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## **The Element Factor. The Concept of ›Character‹ as a Unifying Perspective for the Akihabara Cultural Domain**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a developing perspective on characters within Japanese visual novel games and their connections to their host cultural domain of Akihabara. The cultural domain comprising Akihabara and its connected fan industries (cf. SUAN 2017: 64) have been alternatively described as a ›database‹ for a ›grand non-narrative‹ (cf. AZUMA 2009: 33–34), as a ›fantasy-scape‹ (cf. RUH 2014: 171), or as an ›imagination-scape‹ (cf. KACSUK 2016: 277). These viewpoints are concord in their vision of the Akihabara cultural domain as being in a continuous flux, lacking any fixed perspective or origin. This paper will propose characters as the unified perspective of the Akihabara cultural domain. While their design elements are not static and subjected to conventional re-performances (cf. SUAN 2017), ›characters‹ themselves, as hierarchical sets of information, remain recognizable and render their host media as belonging to Akihabara. This activates expectations (as well as related rules and procedures) associated with the domain, which in turn require additional conventional re-performances. Conceptualizing ›characters‹ and their associated conventions as a peculiar type of an intersubjective communicative construct (cf. THON 2016: 54), the paper argues that characters presented in visual novel games are representative for the wider tendency of Akihabara characters to exist prior to all media and narratives. The re-performance of conventions precedes media specificities, narrative peculiarities, or subjective reception.



## 1. Introduction

Akihabara, as a peculiar subcultural niche and physical location, has mobilized new terms for the description of its characters. These terms include ›*moe*‹ (cf. GALBRAITH 2009),<sup>1</sup> ›character elements‹ (›*moe yōso* 萌え要素), ›*bishōjo/bishōnen* 美少女, 美少年-characters‹, and many more. The employment of such terminologies reflects a tendency to aggregate meanings, capable of generating fan engagement and participation through a continuous re-performance (second order restatement) of conventions (cf. SUAN 2017: 64, 72). Such a tendency to aggregate and re-perform meaning, primarily linked to the domain of animation by critics like Thomas Lamarre (2009), is not limited to it, nor does animation constitute the exclusive origin point from which Akihabara characters originate. This is especially evident in light of the disparate media forms circulating within the cultural domain of Akihabara: printed material, model kits, musical performances, video games, animation, and many more (cf. ALLISON 2006; CONDRY 2013; STEINBERG 2012). All of these feature subcultural characters while also possessing their own forms of media specificity.

As a subcultural niche, Akihabara is both self-referencing across a wide variety of media and permeable to external influences, resulting in ill-definable and blurry borders. The conventionality by which Akihabara characters remain recognizable, however, is clearly a defining point. Consequently, Stevie Suan's discussion (2017: 64) of the development of ›anime-proper‹ as a reperformance of aesthetic and operational practices of representation can be extended to the Akihabara cultural domain as a whole. This tendency serves as a common ›language‹ between content producers and content consumers (cf. AZUMA 2007: 67). Amongst the disparate media forms within Akihabara, there is one peculiar video game genre, visual novel games, in which characters are even more vital than in other Akihabara media. Differing from anime, manga, or other non-interactive media forms, visual novel games entrust the operation of re-performing conventions more directly to the player's imaginative prowess, which, in turn, is based on their intimate knowledge of Akihabara's conventions.

Generally, the player's explicit task in a visual novel game is to seek an affective relationship with one (or more) character(s) which are depicted, aesthetically and behaviorally, in the style of Akihabara. The ultimate objective of the player is to get to the game's ending(s) through decisions made at key points during the game. Making the appropriate choices steers the playthrough towards one (or more) particular character's storyline (and towards an ending). Aside from making these choices, the player reads prose text and enjoys illustrative artworks, especially so-called ›reward images‹ (›*gohobi-e* ごほび絵, cf. MIYAMOTO 2013). These images serve as milestones in the game's narration and

<sup>1</sup> Within the study of Japanese characters, character-based media, and their fans, ›*moe*‹ has been widely used as a descriptor for specific aesthetics, and also to point to unique fan engagement with characters. However, due to the semantic width and instability of the term, its usefulness is limited. The following perspective will be opting instead for an emphasis on ›meta-engagement‹ with characters.



can generally be re-accessed once viewed through a gallery located in the game's main menu. The settings and stories of visual novels are disparate, ranging from ›high fantasy‹ epics to gritty tales of post-apocalyptic science fiction; their emotional tone ranges from the comedic to the tragic.

What connects these disparate ranges of themes and tones is the common purpose to establish an affective relationship with the respective characters, which may or may not lead to physical intimacy. The focus of navigating a visual novel game is not limited to amorous conquests and, in fact, it would be pinpointed better by highlighting the many, highly emotional situations which are traversed by the player's avatar and the game's characters, through which tight affective bonds are developed. While sexual intimacy can be presented explicitly, often in pornographic details, such scenes are used sparingly. They signify a particular climax in the relationship between player and character, the game's plot, or both. Consequently, it is necessary to further remark that a visual novel game might not be so much about pornographic enjoyment. It is better described by its focus on the experience of highly emotional storylines, centered on Akihabara characters.<sup>2</sup>

Playing a visual novel game is, on the surface, a strikingly non-interactive experience. The player proceeds through reading texts and building engagement with the characters by imagining their actions on the basis of prose text and voiced lines (if present). Character illustrations on the screen are usually not animated, but instead cycled through image files deputed to represent the respective character in a certain emotional state. These images are essential, but not tied to any specific narrative situation. The lack of a connection to distinct situations allows a continuous repurposing of the image files to denote small changes in mood throughout the course of the narration. Patrick Galbraith highlights that character designs are divided into three major categories: visual design, voice (idiolect and manner of voice acting), and scenario (the character's personal background narrative, cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 152, 159; fig. 1). These three macro-categories, each corresponding to a different channel within the enfolding of the visual novel's narrative, coalesce into a system of conventional character design elements. These elements, recurring and self-referencing, form a system of coded cues embedded into the character's design (cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 150).

Different colors of hair and hairstyles might suggest character, for example ›blond with pigtails‹ (*kinpatsu tsuin tēru*), which I was consistently told referred to characters with a bad attitude and a soft heart. There are hundreds of these combinations. A strand of hair sticking up, which is called ›stupid hair‹ (*ahoge*), suggests a character that is energetic but not too bright. Glasses may convey intelligence or shyness and a girl with glasses becomes a character type, ›glasses girl‹ (*meganekko*) (GALBRAITH 2017: 150–151).

This reliance on the combination of recurring elements was explored by cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2009) in his famous ›database consumption‹ framework. According to Azuma, characters are constituted by specific affective

<sup>2</sup> A subset of visual novel games, *nukigē* (›strip games‹), is instead primarily focused with providing pornographic entertainment to its audience. There is a tendency that these remain confined to their own market niches, however.



elements (*moe yōso*) capable of generating engagement in its intended audience (cf. AZUMA 2009: 33). These elements are organized in the structure of a non-linear database, where no apparent over-arching narrative can be found, favoring the aggregation by keywords and ›tagging‹ in its stead. Consequently, each element can equally function as a window into its host culture. Elements are in a constant flux and can be freely combined to design characters whose structure enables them to exist within, without, and in-between media (cf. AZUMA 2007: 133–134).

Beyond the sense of commonality generated by the system of conventions (cf. AZUMA 2007: 67–68), another development resulting from this tendency is the data-ification of character design practices, leading to the identification of hundreds (if not thousands) of discrete character design elements. These can range from being mere visual components, such as specific accessories (glasses, ribbons, ties, etc.) or hairstyles, to a peculiar demeanor (as in ›being lovey-dovey‹). All of these elements are subject to a continuous re-performance of conventions, in a way that is similar to Suan's discussion of anime-esque acts within anime-proper.



Fig. 1:  
A gameplay screenshot from *Tōkyō Necro* (Nitroplus 2016). Note the character sprite, super-imposed on the locale illustration, and the stylized language expressed through the text box in the lower portion of the screen

These conventional acts are what allows anime to be recognizable as such; anime-proper is then a form of animation which performs a large quantity of such anime-esque acts. This allows the conceptual disentanglement of anime-proper from ›animation from Japan‹, in favor of a categorization as an animation genre that follows a certain set of conventions (cf. SUAN 2017: 64–65). In the same vein, the characters of the Akihabara cultural domain can be recognized by the re-performance of conventions expressed through their character design. Each design element is, in turn, involved in a complex system of



repetition, reinforcement, innovation, and re-invigoration (cf. SUAN 2017: 68), citing prior re-performances as conventional acts (cf. SUAN 2017: 73). This, however, would not make a ›character‹ more than a sub-domain in a fuzzy and blurry cultural niche.

As with Jaqueline Berndt's concept of ›the manga-esque‹—a descriptor of what may or may not be expected typically from a ›manga‹ (cf. BERNDT 2012: 149)—a similar ›character-esque‹ system would coexist with the anime-esque and the manga-esque. The presence of characters, however, overlapping with both the anime-esque and the manga-esque, distinct from acts proper to the respective medium (such as camera angles or panel layouts), suggests otherwise. Characters can exist within, without, and in-between texts (cf. AZUMA 2007: 133–134) and, more importantly, before any media specificities are applied to them. This non-contextualized character-state is often referred to as a ›*kyara*‹ in Japanese discourse, in contrast to a contextualized ›*kyarakutā*‹. However, the ›*kyara*/*kyarakutā*‹ dichotomy envisions both *kyara* and *kyarakutā* as individual entities. Such a framework does not take into account the system of conventions that makes characters within the Akihabara cultural domain recognizable as such. Their respective identities and individualities can be recognized only under this system of conventions. Conventionality begets the necessity for Akihabara characters to remain recognizable as such, even after media specificities are applied to them. In other words, the prerequisite for the media (re)contextualization of characters is that their identity remains recognizable before and after they are (re)contextualized (cf. NOZAWA 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that the system revolving around characters within the Akihabara cultural domain exerts its influence prior to and beyond all media specificities, even modifying the media forms in which the characters will be placed in the end.

## 2. A Bedrock of Information. Characters, Motion, and Projection

In discussing the ›anime-esque‹, Stevie Suan (2017) compares it with the ›anime-ic‹ descriptor proposed by Thomas Looser (2002) and built upon by Brian Ruh (2015). According to Suan, the ›anime-esque‹ is the »performance of conventions that can be easily recognized and associated with anime, and the accompanying tension between repetition and variation in such a performance« (SUAN 2017: 73). In contrast, the ›anime-ic‹ is an insistence on multiple layers, mixed styles, media, and their orientations (cf. LOOSER 2002: 310), as well as a space containing multiple (non-unified) points of view lacking a fixed perspective (cf. RUH 2015: 171).

However, there are differences between the anime-ic and the anime-esque. Put simply, the anime-ic appears to be a way of conceiving of space that relates to how anime deals with a distinctive manner of organizing together layers of perspectives that are not unified; whereas the anime-esque is the performance of conventions that can be easily recognized and associated with anime, and the accompanying tension between repetition



and variation in such a performance. While the anime-ic and the anime-esque usually overlap, they can be mutually exclusive (SUAN 2017: 73).

In contrasting the ›anime-esque‹ with the ›anime-ic‹, Suan describes two different levels: the ›anime-esque‹ is concerned with the conservation of a trajectory as the medium (anime) evolves, while the ›anime-ic‹ is concerned with its overall organization. Both Suan and Ruh argue for the lack of a fixed origin point, either by way of a constant flux or by the need to accommodate for disparate media technologies, styles, and perspectives. However, this fails to consider the perspective that is communicated through characters and their own system of conventional re-performances.

This becomes evident when the model for media diffusion developed by Kadokawa and ASCII media works, now dominant within Akihabara, is taken into consideration. On the basis of Ōtsuka Eiji's (2010) framework of ›narrative consumption‹, this model calls for information to be disseminated through characters (cf. STEINBERG 2015: 28) and, by extension, by their design elements. When approaching anime-proper, or other media forms similarly supporting the Akihabara cultural domain, it is important to highlight that these systems are projecting character information through media specificity. Anime-esque acts are tied to animated productions and build upon the convention of animation (cf. SUAN 2017: 75–77), which finds its foundations in motion. By coalescing into motion, character information is ›fixated‹ by a specific point in narrative time and space. Within manga, characters are projected into a specific point in narrative time and space as well, this point being a specific panel on a specific page (cf. fig. 2). In action figures, character information is projected into a specific pose and materialized by means of specific materials, such as Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS) or PolyVinyl Chloride (PVC). It follows that a certain choice of material can pre-empt the possibility that a series of details are omitted or modified due to constraints in the manufacturing process (cf. fig. 3).

Visual novel games, on the other hand, rarely feature motion or other kinds of projections outside of key elements (such as the introductory movie or other special events through the game's narration). They present the building blocks of their narrative experience discretely. It is then up to the player to bridge the gap between character visuals, narrative prose, and soundtrack. While a similar case could be made for manga representation, where the recipient makes an effort to mentally visualize a temporal progression between panels, there is a decisive difference to visual novel games. Each of a manga's panels can be connected to a specific moment in the narrative's timeline, while the game's illustrations cannot be connected to any point in the narrative's time at all.





Fig. 2:  
A diptych of panels from the manga *Zero in* by Inoue Sora (Kadokawa Shōten 2004–2011). Each illustration/panel is a representation of a progress through the manga’s narrative timeline



Fig. 3:  
A Character sprite of Ashikaga Chachamaru from *Sokō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2010) and a PVC statue (ALTER 2018) of the same character. Note the loss of detail in the hair, which assume a more rounded shape and lose transparency, compared with the character sprite

The character(s) and the setting of the scene are depicted as still, two-dimensional illustrations, which have (by themselves) no connection to any particular moment in the story’s timeline. Each of the illustrations depicting a character represent a generic, *essentialized* state, which is only ›projected‹ by the user: He or she mentally combines the illustrations with the narrative situations described through prose and soundtrack. »To put it simply, the player looks at



the still image and imagines it to be moving in ways that are described in the text and suggested by the sound» (GALBRAITH 2017: 158).<sup>3</sup>

The visual presentation of characters within visual novel games consequently differs from anime, because, arguably, the character is generally presented in what can be defined as an ›un-projected‹ form. Character illustrations are not animated (exceptions can sometimes be found in eyes or lips) and resemble character model sheets for animated productions. The same can be said for the illustrations depicting the locales in which the scene is taking place. This mode of representation makes it impossible to connect graphic representations of characters and locales to a specific point in the narration (cf. fig. 4); they are thus *non-projected* information in the form of a set of character design elements. Again, this non-contextualized and non-projected character-state is often referred to as a ›kyara‹, although not with the same specificities highlighted within this paper (I will continue to refer to ›un-projected‹ and ›projected‹ characters and character information). The user is free to visualize and contextualize the character in the way they prefer, as long as character information is not contradicted. In contrast, medial contexts such as frames in anime or panels in manga consist of projected information pointing towards a specific point in narrative time, placing limits on how the user coalesces the information provided to them.

Other media forms, such as action figures or PVC statues, project character information onto material dimensions with all their constraints (instead of in narrative time/space): They render the character into material form (in just one pose, at the exclusion of all others).<sup>4</sup> Within visual novel games, an exception to the lack of projection lies in ›reward images‹ (cf. fig. 5). This is due to their role as markers of progress through the game (cf. MIYAMOTO 2013: 24), as representations of pivotal events in a character's personal story. The player can usually review these images later from a gallery and thereby check how many of the game's story paths they have traversed. Aside from reward-images, it is only through the user's own mental projection that character and locale illustrations point towards specific situations. This fundamental difference signifies that characters and visual novel games cannot be reduced to the anime-esque acts or manga-esque acts mentioned before. The anime-esque requires motion for its re-performance, while the manga-esque relies on the specificities of a printed medium (consisting of sequential images). Characters in visual novel games, on the other hand, consist mostly of static, non-projected, and hierarchical sets of information.

<sup>3</sup> A similar case could be made for light novels, which provide some character key visuals at the beginning of each volume, but they lack the interactive dimension of visual novel games. Furthermore, there is a preponderance of prose over re-usable visual elements which brings light novels closer to projected media forms. However, an in-depth comparison between visual novel games and light novels is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> This particular aspect of character information projection requires extensive additional research. This brief statement should not be considered definitive, especially since the examination of (dis)similarities between narrative time/space and materiality (both restricting the user's imaginative projection) is well beyond the scope of this brief perspective.





However, while characters in visual novel games cannot be reduced to medium-specific acts, they nevertheless often carry certain media-specific associations (such as the anime-esque or the manga-esque) in their visual design, their idiolect, or their personal background story. One example can be found in the *Muv Luv* video game franchise by âge (2003; 2006), and, more specifically, in the character of Yashiro Kasumi. Her visual design implies that she is soft-spoken, that she has a general stiffness in her movements, as well as a propensity to become expressionless. Her idiolect privileges short, tone-lacking sentences, devoid of flowery descriptions, over-enthusiastic remarks, or visible expressions of sadness; her background story focuses on her being an artificially-bred human with mysterious powers that are key to fight an alien invader threatening mankind.



Fig. 4:  
Character sprites from *Muv Luv* (Âge 2003). These illustrations can be freely re-used during any point in the game



Fig. 5:  
A reward image from *Muv Luv* (Âge 2003). This illustration is clearly linked to a specific point in time within the game's narrative timeline

Through these three channels, the character of Yashiro Kasumi evokes the characters and the situations of Ayanami Rei from *Neon Genesis EVANGELION* (cf. fig. 6). While it is up to the player to «animate» Yashiro's character information mentally, what is provided to the player steers the visualization into recreating situations similar to those experienced with Rei in the anime. The character type developed with Ayanami Rei, and all the associated character design elements, are thus both preserved and re-performed in a new context. Through the projection of character elements into a specific point in narrative time, the anime-esque acts of *EVANGELION* are clearly referenced. From the irreducible baseline that is a character's constitutive set of design elements, players can face a range of possible outcomes during their efforts in mental visualizations. The range of possible outcomes is determined by the interplay of a character's design elements and the associated conventions, and how they are coalesced as a character. When, where, and how a character will behave—in relation to the information provided—generates specific expectations, which can then be confirmed, subverted, or disappointed. The constant feedback between expectation and either confirmation or subversion builds engagement and, through it, iterate the cultural domain as a whole.



Fig. 6:

A character sprite of Yashiro Kasumi from *Muv Luv* (Âge 2003) (left) and a character key visual from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Studio GAINAX 1994) (right). Note how the expression and the general visual arrangement (hair, facial expression, pose) of Yashiro tends to evoke Ayanami Rei

### 3. Engagement, Expectation, Confirmation, Subversion, and Procedure

Building on expectations towards characters, a visual novel game includes a significant metatextual component: the task of imaginative projection is entrusted to the players. When they face a character's design, they are presented a range of possible outcomes concerning their imaginative projection efforts, as well as a respective range of expectations. The use of the term ›projection‹ (instead of just ›imagination‹) is important for this perspective, as ›projecting‹ character information requires that the character's core features remain stable, and that the source of the projection must be evident at all times. Imagination, on the other hand, is supposedly unlimited and unbridled. Suan, in describing this process within anime, writes:

These rules dictate a degree of restriction of potential, evidenced by the repetition of only certain conventions. But these conventional rules are not entirely a limiting practice. They may be described as, using the words of Jonathan Culler (2002), ›a system of constitutive rules: rules which do not regulate behavior as much as create the possibility of certain forms of behavior‹ (SUAN 2017: 70).

The process of re-performance steers expectations according to established conventions. It also determines how close (or distant) the result will be from the original model. Consequently, the range of possible outcomes is not limited exclusively by the information contained within the characters' visual



appearance; the information also includes the narrative potential invoked by elements of the characters' background story, their demeanor, and their ways of relating to other characters. A proper understanding of each element and its implication is fundamental, as highlighted by Kagami Hiroyuki. According to this veteran visual novel scenario writer, the system of conventionalized elements employed in the character design of visual novels requires a proper understanding to ›parse‹ what is being communicated through characters. He calls this a ›literacy in [character] elements‹ (*moe riterashi* 萌えリテラシー, KAGAMI 2010: 131; translation L.B). Patrick Galbraith offers a similar remark as part of an interview with Kagami:

Let's say I write a Lolita granny (*roribaba*) character. That's a character type, you know, Lolita granny. It makes no sense unless you understand that Lolita means a young girl character with a small chest and granny refers to the fact that she speaks or sounds like an old woman. You know, saying ›ja‹ at the end of a sentence. You have to read the characters in terms of [visual] design, scenario and sound (GALBRAITH 2017: 152).

By parsing the character in this way, the player expects a determinate range of outcomes based on the character information provided by the game, which in turn is based on conventions internal to the Akihabara cultural domain. As the narrative proceeds, the player keeps guessing when, where, and how characters will or will not act by using the character information as a basis. The continuous testing of the player's expectations builds tension, until the narration hits a climax, and the player's expectations are either confirmed or subverted. Each climax within a character's narrative bestows an emotional impact upon the user, a development that echoes cognitive musicologist David B. Huron's (2006) ITPRA-theory of expectation. Huron divides expectational responses to an event in time in five categories: imagination, tension, prediction, reaction, and appraisal (ITPRA). Imagination and tension take place before the respective outcome, while prediction, reaction, and appraisal take place afterwards (cf. HURON 2006: 7–18).

Imagination (cf. HURON 2006: 7–8) is tied to the contemplation of a possible future outcome, with the power to both induce emotional states and to retain an awareness that the outcome has not yet taken place. Tension is a preparation for an imminent event, involving changes in one's arousal (proportional to the uncertainty of the outcome, cf. HURON 2006: 9–12). Prediction is tied to the accuracy of the expectation, with appropriate positive and negative changes in the emotional state tied to the process' results (cf. HURON 2006: 12–13). Reaction activates bodily functions and is emotional in nature (cf. HURON 2006: 13–14). Finally, appraisal is a conscious and attentive reflection about the outcome, separate from the emotional response itself (cf. HURON 2006: 14–15).

Each of these five proposed systems is able to evoke various feeling states—although some systems are more constrained than others. The tension and reaction responses, for example, have a limited range of affective expression. By contrast, the appraisal response is able to evoke a huge range of feeling states, from jealousy, contempt, or loneliness, to compassion, pride or humor. For any given situation, these five proposed systems combine to create a distinctive limbic cocktail. Actually, ›cocktail‹ isn't quite the right word, because it is a dynamic phenomenon rather than a simple static mixture. Expectation-related emotions can begin long before an event occurs and linger long afterwards.



Within this time span, a dynamically evolving sequence of feelings can arise (HURON 2006: 18).

Characters within visual novel games, by setting the player on a continuous cycle of expectation and prediction, are particularly reliant on a similar system to build engagement in players. Depending on the accuracy of their predictions, players undergo changes in their mental and physical state, with positive and negative reinforcements directly tied to how accurate their prediction was. When the prediction is completely inaccurate, there is subversion, and an equally charged emotional state. The state of surprise derived from inaccuracy is tied to contrast (which can be negative) and then inverted by appraising the outcome as positive, or vice-versa (cf. HURON 2006: 22). The construction of a personalized mental projection by means of character information is a learning process. The character's identity is discovered throughout the game's story. The player traverses the narration, visualizes the character, and, in doing so, builds a ›personalized take‹ on the narration, while also developing their ›literacy‹ in character elements. This makes the pre-requisite of character *sameness* all the more fundamental, as highlighted by Nozawa Shunsuke (2013). Although each projection is personal—and therefore distinct—each of them needs to be retraceable to the original set of design elements that constitute the character's identity.

The process of mentally assembling information is similar to the interplay between a transmedial storyworld and specific forms of media representations discussed by Jan-Noël Thon (2016) in his framework of a transmedial narratology. Thon argues for the need to differentiate between 1) internal mental representations of the world of a story, 2) how the world is represented in various media, and, finally, 3) the storyworld itself (cf. THON 2017: 51). The mental representation of a storyworld is the narrative world, including characters and their perspectives, as projected by individual recipients. It must be held separate from the specificities of the respective media on which the material representations are based. Finally, there is the storyworld itself, the irreducible sequences of events, characters, and their motivations which must or can be agreed upon by producers and recipients (cf. THON 2016: 51–52). In this way, commonalities of narrative references are established within a fan-producer community. Thon defines storyworlds as »intersubjective communicative constructs based on a given narrative representation« (THON 2016: 54). He draws on David Herman's definition of »mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate« (HERMAN 2004: 9). In other words, the storyworld is the irreducible bedrock upon which an audience can agree when engaging with a specific narration, regardless of media specificities or potentially unreliable narrators.

To function as an irreducible bedrock is a commonality between such a conception of a storyworld and character identity, with one interesting difference: narrative ambiguity across media allows for the possibility of multiple storyworlds (cf. THON 2016: 55), while visual novel characters' primacy (in terms of visual design) cements a single irreducible baseline. A visual novel game's





character will usually retain a set of visual elements (or visual-based elements, such as demeanor-denoting poses) whose constancy is necessary for the character to be recognizable as such. The set of elements is hierarchal in nature, with certain elements requiring the presence of others to acquire meaning as a node within the set's hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> While these are parallels to the ›kyara-state‹, ›kyara‹ are envisioned in a framework of substantial independence from narration in favor of their endless re-contextualizability, but still as unique and indivisible character identities. The ›openness‹ of character design elements and the shared means of character re-production and re-performance between producers and audiences makes accounting for conventionality within the ›kyara/kyarakutā‹ framework problematic.

The necessity for constancy in conventional re-performances echoes the anime-esque, in that it allows characters to be recognized as such through a stylized repetition of acts (cf. SUAN 2017: 67). Furthermore, it makes characters exist on a level separate from the storyworld, as the same character (and his identity) can exist across multiple storyworlds as the same set of elements. A visual novel game's structure makes this capability explicit via the (generally) mutually exclusive storylines that a player can experience during the course of many playthroughs. Once a player starts making narrative decisions and embarks on diverging storylines, other characters might still feature within these specific story paths, albeit in minor roles only. Their character identity, their hierarchical set of character elements, remains unchanged—despite being located within different narrative worlds. They are, for all intent and purposes, *the same characters*, with the same hierarchical sets of character elements, even when contextualized in different storyworlds. Within visual novel games, and by extension, within the Akihabara cultural domain, characters constitute a distinct category of intersubjective communicative constructs, antecedent to the storyworld.

Emblematic in support of this argument is the 2000 interview with Takahashi Tatsuya, lead writer on Leaf's visual novel game series *To Heart* (1997; 1999). He remarks that character design is happening before the establishment of any kind of narration and observes that the game's multiple stories were merely an exploration of this initial character design.<sup>6</sup> These practices, although new at the time, are now an industry standard for visual novel game creators; they explicate the focal importance of characters and character information within the Akihabara cultural domain.

By envisioning characters within visual novels (and the Akihabara cultural domain as a whole) as a distinct type of intersubjective communicative construct, accompanied by distinctive re-performance aspects, allows to explain the constancy of character conventions, aesthetics, and storytelling

<sup>5</sup> The ›blond with pigtails‹ character combination is an excellent example: visually, it requires the character's set of elements to possess two visual elements before the character can be identified as having a ›bad attitude and a soft heart‹ (cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 150), which, in turn, calls for a peculiar graphical representation.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <http://www.tinami.com/x/interview/04/page1.html> [accessed September 15, 2018].



practices across media within the wider cultural domain. The presence of an Akihabara character forces modifications on the alleged specificity of media forms to accommodate for the character's re-performance, even before any distinct storyworld can be established. In fact, the construction of a storyworld is itself conditioned by the presence of characters. Certain narrative scenes that appear completely superfluous by themselves (a homicidally jealous character plotting to murder his love rivals, for instance) can be required by character identities that need to be realized at to their fullest extent. Within visual novel games, the process by which characters condition storyworlds is only made more explicit. Here, three dimensions of aspects of characters continuously exist at the same time: pre-narrative dimensions (design elements), narrative dimensions (the actual characters within the game's story) and meta-narrative dimensions (references to other characters and media).

#### 4. Procedures for Emotional Feedback

The processes necessary for the mental visualization of characters are consolidated amongst the audience by continuous references to conventional practices shared amongst fans and producers. This makes Akihabara characters subject to what Ian Bogost (2007) termed a ›procedural rhetoric‹: »Procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational process in particular« (BOGOST 2007: 3). By way of a shared set of conventions surrounding the production and reception of characters (and media) within the Akihabara culture, players are persuaded about what, who, and how to expect. ›Literacy‹ in these elements is not limited to the understanding of the codes invoked (cf. KACSUK 2016: 277), but also includes experience of how the information (facilitated by the code) can or should be creatively (re)projected to achieve pleasant effects: it is a question about which methods of (re)projection are most effective. Partaking in this process is rewarded with emotional engagement, successful predictions are connected to positive emotional states. Furthermore, all of these procedures are based on underlying philosophies and hierarchies of meaning, exposing the inner workings and how something operates or fails to do so (cf. BOGOST 2007: 71–75).

These *hierarchies* of meaning are evident within the arrays of possible outcomes, which can result from the projection of a character's elements into visual novel game narratives. One example for this tendency is the female *osanajimi* 幼なじみ (childhood friend) character-element. When the player is presented with a character featuring said design element, they can expect an associated array of events and characteristics even before the beginning of the actual game (by reading a game's back cover or the promotional website featuring characters descriptions). The player can reasonably expect, for example, that this specific character will be first to appear during the game's narrative, or that the respective character will have a very gentle, but responsible disposition towards the player's avatar. Furthermore, they can



expect—with a degree of certainty—that the physical intimacy involving that character will be of the virginal type (with all the associated pathos). There can also be other elements reinforcing these expectations, such as a certain shape of the eyes. A ›sweet‹ disposition might be reinforced by the shape of the eyelids tending outwards, which bestows a gentle and tender look upon the character. This shape is known as *tareme* タレ目 (cf. fig. 7) and it is contrasted with another eye shape, the *tsurime* ツリ目 (cf. fig. 8). The *tsurime* shape mandates an inward-pointing eyelid. *Tareme* are featured on characters with a ›sweet‹ disposition, ranging from the *deredere* デレデレ (›lovestruck‹) to the *yandere* ヤンデレ (›homicidally jealous‹), while *tsurime* are featured on mischievous, world-weary characters, whose disposition might range from playful sassiness to outright hostility.



Fig. 7:  
*Tareme* example from an official character art for *Koi to Senkyō to Chokorēto* (Sprite 2010)



Fig. 8:  
*Tsurime* example from a character sprite taken from *Euphoria* (Clockup 2011)



Elements such as *osanajimi* are not immediately evident when compared to elements such as *tsundere* ツンデレ, a demeanor prescribing a character torn between outward hostility and an almost irreconcilable love towards another character. The former, while associated with a specific narrative role, does not call for specificities in terms of visual representation. The latter, on the contrary, requires a series of visual explications in terms of character illustrations that allows an immediate identification of the emotional contrast within the character (cf. fig. 9).

Regardless of the respective specificities of these rules within the system—which elements are necessary for certain predictions to be expectable—it is extremely important to remark that the presence of certain elements usually excludes a range of other elements. This mechanism of element-(in)compatibility, in turn, also removes certain outcomes from the range of expectations that can be exerted over the character and its narrative. Even results which generate an unexpected outcome, and thus subversion, must still derive from the information presented. Consequently, a character whose set of elements is arranged to evoke innocence, for instance, will include said information, even when the element is subverted in the end. One example lies in *yandere* characters whose homicidal jealousy is expected to be articulated through a sweet and honeyed-sounding idiolect.



Fig. 9:

An example of a *tsundere* character from *Muv Luv*. The expression drawn on this sprite is used as the default expression for the character. Confront and compare this to figure 4: the sense of outward hostility must be explicated through visual characteristics



The procedural aspects of engagement towards characters lie in the fact that each player is given the metaphorical tools to draw a series of probable conclusions, and the result can be confirmed or subverted through narrative climaxes. Within visual novel games, this extends to the actual choices presented to the player: acting in contrast to the information provided can lead to the ›wrong‹ story path, and—within certain games—to a negative ending. Therefore, visual novel games can be seen as a kind of explication of the process by which character engagement is developed within the Akihabara cultural domain; they also offer commentary on how the system of production and fruition of characters and their elements could be said to represent the irreducible bedrock upon which the Akihabara cultural domain is founded.

Presenting characters (and character information) as the bedrock of the Akihabara cultural domain is not without difficulties. The process of re-performance described by the anime-esque is mostly concerned with a continuity of conventions and does not call for a unified perspective. While conceptual frameworks like the *anime*-esque or the *manga*-esque can be very useful for the description of a continuous state of development (typical for cultural domains as Akihabara), they do not necessarily recognize a unifying factor. However, the presence of characters proper to the Akihabara cultural domain unifies media forms through reliance on characters as intersubjective communicative constructs. Regardless of the set of character elements which constitute a specific character's identity, characters remain *loci* for generating engagement through the imaginative projection of information on the basis of conventional models. The system of character elements also possesses the duality highlighted by Suan in anime-proper: it possesses the same ›consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action‹ (CARLSON 2004: 73, as quoted in SUAN 2017: 71).

Character design elements reference ideal models not linked to a particular character itself, although certain characters (or certain aspects of characters) might serve as more or less apt representatives of a certain set of elements. In these relations to ideal models, character elements could be seen as rules for visualizing a character, either through specific media forms (such as anime-proper) or through one's personal mental visualization. Guided by these rules, character users can develop their own personalized rendition of a character and thus develop engagement via shared procedures. This, in turn, is built on the character as a form of intersubjective communicative construct, but at the same time expands it into the personal and private. This expansion into the personal sphere, however, is never removed from the character's bedrock, shaping the media forms themselves with their presence. As part of this process, the intersubjective construct is expanded into the subjective perception, which, in turn, is subjected to conventionality in order to maintain the character's recognizability as part of the Akihabara domain. Consequently, rather than rendering Akihabara characters as ›flat‹ and ›freely reconfigurable‹,





the mechanism highlights the same tendencies stressed by Jos de Mul (2015) in his discussion of the ›database-ification‹ of identity:

Facebook might serve as example again. Paradoxically, in spite of the almost unlimited possibilities to combine, decombine and recombine the elements of the database, Facebook forces its users into an extremely homogeneous technological structure with predefined menus, dropdown lists and categories. ›Individualization‹ requires extreme forms of standardization, technological and cultural homogenization (DE MUL 2015: 112).

To produce these highly personalized experiences, a strict set of rules is necessary, accompanied by the potential to influence and guide how possible stories can be constructed around them. Whether it is the male-oriented *bishōjo* or the female-oriented *bishōnen*, characters within the Akihabara cultural domain are constructed for the inter-relation with other Akihabara characters and different forms of media. As was highlighted before, characters are thus capable of exerting a profound influence on the creation of storyworlds, and, in fact, often come into being long before a specific storyworld can be agreed upon. With this capability, they carry their own potential stories; if the character is placed within a storyworld, it must conform to the character elements to allow the preservation of character identity—as well as of the conventionality of the cultural domain as a whole. Through articulations of character identity, all the elements point into the direction of the recipients' imaginative projection as they traverse the story.

However, a journey through a visual novel game or, for that matter, any Akihabara-related form of media, is not merely an exercise of literacy in elements to obtain a positive emotional feedback. It is also a learning process in which commonalities with other media users are exercised and developed. The re-performance of conventions requires a hierarchy, negotiating the relevant directions for the connections between character elements, characters, and media forms. These directions can then be employed by each media user to *actualize* the re-performances of a character. The respective procedures are not even limited to the navigation of visual novel games' storylines. In fact, these only bestow the player with the mental toolbox that is necessary to derive at personalized engagement with the game's characters; the same toolbox is necessary to relate the personal engagement with other players' experiences. Every player might be enjoying the same narration, but each enjoys it in his or her own way: in ›direct‹ engagement with the characters and the story, relying on the same kind of procedures as other players. In virtue of this personalized, yet homogeneous engagement, a sense of commonality is established. Through these procedures, Akihabara, as a cultural domain, fluidly develops, thrives, and evolves, always divergent, but recognizable as a distinct domain, its blurry boundaries ever enlarging and contracting.



## 5. Conclusion. Procedural Characters?

Characters—as hierarchical sets of character design elements, both within visual novel games as well as within the wider Akihabara cultural domain—can be seen as intersubjective communicative constructs which enable the re-performance of conventions. Although media forms (such as anime-proper and the surrounding system of character design elements) are in a state of constant flux, the presence of characters conditions the requirements for this re-performance. This potential does not rely on the respective state of the system of conventions at any given time. A particular character's presence immediately shapes the rest of a surrounding storyworld, acting as a virtual interface to the Akihabara cultural domain. It makes design elements meaningful, capable of being parsed: a kind of hub for emotional feedback. This system relies heavily on expectations, as well as on the emotional feedback following the success—or the failure—of the imaginative projection of character information distributed through the character's core identity. Character identity can then be seen as an arranged set of design elements, whose structure determines the array of possible outcomes that players can expect during their imaginative engagement. To properly initiate this ›meta-game‹ of character information projection, a certain literacy in character elements is necessary, as the entirety of the set of character elements must be parsed for the proper appraisal of possible outcomes.

Such a reliance on the respective *procedures* surrounding Akihabara-characters is noteworthy, a testament to characters' roots in games, both analog and digital (cf. STEINBERG 2015: 8–12, 22–29). This paper proposes the descriptor of ›procedural characters‹ to denote and reflect these dimensions. My proposal is informed by the peculiar position of Akihabara-inspired characters within the larger media ecology, parallel but distinct from any given storyworld, as well as by their reliance on specific rules for personalized projections. This is not to say that Akihabara-characters are in fact ›procedurally generated‹, especially given the popular use of the term to refer to *randomly* generated characters. It is rather to emphasize their reliance on established procedures, even long after their actual creation. Akihabara characters can be seen as intersubjective communicative constructs whose presence exerts a salient influence on potential storyworlds into which their information can be projected—in which they can become contextualized. This, in turn, transforms the respective media into ›Akihabara-proper media forms‹, which stem from the projection of character information onto storyworlds and back onto the media forms themselves. Through this potential for the transmission of information and its influence over specific media forms, Akihabara characters can arguably be regarded a possible candidate for the role of a unifying factor throughout the Akihabara cultural domain. In turn, this would allow to trace the blurry boundaries of the cultural domain and its slowly shifting hierarchies of meanings. It also helps to avoid a conflation with similar, but distinct subcultural niches (such as productions originating within the *JUMP* editorial conglomerate). By



highlighting the *procedures* for emotional engagement and conventional re-performances, Akihabara remains distinct from other Japanese subcultures. From this perspective, new approaches can be derived and new paths opened.

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