

Are Visual Novels Games? A Look into What Makes a Game.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
PC	Stands for “player character”. It is the character controlled by the player or main character of the game.
LI	Stands for “Love Interest”. Term used to describe the pursuable characters in romance games.
VN	Stands for “visual novel”.
Bishoujo	A romance visual novel catered to a young male audience. The game is centered around a male lead pursuing female characters.
Otome	A romance visual novel catered to a young female audience. The game is centered around a female lead pursuing male characters.

Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the categorization of visual novels as games through examining the criteria that define a game, including interactivity, narrative structure, and player agency.

I aim to explore the defining characteristics of a visual novel and determine the crucial elements of a game. This way, I can determine whether or not visual novels fit within the framework of a game, and hope to contribute to the ongoing debate about the visual novel's role as a genre in the gaming industry.

Introduction

The definition of a “game” remains to be discovered, however most would agree that interactivity is a key component. The genre of visual novels challenge this notion, as the degree of interactivity within a visual novel can range from multiple choices and branching narratives to simply requiring the player to click through a completely linear storyline. The begs to question: can visual novels be considered games, or are they simply novels adapted into a digital format?

Literature Review

Relevant sources

What is a Visual Novel? Proceedings of the ACM on Human- Computer Interaction

Camingue, J., Carstensdóttir, E., & Melcer, E.F. (2021). What is a Visual Novel? *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5, 1 - 18.

The goal of this paper is to create a “unified definition” for visual novels. By examining the interactivity and content of 54 existing visual novels, the researchers aim to identify guidelines and structures that visual novels universally share. Upon getting unbiased participants to play the provided VNs, they found that the following definitions were found most: Art and Aesthetic, Narrative Structure, Interaction and Story Quality.

The level of interaction between different visual novels varies, so researchers decided to measure interactivity by playing the VNs again and identify the frequency of interaction in all VNs. Most VNs had one interaction per minute. They decide upon a universal definition of a VN at the end.

From Novel to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games.

Saito, K. (2021). From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games. *Arts*.

The following research paper examines the differences between romance games aimed for male audiences and female audiences. Upon comparing the two, the author explores how the romance genre has evolved in the modern era. In the paper, Saito comments on if “games can be stories”, as games usually consist of a win/lose objective rather than story

development. Saito aims to study these VNs and explore the concept of romance as gameplay. Saito concludes that bishojo VNs (aimed for men) reinforce the patriarchal power of choice and give the player a sense of control over the story. In this case, the player chooses their love interest. Otome (aimed for women) makes the player work harder to build connections with characters, which adds complexity to the game. Instead of being in control, the game itself guides the story and allows the player to feel more immersed.

Anime and the Visual Novel: Narrative Structure, Design and Play at the Crossroads of Animation and Computer Games.

Cavallaro, D. (2009). *Anime and the Visual Novel: Narrative Structure, Design and Play at the Crossroads of Animation and Computer Games*.

This research paper analyzes how visual novels have been adapted into animated series and the limitations of adaptation between the two mediums. In this paper, the author aims to talk about the relationship between ludology and narratology, the player's role, the concept of immersion, and the importance of character relationships inside of visual novels. They explore the idea that anime adapted from visual novels is considered an "art within the art" as they combine ludology with narratology.

Visual Novels: Narrative Design in Virtue's Last Reward

GDC. (2018, July 1). *Visual Novels: Narrative Design in Virtue's Last Reward* [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrxz3s0L8F8>

This GDC talk by Kotaro Uchikoshi (Spike Chunsoft) aims to explore the definition of the visual novel and how unique the genre is by comparing it to linear story games and other media. As there is no clear definition, Uchikoshi determines the “essence” of the visual novel which he describes as “a text-based video game featuring narrative using graphics and sound”. Uchikoshi determines that a game is “something with selectivity” and a visual novel is “a video game that specializes in selectivity”. He then explores the specific narrative structure of a game called Kamaitachi.

In Kamaitachi, the player must go through multiple endings and routes to get the final good ending, as they gather different clues in these different endings. It’s only once they get all these clues that they can enter the murderer’s name and get the good end. Uchikoshi points out that this doesn’t make sense, as the main character wouldn’t be able to remember these clues between different routes. However, it’s the player that remembers, and finds out the murderer’s name. It’s the player that guides the main character to this conclusion; the main character being the player’s alter ego.

A study of interaction in idle games & perceptions on the definition of a game.

Purkiss, B., & Khaliq, I. (2015). A study of interaction in idle games & perceptions on the

definition of a game. *2015 IEEE Games Entertainment Media Conference (GEM)*, 1–6.

<https://doi.org/10.1109/GEM.2015.7377233>

In this study, Purkiss examines idle games (games that can be played with zero player interaction) in hopes to emphasize the importance of interactivity in games and find out the public's perception of what a game is. Purkiss defines a game as an activity with rules, but only occasionally a set goal. The study concludes with the consensus that games are defined under two factors: players and interactivity. In terms of what level of interactivity required for a game to be considered a "game", Purkiss concludes that the player must have a tangible effect on the progression of the game

Conclusion

In all, each of the sources provided explores the definition of a visual novel and what makes a game. Although the findings vary, each source explored the level of interactivity present in visual novels and tried to determine how interactive a piece of media must be to be considered a game. With these sources, I aim to determine the consensus of what a visual novel is, and if it can be considered a game based on the different elements and requirements that are derived from these various sources.

What is a Visual Novel?

Visual novels are games that focus heavily on narrative and character development. The subgenre originated in Japan, where most of the population were trained in art and design rather

than programming. (Cavallaro, 2009) Although they started out as narrative games, visual novels eventually developed their own subgenres with the most popular eventually becoming romance games or dating sims. in fact, visual novels actually were inspired, “[...] from text-based mystery and escape games [and] [...] were not initially associated with romance until these representative titles [*Tokimeki Memorial* and *Classmates*] redefined the game genre as a mix of novels and dating simulations.” (Saito, 2021, p.2)

Although widely considered to be narrative focused games, there is no clear definition for the visual novel genre. Many try to define them in ways that state the elements of a visual novel, but often fail to define the genre as a whole. For example, Cavallaro defines a visual novel as, “[...] a multi branching ludic experience that enlist the player’s creativity[...] [and] typically articulates its narrative by means of extensive text conversations complemented by lovingly depicted (and mainly stationary) generic backgrounds and dialogue boxes with character sprites determining the speaker superimposed upon them.” (Cavallaro, 2009)

Despite this, visual novels are easily identified by the community and publishers alike. To determine a universal definition of the genre, researchers from the University of California conducted a study. They collected 30 different definitions for visual novels and identified the core features present in them. Then, they played the visual novels and indicated features that were not stated in the previously attained definitions. Ultimately, the study identified key features present in 95% of the visual novels analyzed. (Carmingue, 2021) In the end, Carmingue proposed the following definition :

“A Visual Novel (VN) is a digital narrative focused game that requires interactions where the player must be able to impact the story world or the story’s progression. The story and

interactions are most commonly presented through a text box and often employ additional forms of interaction including menu choices—which often contain sets of actions that the player character can perform—or dialogue options representing the player character’s speech or thoughts. Crucially, VNs have On-Click Progression, where the player clicks, taps or presses a button to see the next part of the story. The aesthetics of VNs are most often conveyed through static images of characters, background art, sound effects (SFX) feedback, and soundtracks.” (Carminque, 2021)

In all, while visual novels share many elements of traditional games, their distinct blend of narrative and unconventional form of interactivity places them in a unique category.

What is a Game?

The concept of a ‘game’ has been greatly discussed over the years, with definitions varying as games have evolved from traditional formats to digital experiences. As game come in so many different forms, it is hard to pinpoint a precise definition, however Purkiss states in their paper *A Study of Interaction in Idle Games & Perceptions on the Definition of a Game* that, “A game is an activity, it has a set system of rules and often, but not always, a defined goal or desirable outcome.” (p.1, 2015) This definition can be applied to all forms of games, whether they be tabletop games, video games or even sports.

Two critical criteria must be met for an activity to be considered a game: players and interactivity. Without a player, a game would function like a movie or a book, watched or read by a viewer who has no control over the narrative. However, interactivity is equally, if not more

important. A player's main role in a game is to engage with it, as without interactivity, the player would only be an observer. (Purkiss, 2015) These two elements are crucial in distinguishing games from other forms of media.

While the previous definition provides an academic perspective, the concept of a game often depends on the player's perspective. To find the definition of a game from a player's point of view, Purkiss handed a survey to 103 players of varying gender, age, and gaming experience. Each player played various games for five minutes and were asked to rate the graphics, interactivity, and overall rating from one to ten. After this, players were asked if they considered the game they played to be a game. In the end, 85% of players agreed that the game had to have the following elements: allow user input and provide feedback, offer choices to the player and is designed to entertain the player. The most common reason given when classifying a game was that it was interactive. In fact, the 15% who did not classify the games played as games was due to lack of interactivity. 82% of these players gave the games an interactivity score of 4 or less.(Purkiss, 2015) In all, this study suggests that players perceive games as interactive experiences, thus interactivity is crucial to what defines a game.

In conclusion, the academic definitions provided align with player perception, showing the importance of interactivity in games. Purkiss' study demonstrates that from a player's perspective, a game is an interactive activity that offers choices with feedback with the goal of entertaining the player.

Where Do Visual Novels Fit?

Now that the definition of both a game and a visual novel has been established, the question remains: how does a visual novel fit within the framework of a game? As Saito says in the article *From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games*:

“Visual novel’s narrative may vary to some extent due to the “decision points”, which are occasional multiple-choice decisions to determine which scenario route the player will follow, but the player’s interaction with the game is limited to pushing a button to turn pages and read. [...] The more the plot pursued depth and integrity, the less the text became interactive.” (p.3)

This presents a dichotomy between narrative depth and interactivity. For example, “Shizukue, [a visual novel] written in proximity to horror and mystery novels, reduced the number of decision points and endings for the sake of plot coherency and emotional impact.” (Saito 2021, p.3)

To see whether visual novels fit the criteria for interactivity, Jennalynn Carmingue studied the frequency of interaction within 54 visual novels. Carmingue measures levels of interactivity based on perceived cognitive load, frequency and psychical activity of an interaction. First, they set a thirty minute timer to determine if the first thirty minutes of a visual novel was representative of the overall gameplay. Upon proving this, participants evaluated the first thirty minutes of each visual novel. The total number of interactions was divided by thirty to calculate the frequency per minute. In the end, most VNs had less than one interaction per minute, with an average of only 0.37 interactions per minute. (Carmingue, 2021)

This study aligns with Saito’s observation that, “Playing bishoujo games eventually came to signify spending hours by passively reading the scenario that appears on the screen, while “an

interaction between the player and the game system is limited to the act of selecting one of the two choices, which occurs only once every few hours”” (Saito 2021, p.3)

However, this pertains to the most basic of visual novels. Older romance games and visual novels did not rely on narrative as a sole element. Gameplay elements such as numerical components, RPG battles and mini games were added to dating sims, often switching between ‘game mode’ and ‘visual novel mode’. (Saito 2021)

Some examples of dating sims that mix gameplay elements include *Amnesia* and *Collar x Malice*. Although they include simple mini games, the way in which the games approach the significance of such differs. In *Amnesia*, the player is given the option to play rock paper scissors or air hockey against the five LIs. The mini games are optional and accessible from the main menu, with the reward being a special still image if the player wins against three of five LIs. On the other hand, *Collar x Malice* includes a shooting mini game that affects the story directly . When the player faces “Trigger mode” they must aim their gun and shoot at the correct time. If they fail to aim properly, a bad ending will be triggered. These mini games are put into the visual novels to increase interactivity, although implemented in different ways.

While mini games can be used to increase interactivity, visual novels also engage players through their narrative structure. In Kotaro Uchikoshi’s GDC talk, *Visual Novels: Narrative Design in Virtue’s Last Reward: discuss how narrative design in visual novels blur the lines between game and interactive story*, he determines that a visual novel is ‘a video game that specializes in selectivity. Uchikoshi explores the narrative structure of his own game *Kamaitachi*, where the player might go through multiple endings and routes to obtain all clues and solve a murder. Normally, this would not make sense as the main character could not remember clues between different routes. It’s the player that finds out the murderer's name and guides the main

character to that conclusion; the main character being the player's alter ego. (Uchikoshi 2018)

This use of parallel plots and repetition as gameplay mechanics is unique to visual novels, as Saito explains, "While reading a novel is modeled as a chronologically linear experience with a beginning and an end, nearly all romance games, equipped with multiple endings and parallel scenarios are designed on the premise of repetitive play and repetitive reading." (Saito 2021, p.4)

This feedback loop of repetition immerses the player as they piece together each route in order to reveal the full narrative.

Repetition in visual novels is achieved by giving players agency over the game's narrative. By offering multiple choices, visual novels revolve around a branching plot structure guided by the player. The branching plot structure further immerses the player and encourages replayability, as players often encounter bad endings and must explore different paths. Bishoujo games, for example, weave together these parallel plots so that the player's interest in the various LIs leads to multiple endings. (Saito 2021, p.4)

This structure also deepens the player's connection to the PC. By making choices which directly impact the narrative, players naturally project themselves onto the PC. This creates a sense of immersion while maintaining a certain divide between the player and PC. For example, in bishoujo games:

"[...] the illusion of identification between the player and PC is created through the frustrated experience of the narrator/protagonist trapped in the literary text. The simulation of repetitive gameplay, often embedded in the written scenario itself, illustrates a suffocating closed system of the narrative world where characters are controlled by the predetermined plot or "fate" from PC's viewpoint." (Saito 2021, p.5)

Unlike characters in books, who remain unaware of their existence as part of a story, PCs in visual novels may realize they are in a story and may wonder about life outside of the game. To make this feel more cohesive, some games will emphasize the divide between the player and the PC. (Saito 2021, p.5)

In contrast, otome games (romance games targeted towards women) approach this in an entirely different light, deliberately preventing the player from fully identifying with the main character. For example, *Norn9* lets players choose from three protagonists, each with their own love interests, distinct personalities, voice lines, and character sprites. Players can select Koharu, a kind hearted and cheerful girl with pink hair; Mikoto Kuga, a reserved and mature young woman; or Nanami Shiranui, a naive and “emotionless” kunoichi. These distinctions emphasize a clear separation between player and the PC, making it difficult for players to project themselves onto these characters. As emphasized by Saito, “These formal characteristics to retain the PC-player divide are not simply sustaining distance between the two but are also likely to represent PC as an object of affection and visual pleasure for the player rather than PC as a locus for the subject position.” (p.9)

Conclusion

In all, visual novels are a unique genre that combine the art of storytelling and gameplay. While visual novels may lack the frequency of interactions often seen in other genres of games, they create their own form in interactivity through branching narratives, replayability, and player agency. Some visual novels even add mini games as additional elements of interactivity. Through the use of decision points and parallel plot structure, players can actively shape the outcome of

the story while simultaneously piecing every plot thread together to see the story unfold. Despite the limited physical input required to play a visual novel, the immersive experience and emotional involvement of the player supports the argument that visual novels can be considered as games.

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