

# **Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side: Enacting femininity to avoid dying alone.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the Japanese dating simulator video game, Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side, the first female protagonist version in the Tokimeki Memorial series. Analysis of the game mechanics, characterisations, player options and their results demonstrate that the game assumes and reinforces a range of cultural norms and social expectations in relations to female and gender performativity, courting and dating, relationships and intimacy. I discuss how the gameplay actively produces particular heteronormative perspectives on how girls and young women should enact femininity if they are to avoid being alone at the end of the game, and, for that matter, in life.

## **Keywords**

Dating Sim, Tokimeki Memorial, Otome, Gender, Techno-intimacy, video games.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the ever-growing globalised market for video games, those produced for particular cultures and language groups are increasingly finding international audiences as Internet sales and greater opportunities to travel provide access to games initially conceived and promoted as regionally exclusive. We may need to pay more attention to how games can become popular regardless of apparent limitations of language and culture. For example, with roughly 19% of the population considered bilingual (Griffith, 2014) and over 1.4 million students undertaking second language learning (Lo Bianco, 2009), a considerable proportion of Australians can readily consume cultural product from non-Anglo sources. Widespread familiarity with genre conventions among gamers means that players who do not share a game's language can nevertheless engage in an enjoyable level of play. Further, in the context of globalised fandom, an appetite for Japanese popular culture means that video games popular in Japan are attractive to Australian players, even when untranslated. It seems important for Australian game studies to pay attention to the impacts and implications of games not available in English yet increasingly popular among Australian players.

This paper examines the Japanese dating simulator video game, Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side, the first female protagonist version in the popular Tokimeki Memorial series. Like many dating simulators, the game remains officially unavailable in languages other

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than Japanese (although fan translations exist). Widely consumed by Japanese men and women, dating simulators are a single-player game requiring the player to be the protagonist, either a male or female character chosen from those offered by the game, whose purpose is to court one of a considerable number of possible suitors, also provided. In order to court a suitor, the player must make both conversational choices and decisive actions, each of which are allocated points. Choices, depending on their positive or negative connotations within the situation, can have points awarded or subtracted from previously attained scores. Dating simulators usually have a set time frame at the end of which the points received will determine the outcome of the game.

In this paper I focus on the choices and consequences that revolve around the date event, which is made up of 5 specific major game mechanics. The experience of a Tokimeki Memorial Girl's side date from the player's point of view consists of the following sequential elements: your selection of an outfit and accessories; your date's reaction to your clothing choices; the completion of the main date component, i.e. the meal or movie; a question regarding your impression of the date; and your date's response to your answer to that question. I have conducted an analysis of how these particular game mechanics surrounding the typical date scenario and their consequences in Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side assume and reinforce a range of cultural norms and social expectations in relation to female and gender performativity, courting and dating, relationships and intimacy. Explaining through examples, I discuss how the gameplay actively produces particular heteronormative perspectives regarding how girls and young women should enact femininity if they are to avoid being alone at the end of the game, and, for that matter, in life.

I undertook this project as an insider/outsider participant researcher – I speak Japanese, have lived and studied in Japan and I am a long-standing player of Japanese dating simulator games. The observational research involved both textual analysis and consideration of the effects/affects of how play proceeds. My conceptual frameworks draw on cultural theory, especially in relation to gender and language. I am particularly indebted to Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, and her understandings about how girls and women come to perform their gender in particular ways in relation to the dominant culture; Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze, particularly her recognition that many women may never escape the patriarchal culture in which they exist, so that their identities remain determined by how they are viewed by men; and Anne Allison's concept of techno-intimacy, which has become central to my work, enabling me to achieve an enriched grasp of how people develop intense, affective relations with real and virtual technological objects. In exploring the Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side dating simulator, I have identified a range of actual consequences that could arise for women when the play evokes "real" emotions and strongly felt connections with the gameplay and its characters.

Discussing the cultural implications of particular game elements from both Japanese and Western cultural perspectives, I argue that Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side is decidedly

problematic in how it constructs Japanese femininity, gender relations and the extent of agency assumed to be available to girls and women.

## BIO

Tina Niomi Richards is a PhD candidate in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. With a first degree in Japanese, and having completed Honours in game studies and cultural studies, her research interests include Japanese and western popular culture. She currently teaches contemporary Japanese popular culture focusing on video games and anime. Her PhD project is examining cultural differences and similarities in day one release titles for PlayStation 4 in Australia and Japan. Other gaming studies interests include dating simulators, visual novels and point and click adventure games.

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