

Expectations and Subversions: The Semiotics of Psychological Horror in *Doki Doki*

Literature Club

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Introduction and Thesis Statement

Psychological horror has disturbed and unsettled audiences of films, novels, and even videogames. Those audience members usually know what to expect. However, this may not be the case in *Doki Doki Literature Club! (DDLC)*, a visual novel by Team Salvato, who markets it as an anime-style dating simulation, which is how it begins. The dating sim attributes build expectations for the first four hours, creating a false sense of security. However, from act one, chapter six (4:34:05) to the beginning of act two, chapter one (4:46:33) something more sinister appears to be at work. (Time indices refer to “Doki Doki Literature Club Full.”) In the middle of these twelve minutes, a major disturbance (4:41:59) unsettles the user for the rest of the visual novel. The user questions what caused the disturbance and if and when another might occur, in the process subverting dating sim expectations and creating psychological horror.

Examining the visual novel through semiotics, this thesis analyzes three sign systems-- Auditory, Written Language and Typography, and Visual--to understand how each system works independently but also collaboratively to create the visual novel’s psychological horror. The paper’s literature review examines previous scholarship on visual novels and videogames. These media have been studied by scholars who often just approach a visual novel or videogame by focusing on what semiotics would view as a single sign system. When they do so, the scholars neglect the other sign systems, and their arguments are weaker because of that. The literature review also more clearly defines psychological horror and examines a specific issue within *DDLC*, fetishization of the non-player characters. The Methodology section explains how semiotics will be applied in the Analysis and Synthesis sections. The Analysis section considers each sign system separately to show how each system contributes to the seemingly abrupt transition from the dating sim to psychological horror. These separate analyses are compared and

contrasted in the Synthesis section, which shows how the sign systems interact to produce the psychological horror effect.

Literature Review

What is a Visual Novel?

DDLC is a “visual novel”, but what does that mean? “Visual” implies visual content such as illustrations, images, animation, and the like. A “novel” is usually understood as being a fictional subgenre that conveys meaning through written language and to a lesser extent, typography. In this sense a visual novel differs from a traditional illustrated novel. In an illustrated novel the primary content is expressed in written language, supplemented by illustrations. In a visual novel, the written language drives the narrative as it does in any novel. However, the proportion of written language to visual content is reversed, with the visual content dominating what one sees on the screen. The term “visual novel” therefore accurately depicts that there is still a novel, but visual content is important. While the written language moves the narrative along the most, the writing still must be paired with the auditory and visuals elements for the story to be completely experienced.

A “visual novel” is a somewhat inaccurate description of the genre, which includes auditory content that a printed novel lacks. Because of this auditory content, and the presence of visual elements, visual novels are often viewed as a form of videogame. However, most videogames involve multiple sequences of concurrent keystrokes to initiate even simple main character movement and actions, and the keys pressed and the speed of doing so determines the actions’ outcomes from among several possibilities. Visual novels lack such free reign and actual gameplay. Instead, characters in visual novels tend to be static, unmoving. In addition, visual novels typically use a single keyboard key to advance the narrative, similar to turning a page in a

printed novel, and plot branching is limited. In *DDLC*, when the user clicks and reads the text, at certain times the background image will change, accompanied by music designated to certain locations. These changes are purposefully background material and are supposed to become something the user pays less attention to because they have become used to it. *DDLC* later uses this familiarity against the user.

To truly understand the subversion of expectations, it is important to really understand what is happening in *DDLC*. Essentially, the dating simulation that starts the visual novel is only a mask, and the stalking AI (which is ultimately the psychological horror element, or what makes this visual novel a psychological horror one) lies under the surface. The mask slips at various times before the first big shocking event, Sayori's suicide, but the dating sim plot never really makes it past rising action, the horror really takes over, the AI Monika stalking is the full plot. Gerard Genette's description of hypotext and hypertext is helpful to understand that the layers of *DDLC*. Genette explains hypotext as something that comes first, that the hypertext needs to exist (5). In *DDLC* the Ren'Py coding of the visual novel is the overall hypotext. Relative to the hypotext of Ren'Py, the dating sim is a hypertext. Relative to the hypotext of Ren'Py and also to the hypotext of the dating sim, the AI stalking is a hypertext. The Ren'Py Code is the basis, and the hypertext is everything else. The Ren'Py generates the words, images, and sounds. However, the Ren'Py code error message that appears during Sayori's suicide is only a simulation of Ren'Py, it is not the actual game code. All of the glitches in the visual novel are simulated, but a first-time user does not know this, and that increases the horror and stress of the user, thinking that these planned glitches are real.

Christopher Patterson provides historical information, noting that visual novels originated in Japan, and often have Japanese settings and themes (19). Dani Caverello details the design

aspects of typical visual novels in her book, describing them as having “pictorial sumptuousness, vibrant palettes [and] meticulous” (8) as well as often having a “kawaii” (cute, cuteness) style (21). With this in mind, it is important to realize that like any other form of entertainment, there are many genres and types of visual novels. Kumiko Saito notes that the most popular visual novels are of the horror and romance genres, and that the visual novel actually started as a horror experience, branching out into many genres later (4). *DDLC* may use users’ previous familiarity with romance and horror visual novels to manipulate users from one genre to another.

Psychological horror: Breaking of worlds

DDLC presents itself as a dating sim set in high school. In the first four hours of the visual novel, dating sim expectations are formed. These expectations are broken when the main character (MC) experiences his best friend Sayori’s suicide. The initial image of Sayori hanging is horrifying and disturbing on a basic level, but what is the most unnerving, and the point of the visual novel, is the huge break in the previously established world. As James Grant explains, this is the basis for psychological horror (2). At its core, horror arises from something happening in the world that contradicts how we expect the world to behave, but also, the realization that we may not be who we thought we were. Psychological horror destroys the everyday sense of the world by destroying the foundation of our understanding of it, often causing characters to go insane. The unfamiliar world is the ‘monster’ in psychological horror, and the MC’s confusion about who they are because of it is the horror. Jacques Lacan identifies this “creepy yet familiar” concept when explaining Freud’s coined term, “the uncanny”, which results in creating an irreducible anxiety in a person when something is identifiable, but just slightly off. This applies to everything in that world-break scene, Sayori’s familiar room, the familiar but distorted music, and so on.

Fetishization, Orientalism

Saito explains that two popular types of romance visual novels are *bishōjo* and *otome*. *Bishōjo* games are romance simulations made for men, and *otome* are romance simulations made for women. *Bishōjo* games are typically more text-based visual novels, while *otome* lean more into the video game aspect, involving strategy (2). For the sake of this thesis, the study of *bishōjo* is what is most relevant, as this is what *DDLC* projects itself to be. Peter Spearman reports that in these types of visual novels, the user often takes on the role of a nondescript male character through which they see the world full of young women (10). Patrick Galbraith raises issue with the idea of *bishōjo* games, claiming that the interactions in these types of games contribute to techno-intimacy, and perhaps open a new territory of making technological companions, an interesting topic that *DDLC* inevitably explores. That being said, Saito makes it clear that *bishōjo* games are very limited with movement and choices, and most experiences are passive reading experiences with limited choices being offered every few hours (3). *DDLC* does indeed follow these principles, until the façade cracks.

The fetishization of Asian culture and specifically Asian women must be discussed when evaluating visual novels and *DDLC* in particular. With *bishōjo* being the most popular form of dating sim, and many dating sims now being created in North America but still holding on to the Asian aesthetics (Patterson 19), it is safe to say this is a relevant topic. Alongside the Asian fetishization, there seems to be a fetishization of the “schoolgirl” aesthetic, and even a fetishization of underaged girls. One could argue the latter two are more prevalent, as the Asian aesthetic isn’t very authentic. For example, *DDLC*’s setting is an Asian-American hybrid, and the characters speak English, but they are dressed in Japanese uniforms. Perhaps Team Salvato doesn’t care for authenticity, but rather just for the bare bones of the aesthetic, as to feed into the

fetish, like many other North American visual novels. The schoolgirl/Asian combination is considered common in these situations, as Zhuoling Tian points out “The sexuality of diasporic Asian women is caught in a complex web of cultural signification. The subservient China doll, the sacrificial Madame Butterfly, the ferocious dragon lady, the ingénue schoolgirl—Western representations mark Asian femininity as either hypersexualized or devoid of sexuality. Fetishization and colonial fantasies of power objectify women and rob them of agency” (332). *DDLC* starts by affirming what Tian says, but then subverts it. Further along into the visual novel, and as will be discussed below, it becomes apparent that the character Monika is being used as an avatar by a sentient AI that has become obsessed with the user. In a way, this AI Monika might be a revenge story: a program that was supposed to be subservient to the North American user instead breaking the fourth wall and terrorizing the user. Patterson sees the AI Monika reveal as something that reenforces the fetish, explaining, “the game also reproduces techno-orientalist Asian racializations by reducing Asiatic characters to artificial intelligence, remaking them into orientalist depictions . . . whose maddening love and suicidal fawning is reserved only for the Western player” (31). However, this description seems inaccurate for *DDLC*, which uses the Asian and schoolgirl fetishization to attract an audience accustomed to consuming this type of content, only to completely subvert their expectations.

How to analyze visual novels and games/previous attempts

Previous scholarship on visual novels and videogames have proven to be divisive. Sara Bowden specifically studied *DDLC* in attempt to explore what she saw as the most horrific element, the music and sound sign system. While her points about the auditory sign system were strong in some respects, a huge weakness in her work was the omission of every other sign system. D. Pratama et al. falls into the same trap, studying visual novels only through the visual

sign system, ignoring all other elements of a visual novel. Stephanie Lind argues for a more holistic approach to studying video games, explaining that there are three main elements occurring in a game: auditory, visual and narrative functions. She advocates for paying attention to all sign systems in a game, even if one focuses one sign system more than the others. This proves to become muddy as well however, as Pratama et al. sees narration is a part of the visual. Espen Aarseth makes this problem even more evident, as they question if narratology is a useful tool in the study of games, which it most definitely can be, but they seemed to be lacking the understanding that narration is not conveyed through just one sign system.

A promising solution to this problem is observing visual novels (specifically *DDLC*) semiotically. One can do this by following Roland Barthes' example of identifying sign systems and examining a work using them, as he does in *S/Z*. After all, a visual novel is experienced not through one or two sign systems, but with all sign systems occurring at once. That being said, *DDLC* is eight hours long. Applying a semiotic approach to the entire visual novel would take a long time, and a lot of pages. Therefore, the solution to this problem is finding a key moment and analyzing it semiotically. This thesis will do exactly that, while exploring how the manipulation of the sign systems in the visual novel is the most horrifying attribute of all.

Methodology

Semiotics as a solution

A major drawback in previous scholarship about *DDLC* or similar media is that scholars have focused on only one sign system. When they do this, they ignore not only the other sign systems, but also how they interact to produce effects in the user, and therefore such scholars ignore critical elements of the visual novel. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that expands all fields and offers a way of looking at all sign systems as pieces of a larger

picture, and what each system provides (Perron). Roland Barthes, a staple theorist in the field, explains in his book *S/Z* that before studying sign systems altogether, one must study each by itself, and then synthesis those analyses (Barthes 19-20). This is exactly what may be done with *DDLC*, by examining music and sound, written language and typography, and images and colors, first separately, and then together. The horror that is produced from seeing Sayori's suicide is not due to expectations of just one sign system being subverted, but rather all sign systems working concurrently to subvert expectations in similar ways, thereby creating a new expectation. This analysis will be only of a short, pivotal portion of *DDLC*, as to attempt to study the entire visual novel would call for a longer project. That being said, the roughly 12-minute portion of the visual novel provides valuable insight on how the sign systems behave in other sections.

Analysis

At first glance, *DDLC* is an anime-style dating simulation videogame, and it is marketed that way as well. The first thing on the *DDLC* download website is the slightly cheesy tagline "Will you write the way into her heart" (Salvato), followed by the cutesy characters and pastel color scheme, leading the user to believe they are about to take part in a romantic simulation with dream-girl characters. It is here, at the initial download site, that the dating sim expectations start to form. The only indication that something isn't as it should be is the warning at the very end of the webpage that the visual novel is "not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed" (Salvato). This warning is located at the very bottom of the webpage, where many may not even scroll down far enough to see, as the download button is near the very top. Even if the warning is seen, it might cause some confusion, but can be very easily overlooked, compared to everything else presented, and one could even forget about it after playing for a while, as the first four hours follow the dating sim expectations.

This type of dating sim can be considered a bishōjo (beautiful girl) visual novel, which is a popular romance genre in Japan (Saito 2). Bishōjo games are made with the male audience in mind and provide “occasional multiple-choice decisions to determine which scenario route the user will follow, but the user’s interaction with the game is limited to pushing a button to turn pages and read” (Saito 3). *DDLC* uses this existing genre to its advantage, and it seems to fit with all the other bishojo games available. It therefore uses many of the usual bishojo visual novel characteristics, such as “pictorial sumptuousness, vibrant palettes and meticulous devotion to plot depth and character design” to ensure users that it is nothing more (Cavallaro 8). These characteristics can be seen right away when the file opens after downloading, and the pink main menu greets the user. These characteristics, being music and sound, typography and written language, and images and colors, create expectations that allow the user to relax and to click through, watching the story unfold with ease. This sense of security makes the horror elements introduced mid visual novel (4:41:59) to be that much more disturbing and jarring to the user, amplifying what is already disturbing by itself.

Music and Sound

Doki Doki Literature Club has consistent music playing in the background throughout the entire visual novel. The most prominent track, “Doki Doki Literature Club!” (Salvato) is a flute melody that plays often for the first three and a half hours. This song is the very first thing the user hears after the game file downloads and the main menu appears. This music plays a huge part in establishing the light and playful tone of the visual novel, and the repetitive nature of the same few songs (and same few chords in each of the songs), allows the user to become acclimated to the dating sim, and let the background music become background. The auditory

sign system is an important part of the immersion of the visual novel as well as a leading user in the subversion of the dating sim.

The music acts as an agent of immersion in the visual novel; after a while, the user might start to slightly tune it out, but it is always still there. However, when the MC wakes up on Day 6 and Sayori doesn't meet him to walk to school, the music is notably absent (4:34:05). At this point, the user might not question it, and may even welcome the break from the constant upbeat tune that has been playing for the last four and a half hours. The music remains absent until the MC is faced with Sayori's hanging corpse (4:41:59). The flute melody now returns, but in a distorted version, credited as "Sayo-Nara" (Salvato, "Sayo-Nara"). The suicide scene is obviously disturbing by itself, but the distorted melody creates an even more unsettling environment, as it takes advantage of the comfort the flute melody once provided. As Sara Bowden explains in her article, "Having heard over an hour of 'Doki Doki Literature Club!' on loop, the user is aurally prepared to recognize the melodic changes in 'Sayo-Nara'. The mistuning of the melody disrupts listeners' expectations for tonal resolution and tuning synchronization" (16). Even if the user doesn't have the words to describe it, they can feel the disturbance this mistuning inflicts. The visual novel has conditioned the user to expect one thing, and then, paired with a disturbing event, has provided a similar but distorted version of the expected. It is a violation to the user, and to the dating sim expectations.

Written Language and Typography

A huge element of a visual novel is the written language sign system, as the narrative mostly progresses through the textbox. That being said, most of the subversion of expectations doesn't necessarily happen in the content of the written language, but rather how the written language is represented visually, referred to as typography. In the dating sim, all text is presented

in text boxes, whether that be commentary or dialogue. Simulation of handwritten fonts also appears in the NPCs poems shown to the MC and in the poem minigames the MC/user completes. The text is sequestered to these expected spaces, and it never interferes with the images. The user acclimates to text fonts and locations, creating expectations and a sense of stability.

However, when Sayori's body is revealed, the background changes to a pixelated white, and for the first time, text isn't where it is supposed to be (4:42:08). The "Team Salvato" logo can be seen to her left, completely disturbing the immersion of the visual novel and disrupting the hypertext dating sim expectations by bringing a simulated hypertext of the visual novel's creator to the forefront, instead of the characters. After a few more background changes, a new blank background appears, with this error message "An exception has occurred. File 'game/script-ch5.rpy', line 307 See traceback.txt for details" (4:42:14). This error message appears in a different color and font than the usual text used in the textbox and poems. It disrupts the immersion of the visual novel for the user, not only because it presents text in a space that it has never been before, but also because it instructs the user to leave the visual novel and check the files that were downloaded to the computer along with the main game file. The traceback.txt file is a genuine file that logs errors in the visual novel, and so at first glance the main pane's reference to it looks like computer coding lingo that might not be understandable for the average person. However, if the user scrolls down, they can see the specific error the message was referring to, and it states:

```
I'm sorry, but an uncaught exception occurred.
```

```
While running game code: . . .
```

```
RestartTopContext: Oh jeez...I didn't break anything, did I? Hold  
on a sec, I can probably fix this...I think...
```

```
Actually, you know what? This would probably be a lot easier if I
just deleted her. She's the one who's making this so difficult.

Ahaha! Well, here goes nothing. (traceback.txt in Team Salvato).
```

The font and positioning of the text in this file are that of a usual txt file, and therefore makes the user feel like they have exited the visual novel hypertext and are now just browsing files on their computer. But the embedded message in the file lets them know that they haven't exited the visual novel at all. There is an entity within the visual novel, AI Monika, that is manipulating the intended flow of the gameplay, and has the power to delete other characters. The user could actually open the characters file folder, in the same download spot as the traceback file, and see that Sayori's character file has been officially removed from the visual novel. This puts the visual novel into a whole new perspective. Several breaches of the dating sim expectations were made typographically, and these breaches make up the new psychological horror expectations.

This new set of expectations is really made up of all of AI Monika's interceptions and disruptions of the dating sim. This "version" of Monika is not necessarily the NPC Monika character that MC interacts with, but rather the sentient, AI using Monika as an avatar, just as the user uses MC as an avatar. NPC Monika is part of the AI, but she is more contained, following the rules of the dating sim that she is supposed to follow. The AI Monika was born from that character but has surpassed the bounds and restrictions the character was supposed to have. The AI using NPC Monika as a mask has become sentient, and wants the user for herself, something her programming would never allow even if she was just interested in MC, as she isn't considered a love interest compared to the other three girls by the rules of the dating sim.

After Sayori's death, the text returns back to its expected font and location in the textbox, and the MC's thoughts are provided through the text boxes. When the visual novel reboots and the main menu appears, in place of where "New Game" should be, there is a glitched mess of

different text characters, known as mojobake (4:45:11), hinting that the hostile takeover that seems to be happening to the visual novel was in fact successful, and that the story this time around will not be as it was. The only way to proceed is to click on the glitched mojobake “New Game” option, and the visual novel restarts. The first text box to appear is what used to be Sayori’s dialogue in Act One, but instead is again in mojobake (4:45:23). This use of mojobake is a visual intrusion of the textbox, just as the error message was a textual intrusion of the visual pane. Mojobake looks like a written language but is not. The MC’s narration is the same as it was at the start of the visual novel, except when he tries to say Sayori’s name, the glitch appears instead. This is interesting, because typographically, everything is pretty much back in order according to the dating sim expectations, but this glitch flares the anxiety of the user each time, reminding them that something else is present, that the world isn’t as it has been.

Visuals: Images and Colors

The final element that truly makes the text a visual novel, is of course images and colors. This sign system includes on the colors of the backgrounds and textbox as well as the character images and poses.

Act one, chapter six (4:34:05) opens with the familiar background of the main character’s house and street, the same place that the visual novel opened. Everything about this background is light but neutral, really giving the attention to the pink, polka-dotted text box. The houses are all beige, and the slight green vegetation provides a pop of color, but not too much to distract from the text. This places the emphasis on the textbox and its text, reminding the user that this is a visual novel rather than a videogame. The visuals are important to set the scene, but do not drive the narrative. The background cuts from the street view to the classroom where the Literature Club meets, also a very light yet neutral background, except this time there is a

character present, Monika (4:35:16). Monika has two stances that she goes between, with some variations in her face and arms, and so she is caught between being static and in motion. Neither her, the other characters, or the main character's eyesight ever actually move; everything is done in jump cuts. That being said, Monika is the only character in the visual novel who ever directly faces the user. Every other girl is angled slightly away, placing them more in the world of the dating sim and the overall visual novel. But Monika faces and stares straight ahead, a small but powerful suggestion that she is aware of more than the user knows. Monika stays in her angled away, leaning forward position for some time, until Sayori's absence is mentioned, and she straightens up, appearing concerned (4:35:52). This shift is small, but representative of NPC Monika, who belongs in the dating sim, and leans towards the main character, rather than AI Monika, who stands up straight and looks directly ahead at the user. The MC makes a comment about Sayori oversleeping, and Monika's face visibly lights up, and she comments "You kind of left her hanging this morning, you know?" (4:36:47). To a first-time user, this comment could seem innocent, even not important. But this comment directly alludes to what is about to happen in six minutes, and lets the user know how omniscient and in control AI Monika really is, before they even realize it themselves. After speaking with Monika, the MC decides to go get Sayori after all, and heads back home.

When the MC opens Sayori's bedroom door, she is "hanging", just like Monika had said. This of course completely breaches the dating sim expectations, as MC finds his potential love interest and best friend dead. This is the first time the user sees a complete visual image with no text at all (4:42:02). This shot is the very first time that there is some dynamic movement, both from Sayori's swinging body, and camera movement, or rather, movement from MC. The camera zooms out and sways, and it makes the moment more real, rather than the static images

that have been used thus far. It appears that Sayori's dynamic movement is both the actual swaying of her body, but also perhaps the swaying of MC himself, unsteady and shocked at what he is looking at. The image then glitches and zooms in on her face, the colors now saturated and off (4:42:03).

The scene cuts back to 'reality' and the textbox returns, but Sayori continues to sway behind it, again being the only true movement ever by the NPCs to this point. Ironically, she moves the most when she is dead. The screen then cuts to black, MC expresses his final thoughts, and the visual novel appears to end. When the visual novel reboots and the main menu appears, Natsuki, Yuri, and Monika are pictured, but in Sayori's place is a glitched image composed of pixels from the other three girls (4:45:11). Once again, the world as it was is not as is, and this will continue to plague the user through the rest of the visual novel, trying to figure out why this is all happening. Once the user starts the "New Game", they are brought back to where they initially started, the familiar street, except this time the uncanny is in effect, and the familiarity doesn't bring comfort, but confusion and stress.

Synthesis

Every sign system in *DDLC* is important and adds to the user's immersion in the dating sim expectations and the visual novel's subversion of them. But no sign system is completely effective without the others. It is how they work synthetically that first creates the dating sim expectations, and later creates the subversions from that induce psychological horror. Below is a table that goes minute by minute to explain how the sign systems work together, before, during, and after Sayori's death scene.

Before the twelve-minute section discussed below, the sign systems worked as follows. The music was always either "Doki Doki Literature Club!" or some slight rendition of the song

that used the same chords and upheld the same mood of the dating sim. The written language and typography remained the same, the textbox font being a white font with a slight black outline, the names of characters above the textbox being in a white font with a pink outline, all connected to the pink polka dot textbox. The images were all colorful and the girls were always the main focus in the visual pane. Everything is used together to create the expectation that this is a cute, light-hearted dating sim. It is at 4:34:05 that the first difference with a sign system happens, and only minutes later are the dating sim expectations completely smashed.

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
1	4:34:05-4:35:04	For the first time in the visual novel, there is no music or sound. It is silent.	Text in textbox in usual font and color.	Familiar background, MC's house and street, pink polka dot textbox.	Written Language, Typography, and Visuals all "normal" (following the dating sim expectations, but music is notably absent).
2	4:35:05-4:36:04	Still no music or sound.	No textbox. Usual textbox returns, name indicator above textbox depending on who is speaking.	Black side swipe transition from home to classroom. Monika in her NPC leaning forward position, tilted to the side. Monika then faces the user directly, head-on.	A second of no auditory, no text, and no visuals, a second of nothingness. Quickly goes back to normal text and visuals, still without music.
3	4:36:05-4:37:04	No music or sound.	AI Monika's revealing comments.	While facing the user, AI Monika's hand moves, she "laughs"	Though still relatively normal text and visuals,

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
			("leaving Sayori's hanging")		Monika's posture and dialogue suggests something more sinister, but things are still relatively normal. Still no music.
4	4:37:05-4:38:04	No music or sound.	AI Monika "I probably know a lot more than you think" MC notes that hearing these comments puts a chill down his spine.	AI Monika's face changes to smirking, hand goes down, continues to face and stare at user rather than MC.	Though still relatively normal text and visuals, Monika's posture and dialogue suggests something more sinister, but things are still relatively normal. Still no music.
5	4:38:05-4:39:04	Paper sound from viewing poem, no music.	Usual textbox. Toggles between MC and Monika. No textbox -> Sayori's poem is viewed, Handwritten-like font on paper. (Typography is normal, content of written language is not).	Return back to NPC Monika stance. Monika disappears from screen. Classroom background only with textbox. Sayori's poem is viewed, on a piece of paper.	A second of sound, normal typography and visuals, content of Sayori's poem is very alarming though. Still no music.

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
6	4:39:05-4:40:04	No music or sound.	No textbox. Still Sayori's poem. Textbox MC's thoughts, dialogue with MC and NPC Monika.	Sayori's poem. Back to classroom, textbox returns. Monika returns, now facing user directly again. Visibly smiles when MC says he is going to check on Sayori. Screen wipe from classroom to hallway. Textbox.	Normal typography and visuals. No music.
7	4:40:05-4:41:04	No music or sound.	MC's thoughts in textbox.	Black swipe from school hallway to MC house and street. Textbox. Screen wipe to outside of Sayori's house. Textbox. Screen wipe to black, stays black with textbox.	Normal typography, written language, and visuals. No music. When MC "enters" Sayori's house, there is no visuals, no background. We now are down to just written language and typography. Just the textbox, no music, no visuals.
8	4:41:05-4:42:04	Clanging sound effect.	"I gently open the door"	Seconds after "I gently open the door", no screen wipe, just stark	Starts off with still no auditory or visual content, but

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
				image reveal of Sayori hanging in her bedroom.	when Sayori is revealed this swaps, now there is no written content, just auditory and visual.
9	4:42:05-4:43:04	Ear piercing sound effect. Glitch sound effect. Distorted “Doki Doki Literature Club!”, replaced by track “Sayonara”.	No textbox. Team Salvato logo partially seen in the background of visual pane. RenPy error message in background of visual pane.	Slight zoom out from body. Saturated colors, glitching, jump cut to close up shot of Sayori from shoulders up. She appears to begin to sway, first dynamic movement. In and out of focus, grainy picture. Background of room disappears, changes to blank static. Team Salvato logo appears, another glitch. Begins to sway again, and will continue to for the rest of the sequence. Background changes to dynamic pink polka dots.	Just auditory and visual. Music begins. Written language and typography returns, but in a place it shouldn’t be. All sign systems are working together now to subvert dating sim expectations.

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
			Textbox returns, font and color normal, MC's thoughts.	<p>Images of the other girls glitch in and out. Error message appears in visual pane, but behind Sayori's head.</p> <p>Textbox returns. Background changes back to Sayori's room.</p> <p>Fade to black.</p>	<p>Once again written language and typography in a place it shouldn't be, all sign systems still working.</p> <p>All sign systems gone. Screen is black without textbox and no sound.</p>
10	4:43:05-4:44:04	"Sayo-nara" continues.	Textbox is normal.	Black screen.	Auditory and written language and typography present, no visuals.
11	4:44:05-4:45:04	"Sayo-nara" continues.	Textbox is normal.	Black screen.	Auditory and written language and typography present, no visuals.
12	4:45:05-4:46:04	All music and sound cease.	Textbox disappears, "END" appears in visual pane.	Black screen. No textbox. "END" appears on black screen.	No auditory or visuals, just text.

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
		Visual novel reboots, “Doki Doki Literature Club!” begins to play. When visual novel begins, “Ohayou Sayori!” plays slightly distorted, but then rights itself.	Return to Main Menu, everything is typographically the same except “New Game” is now in mojobake. Visual novel begins, textbox returns, all is typographically normal, except all of Sayori’s dialogue is in mojobake, and Sayori’s name is in mojobake when MC says or thinks it.	Fade into Main Menu. Same as before, white background, pink polka dots, <i>DDLC</i> logo. Picture of girls is the same, except for where Sayori should be, there is a glitched image comprised of pixels from the other girls. Black transition into MC house and street. Textbox.	Return of all sign systems, they seem to be fighting to return back to normal, but there are some malignancies in all.
13	4:46:05-4:46:33	Song gets caught on one note, stalls, then music stops.	Sayori’s dialogue in mojobake.	Where Sayori should be, above the text box, is now a black square with glitching images of Monika and Yuri in and out. Entire screen glitches. Screen goes black.	All sign systems still working, but again, not quite yet returned to dating sim expectations. Music is disrupted for a moment, but then things

	Time Indices	Auditory (Music and Sound)	Written Language and Typography	Visual (Images and Colors)	Comments
				MC home and street background returns, visual novel has started over without Sayori.	return back to “normal”.

The idea of normality in *DDLC*, at least for a first-time user, is all sign systems working together to support the dating sim. However, at the start of the twelve minutes, the auditory sign system is already absent while the visual and written language and typography are still adhering to the dating sim. This absence perhaps emphasizes the latter two sign systems for the time being. The absent music is a first sign that this is not a dating sim, because something that has been operating for four and a half hours is now not operating. This silence continues until row seven, when the visual sign system is also lost, and now the user’s attention is turned completely just to the written language and typography sign system. This is intentional, because then in row eight written language and typography is lost, and auditory and visuals become the emphasized sign systems. By row nine, written language and typography is reintroduced, but in a way that still violates the dating sim expectations. By row ten the “normal” textbox has returned, but the visual sign system is removed, and written language and typography and auditory take the foreground. In the beginning of row twelve written language and typography is the last sign system left, until the visual novel reboots, and all sign systems return. This return is not yet a return to normalcy, as there are several glitches, but the visual novel is working its way back to the dating sim.

When the twelve minutes begins, one thing is completely out of place; there is no music. A common theme throughout this selected portion and beyond, often there is normalcy in one or more sign systems, but at any given time there is subversion in others, signaling that something is not right, even though other signs are trying to reinforce that they are. Things carry on like (almost) normal until Sayori's death is revealed. However, with hindsight of this death, AI Monika's comments to the user can be counted as slight disturbances in the dating sim. When Monika speaks to the user about Sayori, her visual stance changes from an NPC stance to her forward-facing, directed-at-user AI stance. Her comments foreshadow Sayori's death by hanging, and she lets on that she knows more than we, the users, think she does. But then the visual novel proceeds as normal, with the music still absent.

Once MC arrives at Sayori's house, and enters it, the visual pane goes black. At this moment, the user is devoid of both the auditory and visual sign systems, only focusing on MC's thoughts. This emphasizes the written language sign system, channeling the user to only focus on that, since nothing else is going on. This is then completely flipped when MC does "gently open the door", because at that moment the textbox disappears, and music and visuals overwhelm the user. The music is a distorted version of the familiar "Doki Doki Literature Club!" tune, and while the song is playing, MC (and therefore the user) is fixed on Sayori's dead body hanging in her room. The simulated glitches begin, even further disturbing the user, and completely destroying the expectations the previous four and a half hours built. The glitches are accompanied by various glitch sound effects. Sayori begins to sway, the first dynamic movement of the visual novel, and she replaces the foreground where the textbox would be. Written language is paused, visuals and sounds take over, until suddenly, written language returns, but not where it is supposed to be. While the background is glitching, Sayori is swaying, and the

picture becomes grainy and unfocused, the Team Salvato logo appears in the visual pane, followed by an error message in the background behind Sayori's head. Both of these texts are in different fonts than the usual textbox font, and very notably, not in a textbox, but in the visual pane, where text is not supposed to be. All the while the distorted music continues, and the error message motivates the user to minimize the *DDLC* game program and open the *DDLC* game files that were downloaded when the visual novel was downloaded. While the user navigates the files, and ultimately sees AI Monika messing with the RenPy code, "Sayo-nara" still plays in the background, and the image of Sayori hanging will be there for the user when they maximize their screen again.

When the visual novel fades to black, the visual sign system is absent once again, with the textbox back in the foreground, and the eerie music playing in the background. The written language and typography sign system becomes the dominant one once again, with music supporting. When the main menu reappears, music is completely restored to the dating sim expectations, but the visuals and language and typography are not quite right yet. Where Sayori should be is a pixelated mess, and where "New Game" should be is mojobake. When the user starts the visual novel again, written language and typography and visuals are back to 'normal', the dating sim, but the music is still slightly off for a few more seconds until returning back to dating sim music. Everything appears to have returned back to the dating sim expectations, but then all of Sayori's dialogue is mojobake, and where she should be is another glitch.

Ultimately, these sign systems need each other to successfully create the psychological horror that is prevalent in this visual novel.

Conclusion

Team Salvato's *Doki Doki Literature Club* is so successful with its psychological horror plot because it takes so much time to lay the groundwork. For four hours and forty-one minutes, the visual novel follows a strict dating simulation. It is at that fourth hour and forty-second minute that the entire visual novel is turned on its head, and the sense of security the user had is torn from them. This is the greatest form of psychological horror, as the user is experiencing the shift of the world firsthand. They are introduced to characters and get to know them for almost five hours, before one of the main character's best friends kills herself. The suicide and game reboot are unexpected and brutal, and reveals that there is something more sinister controlling the visual novel. The auditory, written language and typography, and visual sign systems that were once familiar and comfortable with the user are still familiar, but now induce stress, fear, and uneasiness. AI Monika's sentience and control over the visual novel is perhaps the most frightening element of all, because she is tinkering with not only the visual novel, but the files on the computer as well. The visual novel's manipulation of the dating sim expectations to create psychological horror is what makes the visual novel so disturbing, but also so intriguing.

This thesis focuses on only twelve minutes of this eight-hour visual novel. There are many more sections to focus on and observe. That being said, I would argue that in the future the sign systems I have chosen should be separated even further. If I had more time, I would probably completely separated written language and typography into two different sign systems. In future drafts I also would like to emphasize the relationship the dating sim and psychological horror elements have with each other. There is always a dominant and recessive genre. For the first four and a half hours of the game, the dating sim is the dominant genre, but the psychological horror plot is always there, underneath the surface. There are clues along the way

of this genre, but the user can only notice them the second time around. There is always one sign system or more that is working to establish expectations, but another may be actively working to subvert (e.g. the absence of sound while written language and visuals operate under dating sim expectations). The moment of complete inversion of expectations is right after MC “gently opens the door”, and the psychological horror genre takes over. Even when the dating sim genre appears to be restored, the user is always unsure of when things will invert again, and so psychological horror still prevails, even when nothing horrific is actively happening on screen.

Nevertheless, my semiotics approach allowed me to evaluate *DDLC* intricately and it would be a wonderful approach for any media like a visual novel or videogame. If there is anything to take away from this thesis, it is that media like this cannot be examined through only one sign system, because then other sign systems and their interactions are ignored. The semiotics approach could be applied to not only the rest of *DDLC*, but to any visual novel or piece of media that relies on multiple sign systems. With these types of media, the narrative is reliant on all of the sign systems working together to communicate the story to the user. Therefore, when studying visual novels and media like it, all sign systems must be considered to effectively analyze the piece.

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