Women's Games in Japan
Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction

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Abstract

Women's games (女性向けゲーム) refers to a category of games developed and marketed exclusively for the consumption of women and girls in the Japanese gaming industry. Essentially gender-specific games comparable to the 'games for girls' proposed by the girls' game movement in the USA, Japanese women's games are significant for their history, influence and function as a site for female gamers to play out various female identities and romantic fantasies within diverse generic structures. This article will first review previous research and literature on women and gaming, analyze the key issues raised in the discourse concerning femininity and electronic games, outline the history and development of women's games, explain how multiple factors contributed to the appeal of women's games by analyzing the games *Angelique* and *Harukanaru Tokino Nakade3* and, lastly, discuss the meaning and significance of women's games in the larger context of women and gaming. The 1994 game *Angelique* succeeded in establishing a loyal and close-knit fan base by actively utilizing popular female culture such as *shoujo manga* (girls' comics) and the fan base for voice actors. *Angelique* also set up the specifics and conventions of women's games: a focus on romance, easy controls and utilizing other multimedia. In 2004, *Harukanaru Tokino Nakade3* deconstructed the genre and gender conventions of women's games and shoujo manga, while developing a new type of feminine identity and narrative. Women's games indicate that gender-specific games can be more than educational tools to familiarize girls with technology or perpetuate stereotypes; they can be a significant extension of female culture into the realm of gaming, and contribute to the development of women's culture and the diversification of the gaming industry.

Key words
computer games ■ gender ■ Japan

Women's games (女性向けゲーム), a term used within the Japanese elec-
tronic gaming industry, refers to a category of games developed and
marketed exclusively for the consumption of women and girls. Essentially
these are gender-specific games comparable to the 'games for girls' proposed
by the girls' game movement in the USA, a moment that first emerged from
an alliance between feminist activists and industry leaders (Cassell and
Jenkins, 1998). Japanese women's games are significant for their history,[1]
influence and function as a site for female gamers to play out various female
identities and fantasies within diverse generic structures. Women's games
act as a medium for women and girls to acquire pleasure from identification
and gratification as women; or at least women's games are more likely to
provide a specific type of pleasure than games targeting a general or domi-
nantly male audience. Located within the Japanese gaming industry as a
continuously developing niche market, women's games offer alternative
solutions and valuable case studies on developing video games that are more
accessible to women (Girard, 2006) by analyzing how an entirely different
type of 'girls' games' was able to exist and persist in a particular socio-
cultural context. This article will first review previous research and litera-
ture on women and gaming, analyze the key issues raised in the discourse
concerning femininity and electronic games, outline the history and
development of women's games, explain how multiple factors contributed to
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women's games in the context of women and gaming.

Research on Women and Gaming

Literature on women and gaming is usually approached from two perspec-
tives: games for women and representations of women – or femininity – in
games (Taylor, 2006). The former was perhaps most explicitly researched
and experienced through the girls' game movement in the US, triggered by
many different social and cultural conditions in the 1990s, such as the
increasing competitiveness of the gaming market, the rising familiarization
of girls and women with computers, concern about violent video games, and
the emergence of female game designers who challenged gender stereotyp-
ing within the industry (Kline et al., 2003). The first girls' game[2] to appear
in the American market was *Barbie Fashion Designer*, published by Mattel
in 1996, essentially an electronic version of dressing up Barbie (Cassell and
Jenkins, 1998). The success of *Barbie Fashion Designer* sparked discussion
and concern among feminists and educators over the stereotypical gender
representations of Barbie expanding to the realm of electronic gaming, and
was countered by Purple Moon Software's *Rockett Movado* games, backed
up by extensive empirical research findings on girls' preferences in gaming
(Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). According to the findings – documented
meticulously in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998)
– girls have distinct preferences and tastes different from those of boys; they
liked collecting, creating and constructing, and placed more emphasis on

character, story and relationships than achieving a given set of goals. To summarize, the results indicated that girls favored socialization and exploration over competition; thus *Rockett's New School* was developed as a 'friendship adventure game'. Another recurring theme in the discourse over women and gaming was the problem of identification. The quantitative lack of female avatars, the stereotyped or sexualized description of female characters, such as Lara Croft, and the appeal of games such as *The Sims* or massive multiplayer online role-playing games contributed largely to the intricate character/avatar-creation system (Taylor, 2006) and were all intimately connected around identification. Again, socialization and exploration re-emerge and interconnect with the identification factor in the discussion around women and gaming, particularly when explaining the large female population in massively multiplayer online role-playing games – games that are not explicitly designed for women yet strongly appeal to them (Taylor, 2006). This recent development strengthens and verifies the critique against 'pink games', or gender-specific games, represented by *Barbie* games and the 1990s girls' game movement. One of the main questions raised regarding the girls' game movement was the necessity for and significance of gender-specific games, pointed out by academics and mature female gamers alike (Yates and Littleton, 1998). While feminists have emphasized the need for 'girls' games' as devices to familiarize girls with computer technology – a valid and important argument based on educational and feminist grounds – the resulting 'friendship adventure games' developed by Purple Moon Software[3] were criticized for their essentialist assumptions on gender differences (Yates and Littleton, 1998). Although this critique is certainly valid and significant, it is important to note that the 'pink games' in question are almost always either *Barbie* or Purple Moon games published during the 1990s. This is where Japanese women's games, in existence since 1994, can offer a wider definition of games for girls – or even a counter-argument against the critique of gender-specific games.

Identification, Structure and Gender

Before proceeding with the history and specifics of Japanese women's games, a definition of identity and identification with regard to gaming is necessary, due to its importance as a central recurring theme in studies of gaming and the gaming audience. Butler defines identification as 'a phantasmatic trajectory and resolution of desire, an assumption of place, a territorializing of an object which enables identity through the temporary resolution of desire, but which remains desire, if only in its repudiated form' (1993: 99). Identification in the gamer–avatar relationship also embodies the complexities of desire and positioning, and the medium of interactive gaming complicates the issue further. The avatar is understood as an externalized Lacanian 'mirror image' of the subject, which the medium of gaming induces as the gamer not only controls the avatar but through the process is also encouraged to see through the eyes of the avatar (Schleiner, 2001). This creates complexities when the gamer and the avatar are of different

sexes, exemplified by the symbolic cross-dressing that occurs when a male player controls Lara Croft (Schleiner, 2001), or homosexual tensions between the male player and the feminized male avatar of *Final Fantasy IX* (Consalvo, 2003). The avatar is simultaneously a vessel to insert the gamer's self into the game, and also an object of desire as the identifying player comes to care for the avatar. According to Consalvo (2003) in her analysis of *Final Fantasy IX*, the distance between the (heterosexual) male player and male avatar collapses through the structural encouragement of the player to desire the heroine and the traditional, heterosexual romance featured in the scenario. Within this structure, player identification with the avatar is maximized by both agents working towards validation of heterosexuality and masculinity – assuming that heterosexual males are the normative audience of the game. However, a heterosexual female or homosexual male player is not only unable to identity fully with this position, but is even 'forced' to flirt with the heroine as a heterosexual male, and constantly reminded that she/he is not a 'normative' audience for the game (Consalvo, 2003), their desires unaddressed and unaccounted for. This structural problem raises another important factor interconnected with the gamer–avatar relationship and identification: the narrative structure/context. According to Kinder: 'narrative conventions affect the construction of the subject by positioning spectators and game players in a system of identification' (1991: 5). The problem she sees in electronic games is that, despite their 'sliding signifiers that move fluidly across various forms of image production and cultural boundaries', games fail to challenge the gender stereotypes repeated in 'old' media such as television and storybooks. The case study of *Final Fantasy IX* reveals that not only is the avatar gendered, but also the very structure and narrative construction can be gendered too. This construction and assumption regarding the audience – although Kinder was mainly discussing child gamers – as 'commodified gendered subjects' is actually a natural stance for the media producer. Every media commodity assumes and targets a certain type of audience: male and/or female, young, old, urban, rural, local, foreign, and so on. War movies and romantic comedy movies are each constructed using drastically distinctive structures, styles, genre conventions and cultural codes because of their vastly different audience demographics. The main reasons why research on women and gaming have focused largely on the 'lack' of women in gaming (Vered, 1999) – questioning why women gamers are a minority, or searching for women gamers – is essentially due to the industry's reluctance to acknowledge or challenge the gendered structure in games, and the absence of gender-specific games in the (North American) gaming industry. Distinctively gender-specific genres such as romance have expanded across literature, film and television, yet not to the realm of electronic games.

Of course, female gaming clans of *Quake* have argued that they are content with violent, male-coded games and denounced the necessity of games for girls; female avatars such as Lara Croft are discussed as positive role models for women (Schleiner, 2001), and the argument for 'good games

for everybody' over 'limiting' girl games (Newman, 2004) has increasing validity with the popularity of massively multiplayer online role-playing games. However, no matter how much the female players of *Quake* and *Tomb Raider* may enjoy the games, the fact that they are not considered a normative audience by the developers will affect player–avatar identification in the long term, just as the female players of *Final Fantasy IX* were excluded from immersion in the narrative. Additionally, the exclusion can discourage potential women gamers, who may perceive electronic games as a medium that deliberately or unconsciously alienates – or, at the very least, is inconsiderate of – women. This type of estrangement can also disrupt game immersion: that is, the 'sense of being there' (Newman, 2004) within a virtual environment, essentially joining in fantasy play. The value of fantasy lies in offering liberating pleasure by allowing the individual to 'play with reality' (Ang, 1982), which can be literally accomplished through the virtual reality of interactive games. Naturally, experimenting with social or gender identity is a main factor in electronic games, although the market offers only a limited number of stereotyped masks/personas/avatars for the player (Consalvo, 2003). In contrast, Japanese women's games offer their audience avatars and genre structures that enable a certain type of feminine identification and narrative unavailable in games for a general audience or a largely male audience. They are also distinguished by their active utilization of multiple mediums, such as comics and animation, and the close relationship between the publisher and the fans.

Women's Games

Definition

Before detailing the nature of identity in Japanese women's games, a clear definition and brief history of women's games are necessary in order to understand their particular mechanics and context.[4] Women's games – '*jyoseimuk g mu*' (女性向けゲーム) – is a combination of the words '*jyosei*' (woman) and '*muk*' (for), thus *jyoseimukê gêmu* literally means 'games for women'. This means that the female audience is specifically targeted during the development and marketing process of a women's game. For example, although major role-playing games such as the *Final Fantasy* franchise were enjoyed by a high percentage of female gamers (Newman, 2004: 56), they do not qualify as women's games because they were neither produced for nor marketed towards an explicitly female audience. The 'women's games' discussed in this article meet the two requirements: developed for women, and marketed towards women. This definition is part of the stabilized vocabulary of the Japanese electronic gaming industry, used by game developers, major online game retailers (Animate, Messe San'ou, Toranoana),[5] gaming or fan fiction search engines (Surpara, Gamers Terminal),[6] newspaper articles (Miyazaki, 2005), and by the gamers themselves. Also, two monthly gaming magazines deal exclusively with women's games: *B's Log* and *Cool-B*.[7]

Specifics

It is important to note that 'women's game' is not a genre definition but a categorical one, in the same sense that the term 'women's magazine' is used; women's magazines can encompass a diverse range of different periodicals dealing with subjects as varied as fashion, cooking, books and lifestyle, as long as they are published primarily for a female audience. Thus the term 'women's game' does not necessarily designate a certain genre, and women's games can constitute a number of different genres, such as adventure, simulation and role-playing. Still, several factors and certain trends characterize and distinguish women's games from other electronic games. First of all, women's games contain a 'dating feature', a plot or system that allows the gamer's avatar to form interpersonal (romantic) relationships with the (overwhelmingly male) game characters. The first women's game, *Angelique*, featured a female avatar and nine male characters available for romantic relationships. Succeeding women's game titles, such as the simulation role-playing game *The Maiden of Albarea* in 1997 and the mystery adventure game *Graduation M* in 1998, also featured a female avatar and a number of male characters for the gamer to interact with – and eventually reach romantic endings. Second, the game system and game control tends to be simple, and the overall gameplay avoids complexity. This means the games do not have fast camera or character movement, the flow of the game is largely static rather than fast, jerky or violent; in other words, quick joystick reflexes or elaborate strategic calculation is not required from the gamer. This tendency is part of the reason why certain genres, such as adventure and simulation, are popular in women's games, while action or first-person shooting games are completely absent. Third, women's games are intimately related to other multimedia products in terms of content and industry. For example, *Angelique* was not only heavily influenced by shoujo manga[8] in its visual and conceptual designs, but also ran as a manga serial in *LaLa*, a monthly shoujo manga magazine. Another important aspect is the star power provided by voice actors, attracting voice actor fans[9] to electronic games and leading to related products such as drama CDs, voice actor events, and animated films (Koei, 2008). An additional example of multimedia influence is the appearance of *yaoi* culture[10] in women's games around 2000.

History

The first women's game was *Angelique* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1994, published by Koei and developed by Ruby Party, an all-female team within Koei (Marfisa, 1999). Ruby Party was organized by female staff from different departments of Koei, previously assigned to historical war games such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Nobunaga's Ambition* (Tanizaki, 1995). According to Ruby Party staff member Mami Matsushita in a private interview, *Angelique* was largely the result of the personal aspirations of honorary president Keiko Erikawa and the company's interest in the slowly increasing female gaming population

of role-playing games (Matsushita, 2008). Erikawa was 'particularly insistent about developing a game for girls made by girls, being a woman herself' (Matsushita, 2008) and summoned female Koei game planners to work on the project. The planners brainstormed and collaborated with female staff from programming and graphic departments, acquired feedback from other female Koei employees,[11] and developed a dating simulation game heavily influenced by the shoujo manga genre: *Angelique*, published in 1994. The game initially suffered from various promotion and marketing problems (Matsushita, 2008), as the concept of games for girls, or the very idea of a female gaming population, was very new at the time. Fan culture played a key role in enabling the new field to evolve; by 1995, Koei was aware of an *Angelique* fan network among female gamers and amateur comic artists, spreading the game by word-of-mouth through *Angelique* fan books and cosplay[12] in amateur comic conventions (Matsushita, 2008). This spurred Koei to release an enhanced PC version of *Angelique* – *Angelique Special* – in 1996 with animated cut-scenes and prominent voice actors dubbing the characters. Following the enhanced version of *Angelique*, Koei began publishing a quarterly periodical called *Love Love Tsuushin*, which offered the latest information on new *Angelique* products, goods and projects, *Angelique* comics drawn by professional and amateur artists, and an extensive fan mail section (Koei, 1999). *Angelique Special* and *Love Love Tsuushin* led to the expansion of a loyal fan base of women in their 20s rather than the intended target audience of girls in their early teens (Tanizaki, 1995). *Angelique* officially marks the birth of 'Neo Romance' games,[13] the Koei brand of women's games developed by Ruby Party (Koei, 2008), as well as the very concept of women's games. The publication of successors such as *The Maiden of Albarea* in 1997, from Messiah, and *Graduation M* in 1998, from E3 Staff, continued to diversify and expand the women's game market. Up to now, 24 different Neo Romance titles have been released in multiple gaming platforms (Koei, 2008), and major international companies such as Capcom and Konami have published their own franchise of women's games.[14]

Angelique

The significance of *Angelique* lies not simply in its being a pioneer, but also because it established many of the characteristics and trends recurrent in women's games. The avatar is a blond teenage girl called Angelique (name changeable), who is chosen as a candidate for the next Queen of the Universe. Angelique competes against another Queen candidate, Rosalia, in the test for choosing the new Queen. Each girl is entrusted with a continent to populate, accomplished by requesting the Nine Guardians – male celestial beings who serve the Queen – to send their powers to the continents. The candidate who populates enough buildings to reach the island in the center of the two continents will be chosen as the new Queen of the Universe. Alternatively, the player can choose to give up the throne and reach a romantic ending with one of the Guardians.

Figure 1   (left) Angelique cover; (right) Angelique's room. © Koei Inc.

Figure 2   (left) The map; (right) affection meters. © Koei Inc.

Figure 3   (left) Angelique chats with one of the Guardians in his room; (right) dating in the lakeside. © Koei Inc.

After the opening introduction of the game, the player finds herself in Angelique's pink-draped room in the dormitory building. This is the space where the player is informed of Angelique's current conditions (remaining power points, depicted as red hearts on the screen) and is offered a range of choices such as going outside, saving or loading the game, checking the continent and listening to music.

When Angelique chooses to venture outside, the entire map is featured on the screen. The numbers in the upper left show the current population of Angelique's continent, while the hearts indicate the power points mentioned earlier. Hearts are required for actions such as talking with the Guardians, requesting Guardians to send their power, visiting the continent, and requesting the fortune teller to find out the score on the 'affection meter' – numeric parameters that signify the degree of affection other characters (which include the Guardians, Rosalia, and the residents of Angelique's continent) feel towards Angelique – or the characters' affection meters for each other. More hearts can be acquired by defeating Rosalia during the monthly evaluation, which is determined by population (number of buildings in the continent) or popularity (the affection meter of the Guardians).

The score on affection meters can be raised by talking to the characters and successfully completing dates in the park or the lake; by selecting the appropriate replies to the Guardian's question, such as 'How many people populate your continent?', 'Which Guardian would you like to befriend?' or 'Is it difficult being a Queen candidate?', testing not only basic knowledge of the game but also the player's comprehension of the character. These conversations allow the player to explore the characters in-depth, as diverse patterns of dialogue exist depending on the degree of affection, place and time. Also, the Guardians are carefully constructed characters with distinct individual characteristics designed to appeal to the female audience; this is apparent in the fan letters directed towards the characters that are printed in the official Angelique periodical *Love Love Tsuushin*, and also coincides with the voice actor fan base as well.

Angelique was basically a combination of an extremely simplified type of city-building simulation game and a conversation-based dating game, and a leisurely paced one; the Queen test ends after 999 days in the game have passed. It should be noted that since the game was initially targeted at girls in their early teens (Tanizaki, 1995), and as the characters and genre structure were strongly influenced by 1970s shoujo manga, the featured love romance was highly fantasized, romanticized, purified and desexualized. The reasons for choosing a romantic dating format can be speculated by a quote from the developer: 'Boys may be happy enough with saving the world (as in typical video games). But we thought that girls couldn't care less about a planet or two as long as they could find true love' (Tanizaki, 1995: 36). Although this statement (albeit made lightly) could be seen as discriminating against and stereotyping girls, the point is that the developers had captured two important things: female interest in interpersonal relationships, and its commercialized form, which is the essence of the most visible

and popular form of Japanese girl's culture – shoujo manga (少女マンガ): girls' comics, the highly influential genre of comics for girls and women in Japan (Thorn, 2004). The main concept of the game was to 'compete with a mean rich girl, surrounded by cool guys' (Tanizaki, 1995: 34), a popular recurrent structure in shoujo manga (Yonezawa, 2007). Also, Kairi Yura, the character and art designer – often a central and crucial figure in such character-oriented games – was a shoujo manga artist herself (Tanizaki, 1995), and was assigned to serialize the manga version of *Angelique*. Centering on interpersonal relationships, highly personal in nature, often featuring romance and relying heavily on conversations (Thorn, 2004), the idealized and fantasized romance and visuals of shoujo manga were considered reliable and safe common ground for girls to feel familiar with and associate to the medium of electronic games (Tanizaki, 1995: 36). This (retro) shoujo manga influence is confirmed by Yura herself: 'I was initially told to design Angelique as a *Candy Candy* type of girl.'[15]

Candice has blonde hair tied in two bunches with bows, large, wide, sparkling green eyes and gives an overall impression of cheerfulness and innocence. In the center of Figure 4 is the early design of Angelique, sporting the similar blonde bunch, bows, large eyes, and naive expression. The finalized version on the right has loose hair, yet still retains the bow, blonde hair, green eyes and sunny expression.

Influences of retro shoujo manga are also apparent in Rosalia, Angelique's rival (see Figure 5) – the character on the left is Eliza, the archetypical snobby rich girl who constantly torments Candice throughout her life. The heavily curled hair, the bow at the back of the head, and the proud, haughty expression are evident in Rosalia as well. The icons of the sunny heroine and the aristocratic female nemesis are, in essence, cultural and generic archetypes easily recognizable by readers of shoujo manga – a shared cultural code, particularly for those who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. This is part of the reason why players could easily identify with Angelique, or at least find her familiar, and why women in their 20s – instead of the intended audience of teenagers and children – responded to *Angelique*. Like Mattel's *Barbie* games, which were successful not simply because they 'perpetuat[ed] gender stereotypes', but because of the iconic

Figure 4   From left to right: Candice; early design of Angelique; Angelique[16]
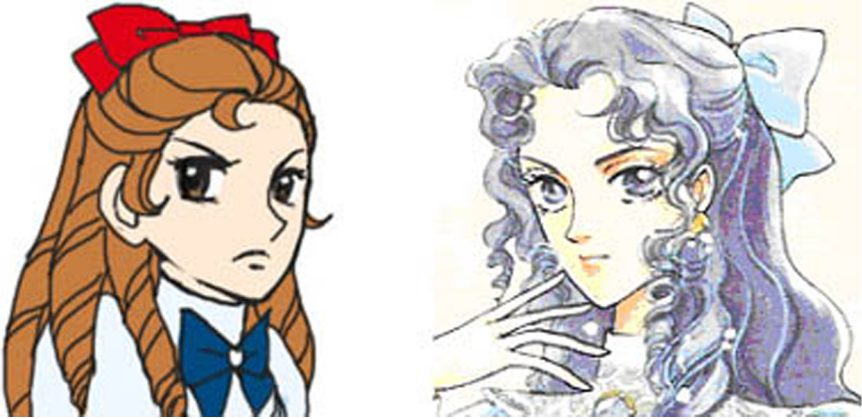
Figure 5   Eliza and Rosalia. © Koei Inc.

status of Barbie (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998), Ruby Party utilized the prevalence and popularity of shoujo manga to familiarize women with the alien medium of electronic games.

Ruby Party had evidently chosen a familiar, if somewhat retro, female avatar for the female player to identify with. The appearance of Angelique, the design of her room, and the lively, girlish language she uses in speech clearly indicate the strong shoujo influence. The structure and system also work in a certain way to intensify player identification and immersion. First, Angelique is not voiced like the other main characters. Second, Angelique's dialogues are kept to a minimum; most of her lines are functional, such as the monologues she speaks to the player in decision-making scenes. In conversation, other characters do most of the talking while Angelique mostly remains silent or chimes in if necessary. Third, Angelique is depicted on the screen as a deformed, doll-like cursor. Because Angelique's response is so limited, the player can position herself in the avatar and imagine her own response to the characters while simultaneously encouraging the romance between Angelique and the Guardian, as the barrier between player/avatar collapses – the player and avatar move towards a singular objective of female heterosexual romance. The specific romantic fantasy *Angelique* offers is, like its avatar, strongly based on 1970s shoujo manga fantasies. Love, romance and relationships are key themes in shoujo manga, exemplified by what the critic Osamu Hashimoto asserts as the core essence of the genre: 'I love you just the way you are' – unconditional, idealistic, eternal love (Fujimoto, 1991). In *Angelique*, although the initial goal is to become Queen, the real objective lies in achieving romantic endings with any one of the Nine Guardians. In order to achieve a romantic ending, the player must increase the score on the affection meter of a Guardian by repeated conversation and dating. When the affection meter reaches 90 percent, the Guardian makes an extensive and elaborate confession of love to Angelique, and the player is given a choice either to accept (and give up the throne) or

reject his proposal. Paradoxically, Angelique cannot be Queen and fulfill true love at the same time; in other words, power over the universe must be abandoned to achieve true love. Such an outcome would rightly provoke the feminist critique that the illusion of romantic love is an effective tool of patriarchal hegemony (Fujimoto, 1991). However, the fact that *Angelique* is an interactive game complicates matters, since 'true love' in a multiple ending system is far from being singular or absolute; as a result, the player can selectively experiment with other possibilities – she is able to 'flirt' with true love, something implausible within the confined, linear narrative text of non-interactive mediums (Newman, 2004). This was the main appeal of *Angelique*: to allow players to identify and play as females within a familiar genre structure adapted successfully from a popular female culture, and actually act out the romantic fantasies and desires that could only be imagined in non-interactive mediums.

To date, 11 different *Angelique* games have been published in various genres such as role-playing and puzzle. *Angelique* games are unified by the shared fictional universe, the dating features and romantic endings, and returning and additional characters; the latest *Angelique* game, *Angelique Etoile*, featured 19 love interests – the original Nine Guardians with the addition of 10 more characters added throughout the course of the series (Koei, 2008). This current situation of *Angelique* games indicates the limitations and shortcomings of the franchise's premises over time. The icons and sensibility of retro shoujo manga – the archetypical girly heroines, the emphasis on pure, sexless, tranquil romance and on a peaceful, stable setting – which at first played a credible role in familiarizing women gamers with gaming – also acted as restraining factors preventing new experiments. The recurring and additional characters demonstrate the harmful effects of avoiding experimentation and revitalization, and also the negative side of intimate publisher–fan networking and heavy reliance on voice actors. Because each character (and voice actor) has a steady fan base that Ruby Party had established and encouraged to such a degree that it could not risk alienating it, each new game resulted in accumulating yet another set of new characters, which unavoidably became repetitive and monotonous. This was probably why Ruby Party started another franchise in 2000 to attract a newer, younger audience whose tastes have moved far from retro shoujo manga – and also to overcome the limitations of *Angelique* and the women's game structure established six years before.

Harukanaru Tokino Nakade3

Harukanaru Tokino Nakade3 (which translates as *In a Distant Time*; henceforth *Haruka3*) is the third installment of the *Harukanaru Tokino Nakade* series, one of Ruby Party's major game franchises along with *Angelique* and *La Corda d'Oro* (Koei, 2008). The first *Haruka* game was published in 2000 for the Playstation. Each *Haruka* game shares the same system, premise and fictional universe, although some additions and improvements have been made over the series. Like *Angelique*, a shoujo manga artist – Toko Mizuno

Figure 6   *Haruka3* cover. © Koei Inc.

– was assigned as character designer of the series and to serialize the manga version of *Haruka* in the bimonthly shoujo manga magazine *LaLa DX* (Koei, 2008). Popular voice actors – mostly younger than those of *Angelique* – dubbed the voices and returned for each new *Haruka* game, although the characters changed in each series. This was a strategy to refresh each series and avoid the repetitiveness that was problematic in *Angelique*, while still retaining the voice actor fan base. System-wise, *Haruka* is an adventure game combined with a turn-based combat phase. The game is largely divided into two phases: the adventure phase, where the story progresses and the player can make choices that affect the story and affection meter of the characters, and the combat phase, encountered randomly while moving the player character from one destination to another in the map screen, which is required in order to progress the story. Upon reaching a certain destination, the adventure phase begins again, directing the player to yet another quest in a new destination.

The combat is turn-based, providing the player with given commands such as [Attack] [Spell] [Cheer] [Flee], etc. The [Cheer] and [Spell] commands can influence the affection meter of the characters (depending on whom the player chooses to cheer for or cast a spell with). Each *Haruka* game is set in an otherworld which strongly resembles Heian-era Japan,

Figure 7   Top left: the adventure phase; top right: the map screen; bottom left: the combat phase; bottom right: the [Spell] command activated. © Koei Inc.

except that gods, demons and sorcery exist (although *Haruka4* sets out to be a prequel to the series, featuring a world resembling the Yayoi period and ancient China). In every *Haruka* game, the player character is a high school girl transported from contemporary Japan, revered as the Priestess of the Dragon God, and entrusted to save the otherworld as the only human being capable of sealing off demons. She is also given the service of the Hachiyo, eight guardians destined to defend the Priestess (Koei, 2004). Naturally, the Hachiyo are the major love interests, just like the Guardians in *Angelique*. The difference is that achieving a greater cause/goal – saving the otherworld in *Haruka* – unlike winning the throne in *Angelique*, does not conflict with other goals. The heroine can 'save the world' and 'get the guy' at the same time – to be precise, the game is structured so that she has to save the world to get the guy. The game progresses as a linear adventure in *Haruka* and *Haruka2* in the main scenario, while character events appear as side quests accessible by increasing the score on the affection meter during the adventure phase or the combat phase. *Haruka3* offers a more diversified structure; the player's actions and character affection meters up to the fifth or sixth chapter can unlock a desired character's scenario, which then leads to additional chapters and multiple choices resulting in a number of bad endings and one good or 'true' ending. Either way, true love is only attainable by resolving the central conflict, whether it be demonic forces or a civil war.

Haruka3, published in December 2004 for the Playstation2, is import-
ant to discuss not simply because of its popularity (it was the first non-
Angelique Ruby Party game to produce its own spin-offs: *Ijayoi* and *Unmei
no Meikyu*) but because of how it departs from – yet partly retains – the struc-
tures and characteristics of women's games. Set during the Genpei War,[17] a
historical event much romanticized, dramatized and fictionalized throughout
Japanese history (Arnn, 1979), the *Haruka3* franchise is distinguished most
notably by its wartime background, the first heroine in the series to wield a
sword, numerous character deaths and time-traveling (Koei, 2004).

The Avatar

In the previous *Haruka* games, the heroines were unarmed and attacked
by emitting magic arrows, causing minor damage to the enemy during
battle. The heroine of *Haruka3* – official name Nozomi Kasuga – attacks
with a sword and can inflict credible damage on the enemy. She also differs
drastically from the previous heroines in terms of design; while the Dragon
Priestesses of *Haruka* and *Haruka2* wear a bright-colored *kariginu* and
noshi[18] over a modern-day school uniform skirt, Nozomi wears a black
jinbaori[19] over a pink kimono top and school uniform skirt, along with a pair
of ankle-length sneakers. While the heroines of the early games have short
hair and wear mild, smiling expressions with wide-open eyes and open lips,
Nozomi has longer hair, wears a determined facial expression with tightly
shut lips and focused eyes, and is drawn in an active posture, brandishing
a sword. Her design shows an interesting and elaborate attempt at depict-
ing an active, warrior heroine appropriate for an adventurous wartime
setting without overt sexualization and without losing the feminine, romantic
qualities of a shoujo heroine. While the jinbaori, sword, serious facial

Figure 8   From left to right: the heroines of *Haruka*, *Haruka2* and *Haruka3*.
© Koei Inc.

expression and sneakers embody traditionally 'masculine' characteristics, such as adventure, war and action, they are balanced with traditionally 'feminine' features represented by the long flowing hair, the flower-patterned pink kimono, the skirt, all blended harmoniously through Mizuno's graceful and elegant art style. Also of importance is Nozomi's personality and character. Due to the nature of the adventure genre, which places strong emphasis on narrative (Newman, 2004) and the elaborate storyline with multiple chapters and endings, the game contains an immense quantity of dialogue. This is why Nozomi was constructed as an intricately developed character, unlike Angelique, who was intentionally adapted from an archetype and given minimal dialogue for easy identification and immersion. Nozomi's speech pattern is also distinctive; she maintains only the basic acceptable form of feminine speech in Japanese society and avoids any overtly girly or 'ladylike' language spoken by Angelique and previous *Haruka* heroines. The character description of Nozomi in the *Haruka3* offical guidebook reads as follows:

> Nozomi is generally bright and positive, but hates to lose . . . once she decides on something she never changes her mind, sometimes causing her to quarrel with Kurou Yoshitsune, one of the Hachiyo. However, Nozomi's strong will also enables her to shape fate. (Koei, 2004: 7)

She is constructed as a likeable and easily approachable personality ('bright and positive') if somewhat willful ('hates to lose, never changes her mind, quarrels') although her strong will is ultimately more a virtue than a fault ('shape fate'). Nozomi is both a teenage girl and a warrior;[20] cheerful, honest, compassionate and occasionally coy, she has a strong sense of responsibility and morality,[21] which functions to further intensify narrative and emotional tension when she falls in love with complex characters such as a political assassin or the enemy commander.

Gameplay and Immersion

It can be argued that such a strong avatar character can place the gamer as a mere spectator; however, different levels of immersion can exist, and the particular interactive system of *Haruka3* is structured in a way that requires the player's constant 'investment' (Newman, 2004) throughout the gameplay. The combat phase plays a key role here; boss battles[22] are frequent in the climax or side quests of the game, hidden collaborative spells are attainable by deepening the Hachiyo's relationship with each other, and the experience points[23] gained by repeated victory can be distributed to the party characters to learn new 'skills'. Most skills are abilities that assist in the combat phase, such as increasing attack stats, but some skills are essential factors in developing deeper relationships with the characters. This is because the maximum value of the affection meter is locked at the beginning of the game: if the complete maximum value of the affection meter is 100, most characters began with 20 or 30 as the current maximum value.

The player can increase the maximum value only by completing various character-related side quests, not simply by increasing the score on affection meters. After increasing the maximum value – say, from 30 to 50, the player can finally push the affection meter up to 50 through interactions in the combat or adventure phase. The increased affection meter scores combined with appropriate dialogue choices in turn unlock yet more side quests and new chapters. Certain 'skills' are also required to trigger the side quests, or even crucial preconditions to achieve happy endings. The gamer has to invest considerable time and effort to collect experience points, learn new skills, increase the affection meter score and its maximum value, and make careful decisions based on her/his understanding of the storyline. Such intricately organized systems heighten player involvement and immersion (Kline et al., 2003), in turn leading to increased identification and gratification.

Additionally, Nozomi's carefully constructed character is not a limiting but a necessary, even a contributing factor to the game. Because the game focuses on dramatic romance within a highly narrative genre, the frequent and involving interaction between the heroine and her lover forms the central narrative arc – which is precisely why the avatar character is so important. Game characters, particularly avatars, are fundamentally ambiguous and complex because they are both the 'shoes' for the player to step into and an icon to be admired (Newman, 2004): subject and object concurrently. Nozomi is established as an easily identifiable heroine – a modern-day young woman, confident and honest about her feelings – who is controlled by the player throughout the combat phase and adventure phase. Simultaneously, she is constructed as an admirable and desirable character with heroic qualities such as resourcefulness and leadership in the battlefield, spiritual powers, courage and an iron will. The player is located both as Nozomi living out her adventures, and as a spectator watching a warrior heroine's dramatic romantic affairs. She is both the identifiable subject and desirable object – and, most crucially, a female avatar whose femininity is neither downplayed nor overtly sexualized.

Narrative Structure

Nozomi's strong personality was perhaps necessary considering the plotline and characters of *Haruka3*. She needs to overcome numerous obstacles to achieve love, as the Hachiyo in *Haruka3* are all based on historical or legendary figures of the Genpei War, many of whom meet tragic ends. One example is Kurou Yoshitsune of the Minamoto clan, a popular figure throughout Japanese literature, theatre and visual art (Arnn, 1979). Yoshitsune was the younger brother of Yoritomo – head of the Minamoto clan – who led a successful military campaign against the Taira clan but was banished and driven to suicide by the suspicious Yoritomo (Arnn, 1979). Kurou Yoshitsune in *Haruka3* also meets the same tragic fate unless the player chooses to form a strong bond with Yoshitsune, makes him more cautious in his moves, assists his campaigns and ultimately confronts

Yoritomo himself. As demonstrated in the case of Kurou Yoshitsune, character deaths occur frequently throughout the game, heightening the dramatic effect, intensifying tension and immersing the player more deeply into the narrative. The player is capable of altering history through the 'fate over-writing system' (運命上書きシステム), one of the new features of *Haruka3* that drastically distinguishes it from its predecessors and fully utilizes the dynamic drama of the Genpei War (Koei, 2004). This system can be unlocked after completing the game for the first time. The first gameplay proceeds in a singular linear narrative, with only one main story and ending. Upon arriving in the otherworld, Nozomi joins the Minamoto army to defeat the Taira clan's demon soldiers. However, most of the Hachiyo are lost or killed in battle, the capital is burned and sacked by the Taira clan, and Nozomi is transported back to her own time by the Dragon God. Through this traumatic outcome she acquires the power to travel across time (hence the title *In a Distant Time*). Time-traveling is expressed in the game as a new option allowing the player to move between chapters[24] regardless of chronological order and additional choices in the adventure phase due to Nozomi's knowledge of the future.

The fate overwriting system allows the player to 'simulate' a possible future or influence the narrative – such as opening new chapters – and developing relationships. For instance, to deepen relationship with a character who appears late in Chapter 4, the player acquires information on his whereabouts during the timeline of Chapter 1, then moves back to Chapter 1 to encounter him much earlier. This concept of 'shaping fate' can also be interpreted as the masculine space of medieval war deconstructed and rearranged within the framework of a 21st-century female genre structure. Most female figures in the Genpei War stories are described as victims of fate, political tools through arranged marriages, war widows, tragic heroines mourning the loss of their husbands, lovers and sons (Arnn, 1979). The first gameplay which forces Nozomi into the tragic heroine position is essentially set out to demonstrate the archetypical Genpei War heroine narrative – while establishing it as the very antithesis of *Haruka3*. By taking a popular historical narrative apart and challenging its gender conventions, the

Figure 9   Left: an additional choice unavailable in the first gameplay appears from the second gameplay; right: selecting chapters. © Koei Inc.

narrative structure of *Haruka3* builds up to maximize catharsis of the central drama and romance.

Media Influences

Like *Angelique*, the presence of shoujo manga is abundantly evident in the *Haruka* series. The otherworld fantasy is recurrent throughout Japanese pop culture, perhaps the most famous shoujo example being Yuu Watase's 1992 bestseller *Fushigi Yuugi*, about a modern-day schoolgirl transported to an Asiatic otherworld and designated as the Priestess of the Vermilion Bird. The warrior heroine is also a popular theme throughout the history of shoujo manga; *Princess Knight* by Osamu Tezuka in 1954, *The Rose of Versailles* by Riyoko Ikeda in 1972, *Basara* by Yumi Tamura in 1990, and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* by Chiho Saito in 1996 all featured fighting heroines in male guise (Yonezawa, 2007). However, the Genpei War backdrop seems to reflect trends in Japanese mainstream publication and television rather than shoujo manga; 2004 and 2005 saw the 'Yoshitsune boom', with increased publication of Yoshitsune and Genpei War-related topics (*Yomiuri Shinbun*, 2005), with the much-anticipated historical drama *Yoshitsune* airing on NHK and games centering on the Genpei Wars being published, such as *GENJI*, *Yoshitsune Eiyuuden*, *Yoshitsuneki* and *Shoujo Yoshitsuneden2*. The fact that Nozomi is a warrior heroine but not in male guise also distinguishes *Haruka3* from the traditions of shoujo manga up to the 1990s, possibly reflecting a discursive development over the issue of femininity in Japanese female cultures: the woman and the warrior identities reconciled and co-existing in harmony without the need of a mediating male identity. Shoujo manga and voice actors still remain important factors in women's games, as female fans of animation and manga mostly unfamiliar with games form a majority of Ruby Party's audience demographics (Matsushita, 2008); but *Haruka3* also incorporates popular trends in mainstream culture and traditional historical narratives, while simultaneously utilizing and improving on the genre codes and archetypes of shoujo manga in a way only electronic games are capable of.

Conclusion

Women's games incorporate the so-called 'girl-appealing' factors discovered by empirical research in the girls' game movement and the familiar codes of shoujo manga, a prevalent female culture; in other words, they share some common aspects with Purple Moon or Mattel, yet are positioned differently in the Japanese gaming industry, and interact in a unique way with the fans. Unlike the girls' game movement, Koei was devoid of any feminist, political or educational intentions, nor did they carry out extensive quantitative research; instead, the company was merely experimenting in a largely unexplored market. Like Mattel, Koei was motivated primarily by commercial interests and thus actively utilized established codes of femininity and heterosexual fantasy. However, the Ruby Party team was composed entirely of female programmers[25] – just as 80 percent of the Purple Moon Software

staff were women (Kline et al., 2003). *Angelique* relied heavily on images and fantasies of shoujo manga, although the structures and mechanics also functioned to increase player identification with the avatar and the virtual romance within the game narrative. At the same time, the interactivity of the game enabled the player to move beyond identifying with a female avatar to playing with various possibilities within the narrative of the heterosexual romantic fantasy. Women's games in Japan undeniably exist as a local niche market, something Adams (1998) might have criticized as 'limiting' and 'ghettoizing'; however, the very enclosed nature of a niche market can be potentially empowering as the relationship between publisher and audience is closer and more fluid than that for major bestsellers. More precisely, the publisher must maintain a close relationship with the audience exactly because of the 'limited and ghettoized' niche market; fan loyalty and networking, such as word of mouth, are crucial factors that can impact sales and market reception. The interaction between *Angelique* and fan culture demonstrates the importance of audience networking from the early stages of women's games. Within this context, women are not simply the normative audience invited to identify readily with the female avatar, but the absolute audience. 'Identification and socialization' also occur at two meaningful levels: identifying with the female avatar and socializing romantically with the game characters, and identification and socialization within a female gaming community. Women's games are significant not simply because their existence potentially empowers the player with the understanding that she can be the normative, dominant audience, but also because she can experiment with and enact various female identities and female fantasies through the medium of electronic games. The case of *Haruka3* shows that women's games can actively utilize and deconstruct gender and genre conventions in female and mainstream cultures, develop identifiable and desirable female avatars and narrative structures, and offer pleasure and fulfillment through a unique type of adventure and romance probably only available on an electronic gaming format designed specifically for women. Furthermore, women's games can be understood as expansions of female culture into the realm of electronic gaming capable of enhancing both areas with their philosophy, perspective, gender-awareness and diversity.

Notes

1. The first Japanese women's game was *Angelique* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, developed and published by Koei in 1994.

2. Although there is much dispute over whether the Barbie software should be considered as 'games' (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998).

3. *Rockett's New School* has also been criticized for 'perpetuating girls' insecurities about their looks', 'capitalizing on girls' fears about middle school and adolescence', and also ethnic stereotyping (GREAT, 1998).

4. Another reason for taking the space to introduce this definition in detail is because women's games were never officially released in non-Asian markets.

5. Animate (http://www.animate.co.jp/), Messe San'ou (http://www.messe.gr.jp/

boys/) and Toranoana (http://www.toranoana.jp/bl/index2.html) all have links to anime goods and games for women.

6. Women's games are designated keywords on both Surpara (http://www.surpara.com/) and Gamers Terminal (http://www.gamersterminal.com/) search terms.

7. *B's Log* (http://www.enterbrain.co.jp/bslog/) presents itself as a 'Gaming magazine for ladies', while *Cool-B* (http://www.ohzora.co.jp/sf/cool-b/) calls itself the 'boys' love & otomē game magazine for girls'.

8. Shoujo manga (少女マンガ), which literally translates as girls' comics, is one of the major genres of Japanese comics. Shoujo manga is usually characterized by its elaborate and decorative art style and concentration on the flow of feeling and emotion (Thorn, 2004). While early shoujo manga were melodramas centered on an unfortunate girl, or a fantasy romance set in a vaguely Western setting, the genre has evolved throughout the years to incorporate daring expressions and complex themes challenging traditional notions of female identity and gender. The 1970s and 1980s are considered the height of shoujo manga both in terms of popularity and diversity (Yonezawa, 2007).

9. Voice actors in Japan enjoy a certain celebrity status, and some have dedicated fan bases (Patten, 2004).

10. Called 'yaoi' or 'boys love', this genre originated from 1970s experimental shoujo manga. Yaoi focuses on romantic and/or sexual relationships between male characters, and is created and consumed almost exclusively by women who identify themselves as heterosexual. A Western equivalent would be the slash genre (Jenkins, 2006; Thorn, 2004). In yaoi games, the avatar is male and dates male characters. Since the emergence of yaoi in women's games, heterosexual women's games have been distinguished as otome games (乙女ゲーム, which translates as 'maidens' games'), while yaoi women's games have been called 'boys' love games'.

11. Repeated surveys and feedback from female employees of all departments were crucial in the creation of *Angelique*'s male characters (Matsushita, 2008; Tanizaki, 1995), the central appeal of the franchise.

12. Cosplay is an abbreviation of 'costume play', and refers to the act of dressing up as characters from animation, comics, video games and other mediums (Patten, 2004).

13. Neo Romance is simply a branding of Koei's women's games, although it could also be read as Koei's attempt to establish itself as the pioneer of the field – 'Neo' Romance – and to distinguish their women's game titles from the historical war games for which Koei is most famous (the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* franchise, *Dynasty Warriors* franchise, *Taikou Risshiden* franchise, etc.).

14. Konami published *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* for the Playstation2 in 2002, a spin-off of its innovative and popular dating simulation franchise *Tokimeki Memorial* (published by Konami in 2008). The game was a huge success, and a sequel was released in 2006. Capcom published *Full House Kiss* in 2006 and its sequel in 2007 (Capcom, 2008). A shoujo manga artist was hired to design the characters and serialize the manga version of *Full House Kiss* in *Hana to Yume*, a prominent shoujo manga magazine. Both companies also publish periodicals featuring product news and fan participation, and have capitalized heavily on voice actors, releasing drama and song CDs and holding voice actor events.

15. *Candy Candy* was a highly popular novel, shoujo manga, and animated series during the late 1970s, written by Kyoko Mizuki and adapted to manga format by Yumiko Igarashi. The series features the romance and adventures of a blonde, freckled, good-natured American orphan girl named Candice in early 20th-century England and America (Misaki, 2003).

16. The manga version of *Candy Candy* went out of print in 1999 due to a lawsuit between Mizuki and Igarashi over image rights, which Mizuki won in 1999. As a result obtaining copyright for images of *Candy Candy* is difficult, which is why I have substituted my hand-drawn copies of Igarashi's drawings. This method to avoid copyright infringement is permitted and is commonly adapted in Japanese publication, most notably by manga critic Fusanosuke Natsume (Natsume, 1992).

17. The Genpei War (1180–85) was a conflict between the Minamoto and Taira clans, marking the end of the Heian era and the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate under the victorious Minamoto clan (Arnn, 1979).

18. *Kariginu* (狩衣) and *noshi* (直衣) are round-collar cloaks worn by court nobles (Hays and Hays, 1992).

19. *Jinbaori* (陣羽織) is a sleeveless war jacket worn by generals (Hays and Hays, 1992).

20. Unlike the Dragon Priestesses of the previous *Haruka* games, who were revered simply as spiritual figures, Nozomi is respected and feared as a war hero with spiritual powers.

21. At the beginning of the game, the first thing Nozomi does in the otherworld is to grab a sword and fight a demon soldier who is about to attack a child.

22. The boss is 'an extremely common character or mechanism in video games . . . essentially an end of level, or sometimes inter-level, guardian that must be defeated in order to progress to the next level' (Newman, 2004: 77). A boss battle refers to the combat with the boss character, and requires more skill, time and strategy than the average enemy character.

23. An experience point is a unit of measurement used in many role-playing games (RPGs) and role-playing video games to quantify a player character's progression through the game. Experience points are generally awarded for the completion of quests, overcoming obstacles and opponents, and for successful role-playing (Barton, 2007).

24. The game is divided into numerous chapters arranged in chronological order; for instance Chapter 1 begins with Nozomi's arrival in the otherworld, and Chapter 4 is when all the Hachiyo assemble. In the first gameplay, the chapters proceed in chronological order; but from the second gameplay, the player is able to shift through previously played chapters. Additionally, the player can quit the chapter mid-way; in other words, she/he does not have to finish a previously completed chapter to proceed to the next chapter.

25. Currently, Ruby Party has expanded to include collaboration from male staff in the 3D graphics and marketing departments; however, the main staff in charge of planning and designing the games still remain exclusively female (Matsushita, 2008).

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