component of this intricate amalgamation of prose, visuals, and sound effects, mobilizing the recognizable attributes of anime-manga media (*shōjo/josei*) and the associated expectations, thereby producing an estranging and dissonant effect.

As a result, exploring character idiolect in relation to roles within relationships, as demonstrated in this paper, can unlock crucial new perspectives in niche media forms that heavily rely on imagination, such as adult computer games. While this paper provides only a brief glimpse into *adaruto gēmu*, it aligns with growing research interests in video games and other media that promote the emergence of fictoromances and/or parasocial phenomena (see Song and Fox 2016; Liebers and Schramm 2019; Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021). Future avenue of research may include comparative analysis of video games oriented towards both sexes and produced across a variety of contexts.

Tables

Table 1. Aoi as <i>shōjo/josei</i> main character
JP – Akira「あおいちゃんは彼氏いるの？」 ENG – Akira: Sis, do you have a special someone?
JP – Aoi「え？ あ、その……いないです」 ENG – Aoi: Eh? Ah...no, I don't have one...
JP – Akira「ふーん、なんだかわけありっぽいわね」 ENG – Akira: Mh, I think there might a reason for that...
JP – Aoi「えっと、その……」 ENG – Aoi: I...I think...
JP – Akira「大丈夫、話したくなかったら無理に話す必要はないわ」 ENG – Akira: If you don't want to talk about it we should not go there, it's okay.
JP – Aoi「アキラさんは……？」 ENG – Aoi: And you, Akira?
Table 2. Aoi right after a dissociative event – sexual intercourse
JP – Numaoka「あおいさん、どうかしたの？」 ENG – Numaoka: Aoi, what's the matter?
JP – Aoi「いえ、何でもありません」 ENG – Aoi: No, it's nothing.
JP – Numaoka「つらかったら言ってね」 ENG – Numaoka: Tell me if this gets difficult for you
JP – Aoi「……大丈夫です」 ENG – Aoi: ...I'm fine.
JP – Aoi「沼岡さん、私、……」 ENG – Aoi: Numaoka, I'm about to...
JP – Numaoka「イキそう？ いいよ、一緒にイこう」 ENG – Numaoka: ...about to come? Yes, let's come together!
Table 3. Exchange between Aoi and Numaoka with idiolect highlighted
JP – Numaoka「あおいさん……」 ENG – Numaoka: “Aoi...”
JP – Numaoka「あおいさん、いつもきみだけを見ている」 ENG – Numaoka: I only have eyes for you...

JP – Numaoka「……好きだ」 ENG – Numaoka: I love you.
JP – Aoi「ごめんなさい、この間のことは忘れてください」 ENG – Aoi: No, please, forget what happened just now
JP – Numaoka「……忘れられるわけ、ないだろう」 ENG – Numaoka: I don't think I can just do that.

Table 4. Exchange between Aoi and Akira with idiolect highlighted

JP – Akira「ふふっ、ありがと」 ENG – Akira: aha, thank you!
JP – Akira「悩んだんだけど、パエリア作ってみたの、好きかしら？」 ENG – Akira: it's kinda unexpected but, what about if I fixed some paella?
JP – Aoi「パエリア! すごい! 好きです!」 ENG – Aoi: Paella! Fantastic! I love it!
JP – Akira「じゃあ、ちょっと待っててね」 ENG – Akira: then wait a moment
JP – Aoi「私も何かお手伝いしましょうか……?」 ENG – Aoi: can I help you with anything?

Table 5. Exchange between Aoi and Ishitsuki with idiolect highlighted

JP – Ishitsuki「俺だって負けてませんよ。あなたのことが好きです」 ENG – Ishitsuki: I won't be the loser [to Numaoka]. I love you!
JP – Aoi「ありがとう。私も、石月くんのこと好きよ」 ENG – Aoi: Thank you. I love you too, Ishitsuki!
JP – Ishitsuki「よかったら俺と一緒に住みませんか？」 ENG – Ishitsuki: what if you moved in with me?
JP – Aoi「え? どういう……意味？」 ENG – Aoi: wha-? What do you...mean?
JP – Ishitsuki「俺と同棲しませんか？」 ENG – Ishitsuki: do you want to live with me?

Table 6. Exchange between Aoi and Kei with idiolect highlighted

JP – Kei「おじやの方がもっと粘り気があるんだよ」 ENG – Kei: This porridge is so much stickier!
JP – Kei「しょうゆをちょっと垂らしてやるから」 ENG – Kei: Try mixing some soy sauce with it
JP – Aoi「お兄ちゃん、忙しいのにありがとう」 ENG – Aoi: Thank you Kei, even if you're so busy...
JP – Kei「いや、頼ってくれるのは嬉しいよ」 ENG – Kei: No, I'm happy that you called me!

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