

# Interfacing with Data Facts and Fictions on Japanese Digital Games in Fan-Curated Databases

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## Abstract

Fan-curated databases represent an emergent way of preserving and propagating (game) culture and its practices. On the one hand, they are tools for users, created by users to navigate media cultures. On the other hand, they mediate and (re)construct media culture by reflecting underlying geo-socio-technical conditions. In producing cataloged items, users deploy and crystallize consensus views, which interpolate, intersect, commune, and clash as part of user interactions with media, narratives, practices, and other users. Consequently, approaching fan-curated databases requires increased focus on data models, definitions, practices, revealing what really constitutes the object of cataloging for the repository's userbase. In the case of Japanese digital games, such examination may reveal multiple ways by which userbase may describe, relate, interact and make sense of the 'Japanese' in the Japanese digital games they catalog. To do so, this paper approaches two English-language databases cataloging Japanese digital games, *MobyGames* and *The Visual Novel Database* and produces comparison with Japanese-language repositories of similar scopes, *Gēmu Katarogu@Wiki ~Meisaku kara Kusogē made~*, *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan-*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome@Wiki*.

## 1 Introduction: Data Facts and Fictions<sup>1</sup>

Fan-curated databases represent an emerging way by which specific user communities may preserve and propagate their (game) culture and practices. Such enduring similarities and differences represent enduring, shared consensus on the object of cataloging and the modes by which interaction with digital games and sense-making thereof. They are tools for users, created by users to navigate media cultures, mediating and (re)construct media culture by reflecting underlying geo-socio-technical conditions (Couldry and Heapp 2018). Through cataloging, users deploy and crystallize consensus views, which interpolate, intersect, commune, and clash as part of user interactions with media, narratives, practices, and other users. Consequently, approaching fan-curated databases requires increased focus on data models, definitions, presence/absence of works, people, practices, revealing underlying and implicit consensus(es) on what may constitute 'Japanese' digital games in the eyes of multiple communities across borders and cultural contexts. Interacting with a database is never simply about accessing data. It is rather an array of interactions with data, data structures, data models and the underlying principles and foci used in their creation (Kacsuk 2021, 123-124; Ackermans 2020, 3-4).

Within the wider study of digital games, there has been a surge of initiatives aimed at building and aggregating information, and digital games originating in Japan are no exception. Notable fan-curated initiatives in the English-language media landscape include *MobyGames* (<https://www.mobygames.com/>) and *The Visual Novel*

*Database* (<https://vndb.org/>). In the Japanese mediascape, similar fan-initiated online repositories and encyclopedias can be seen with *Gēmu Katarogu@Wiki ~Meisaku kara Kusogē made~* [Game Catalogue ~ From Masterpieces to Shit Games] (<https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/>), *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan-* [*ErogameSpace* -a Space for Adult Computer Game Criticism-] ([https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki](https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki)) and *Otome Gēmu Matome@Wiki* [Overview of Otome Games] (<https://w.atwiki.jp/girlgame/>). Such repositories and database have established themselves as resources of choice for player communities, both in the case of 'generalist' video games, as it's the case with *MobyGames* and *Gēmu Katarogu*, and for niche works, as seen with *The Visual Novel Database*, *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome*.

Also noteworthy are recent efforts in employing fan-curated data in research efforts on Japanese digital games (Bruno 2021; Mühleder et al. 2020). Differently than Wikipedia in its many regional variations (Tripodi 2023; Okoli et al. 2014), fan and/or community-curated databases and repositories have not received equal attention in research, nor to the actual nature of fan-curated repositories: what are they actually archiving? Existing attention to Wikipedia emphasizes, implicitly or explicitly, with the idea that the ultimate end of a data-repository is ground truth – in the sense of providing information accuracy that reflects the object being cataloged as truthfully as possible. In this regard, research focusing on Wikipedia emphasizes its actual non-neutrality vis-à-vis its apparent objectivity (Gildersleve et al., 2023). Therefore, online repositories can also be sites where culture may clash (Figlerowicz and Mertehikian, 2023) but also

<sup>1</sup> All data from repositories referenced within this article should be

considered accurate as of December 18<sup>th</sup> 2024.



reconcile (Gustafsson, 2020), further highlighting conflicts, tensions, and gaps, along with the existence of what may be both “data fact” and “data fiction” (Iliadis and Russo, 2016).

In their introduction to critical data studies, Andrew Iliadis and Federica Russo use the terms “Data fact” and “data fiction” in evocative fashion to maintain an implicit focus towards ground truth as the desirable end of data. If purportedly objective data is revealed to be biased, then it stands to reason that it should lose value. However, this is not true, as Iliadis and Russo argue that “Big Data are susceptible to losing provenance and their ability to be “about” only one thing, their origins and interpretations becoming multiple and conflicting as metadata are mixed with primary, secondary, and derivative data” (2016, 2). Data facts and fictions can thus be considered byproducts of the continuous, ever-growing processes of data-gathering, consolidation, reformulation and re-propagation proper to computerized societies. What may be data ‘fact’ from a specific perspective can become data ‘fiction’ when shifted elsewhere. Data *fact(s)* may thus pertain to information that in some way allows identification towards or in relation to ground truth, however defined. Data *fiction(s)* may on the other hand be the purview of interpretation, derivation and intersection of data from within, without and in-between one or more data sources.

Clashes stemming from interpolations and intersections of data and thus resulting in parallel currents of data facts and fictions are particularly prominent in English-language fan-curated databases that catalog Japanese digital games: Japanese video game production is perceived as distinct from Europe and North America, and possessing of specific, identifiable qualities. This happens both with generalist-oriented repositories such as *MobyGames* and with specialized, niche-oriented databases such as *The Visual Novel Database*. Japan has emerged as a recognizable media landscape for digital game production and focus of research in game, media and area studies (Bruno 2024; Nakamura & Tosca, 2021) Such distinctiveness and recognizability emerges as an axis by which digital games can be interacted with and made sense of, in connection with the Japanese nation-state itself (Hutchinson 2019; 2015), the expanding global popularity of Japanese cultural industries (Galbraith 2021), and their tensions, gaps, and commonalities (Picard 2021; Kobayashi (Hichibe) and Koyama 2020).

Fan-curated databases are no exception, as they may catalog the distinctiveness of Japanese video game production in different ways, according to the explicit or implicit needs of their userbases. This influences how digital games may be related with each other and other data sources, as well as how cataloging efforts appear to end users, within, without and in-between repositories and encyclopedias. Their sprawling nature and richness of information, however, is not ‘limited’ to providing information of interest to a particular userbase. Rather, by catering to and reflecting the “viewpoints, interests, and emphases of the people who use it,” (Royal and Kapila 2009, 146), they provide, first and foremost, a crystallization of a series of consensus views on their objects of interest (Figlerowicz and Mertehikian, 2023,

154). Approaching fan-curated databases in this way can reveal pre-existing fault-lines, tensions within, without and in-between userbases situated in differing media landscapes. Doing so provides opportunities for looking at how specific data ‘facts’ and ‘fictions’ influence userbases and audiences connected to digital games and repositories on digital games. In the case of Japanese digital games, this opens the way to understanding how communities may make of digital games in relation to Japan and how Japan might be perceived – as a nation-state, as a media landscape, as a corpus of video games.

To this end, *MobyGames* and *The Visual Novel Database*, two such fan-curated databases situated in the Anglosphere’s media landscapes, emerge as important case studies in examining the interactions between data facts and data fictions. What (data) facts about Japanese digital games may be garnered therein? And what (data) fictions? How do they compare with fan-curated repositories with similar focii situated in the Japanese media landscape? How does *MobyGames*, in its generalist orientation, compare with *Gēmu Katarogu*, a similarly generalist oriented Japanese database? What emerges from taking the niche focused *The Visual Novel Database* and contrasting it with *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome*, two Japanese-language repositories preoccupied with the same game niche? What is ‘Japan’? What gets cataloged as ‘Japanese’ and perceived as a Japanese digital game? By which (data) ‘facts’ and which (data) ‘fictions’? How is *Japan* and *Japanese* emphasized, amidst tensions and gaps between the “how” and the “what” Japanese digital games (Bruno 2024, 52) and “area and discipline, context and text, media ecology and media specificity” also common to other areas of Japanese cultural industries (Berndt 2018, 11)?

Table 1. Databases, Media Landscape and Focus

| Database                  | Focus      | Media Landscape |
|---------------------------|------------|-----------------|
| Gēmu Katarogu             | Generalist | Japan           |
| ErogameSpace              | Specialist | Japan           |
| MobyGames                 | Generalist | Anglosphere     |
| Otome Gēmu Matome         | Specialist | Japan           |
| The Visual Novel Database | Specialist | Anglosphere     |

## 2 Data Facts and Fictions in Generalist Repositories: Mobygames and Gēmu Katarogu.

Japanese video game production, in its recognizable global circulation (Consalvo [2016] 2022), interacts with other contexts of video game production, North America and Europe in particular. In this regard, *MobyGames* is an interesting case study, due to its generalist, apparently ‘neutral’ position, styling itself as “world’s largest and most flexible electronic game documentation project in existence”. As a “huge game database” *MobyGames* seeks to “meticulously catalog all relevant information - credits, screenshots, formats, and release info - about electronic games (computer, console, and arcade) on a game-by-game basis, and then offer up that information through flexible

queries and "data mining" (<https://www.mobygames.com/info/faq1/#a1>). This, of course, includes video game developed within Japan, along with a perception of distinctiveness that extends in how Japanese digital games are cataloged. This, however, clashes with the overall lack of structured information on a video game's geographical provenance, as it is not possible to list video games or otherwise stratify data on the basis of its country of origin. While descriptions of individuals, creators and groups usually include references to nationality and/or company HQ location, the absence of a specific field makes relating such data problematic.

Instead of providing data on geographical provenance, *MobyGames* opts to reference origin as part of the categories it uses for video game classification: Basic Genres, Perspective, Visual Presentation, Art Style, Pacing, Gameplay, Interface/Control, Sports Themes, Educational Categories, Vehicular Themes, Setting, Narrative Theme/Topic, Add-on, Special Edition, Other Attributes (<https://www.mobygames.com/genre/>). "Japanese-style RPG (JRPG)" and "Japanese-style adventure" can be found under gameplay; "Japan (Ancient/Classical/Medieval)" and "Japan (Modern/Futuristic)" can be found under Setting; "Anime / Manga" is found as a category of Art Style (<https://www.mobygames.com/genre/#category-13>). Out of 141407 works cataloged, 426 works are tagged as being set in Japan (Ancient/Classical/Medieval), 865 in Japan (Modern/Futuristic), 1501 are considered Japanese-style RPG (JRPG), 281 are cataloged as Japanese-style adventure while 14,506 games are cataloged as having an Anime / Manga Art style, the most numerous category at circa 10% of all games cataloged by *MobyGames*.

Such a category is defined as using "a traditionally 'Japanese' style of Japanese animation ('Japanimation' or 'Anime'), Japanese comics ('Manga'), or the adult oriented 'Hentai'". This also applies to other traditional styles incorporated in anime such as Chibi" (<https://www.mobygames.com/genre/anime-manga/>). The usages of such descriptors, in tending towards the generic, highlights that *MobyGames*'s cataloging efforts, despite apparent neutrality, are in fact rooted in perspectives connected to the global circulation of video games. Therein, Japanese digital game production plays a role that is different from the one it may play on its domestic market (Galbraith 2021, 73-76; Fiadotau 2021, 33-34). In global circulation, Japanese video games assume their Japaneseness not out of self-recognition, but rather as possessing sets of characteristics perceived as Japanese, as it may happen with Japanese Role-Playing Games (Koyama 2022, 47-50; Fiadotau 2021, 38-39).

Grouping works such as *Muv Luv Extra* (âge 2003), *Clannad* (Key 2004) and *Sōkō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2009), all adult-oriented works together with non-adult-oriented works such as the *Sonic the Hedgehog* (SEGA 1991-2024) franchise and the *No More Heroes* series (Grasshopper Manufacture Inc. 2007-2021) is the first instance of interaction between data 'facts' and data 'fictions'. It is not false to state that all these games have, in the widest possible sense, an "Anime / Manga Art Style" and that such as style has been historically present in Japan,

and thus is traditional, and thus a 'data fact'. However, doing so produces a flattening effect towards the attribution of Japanese origins to these games, obscuring differences distribution circuits, audiences and markets, between generalist and adult computer games in the Japanese context (Galbraith 2021, 76-77).

A connected, but separate discussion can be made regarding the referencing of "Hentai" as the descriptor for pornographic works in anime-manga aesthetics (<https://www.mobygames.com/genre/anime-manga>). The term, stratified into English-language usage with the early arrivals of explicit anime-manga in English-speaking contexts, is not used within proper Japanese – where the correct term would be *ero*. By emphasizing the usage of the term, there are enough similarities between *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Clannad* to warrant the same classification as featuring the aesthetics of "a traditionally 'Japanese' style of Japanese animation", which is part of a continuity that also includes explicit content. Yet again, while it is not incorrect to state this, such a description applied to the 14,506 games grouped as having an "Anime / Manga" Art Style further flattens differences into a distinct, but samely ensemble of video games featuring a "a traditionally 'Japanese' style of Japanese animation" (*Ibid.*).

If one is to look elsewhere, at the "Eroge / Hentai games" (<https://www.mobygames.com/group/2508/eroge-hentai-games/>) group, the employment of *Hentai* as the word employed in the West is acknowledged, although the groups still refer to games "with significant amounts of nudity and/or explicit sex scenes that was either made in Japan or clearly imitates the Japanese way of making such games" (*Ibid.*). Following this line of thought, within *MobyGames*, Japan is recognized as distinct, and that it produces a significant number of pornographic games. While video games can be generally labeled as being not safe for work, it is only in the case of "Eroge / Hentai games" that the Japanese origin is emphasized, and that label is associated with anime-manga media.

The usage of *hentai* by *MobyGames* sets an interesting dialectic when compared with its similarly focused Japanese counterpart *Gēmu Katarogu*. Situated within the Japanese media landscape, *Gēmu Katarogu* also provides genres [*janru*] for a game's classification within its glossary [*yōgo-shū*] page (<https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html>). Genres are split into two groups: those based on shared characteristics – which may include narrative themes/genres – and gameplay mechanics. Amidst the many descriptors, there are two other categories of interest: "Euro/American Video Game" [*yōgē*] ([https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id\\_48e956f6](https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id_48e956f6)) and, surprisingly at first, "Hentai" – written in roman script – video games ([https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id\\_45aec9b3](https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id_45aec9b3)).

In defining what constitutes a Euro/American Video Game, *Gēmu Katarogu* presents a brief overview of non-Japanese produced video games being a limited subset of video games circulating in Japan, which has only recently changed, and with non-Japanese produced games now

representing the majority of digital games circulating in Japan. More interesting however is the statement that Euro-American game mostly possess photorealistic graphics, providing *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech 1981-2001), *SimCity* (Maxis 1989-2014) and *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design 1997-2001 *RockStar* 2022-2021) as examples of famous Euro-American games series. At the same time, it also provides the *Mortal Kombat*, *Fallout* and *Gears of War* series as examples of games featuring gruesome [byōsha no egui] depictions ([https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id\\_48e956f6](https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/2589.html#id_48e956f6)).

### 3 Data Facts and Fictions in Specialist Databases: The Visual Novel Database, ErogameSpace and Otome Gēmu Matome.

In acknowledging the usage of *Hentai* in English-language platforms such as Steam, *Gēmu Katarogu* produces also an acknowledgment of the relationships between the Japanese media landscape and global game circulation. In doing so, *Gēmu Katarogu* produces an acknowledgment of the ramification of ever-increasing flows of global video game production emanating from contexts such as North America, from a perspective rooted in a local, Japanese context. Comparatively, the emphasis on Anime / Manga as an Art Style and Euro-American provenance on MobyGames and *Gēmu Katarogu*, as well as the respective acknowledgements of what goes around the *Hentai* descriptor, sets up specular data fictions drawing from similar data ‘facts’ – aesthetic appearance and geographical provenance, which nevertheless influence how audiences may make sense of ‘Japanese’ video games and ‘Japan’. While both *MobyGames* and *Gēmu Katarogu* aim for exhaustiveness, their situatedness reveals that, together with games, there is an implicit cataloging of the preferences, needs and emphases of a userbase. And these, on both sides, could be very different from the needs of specialist userbases such as *The Visual Novel Database*’s, *ErogameSpace* -*Erogē Hyōron Kūkan*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome*.

Niche-oriented Japanese video games, such as intimacy-centered video games comprising software falling under categories such as otome game, visual novel, *bishōjo* game, and BL game, elicit different observation than generalist production. If, on the one hand, this subsector of Japanese digital game production is perceived as being even more distinctively Japanese, on the other hand, examining dedicated fan-curated databases promotes more nuanced observations. Observing this field, *The Visual Novel Database* tasks itself with cataloging visual novels, for which it provides its own definition: “computer games with a large text based storyline and only little interaction of the player. A typical visual novel consists of text over an anime-style background image and is accompanied by background music. Throughout the game, the player usually has to answer a few questions which will have an effect on the story, thus playing a visual novel a second time while giving other answers may result in an entirely different plot” (<https://vndb.org/d6>).

Providing such a definition presumes a level of background knowledge in its users, one that is different from MobyGame’s self-styling. For example, users are presumed to know what constitutes an ‘anime-style’ illustration. However, despite the apparent clear definition, *The Visual Novel Database* anticipates objections from users regarding the status of “Eroge, H-Games and Dating Sims” on the database, for which it provides an ulterior definition:

“An eroge or H-game is basically any Japanese game that features sexual content. Many visual novels are eroge and many eroge are visual novels, but this is not a rule. The definition of dating sim is a bit more vague, but it's usually the same as a visual novel, except that a dating sim generally uses a gameplay based on statistics. There are no strict bounds to the definition of "visual novel", most eroge and dating sims include elements of visual novels, but may - strictly speaking - not be visual novels themselves. VNDB has its own rules for inclusion in the database, see the guidelines and the list of special games for more information” (Ibid.)

The presence of this definition produces a contrast between what the database’s object of interest, and what may actually be cataloged as visual novel: the descriptor appears to be more of an umbrella term, pre-empting the heterogeneity of the corpus of digital games being cataloged. Eroge, as a further subset of Japanese video game production, is implicitly stated to be close enough that an authoritative clarification is warranted. A secondary effect of the clarification, combined with the positioning of anime-style aesthetics as a definitional aspect of visual novels, is the linkage of visual novel video games with ‘Japan’ and ‘Japaneseness’, as perceived through ‘anime-style’ images.

And yet, not all digital games cataloged on *The Visual Novel Database* originate in Japan or feature anime-style aesthetics. Out of 52044 works cataloged, 15109 (about 29%), do not originate in Japan, as marked while 1261 (about 2%) do not feature anime-style aesthetics, as seen from the “Realistic-looking 3D” (<https://vndb.org/g3723>) tag. Finally, 6546 works (circa 12%) feature “gameplay elements not found in traditional VNs” (<https://vndb.org/g21>), which would in theory encourage their exclusion from the database if a strict interpretation of the definition is applied. Within *The Visual Novel Database*, the data facts – information about provenance, mechanical systems, and featured art style – contradict the data fiction, namely that visual novels are expected to be Japanese in origin, feature anime-manga style graphics and feature prose reading as the mode of interaction. While these features can be found in *most* cataloged games, they are not found in *every* work in the database.

*ErogameSpace*, the closest equivalent repository to *The Visual Novel Database* within the Japanese media landscape, also features similar paradoxes in cataloged works, and thus data facts at odd with the data fiction that

may transpire from access. Rather than attempting to provide any kind of definition, *ErogameSpace* presents itself somewhat ironically as the ‘adult computer game version’ [*erogēban*] of another similar – but currently no longer accessible – fan-curated database, *CinemaScape - Eiga Hyōron Kūkan*- [*CinemaScape -A Space for Adult Computer Game Discussion*-] (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240507023103/http://cinema.intercritique.com/>). Modeled in such a fashion, *ErogameSpace* presents itself, like *CinemaScape*, as a space that gathers critical opinions from users to get as close as possible to providing an objective evaluation of cataloged works to users (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240507023103/http://cinema.intercritique.com/help.cgi?name=CinemaScape>). There is no definition of what constitutes an *erogē*, nor there are explicit criteria for the conditions that digital games should meet for inclusion. By presenting *erogē* in self-evident fashion, it produces an implicit centering on adult computer games, whose defining trait is the presence of explicit content, with its own distinct circuits and platforms for circulation, production and reception.

Despite the centrality of *erogē*, *ErogameSpace* includes a specific attribute that determines whenever a video game is an *eroge* or not, and not as a criterion for exclusion. Out of 31823, 9291 (almost a third) are labeled as “not-erogē” [*hi-erogē*] ([https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki/sql\\_for\\_erogamer\\_tablelist.php](https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki/sql_for_erogamer_tablelist.php)). Just as it seems that not all video games cataloged by *The Visual Novel Database* are visual novels, not all works cataloged on *ErogameSpace* are *erogē*. At the same time, the situatedness of the repository within the Japanese geo-socio-technical context produces what is apparent exclusive focus on Japanese digital games. However, ‘Japanese’ digital games may not in fact reflect an actual geographical provenance, but rather a matter of circulation. One example is the presence *Katawa Shōjo* (Four Leaf Studios 2012), a non-Japanese-developed visual novel which went on sale in Japan during Comic Market 84 in August 2013. While emblematic, *Katawa Shōjo* is far from being only such case: the entire body of works from Winged Cloud ([https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki/brand.php?brand=4611](https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki/brand.php?brand=4611)) a US-based visual novel developer, for instance, also figure amidst the digital games cataloged in *ErogameSpace*, as well as works from English language creator NTRMan ([https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki/brand.php?brand=7104](https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki/brand.php?brand=7104)). The continued presence of the aforementioned games and makers on *ErogameSpace* thus allows to access an interesting perspective, when compared with *The Visual Novel Database* and its own internal tensions: data facts such as the presence of explicit content and an origin in Japan, when placed in different contexts, crystallize different consensuses. *The Visual Novel Database* might engender a data fiction of Japaneseness in visual novel, only to be complicated by what is actually

being recorded. *ErogameSpace* engenders a data fiction of dealing exclusively with adult computer games, when in fact it is not so. Approaching these niche repositories in this fashion contributes to explicate tensions between individual data facts, collection thereof and resulting data fictions. What can be seen from outside as a whole might not – does not – correspond to the exact sum of its constituent information.

While both *The Visual Novel Database* and *ErogameSpace* deal with similar corpora of video games, they both privilege, in one way or another, games oriented towards male, heterosexual users, especially in *ErogameSpace*’s case. Serving as a counterpoint to both is *Otome Gēmu Matome*, a fan-curated repository situated in the Japanese media landscape that preoccupies itself with otome games, – intimacy-centered video games oriented towards a female public featuring heterosexual relationships – which have received a physical release in Japan. Like *ErogameSpace*, *Otome Gēmu Matome* presents its object of interest as self-evident, without providing a definition, and expecting its userbase to recognize what constitutes an otome game. Interestingly, and a clear contrast to both *The Visual Novel Database* and *ErogameSpace*, *Otome Gēmu Matome* does not catalog video games featuring explicit content, with exceptions in place for works later re-released for the general public – labeled as “formerly 18+” [*moto 18-kin*] ([https://w.atwiki.jp/girlgame/pages/1060.html#id\\_24197479](https://w.atwiki.jp/girlgame/pages/1060.html#id_24197479)).

While it is factual that most otome games do not feature adult content (Tosca and Klasturp 2019, 185), this is not an absolute fact, which turns into (data) fiction when compared with both *The Visual Novel Database* and *ErogameSpace*. Both repositories, of which one is situated in a different media landscape, record significant numbers of otome games featuring explicit content – 496 works on *The Visual Novel Database* and 536 works on *ErogameSpace*.<sup>2</sup> Looking thus back at *The Visual Novel Database*, as repository aimed at fulfilling needs and emphases of users interested in a subset of Japanese video game production also reveals similar internal and external tensions between the ‘surface level’ of definitions, names and presentations, and the actual works being catalogued. However, it is also noteworthy how *The Visual Novel Database*, while emphasizing Japaneseness – in the form of anime-style graphics – is not exclusively, nor strictly preoccupied with Japan. At the same time, *ErogameSpace* and *Otome Gēmu Matome* preoccupy themselves with Japan as a byword for circulation, rather than origin. And yet, the way data fictions – visual novels, *erogē*, otome games being anime-style, ‘Japanese’ – are taken for granted further reinforces the role of data fictions – what appears to, what is mostly true by adding and collating data – in shaping the identity of cataloged works.

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained through *The Visual Novel Database*’s search function and

through *ErogameSpace*’s SQL window.

## 4 Above and Underneath: Data Models in Fan-Curated Databases on Japanese Digital Games

All observations made thus far are based on accessing *MobyGames*, *The Visual Novel Database*, *Gēmu Katarogu ~Meisaku kara Kusogē made~*, *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan-*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome* as they appear on the internet, as of December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024. However, what appears to users might not be the same as what is actually underneath the site's user interface, as the information that go on to constitute a video game page on the five repositories examined thus far might look very different when accessed in tabular form. This is true for every database; in that the information it provides and the data it contains are organized based on what is known as the data model. 'Data model' refers to both the concepts for which data is *actually* gathered and organized and its practical implementation. It regulates how raw data come to represent reality, or what is perceived as such.

In the case of fan-curated databases, looking at both the surface level – how a repository presents itself as a webpage, with a specific interface – and at the code underneath allows to gain further perspectives on what a database is attempting to represent as per its userbase's needs. In its most concrete form, the data model is how a table is organized: the name of each column and the way in which each field can be filled. Central to a data model are the entities that represent what the model is about. For example, a data model preoccupied with video games should have at least one table that is meant to represent video games. Each of the columns of such a table will probably detail aspects of video games that are deemed useful to record by the data model's designer. The table representing video games makes them an entity within that data model. The aspects of video games detailed within the table become its attributes. If, on the one hand, it is reasonable to expect video games to the entity being recorded in a data model, there is no obligation for other concepts such as whoever is responsible for the game's production, its release date, its place of origin, the language in which the software is written, etc.

Making something onto an entity in a data model, at varying level of detail – granularity – is first and foremost a choice by whoever is responsible for the data model's design. When more than one entity is present, it is necessary to determine what kind of relationships exist between the two, and which entity represents the preferred way to reference data between the two entities in question. Such preference is expressed by assigning a univocal identifier as an attribute for each of the cataloged entities – what is also known as primary key. Observing which entities exist and how they relate to each other opens the way for accessing important information about possible hierarchies of meaning within databases and their userbases.


*MobyGames*, as the first of the databases presented thus far, on its landing page, invites players to browse the database according to the following categories: platform, games, companies, people, groups, genre, attributes and critics. When a particular game's page is accessed, users

find games cataloged by release date, its credits, publishers and distributors, platform, the genre categories to which it belongs, user evaluations and reviews (see figure 1). However, when trying to download lists through its service, or to produce custom lists through its search engine, the outputted csv files are, as of December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024, solely based on video games, as the exported id value are connected to video game releases. At the same time, however, the site's own API documentation reveals that it is possible to access endpoints – and thus tables – for genres, groups, platforms and games, with all other lists assumingly being a byproduct of various filtering actions centered on these four entity types (<https://www.mobygames.com/info/api/>). What is thus important – or rather, more important than other attributes – for describing video games and making said information readable to users on *MobyGames* about video games, is the game itself, the type of game – its genre – ways to group games and finally the hardware platforms on which game software can be run. *The Visual Novel Database*, instead, presents itself in a much more articulated fashion, as a video game entry not only includes a set of fixed attributes, but also an ensemble of tags chosen from five groups with which releases can be freely labeled (<https://vndb.org/g>). Beyond data on the game proper, the characters featured in the video game have their own attributes, along with a tree of traits which can be assigned in hierarchical fashion (<https://vndb.org/i>). Both descriptions for the game itself and its characters are readily visible on a game's own page (see figure 2). If one accesses the database's own SQL-based query system (<https://query.vndb.org/about>), one can find the schema for the database (<https://query.vndb.org/schema>), from which it is possible to make sense of *The Visual Novel Database*'s data model. The schema is much more articulate than *MobyGames*, with a total of forty-five tables, all of which can potentially be interconnected, as every row possesses its own id. Theoretically, it is possible to build a series of connections that are able to traverse each table, from one end of the schema to the other. However, what is more relevant is that *The Visual Novel Database* attributes similar importance to both games proper and the characters that populate it, and this is both apparent on the surface – to end users – and underneath, as one accesses the database itself. As much as *The Visual Novel Database* is about visual novel games, with all the idiosyncrasies stemming from its own definition, character might be as important as video games if the database's data model is considered. In fact, identification of a character appearing in illustrations circulating on the internet, and with them the game from which they originate, could be another user need to which *The Visual Novel Database* is responding to.



|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Released</b><br>December 6, 2007 on Wii   | <b>Moby Score</b><br>8.1 #1,442 of 25.9K                              |
| <b>Credits</b><br>249 people   | <b>Critics</b><br>82% (103)   |
| <b>Releases by Date</b><br>2007 (Wii)<br>2020 (Nintendo Switch)...<br>▼ 2 More     | <b>Players</b><br>★★★★★ (36)  |
| <b>Publishers</b><br>Marvelous Interactive, Inc.<br>Spike Co., Ltd....<br>▼ 6 More | <b>Review Ranking</b><br>#41 on Wii<br>#291 on Nintendo Switch        |
| <b>Developers</b><br>Grasshopper Manufacture Inc.                                  | <b>Collected By</b><br>192 players                                    |
| <b>Genre</b><br>Action<br>Racing / Driving   | <b>Wii Specs</b><br><b>ESRB Rating</b><br>Mature                      |
| <b>Perspective</b><br>1st-person<br>Behind view                                    | <b>Media Type</b><br>Wii Optical Disc                                 |
| <b>Art</b><br>Anime / Manga  | <b>Input Devices Supported/Optional</b><br>Nunchuk, Wii Remote        |
| <b>Gameplay</b><br>Hack and slash<br>Quick Time Events (QTEs)                      | <b>Number of Offline Players</b><br>1 Player<br>[ view all 13 specs ] |
| <b>Misc</b><br>Regional differences  |   |

Figure 1. Main portion of a *MobyGames* data entry (<https://www.mobygames.com/game/31970/no-more-heroes/>)



**Title** すたどる! Sutadoru!

**Aliases** Stardoll!, Star Idol, STAR--IDOL

**Play time** Unknown

**Developer** Abelia

**Publishers** Abelia

**Links** VNStat

**Shops** JPY 7124 @ DLsite

**User options**

My labels - select label -

My vote - vote -

**Description**


The protagonist is the producer of the 5-person great success for them, however the group's po convinced that this was because there was no decided on a leadership competition where the with the most fans will become the leader of the

[From Hau~ Omochikaeri!]

content sexual content tech

Idols 3.0 Idol Heroine 2.5 ADV 2.0 Fast Mini-games 2.0 Kissing Scene 2.0 Male P Clothing Damage 1.0

6) quotes (0)



**Asuka Ashita** 飛鳥 あした ♀

**Hair** Ahoge, Orange, Sidehair, W

**Eyes** Tareme, Teal

**Body** Pale, Slim, Teen

**Clothes** Beret, Bikini, Hairpin, Mini-d Thigh-high Stockings, Yukat

Figure 2. Top portion of a data entry on *The Visual Novel Database* (<https://vndb.org/v8183>). Note the tags section (under content) and the character's traits (lower bottom).

*ErogameSpace* follows a similar structure to *The Visual Novel Database*, in that it presents its data in explicit form once accessed from outside. It operates a less articulate descriptive model, splitting a digital game's possible tags into "attributes" [*zokusei*] and "evaluations" [*POV*]

([https://erogamescape.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki/sql\\_for\\_erogamer\\_tablelist.php](https://erogamescape.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki/sql_for_erogamer_tablelist.php)). The former concern aspects of the game's physical medium or other characteristics that are perceived as not being influenced by personal perception, such as the game's physical support, the operating system required to run the game's software, the tools employed in its development, etc.; the latter, instead, concern aspects which are present but can be the object of personal, qualitative evaluation. Such information is presented to users on a video game's page in quick and easy to access form (see figure 3). As with *The Visual Novel Database*, the site's own underneath is accessible through an SQL-based query system. Full documentation for the database is also available, ranging from instructions on how to curate entries to how individual tables function. And likewise, the 40 tables that constitute *ErogameSpace*'s database allow to draw data from a variety of perspectives, hinting that, while the repository is about *erogē*, there are many more aspects that are deemed important enough that require inter-reliability when accessing information on adult computer games.

Differently from the repositories just examined, neither *Gēmu Katarogu* and *Otome Gēmu Matome* feature access to their data in tabular form. In fact, the status of both repositories as wiki makes it unlikely that data is in fact stored in tabular form somewhere. Information is presented as articles, and groups of video games are listed on the basis of keywords but are not relatable in the same way as the previous repositories (see figure 4 and 5). Paradoxically, it also means that the two repositories are the closest to providing the same information whenever it is engaged from the surface or underneath.

## クリエイターの情報

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 原画   | スオウ  |
| シナリオ | やまだ有見, 小和泉いづみ, 吉村りりか, 真崎結衣, 有<br>やみ, かなた春香, こたに白子, 田中彼方, 瀬多海人, 須<br>兎  |
| 音楽   | 杉浦勇紀   |
| 声優   | 下野紘(キング), 高橋直純(チェシャ猫), 立花慎之介(三<br>ギ), 鳥海浩輔(帽子屋), 緑川光(裏ありす), 近藤隆(黒<br>一木千洋(その他), 小杉史哉(その他), 増尾興佑(その他<br>紫野(その他), 荒井聡太(その他), 羽瀬絵里奈(その他),<br>平(その他)   |
| 歌手   | 立花慎之介(OP曲「Regulation of A」、ED曲「ワンシ<br>ン」), 近藤隆(OP曲「Regulation of A」、ED曲「ワ<br>ン」)   |
| その他  | 野沢絵里(ディレクター), 岩崎大介(プロデューサー), 須<br>海(2Dデザイン), 中山尚司(EDムービー制作), 荻原典隆<br>ービー制作), 永井教詞(OPムービー制作), 峰岸彩(アシ<br>ト), スオウ(グラフィック), 松永尚樹(セールスプロモー<br>ン), 太沼晶子(セールスプロモーション), 井伊学(セール<br>ロモーション), 戸塚久美(セールスプロモーション), 高<br>子(デザイン&プロダクトデザイナー), 米山真未(プロダ |

- [クリエイター情報の追加](#)
- [クリエイター情報の変更/削除](#)

## POV/属性/タグ

|            |                    |
|------------|--------------------|
| ネタバレPOVも表示 |                    |
| 公式ジャンル     | ダミーヘッドヴィジュアルノベルゲーム |

Figure 3. Portion of a *ErogameSpace* data entry  
([https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei\\_kaiseki/game\\_pov.php?game=31927](https://erogamespace.dyndns.org/~ap2/ero/toukei_kaiseki/game_pov.php?game=31927)).

This is not to say that information therein is not usable, but rather that it is not designed or curated to be an *actual* database. Thus, the two are better described as two encyclopedias, rather than databases or repositories, which produce implications regarding their underlying userbases' technical prowess and data needs. All these differences and similarities come together into shaping how users might relate with the games cataloged on the site, in a way that might, or might not, reflect underlying foci, emphases, and preferences.

## ファイナルファンタジーXIII

【ふぁいなるふぁんたじーさーていーん】

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| ジャンル   | RPG  |
| 対応機種   | プレイステーション3<br>Xbox 360<br>Windows XP~8 (Steam)             |
| メディア   | 【PS3】BD-ROM 1枚<br>【360】DVD-ROM 3枚組<br>【Win】ダウンロード専売ソフト     |
| 発売・開発元 | スクウェア・エニックス  |
| 発売日    | 【PS3】2009年12月17日<br>【360】2010年12月16日<br>【Win】2014年10月10日*1 |
| 定価     | 【PS3】9,240円<br>【360】4,980円<br>【Win】1,800円                  |
| レーティング | CERO:B(12才以上対象)  |
| 廉価版    | 【PS3】アルティメットヒッツ<br>【360】プラチナコレクション<br>2011年7月21日/3,990円    |
| 判定     | なし   |
| ポイント   | 難易度が高く全体的に自由度が低い<br>戦闘・BGM・グラフィックは高評価<br>現状最後のコマンド戦闘ナンバリング |

[ファイナルファンタジーシリーズ](#)

Figure 4. portion of a *Gēmu Katarogu* data entry  
(<https://w.atwiki.jp/gcmatome/pages/835.html>).

- ALICE=ALICE (アリス=アリス)

## 簡易紹介

ゲームのプロローグに当たるドラマCDとノベルゲームの二枚組。  
ゲームに先駆けてシチュエーションCDが発売されている。

日常に退屈していた主人公の前に黒うさが現れる。  
「おい、オマエ、そんなに退屈ならコッチに来るか？」  
主人公が選んだ答えは…。

## データ

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| 公式サイト  | <a href="#">あり</a> ※音量注意                   |
| 発売・開発元 | <a href="#">Rejet</a>                      |
| ジャンル   | ダミーヘッドヴィジュアルノベルゲーム                         |
| 対応機種   | Windows XP/Vista(SP2)/7(SP1)/8/8.1 日本語版    |
| 発売日    | 2014年5月28日                                 |
| 価格(税込) | 3150円                                      |
| 廉価版    | なし   |
| 原画     | スオウ  |
| シナリオ   | <a href="#">株式会社Polkadot</a> (真崎結衣、やまだ有見、小 |

Figure 5. Portion of an *Otome Gēmu Matome* data entry  
(<https://w.atwiki.jp/girlgame/pages/2928.html>).



Table 2. Visible Categories and Database Entities

| Database                  | Type       | Visible Categories   | Corresponding DB entities   |
|---------------------------|------------|--|---|
| Gēmu Katarogu             | Wiki       | Works  | N/A   |
| ErogameSpace              | Relational | Works, POVs, TAGs, Companies, Platforms, Games, Add-Ons, People, Companies, Critics, Groups, Genres, Attributes. | Works, POVs, TAGs, Companies  |
| MobyGames                 | Relational | Works  | N/A   |
| Otome Gēmu Matome         | Wiki       | Visual novels, Releases, Producers, Staff, Characters, Tags, Traits  | Visual novels, Releases, Producers, Staff, Characters, Tags, Traits |
| The Visual Novel Database | Relational | Works  | N/A   |

## 5 Fan-Curated Data Models, Fan-Curated Hermeneutics

Engaging with data models in fan-curated databases, encompassing both what is visible to end users and what is being referenced underneath the site's user interface further exposes internal tensions, scopes and gaps between what fan-curated databases seek to achieve and what is actually archived. For example, the presence of avenues allowing users to query the database through APIs and/or SQL queries, as it's the case for *MobyGames*, *The Visual Novel Database* and *ErogameSpace* may be symptomatic of audiences capable of interacting with data beyond simple access, as it's instead the case for wiki-based systems like *Gēmu Katarogu* and *Otome Gēmu Matome*. Differences in focus aside, each of these repositories discussed thus far presents its own model for describing video games and video games originating in Japan. And with each of these models comes one or more way to make sense of Japanese digital games.

The result is the circulation of multiple ways for making sense of what a Japanese video game might be. Such a multiplicity of shared descriptions resembles the discussion made by Espen Aarseth and Sebastian Möring in their discussion towards the emergence of video game hermeneutics: no interpretation of digital games can take place without an underlying model beneath – weak as it might be – and motive, which might be a research question in the case of scholars or normativity in the case of critics (Aarseth and Möring 2020, 7). Consequently, each fan-curated database, repository, encyclopedia is not just the articulation of a data model, but in fact constitutes a hermeneutic model for their object of interest. In turn, the expression of hermeneutic model through fan-curated databases crystallizes the needed basis for approaching video games, in the sense of knowing what kind of game a digital game is. In the case of Japanese videogames, this means knowing when a video game is Japanese and why it might be 'Japanese'.

Such processes of interpretation cannot take place

without an underlying model, implicit as it might be (ibid.). Therefore, the interpolation of data facts and fiction is not a mere aspect of the process, but rather, its explication-cum-crystallization is the point of the interpretative process. Fan-curated databases can thus be viewed as supporting tools for interpretative work, that is, they support a process of 'fan-curated hermeneutics'. Through varying levels of influence and diffusion, data sources such as *MobyGames*, *Visual Novel Database*, *Gēmu Katarogu ~Meisaku kara Kusogē made~*, *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan-*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome* each crystallize ways in which digital games are perceived by players. In fact, the process might be twofold, as influential data sources arguably exert influence on what may be taken for granted by developers, or the type of perceived "ideal player" (Neely 2017) for cataloged games, while users influence databases through usage and contributions in return.

Examining *MobyGames*, *The Visual Novel Database*, *Gēmu Katarogu ~Meisaku kara Kusogē made~*, *ErogameSpace -Erogē Hyōron Kūkan-*, and *Otome Gēmu Matome* reveals differences in how users may relate with digital games and digital games originating within Japan and its media landscape(s). The status of Japan, as a marker of situatedness in a recognizable media landscape, and its articulation across contexts is a prime example of the multiplicities expressed in fan-curated data sources. What may become a data 'fact' – geographical provenance – regarding the Japaneseness of a specific digital game for one repository may be data 'fiction', the purview of interpretation for another as more culturally-connotated criteria such as aesthetic style are brought into consideration.

The circulation of multiple modes for describing, cataloging, and making sense of digital games, crystallized through and as fan-curated databases makes the concepts of data facts and fiction increasingly mobile and blurry. Iliadis and Russo's exhortation is directed at the study of big data systems and the accumulation of data from which information on people and their activity can be extracted to increasingly granular levels. With ground truth as the implicit reference point, there is a firmer basis for what may be considered 'fact' and what may be considered 'fiction.' This is not the case for digital games, especially as descriptive axii like 'Japan' are brought into consideration. While attributes traditionally perceived as 'facts' – title, distributor, physical media – do exist in the cataloging of digital games and other media, such characteristics may not be as important as other attributes such as mechanical or narrative genre. These attributes, resting on different and more shifting assumptions, are such that, for the purpose of each fan-curated database, they can be expected to remain part of the descriptive framework as 'fact' only in so-far as community consensus persists.

On the one hand, the underlying tensions, commonalities, and gaps within, between and without data sources appear to follow similar patterns as scholarly approaches, with their own flux-like evolution emerging. 'Japaneseness' itself might become more of a data fiction than a data fact, even without any alteration to the original repositories. It could also represent a symptom of the

transnational tendencies of anime-manga media and its userbases as “Knowledge Cultures” (Li 2024) merging knowledge, play and pleasure. On the other hand, the fact that these patterns exist (also) based on continued userbase consensus must be taken into account, as it forces a continued re-examination of patterns, evolutions and histories, which may or may not be available as fan-curated repositories evolve over time. This is both an accessibility challenge, as comparative analysis of data sources can become problematic when subsequent versions of the database are not available or become unavailable, and an opportunity for comparative approaches that – while far from stable in nature – have enough raw material to be conducted at scale. Such differences are symptomatic of multiplicities in ways of describing, interpreting, and making sense of digital games, and digital games from, and of ‘Japan’, as they circulate across different contexts.

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