

Embodying Anime-Manga Dystopia: User Vulnerability in *Otome sekai no arukikata*

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Abstract

In contemporary Japanese fiction, character intimacy games, also referred to as adult computer games (*adaruto gēmu*) represent a significant yet underexplored sector of Japanese cultural production. *Otome sekai no arukikata* is a prominent example featuring a dystopian setting and themes. This article uses *Otome sekai no arukikata* as a point of entry to examine the interpolation of sectorial languages and media environment affordances with the themes and modes of Japanese dystopian fiction. Such an examination provides insights into how positions and perspectives, which usually remain implicit in anime-manga media, are articulated in sectorial pornographic fiction under the critical lens of dystopian fiction. This approach allows the surfacing of implicit perspectives and positions that are assumed to be normative, as well as their ramifications. Analyzing sectorial media forms and fiction in this manner paves the way for further engagements with still obscure strands of Japanese fiction and cultural production.

1 Introductory Remarks

Recent contributions to Japanese dystopian fiction have been prominently led by women writers such as Tawada Yōko 多和田葉子 and Murata Sayaka 村田沙耶香. Tawada's *Kentōshi* 献灯使 (*The Emissary*, 2018) portrays a declining Japan in the aftermath of unchecked global warming, prompting the Japanese government to adopt an isolationist policy. Murata's *Satsujin shussan* 殺人出産 ("Murder Birth," 2014) explores the repercussions of extreme population control measures, wherein giving birth to ten children grants the legal right to murder one person. These works align with broader trends in contemporary Japanese literature, focusing on language politics,¹ gender issues,² and Japanese neoliberalism.³

Works such as Numa Shōzō's 沼正三 *Kachikujin Yapū* 家畜人ヤプー ("Yapoo, Human Cattle," 1953) depict a future world where a hierarchical system based on ethnicity places Anglo-Saxon women at the top. In this scenario, the Japanese, due to a supposed genetic predisposition to bioengineering, are relegated to the roles of cattle, instruments, and

¹ OTSUKI 2022; DE PIERI 2016.

² SPECCHIO 2024; SAUTTO 2022; SPECCHIO 2018.

³ TILLACK 2023.

(sexual) toys serving an Anglo-Saxon-led matriarchy. Komatsu Sakyō's 小松左京 *Fukkatsu no hi* 復活の日 (*Virus: The Day of Resurrection*, 1964, transl. 2012) presents a narrative in which a deadly man-made pandemic, followed by nuclear war, decimates most of the human population. The protagonist, doctor Yoshizumi Shūzō 吉住周三, is implied to be among the few remaining Japanese men in a world where national boundaries have dissolved and Japan has been depopulated by disease. Works that, though not strictly dystopian, employ a dystopian lens to depict Japan's decline also include Kawai Masashi's 河合雅司 *Mirai no nenpyō* duology 未来の年表 ("Future Chronology," 2017–2018)⁴ and Nire Shūhei's 楡周平 *Genkai kokka* 限界国家 ("Limited Nation," 2023). In both Kawai's duology and in Nire's work, the decline of the Japanese nation is projected by extrapolating demographic trends, with the dystopian frame suggesting that Japanese community has abdicated its responsibilities to sustain the population—defined according to assumed racist criteria.⁵

While the comparison between these works, which include both works of literary fiction and works that straddle the line between fiction and non-fiction, may seem haphazard, the fragmentation of reading publics encourages non-conventional comparisons. Both sides address Japan's demographic decline as a national crisis through different calibration of their dystopian lens: literary texts often use metaphor or ambiguity, while non-fiction and popular dystopias offer direct, systemic projections. Both respond to concerns over national identity and future prospects. There is a noticeable contrast when *Kentōshi* and *Satsujin shussan* are compared with *Kachikujin Yapū*, *Fukkatsu no hi* and *Mirai no nenpyō*. The works by the three male authors mentioned above center the decline or disappearance of Japan through large-scale disruptions—such as racialized techno-futures, global pandemics, or demographic collapse. They depict the physical disappearance of the Japanese nation-society through both science fiction and science nonfiction, envisioning national decline as a biological, territorial, or demographic erasure. *Kentōshi* and *Satsujin shussan*, on the other hand, shift the lens toward the erosion of social norms and intimate relations, illustrate the degradation of the Japanese nation-society through changes in social norms and constructs.

Projecting the fate of Japan in the future is to depict the fate of Japanese ethnic people, their mode of interpersonal relation, and how these might (or might not) be perpetuated in the face of a changing world. Future Japan, in these female-authored works, appears to hinge on evolving notions of identity: identity as a parent in *Kentōshi*, and evolving gender roles in *Satsujin shussan*. Murata explores changing roles, norms, and perspectives associated with womanhood in *Satsujin shussan*, and its shift towards a post-gender, sex-less society. Tawada, meanwhile, envisions a reversal of generational roles, where

⁴ *Mirai no nenpyō* falls into a class of infotainment media works where reactionary perspectives are expressed by taking a dystopian lens to contemporary social, cultural, and political trends, and thus pertinent to this discussion. For an extended perspective, see ABRAHAMSEN/WILLIAMS 2025.

⁵ YAMAURA 2024: 38–39.

Yoshirō 義郎—a senior citizen with youthful vigor—becomes caretaker to Mumei 無名 (lit. “Nameless”), his fragile great-grandson born into a deteriorating world.

Social mores that assign specific, gendered duties and obligations to individuals disappear or degrade, and with it, the Japanese nation-society centered on the nuclear family with a working man as its “central pillar,”⁶ and as the natural endpoint of male–female interaction in Japan. Other configurations of social relationships, social mores, and interpersonal dynamics are presented as non-productive (*Mirai no nenpyō*) or perverse (*Kachikujin Yapū*), with their emergence occurring at the expense of the male-dominated, heteronormative structure of Japanese society and linked to the disappearance of Japan as a polity (*Fukkatsu no hi*). The nuclear family appears to remain an implicit source of social roles—especially for women—whose removal or degradation is depicted as dystopian. In *Satsujin shussan*, as women are encroached upon by production-oriented social roles, their complementary position connected to care, childbirth, and the household is stripped away in favor of assuming productive, work-oriented social roles associated with Japanese masculinity.

Orthros’ latest pornographic character intimacy game,⁷ *Otome sekai no arukikata* オトメ世界の歩き方 (“Walking in the Maiden’s World,” 2024, alternatively *Otomeki* オトメき) also depicts a dystopian world where social and sex/gender-connected roles have been upended, articulating a sense of threatened masculinity while placing its dystopian lens⁸ on feminist instances by way of caricature. The game has been met with positive reception, winning the ‘best graphics award’ and the ‘user endorsement award’ at the Moe Game Awards (*Moe gēmu awādo* 萌えゲーアワード) 2024, an industry-sponsored context.⁹ As a character intimacy game, it tasks players with establishing, developing, and fulfilling intimate relationships. Game traversal involves deepening emotional intimacy and increasing personal disclosure between the player and the game’s characters. In positioning its players as a threatened male in a sex-segregationist dystopia while also reproducing aesthetic and narrative affordances of narrative anime-manga media, *Otome sekai no arukikata* both reiterates and subverts trends in Japanese dystopian fiction.

⁶ DASGUPTA 2017: 39.

⁷ Character intimacy game is not a label in use by game developers. It is a purpose-developed descriptor to encompass as many intimacy-centered video games as possible—including but not limited to visual novels, AVGs, adult computer games etc. In focusing on establishing, developing, and fulfilling intimate relationships, it seeks to account for variance in audiences, configurations of game mechanics, presence/absence of explicit content, as well as aesthetics, while emphasizing the focus on intimacy—romantic, sexual, sensual, and in rare cases, amical and parental—intended in the most inclusive fashion, found in such games. See BRUNO 2023a for a full discussion.

⁸ CAVALCANTI 2022: 65.

⁹ “Moegē awādo 2024-nendo yūzā shiji-shō happyō.”

But why compare interactive software and traditional prose fiction? Character intimacy games rarely exhibit the levels of interactivity¹⁰ associated with video games, such as hand-to-eye coordination or puzzle-solving challenges.¹¹ Some, as is the case with Key's *Planetarian: Chiisana hoshi no yume* planetarian 〜ちいさなほしのゆめ〜 (*Planetarian: The Reverie of a Little Planet*, 2004), do not even allow users to influence the game's outcome, making them akin to digital fiction, maintaining only the illusion of player agency. In other words, this is a media form centered on reading, tasking its users with imaginatively rendering what is conveyed through prose. While it is not the same as reading prose fiction due to the presence of significant visual and aural components, the way in which character intimacy game players must imaginatively interface with the narrative makes comparison and juxtaposition productive.

Beyond the dystopian setup which places masculinity and its expression as a source of danger for the main character, *Otomeki* intertwines such a setup with what Azuma Hiroki calls its wider "imaginative environment" (*sōzōryoku no kankyō* 想像力の環境).¹² With this term, Azuma points at the visible production-and-reception practices of a media context that users must accept and navigate to make sense of the fiction it produces.¹³ This environment—likened to a "genre-zero" (*zero-janru* ゼロ・ジャンル)—exerts influence on narrative form even before authorial intentions or established genre tropes take hold.¹⁴ This, as outlined by Ōtsuka Eiji,¹⁵ means an abandonment of verisimilar representation in favor of reproducing an artificial, pop-culture-based environment. In turn, it means that dystopia is articulated from a different and distinct baseline, with its own interests, trajectories, and representational affordances.

Otome sekai no arukikata, by inviting users into a sex-separatist dystopia while priming them toward character intimacy, sets up a sense of "fragile masculinity," incorporating anxieties related to cultural standards connected to manhood and the compensatory

¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, the non-interactive aspects of adult computer games, as well as their focus on reading as the chief activity by which the narrative is brought to fruition by users, are privileged over their gamic aspects. For discussions around the nature of adult computer games as video games centered on character intimacy see BRUNO 2023 and GALBRAITH 2021b. There is also consideration of reading as a form of constant interaction that allows synchronization between users and the characters they control (cf. JIANG 2019: 36–37), but the nature of interaction within character intimacy games and its ramifications for their study as video games are beyond the scope of this article. For further examination, see BRUNO 2023, GALBRAITH 2021b and JIANG 2019 for works oriented towards male audiences, KIM 2009, GANZON 2022, and SAITO 2021 for works oriented toward female audiences.

¹¹ FABRICATORE 2018: 97–99.

¹² AZUMA 2007: 36–41.

¹³ AZUMA 2007: 41–45.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ŌTSUKA 2004.

attitudes toward maintaining and/or restoring ‘male’ social status¹⁶ into the game experience. However, as the setup intertwines with the imaginative environment’s affordances, several questions emerge: what kind of fragile masculinity is articulated, and how does it connect—or not—with wider cultural issues? And how might this intersect—or not—with dystopian fiction beyond anime-manga media?

2 Environmental Analysis, Anime-Manga Media and Character Intimacy Games

Otome sekai no arukikata is an anime-manga media work, a piece of dystopian fiction, and a form of interactive software that provides erotic entertainment through pornographic depictions of heterosexual intimacy. The intersection of its various affordances¹⁷ means that users may engage with *Otomeki* in multiple ways, beyond its dystopian narrative or its pornographic illustrations. This multiplicity makes Azuma Hiroki’s method of environment analysis (*kankyō bunseki* 環境分析)¹⁸ particularly suited to the task of interpretation. Developed in response to early 2000s debates within anime and manga criticism regarding audience fragmentation and the proliferation of sector-specific, opaque creative languages, environment analysis pre-empts traditional approaches privileging the author as the originating creative entity in favor of taking into consideration how the work and its environment interact with each other, analyzing the unconscious dynamic that led the author to create the work and to express it in the way they did.¹⁹ As consumer motivations diversify, there is no longer an over-arching interpretative framework suitable for the task. It is thus necessary to examine how text and creative environment interact: tracing the unconscious dynamics through which the imaginative environment shapes both creation and reception.

Environment analysis builds upon and synthesizes insights from other key thinkers of the anime-manga media sphere, such as Ōtsuka Eiji and Itō Gō. Although these scholars focus on distinct media forms, their work highlights broader transformations in how fiction is produced, consumed, and circulated. Central to this theoretical constellation are Azuma’s concept of database consumption (*dētabēsu shōhi* データベース消費)²⁰, Ōtsuka’s

¹⁶ DIMUCCIO/KNOWLES 2020.

¹⁷ The term ‘affordances’ is used here in reference to all factors with the power of influencing creation, reception, and consumption of fiction, such as established practices in character design and their interpretation, the ways in which users relate with fiction, etc. without guarantees of dominant commonality from which to draw upon. One example are expectations related to anime-manga media, which will be discussed later within this article.

¹⁸ AZUMA 2007: 156–157.

¹⁹ AZUMA 2007: 215.

²⁰ AZUMA 2009 [2001]: 47–53; AZUMA 2007: 215. The concept of ‘database consumption’ emphasizes how, within (sub)culture, culture is no longer consumed in hierarchical fashion, with the author creating an original work against which derivative works are copies. Instead, the environment in

identification of a shift away from naturalist realism as a core premise for engaging with fiction,²¹ and Itō's emphasis on the interpretive multiplicity within manga.²² Together, these contributions foreground a fragmentation of cultural discourse into specialized sectors, each operating with its own distinct and often opaque expressive codes.

Such fragmentation extends beyond anime-manga media and signals a broader cultural transformation in the creation and interpretation of fiction. Foundational representational assumptions no longer apply universally as the distinction between original, parody, and derivative works degrades. Authorial control has diminished, and a multiplicity of user interpretations have gained legitimacy—even when diverging sharply from the author's intent.²³ In the environment of anime-manga production and reception, the integration of game-like features into non-interactive media forms reflects this move away from realism toward pop culture-based artificial representational environments.²⁴ The diminishing adequacy of traditional critical tools reveals the limits of claims to objectivity in media criticism.²⁵ It is now necessary to navigate environments where meaning is shaped not—at least not exclusively—by authorial design but by the interaction of shared expressive codes and user engagement.

Azuma builds on both Ōtsuka's and Itō's insights by looking even further upstream of authorial intent, character archetypes, and anime-manga or game-like aesthetics. He introduces the notion of *genre-zero* (*zero-janru* ゼロ・ジャンル): a preexisting environment shaping creation and reception of media works. Azuma emphasizes the unconscious mode by which creators and producers are conditioned by their milieu—its opaque, pre-existing 'languages' acting as genre-zero. By envisioning cultural production as a set of fragmented environmental sectors, he insists on accounting for these non-transparent codes while simultaneously bypassing the authorial figure as the ultimate arbiter of interpretation.

Character intimacy games exemplify these trends. Resembling choose-your-adventure books,²⁶ they have been likened to digitized fiction or incremental games.²⁷ Players advance the story by clicking through dialogue and occasionally making narrative decisions by

which works are created is characterized by a circulation of shared, semi-formal 'elements' for producing fiction, which weaken the distinction between original and derivative/copy, as all works come from this baseline which conditions creativity. These elements can be consumed, combined, connected, and isolated in a way that reminds of a computer database.

²¹ ŌTSUKA 2004.

²² ITŌ 2011 [2005]: 8–13.

²³ AZUMA 2009 [2001]: 61–63.

²⁴ ŌTSUKA 2003: 24–25.

²⁵ ITŌ 2011 [2005]: 23–28.

²⁶ GALBRAITH 2021b: 28.

²⁷ ALHARTI *et al.* 2018; KHALIQ/PURKISS 2015.

choosing them from a menu when prompted.²⁸ The most significant aspect, however, lies in how they continuously ask players to render meaning using the visual and narrative conventions of anime-manga media.²⁹ This is because players navigate the game via a sort of pseudo first person perspective: they generally do not see the character they are inhabiting, while the characters present in the scene are represented through sprites—referred to as *tachi-e* 立ち絵 (“standing image”), illustrations depicting characters standing in a particular situation or attitude—overlaid over illustrations depicting the locale in which the narrative is unfolding. The character sprites are depicted as gazing at the player, while the essential nature of the visual assets, which cannot be connected to specific moments in narrative space-time, force players to continuously bridge gaps between information across visual, linguistic, and aural channels via their imagination.³⁰ Scenes may also include voice acting and musical soundtracks. Yet none of these channels—visual, linguistic, or aural—offers enough detail to fully render the narrative. Text often resembles a TV script, with sparse descriptions of locales and characters. Visual assets are reused across scenes, independently of specific story events.³¹ Not all character lines are voiced, while protagonists (player-controlled) characters are frequently unvoiced to encourage player identification. Even when the protagonist is voiced, their inner monologue, when present, is not, in order to facilitate players immersion in the character's mindscape.³² The result is a sort of ‘pseudo first-person perspective’ in which players immerse within one character, take its perspective, but are the same time are called to co-create the narrative experience from incomplete information.

In doing so, character intimacy games, while apparently placing players in a passive situation, in fact configure a framework in which they continuously interact with the software in a way that is distinct from ‘solely’ reading, watching, or listening: through the possibility, actual or hypothetical it might be,³³ of altering the game’s outcome, players are invited to immerse themselves in the game, rather than empathizing with a point of view character. By being provided with an aesthetic baseline and incomplete information, players are forced to render the narrative in a certain way, and to uphold the narrative/aesthetic rules of anime-manga media, encouraging embodied response and immersion. This results

²⁸ At times, no such choices might be present for the entirety of the game. This does not make them into digitized fiction, as their parafictional nature, discussed later within this article, can attest.

²⁹ AZUMA 2007: 70–73.

³⁰ GALBRAITH 2021b: 142–143.

³¹ BRUNO 2023b: 105; BRUNO 2019: 45.

³² GALBRAITH 2021b: 134.

³³ A subset of character intimacy games, known as kinetic novels (キネティックノベル), a term first employed as a video game brand by software company VisualArts in 2004, which then spread industry-wide in reference to similar games, do not feature any possibility for the user to alter the story’s outcome, but that might not be evident until the end of the game.

in what can be described as an “affective circuit”: a feedback loop wherein the player’s emotional and bodily responses are enmeshed into the game’s experience.³⁴

A distinct but related element of this circuit is the presence of reward images³⁵ (*gohōbi-e* ご褒美絵), also known as CGs, a shorthand for ‘computer graphics,’ in reference to the digital manufacturing processing involved in the production of these images. These full-screen illustrations depict key, emotionally significant moments in the game’s storyline(s) from a third-person perspective, ranging from initial emotional disclosures to sexual encounters.³⁶ As Andrea Wood notes, these generate what she deems as an “erotic scavenger hunt,” where progress is marked by the reaching of key intimate scenes.³⁷ Miyamoto Naoki similarly emphasizes that such reward structures—erotic payoff vis-à-vis the hassle of actually playing a game you may lose—has always been central to Japanese adult game design practices.³⁸ These CGs offer confirmation that the game’s romanced character is enjoying the interaction, thereby reinforcing the player’s emotional investment and sexual arousal. Even in linear games reward images simulate player agency by integrating emotional narrative progression into erotic payoff, encouraging players to go further, by way of software mechanics and imaginative confirmation, disapproval, and subversion.³⁹

Sasaki Atsushi extends Azuma’s work through what he calls *parafiction* (*parafikushon* パラフィクション): a mode of storytelling that mimics video game mechanics to position the reader or player as an active co-creator of the unfolding narrative experience.⁴⁰ Unlike metafiction, which exposes its artificial nature in ways that may paradoxically reinforce authoriality, parafiction works by demanding specific courses of mental action out of users as they navigate fiction.⁴¹ In doing so, it compels players to interpret and actualize the narrative by resorting to external codes—such as those of anime-manga media—making co-authorship an experiential reality. Even when actual agency is limited, these structures simulate decision-making processes, fostering a sense of co-authorship and interactivity. The reward image-based loop becomes a mechanism for integrating affect, embodiment, and imagination, even when agency is only an illusion.

Otome sekai no arukikata, however, is not a prose text mimicking game mechanics. It is an actual interactive software product, even if it does not present choices that may alter the final outcome of its story. Its feedback loop is sustained through computational mediation, which provides consistency across playthroughs⁴² while still requiring imaginative

³⁴ ANABLE 2018: 63.

³⁵ MIYAMOTO 2013: 24.

³⁶ BRUNO 2023b: 105–106.

³⁷ WOOD 2011: 369.

³⁸ MIYAMOTO 2013: 23–24.

³⁹ BRUNO 2019: 48–52.

⁴⁰ SASAKI 2014: 208–214.

⁴¹ SASAKI 2014: 214–224.

⁴² AARSETH/MÖRING 2020: 7.

participation from players. By calling players to abide by the aesthetics of anime-manga media, it reinforces a sense of co-authorship even in moments where there is no explicit way to interact with game software beyond advancing the story sequence. By calling onto a shared aesthetic and narrative baseline, the game fosters a participatory mode of engagement in which each user's experience is personal but relatable to other user/players. Consequently, the dystopian setting in *Otome sekai no arukikata* does not act as a mere narrative backdrop. Instead, it serves as a constitutive element in the game's overall architecture, influencing how players may engage with themes under a dystopian lens, drawing from the baseline of anime-manga media.

Therefore, an environmental analysis of *Otome sekai no arukikata* must account for its hybrid nature as a character intimacy game, a work of dystopian fiction, and a pornographic product. Such analysis must attend to its production context within the anime-manga industry, the character tropes it draws upon, and its use of pornographic conventions. What kind of cultural position does the game assume as it circulates within Japanese media? What roles does it ask users to inhabit as they traverse—and co-create—its story? What assumptions about gender, desire, and representation may be embedded in the game's appeals to arousal? And finally, what external forces such as regulatory frameworks or shifting sociopolitical expectations⁴³ regarding media depiction of sexuality and gender are referenced—or not—in shaping how the game articulates dystopia through its narrative and aesthetic systems, as well as its software mechanics?

3 Walking in the Maidens' World: 'Feminism' under a Dystopian lens

Otome sekai no arukikata is the story of Katagiri Yui 片桐ユイ, a young man in a sex-segregated society under the authoritarian rule of an artificial intelligence by the name of Mother and a radical feminist party. In a nondescript future in the year 21XX, an AI named Gaia, designed by humanity for environmental protection, has turned against its creators. Judging human beings as the primary threat to the planetary ecosystem, Gaia has been waging a war of extermination with its robotic armies for the better part of a century. Less than one third of the land remains under human control. Humanity, to survive the onslaught,

⁴³ See CATHER 2016: 82 for a discussion of adult manga censorship through an examination of the trial of the *Misshitsu* 密室 ("Honey Room Shōbunkan" 2002) anthology volume for charges of obscenity. The trial, which continued until a final appeal to the Supreme Court of Japan in 2007, ultimately deemed the work as obscene especially given the nature of two of the anthology's chapters, which featured depictions of sexual violence, torture, and sadism. As CATHER argues, the trial was characterized by the court donning "the mantle of the feminist, banning the work in order to protect women from the kind of torture and abuse featured in the manga's pages, a position that echoed the anti-pornography feminists' oft-quoted slogan, 'Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice' [...]. It was the females victimized by male characters in the manga, as well as the ones that would be victimized by male readers in the real world, who needed the court's protection."

has created a second AI to guide human decisions in the war and to preserve humanity as a whole. Adopting a bio-deterministic approach, Mother has relegated males to fight against Gaia's robots while preserving human society in women-only zones, since human male aggressiveness is seen as an inherent threat to human females. This is the society created by the "Gender Segregation Act" (*danjo kakurihō* 男女隔離法).

Where authors like Tawada Yōko and Murata Sayaka reimagine gendered biopolitics through the lens of female subjectivity, *Otome sekai no arukikata* explores similar anxieties around reproductive governance, societal collapse, and gender segregation. *Otomeki*'s difference is that it does so through a male-coded protagonist whose masculinity is continuously threatened under an authoritarian sex-separatist regime. By circulating as male-oriented pornography and inviting male heterosexual arousal towards its characters as such, *Otome sekai no arukikata* makes male vulnerability and gender performance central to the user experience but does so from within the anime-manga media milieu. Describing itself as a "covert crossdressing dystopian world adventure" (*Disutopia sekai josō sennyū* ADV ディストピア世界女装潜入 ADV),⁴⁴ *Otome sekai no arukikata* also broadcasts its continuity to a strand of pornographic anime-manga media centering a male, crossdressing protagonist attending an all-female institution, and its erotic consequences.

This positioning, in turn, primes a series of potential asymmetric emotional relationships—including but not limited to having to navigate a secret identity, being blackmailed by another character, establishing a series of polygamous relationships. In other words, by broadcasting its essential attributes, *Otomeki* primes users towards a specific array of experiences to co-create. It assumes that users are at least familiar with what playing a crossdressing game might entail, and it communicates that the setting is a dystopia. The showcase of explicit content, emphasized by perspectives deliberately adopting the male gaze—the depiction of women through a perspective emphasizing characteristics deemed appealing to heterosexual male sexual desire⁴⁵—further reinforces an intuitive perception of the game speaking exclusively to a male, heterosexual audience. However, the game also communicates that it is a covert crossdressing adventure. This, combined with descriptions of its dystopian, sex-segregated future, also tasks users with co-creating the narrative from a position of fragile masculinity: the protagonist's status as a male is depicted as under constant threat—even revealing oneself as a male inside a women-only area means imprisonment and death.

This tension explodes when, years after being taken in and growing up under a false identity as the older sister of the family's only biological child Yaeka ヤエカ, Yui receives a convocation letter: he is to report to Tōkyō to attend Acacia Women's Academy (Akashia joshi gakuen アカシア女子学園) for training as a future member of the State Security Force

⁴⁴ (*Otomeki*) *Otome sekai no arukikata* official website.

⁴⁵ OLIVER 2017: 451.

(Kokka hoantai 国家保安隊). The SSF is a gendarmerie force responsible for maintaining peace within the women-only area of Tōkyō. Their responsibilities also include the execution of trespassing males and combating armed groups that oppose the gender separation law. This also includes executing individuals who may be deserting the frontline in the battle against Gaia's forces, the very same thing that brought Yui to his new family.

Yaeka will accompany Yui to Acacia as a fellow student while he disguises himself as female. Refusing the call is not an option, and discovery of Yui's male identity can mean execution for him and the rest of his family. All while both will receive training to enforce these same regulations against individuals whose crime is being male while entering a zone in which their biological sex is not tolerated. Arriving in Tōkyō, where civilization continues in a declining, semi-ruined state, Yui and Yaeka meet Himeno Akari 姫之アカリ, also a student-to-be at Acacia Academy, and Moriya Miku 守屋ミク, one of the Academy's top performers, the game's two love interests. A first complication arises when Akari, and not Yaeka, becomes Yui's roommate, adding to the boy's general anxiety as his academy life begins. With academy life comes academy clubs, and Yui, Akari, and Yaeka opt to join the tea ceremony club. This is where cracks in the women-only society start to show, as the club owns a sizeable manga collection, which includes *eromanga*, which they enjoy as part of the club's activities.

This does not sit well with select organizations such as an extremist faction calling themselves the "Purification Committee" (Jōka iinkai 浄化委員会). Following an ultra-radical view of feminism, they strive to rid women's society of remaining male influence, up to and including censorship and confiscation of media works, including dangerous pornography. The Purification Committee assaults the club, demanding the handover of the manga collection as dangerous material. A firefight ensues, with the tea ceremony club emerging as the victors. This is the catalyst for a series of events—character interactions, conflicts, twists and turns—that lead to Yui and Akari becoming a couple, having sex, as well as setting up a limited experiment of re-union with the male side. After Yui and Akari acknowledge that they are a couple, however, Akari is revealed to be a product of genetic engineering, a human being devoid of male genetics, and who can reproduce without Y gametes. Akari and Yui's defiance to the situation, even as Akari's nature is revealed, is eventually crushed, and the story reaches a first conclusion when Akari and Yui die in a bombing attack.

This first ending unlocks an alternative narrative centered on Miku, who also serves as the perspective character. This time, it is Miku who engages in a romantic relationship with Yui, causing minor alterations in subsequent events. And yet, even this storyline is not what actually happened, and is instead revealed as one of the many quantum simulations ran by Mother in her quest to determine the best course of action for humanity. This turnabout, too, is a reperformance of long-standing time-loop tropes in character intimacy games and anime-manga media, which had reached their apex in the first decade of the twenty-first

century.⁴⁶ The same can be said for the shift in perspective to Miku, the undoing of events, and the shift to a third timeline where Yui, Miku, and Akari form a triadic relationship as the backdrop for a modicum of hope for the world, articulating a sort of final ‘meta-finale.’

Another example is how Yui—and the player invited to immerse themselves in the young man’s plight—associates erections, an automated bodily response, to anxiety and panic about his actual sex-gender. Exemplar of this tendency is how Akari meets Yui—and the player with him—for the first time: her clumsiness, a defining character trait, is introduced with her tripping and falling onto the boy. The result is an improbable trample-tackling, with Akari falling crotch-first onto Yui’s mouth, with almost asphyxiating consequences. While the scene retreads long-running comical templates for scenes in erotic anime-manga romantic comedies, its collocation into *Otome sekai no arukikata* recontextualizes it as a source of danger for the main character, as well as a potentially game-ending danger. Expressing masculinity—often depicted through the (non-)use of pronouns, or sexual responses to body language such as gazes or alluring poses by the game’s characters—is in fact positioned as a source of anxiety for both Yui as a media character and for the player as Yui.⁴⁷

The archetypal journey of sexual discovery is employed both in the service of providing users with pornographic content in a variety of settings and as a way of applying a dystopian lens over the context of anime-manga media. An example can be found early on in a scene where Yui and Miku are depicted as engaging in sexual intercourse: Miku’s social awkwardness is depicted in pornographic fashion as the need to know a correct procedure for every course of action, be it in social situations, inside a classroom, or while having sex. Discovering that Yui is a male, an unexpected factor in the all-female everyday, confuses Miku. This combines with her curiosity about sex, and the need for personal experimentation, which is depicted as being stimulated by *eromanga*. This is used as the setup for a sexual encounter.

Miku’s discovery of sex, and Yui’s discovery of Miku’s more intimate facets, while adding an additional source of instability to Yui’s everyday life, is however upholding male-centric perspectives in character intimacy games, where eventually romancing and becoming intimate with a wide range of characters is what leads to game completion. The resulting depiction of mammary intercourse is, of course, pornographically charged, but at the same time, as part of *Otome sekai no arukikata*’s continuity with the lineage of the ‘young boy incognito in an all-female institution’ genre, is coded as being tension-inducing. The embodied feedback that is produced, or which, alternatively, users are expected to develop

⁴⁶ AZUMA 2009 [2001]: 106–116; AZUMA 2007: 158–181.

⁴⁷ This would call for a much more extensive discussion on how players might immerse themselves into the game as Yui, especially in connection with encouragement of user sexual arousal. However, this cannot be properly articulated within the space of this article. For more extensive work on game avatars, see SZOLIN *et al.* 2023 and DE WILT *et al.* 2020.

as part of the game, is enmeshed with the depiction of vulnerability proper to dystopian fiction.

However, more thorough examination of Yui as a character reveals key differences: Yui's face is consistently present during sex, instead of being obscured or non-descript as it generally happens in male-oriented character intimacy games. Such a design choice, making Yui's face visible, makes the game distinct: together with Yui's general design as a non-threatening male, with extensive neotenic features and slender build, it echoes creative choices aimed at producing 'women-friendly' pornography in Japan.⁴⁸ The rendering of Yui in anime-manga feminized fashion is even more evident when looking at the game's official *dakimakura* 抱き枕—a pillow (around 80 to 120cm in length) made to be hugged, whose cover displays a character as if it was on a bed, inviting intimacy; reversing the cover reveals the same character in a state of undress. The pillow cover showing Yui in undressed fashion has a piece of cloth covering his genital area, as per the convention of broadcasting ambiguity in crossdressing anime-manga characters.

However, this should not be conflated with a sense of gender dysphoria or with Yui being positioned as a trans woman. The framing of Yui in a vulnerable, feminine-presenting position is instead better explained through Nagayama Kaoru's idea of the crossdressing male being akin to a costume, or role that readers don or play as part of erotic engagement in BDSM manga:

[...] while it is a "myth" (*shinwa*), it is also simultaneously a "setting" (*settei*), which provides the costumes the players will don. Furthermore, it should be said that these men who mimic women do not "want to become women." To be precise, they "want to become like women." It for the most part has nothing to do with gender dysphoria, and is not the same as a "desire to become a woman" (*josei-ka ganbō*).⁴⁹

In this configuration, Yui as a character becomes something akin to male characters in Boys Love (BL) games—video games featuring homoerotic relationships between *bishōnen* (androgynous looking males) characters—and main characters in *otome* games—video games where a female protagonist interacts, romances and is romanced by a cast of *bishōnen* (美少年). The gaze he invites on the *dakimakura* acquires the potential to cross audiences.

Vulnerability as male is interpolated, and then superseded, by vulnerability as *otaku*, as consumer of explicit media, and as (anime-manga) media user, to which the conflict against the Purification Committee attests. This does not mean that *Otome sekai no arukikata* does not reprise depiction of masculinity or is exempt from positioning Yui's masculinity as fragile—the game's entire story can be seen as a journey towards male affirmation. However,

⁴⁸ HAMBLETON 2016: 430.

⁴⁹ NAGAYAMA 2021: 225.

the game's preoccupation is such that male vulnerability, and the positioning of Yui's masculinity as fragile, are made in service of other trajectories and interests proper to the Japanese anime-manga milieu.

4 *Otome sekai no arukikata*, Japanese Dystopian Futures, and Fragile Masculinity

As dystopian fiction, *Otome sekai no arukikata* produces a warning to its audience by depicting outcomes of political, societal, and cultural developments perceived as catastrophic as shaped by lived experiences and perspectives.⁵⁰ However, the declining importance of authorship complicates this reading, particularly when considering the portfolios of the game's key creative staff. Neither the scenario designer (NYAON), game director (Kotake Yoshihiko 小竹義彦), nor character designer (Mignon ミニョン) appear to have previously worked on a character intimacy game featuring a dystopian setting. They do, however, have experience in creating character intimacy games featuring crossdressing characters. Consequently, drawing direct comparison with literary authors may appear haphazard. However, the dystopian setting depicted in *Otomeki*, centered on the exclusion of males from civilized society, results in the erosion and eventual disappearance of communication styles and interpersonal norms traditionally associated with men in Japanese culture, a sentiment shared with authors like Nire Shūhei and Kawai Masashi, while its nature as pornography may draw connections with Numa Shōzō. The game still reproduces anxieties around male fragility and reproductive irrelevance. This invites comparisons with other works of Japanese dystopian literature, even if *Otomeki* does so 'only' in service of building a dystopian anime-manga experience.

Japanese dystopian fiction often emphasizes shifts in the Japanese nation-society: the interplay of social, ethnic, and cultural change determines Japan's fate in relation to the world, shaping its dystopian settings and critical lenses.⁵¹ Numa Shōzō, Komatsu Sakyō, Kawai Masashi, and Nire Shūhei depict negative, unsettling, and uncanny alterations of Japanese societal norms by placing a male perspective at the forefront: in all these works, the Japanese, as a people and as a nation, degrade or disappear, either by reduction to impotent sexual slavery, as in *Kachikujin Yapū*, removal from their homeland and near extinction, as in *Fukkatsu no hi*, or by abdication to one's sexual reproduction duties as it happens in *Mirai no nenpyō* and *Genkai kokka*. By contrast, Tawada Yōko and Murata Sayaka depict the degrading of Japanese societal norms from a female perspective, depicting the encroachment and/or dissolution of female social roles and spaces into non-descript, male-

⁵⁰ MOYLAN 2018; CLAEYS/SARGENT 1999.

⁵¹ CAPPONCELLI 2021: 365.

adjacent neutrality. While dystopian fiction evokes a sense of global vulnerability,⁵² vulnerability in Japanese dystopian literature is localized, ethnic, and cultural.

Kachikujin Yapū uses its portrayal of a matriarchal, Anglo-Saxon-led empire to depict the dehumanization and decline of Japanese society. The novel addresses unresolved ethnic issues of the 1960s and anticipates themes later explored in *Fukkatsu no hi* (1964). In *Fukkatsu no hi*, Yoshizumi is depicted as both a savior from nuclear war and a key figure in addressing reproduction and dissolving national boundaries. The remaining pandemic survivors, isolated in Antarctica, face the end of Japan as a dystopian theme. Even with the birth of Yoshizumi's son—one of the first children born in the surviving Antarctic settlements—nationality becomes irrelevant; he is part of a new, nationless generation set to eventually reclaim a deserted world.

Mirai no nenpyō is even more explicit in using demographic projections to illustrate the gradual decline and eventual demise of Japanese society. Other Japanese dystopian works, like Takami Kōshun's 高見広春 *Battle Royale* (1999) and Isukari Yuba's *Yokohama Station SF* series (2021–2022), also depict societal collapse: *Battle Royale* portrays the fragmentation of community ties by the state, while *Yokohama Station SF* explores their disappearance under the creeping expansion of the titular station. *Kentōshi* explores a fundamental shift in societal expectations between young and old. *Satsujin shussan* portrays the loss of motherhood as an inherent attribute from birth, reflecting its association with female gender roles in Japanese society, and their relationship to male-attributed social expectations. Masculine-centric social mores and modes of interpersonal relation, intertwining sex, race, and gender,⁵³ are depicted under dystopian lenses as degrading or disappearing. With them comes the reduction or dilution of traits associated with masculinity in hegemonic Japanese social structures such as “physicality, simplicity, violence, and aggressiveness.”⁵⁴

By placing Japanese societal norms under a dystopian lens, Japanese dystopian fiction articulates a perspective that emphasizes complementary, heteronormative roles for both genders, implicitly tethered to the nuclear family as a reproductive unit: men fulfill the idealized breadwinner role outside the home while women are its caretakers. Economically productive activities conducted outside the home are symbolically and materially overvalued.⁵⁵ Activities related to the production and maintenance of social bonds remain “feminized and thus symbolically and materially devalued.”⁵⁶ Although this model has evolved alongside fluctuations in Japan's economic landscape, it remains deeply embedded in Japanese fiction, particularly dystopian literature. While shifts away from masculinities

⁵² Cf. FALCUS 2020; MOYLAN 1999.

⁵³ FRÜHSTÜCK 2022: 19–46.

⁵⁴ JORDEN 1983: 124.

⁵⁵ HIDAKA 2017: 119–122.

⁵⁶ WOŹNY 2025: 2.

now seen as toxic or socially undesirable are evident, gendered perspectives continue to shape dystopian visions of Japanese society.

Despite changes in societal expectations, portrayals of masculinity remain tethered to traditional frameworks, producing what has been termed a “Men’s Crisis.”⁵⁷ Men face deprivation and uncertainty as stable employment and clear social roles become less attainable, leading to the “masculinization of deprivation.”⁵⁸ The evolution of masculine social roles has not erased entrenched gender inequalities. Models such as the “domesticated salaryman,” balancing traditional office work with sensitivity and increased engagement within the domestic sphere instead reflect a hybrid masculinity straddling traditional and newly emerging social expectations.⁵⁹ This diversification of masculine models in popular culture both reflects and shapes public attitudes,⁶⁰ even as cultural pressures to reinforce traditional masculinity persist. This is especially evident in times of national crisis, such as post-disaster calls for the “re-masculinization” of the nation.⁶¹ This fragile Japanese masculinity arises from tensions between shifting social standards and enduring patriarchal structures, leaving men to navigate new vulnerabilities and uncertain social roles.⁶²

In this landscape, the specter of the salaryman as the “everyman” of a once-flourishing corporate Japan remains ever-present.⁶³ Hegemonic in his role as the *daikokubashira* 大黒柱 (central pillar) of the household, the salaryman, and the salaryman-centered family, still occupy a key place in the national psyche.⁶⁴ Tied to a framework of corporate paternalism, the salaryman also serves as the lynchpin of a network of social mores and ways of interpersonal relationships. And while this might no longer be the case in the workplace, as new realities have settled in, echoes of the salaryman-centric family persist in pop culture despite ongoing renegotiations of masculine identities, and despite separate, salaryman-antithetical “microcosms of (hegemonic) masculinities”⁶⁵ seemingly in the process of displacing them. In fact, there has been a paradox in which the tightening of socioeconomic conditions have led to a widening divide between those who are able to enter the “parameters of salaryman masculinity, and those (in increasing numbers) who find themselves relegated to low-paying, insecure jobs in the non-permanent sector.”⁶⁶

⁵⁷ ITŌ/ALEX 2023: 175.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ WOŹNY 2025: 1–2.

⁶⁰ DARLING-WOLF 2004: 290–293.

⁶¹ KOIKARI 2019.

⁶² IIDA 2006.

⁶³ DASGUPTA 2017: 36–38.

⁶⁴ DASGUPTA 2017: 39.

⁶⁵ FRÜHSTÜCK/WALTHALL 2011: 10; DASGUPTA 2017: 43.

⁶⁶ DASGUPTA 2017: 43.

This divide has exacerbated fragility in hegemonic Japanese masculinity, particularly concerning its presumed main goal: finding a marriage partner, starting a family and thus contributing to the nation-community economically and demographically.⁶⁷ Such reproductive fragility—echoing Japan’s ongoing demographic crisis—recurs in Japanese dystopian fiction. Works like *Mirai no nenpyō*, *Kentōshi*, and *Satsujin shussan* foreground Japan’s demographic reckoning. In *Kentōshi*, traditional gender and age roles are reversed through the characters Yoshihiro and Mumei. Yoshiro, a domesticated man, assumes female-coded caregiving roles for Mumei, while also reversing intergenerational social hierarchies. *Satsujin shussan* portrays a shift in which female caregiving roles are dissolved into a gender-neutral humanity. This dissolution is dramatized through the tension between motherhood (giving life) and murder (taking life), symbolizing the erasure of binary sex and gender roles within Japan’s dystopian future. The degradation of traditional systems organized around sex-race-gender roles is portrayed as a dystopian outcome. The heteronormative nuclear family remains depicted as the preferable—often sole—endpoint for intimacy and societal stability: only by perpetuating the Japanese community through physical reproduction can social frameworks, as well as the social roles they articulate, be preserved.

Furthermore, Yui’s mannerisms are coded not through machismo or aggression, but through their absence. Emblematic of this is when Yaeka teases him for being a bedwetter at the beginning of the story, to which Yui reacts in deep embarrassment at being infantilized instead of responding in aggressive or otherwise rebutting fashion—even as it is contextualized as stemming from his traumatic past as a child soldier. He is portrayed as meek, submissive, and comfortable within the domestic sphere. This is echoed in his voice performance by Okamoto Rie⁶⁸ (credited as Ayumi Sarah), who uses soft, feminized speech patterns, drawing on Japanese role language to present Yui as occupying a feminized position.⁶⁹ This is arguably more in continuity with forms of domesticated, hybrid masculinity in Japanese pop culture,⁷⁰ rather than with recent attempts at re-masculinizing men by re-introducing aggressive, machoism-like attitudes associated with traditional masculinity in Japan.⁷¹

A subtler example is the evolution of Akari’s beliefs once she and Yui become a couple. Raised in a women-only society, Akari initially dreams of a world without men. But after falling in love with Yui, she acknowledges that love transcends biological sex. This moment inverts tropes from Boys’ Love manga, where characters often deny gay identity by affirming

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ It is not uncommon for voice actors to adopt a pseudonym for roles in adult games, cf. “Okamoto Rie 岡本 理絵” in *The Visual Novel Database*.

⁶⁹ BRUNO 2023b; DAHLBERG-DODD 2018; KINSUI 2017.

⁷⁰ WOŹNY 2025: 4–5; DARLING-WOLF 2004: 290–293.

⁷¹ KOIKARI 2019: 155–156.

love for ‘just that one person’ of the same sex.⁷² The inversion of this trope is significant because it produces a sense of paradoxical isolation even as Yukari, the subject of Yui and the player’s affection signals fulfilment of the intimate bond: Yui’s gender (and the player with him), are made *irrelevant*. Yukari is not accepting Yui as a male, he is making his gender and sexual identity unimportant because he is special, not because of wider acceptance. Sexual and intimate encounters in the game, along with their invitation to embodied feedback, may always carry a lingering sense of existential threat. Yui’s journey away from home becomes not just one of self-discovery, but one of exploring male sexual expression in a world where said expression can entail death. In getting together with Yukari, the expression of male sexuality ultimately falls on deaf ears.

Furthermore, *Otome sekai no arukikata* inverts anxieties about reproductive politics found in feminist dystopian fiction: rather than controlling women’s reproductive power, the dystopia imagines a future where male reproductive value is being erased. It is not the domesticated woman who is unsettled, but rather the increasingly precarious male—no longer necessary, no longer central. The revelation of Akari as capable of reproducing without male interaction is withheld until after the player has engaged in love and sexual intimacy with her—imaginary though these experiences may be—compounding the sense of masculine fragility. By emphasizing that Akari, the object of player affection, is what will make men obsolete, and with it remove the possibility of forming a family where the male component still possesses some sort of irreplaceable function, the game invites players to co-create a sense of vulnerability rooted in fragile masculinity.

As articulate as its dystopian setup might be, *Otome sekai no arukikata*’s deploying of *eromanga* as the catalyst for narrative development, as well as the game’s circulation as an adult character intimacy game, make such developments not a negation of actual possibilities, but instead the negation of the possibility of (pornographic) fiction. Yui’s reproductive function as male that Akari renders meaningless is in fact a negation of the possibility of pornographic anime-manga media. Expressing fragile masculinity in dystopian fashion within the conventions and expectations of the anime-manga media connect it to the concerns of the anime-manga field. In this case, the casting of a radical feminist as the authoritarian antagonist, instead of reactionary politics, might be instead attributed to recent movements to limit expression in pornographic media.

And while Yui’s encoding can be connected with fetishistic engagement towards and through male characters⁷³ in a submissive position, the fact that the game invites sexual desire towards female characters complicates things. Yui is not repressed in his masculinity only to (re)discover it in order to assert masculinist dominance, as it might occur within feminist backlash narratives. Instead, the repression of Yui’s masculinity function as an entry

⁷² Cf. GARG/YANG 2023: 771–773; WELKER 2022: 7–9.

⁷³ NAGAYAMA 2021: 224–227.

point to (re)discover and then reassert the full range of expression within the ‘unconscious’ (in Azuma terms) of (explicit) anime-manga media. Operating within this media ecology, the game may be engaging less with ‘global’/‘(g)local’/‘national’ concerns and might instead be tied to developments inside and around its wider imaginative environment. Consequently, the vulnerability being expressed as male fragility in works such as *Otome sekai no arukikata* might instead be better expressed as user vulnerability, highlighting its connection to the user as player in a situated environment. This further complicates the way in which the positioning of themes, characters, and setting could be approached as the sectorial nature of media increases.

5 (Pornographic) Anime-Manga Dystopias?

Otome sekai no arukikata articulates a dystopian setup for its narrative while at the same time focusing its effort on matters visible and of concern within the anime-manga imaginative environment. By itself, this is not particularly distinctive, as Azuma Hiroki, in his outline of game-like realism, envisions the possibilities of anime-manga-like genres, elaborating on the existence of multiple imaginative environments. However, the way in which the game invites users toward co-creation from a position of fragile masculinity and subsequent vulnerability—allowing connection with non-anime-manga works—is worthy of interest. Reducing *Otome sekai no arukikata* solely to some sort of ‘anime-manga dystopia,’ with the implicit assumption that it operates in a closed context, is reductive and obscures how the environment might—or might not—interact with external factors such as ongoing debates around pornography and cultural clashes that, in one way or another, intersect with and concern the imaginative environment in which anime-manga media and character intimacy games are created, circulated, and consumed.

In doing so, anime-manga media interact with the present in ways that, while not the same, are similar and comparable to those found within traditional prose literature. And while the anime-manga field still exists within the wider national, cultural, and technological context of Japan, it is also interested by development in the wider world. Just as dystopian fiction by authors such as Tawada Yōko and Murata Sayaka uses a dystopian lens to discuss a changing society, including matters such as reproductive anxieties and the changes in social roles, so may anime-manga media, even if not with the same degree of ‘broadcasted’ authorial intent as prose literature. It is through the interaction with ‘out-field’ factors that *Otomeki* deploys the vulnerabilities that must be assumed by players if the co-creational assemblage is to function properly as an interactive experience. Where the locus of vulnerability is located, however, is where *Otome sekai no arukikata* is most interesting as a work of (anime-manga) dystopian fiction: it locates warning and vulnerability not in relation to tangible reality, as dystopian fiction authored by *Kentōshi* and *Satsujin shussan* does in comparison with *Kachikujin Yapū*, *Fukkatsu no hi*, and *Mirai no nenpyō*. Instead, it sets their

locus in the artificial world of pop culture. As anticipated by Azuma Hiroki, the ‘unconscious’ of the anime-manga environment, the ensemble of practices by which anime-manga media are produced, circulated, and received take precedence over the author’s intent. To produce and circulate fiction within the anime-manga field, the author must embed its practices—character types, archetypical plots, prototypical interactions—in their creative process before everything else. Testament to this peculiarity is the very depiction of the sex-segregationist system of government that rules over human society: its representation appears more rooted with clashes coming out of specific events concerning the anime-manga field than an articulate study of feminist positions and critiques.

In rendering a feminist government as authoritarian, anti-male, and, most importantly, anti-male pleasure, *Otome sekai no arukikata* produces an alignment with perceptions of feminist positions as hegemonic in cultural discourses.⁷⁴ In particular, the authoritarian views expressed by the Purification Committee—which range from behavioral prescriptions regarding how a woman should act to efforts toward eliminating remaining vestiges of masculinity in society, whatever they might be—are a grotesque version of anti-pornographic activist positions in Japan.⁷⁵ These include, iconically, views of pornography as a way for men to re-enact and re-establish dominance over women,⁷⁶ and fears that such media makes women internalize their own self-degradation.⁷⁷ Emphasis on opposition to pornography turns *Otomeki* toward issues that are of concern to consumers of explicit anime-manga media.

By foregrounding the idea that pornographic entertainment is endangered, *Otome sekai no arukikata* grounds dystopia in the everyday lives of those assumed to consume similar media. This arguably invites comparison with events such as the *Misshitsu* trial,⁷⁸ the Tōkyō Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths, which lead to limitations in sales of adult anime-manga in the Tōkyō metropolitan area,⁷⁹ as well as Equality Now’s campaign against the Japanese government following the accidental circulation of ILLUSION’s eponymously named *Rapelay* (レイプレイ), a video game centered on sexual violence,⁸⁰ as well as more recent issues such as increased difficulty in using certain credit card circuits to pay for pornographic media on select websites in Japan following pressure campaigns by feminist activist groups.⁸¹ In doing so, the game positions itself inside the imaginative environment of anime-manga media, establishing a sense of

⁷⁴ Cf. SARESMA *et al.* 2021: 235–236; BLAIS/DUPUIS-DERI 2012: 25–26.

⁷⁵ MILES 2020: 2–3; NAKASATOMI 2012; 2007.

⁷⁶ MILES 2020: 3.

⁷⁷ NAKASATOMI 2007: 25.

⁷⁸ See note 43.

⁷⁹ GALBRAITH 2021b: 65–72.

⁸⁰ DEWINTER 2015; NAKASATOMI 2012.

⁸¹ See MILES 2020 for a recent overview of debates around use, circulation, and perceived dangers of pornography in Japan.

threat resonating with users' daily lives. The game positions players within a narrative context where they are invited to co-create an experience in which they are masculine and heterosexual, and see their status as males negated and antagonized. However, what is most interesting is that, within *Otomeki*, *vulnerability as a male* overlaps with—and is then superseded by—*vulnerability as a consumer of explicit media*.

The contextualization of Akari and Yui's sexual relationship, which—like other sexual interactions within the game—is facilitated by contact with *eromanga*, appears to reflect views positioning pornography as a mode of sexual expression whose freedom should be protected.⁸² It is contact with *eromanga*—and, in general, explicit anime-manga media—and its exaggerated expression that stimulates curiosity in Yui's fellow clubmates.⁸³ Nevertheless, Akari's own realization that love goes beyond the boundaries of sex still cements a dystopian depiction of vulnerability: Yui's (and the player's) gender are considered irrelevant but not accepted, and this does not eliminate the sense of vulnerability as Yui remains an exception to the rule. This sense of menace is dependent on players assuming, and co-creating, a position vis-à-vis the narrative that reproduces conditions of anime-manga media featuring a male protagonist attracted to female characters. The dystopian sense of vulnerability is thus enmeshed in the embedded affordances of anime-manga media on which character intimacy games rely. In articulating censorship against manga—and especially *eromanga*—as the work of authoritarian entities, *Otome sekai no arukikata* speaks to an audience familiar with the issues faced by users consuming explicit anime-manga media, interfacing with the field's own situated history and sense thereof.⁸⁴

Building on such assumptions configures the dystopian development as something that threatens the user's everyday not as men, women, or citizens of a particular country, but as consumers of explicit media. *Otome sekai no arukikata* configures its dystopian development in a way that what is under threat, first and foremost, is the possibility of consuming explicit anime-manga content, in the form that is recognized as endangered at the time of its creation. Groups perceived as working towards the progressive restriction and erasure of explicit anime-manga expression—intended as the avenues of publication and the range of themes, settings, and characters that are deemed acceptable or legal to create—identified with an authoritarian caricature of anti-pornography feminism, are made responsible for the (explicit anime-manga character intimacy game) dystopia. However, as highlighted previously, the critique is not rooted in an in-depth study of feminist positions—

⁸² MILES 2020: 4–5.

⁸³ If the narrative contextualization is taken at absolute face value, while also acknowledging that Yui is a fictional, anime-manga character, Akari's expression of love beyond gender would align with framings of attachment to fictional characters as a distinct sexual orientation, as outlined in MILES 2020: 5. The game, however, does not offer explicit calls to such an interpretation.

⁸⁴ AZUMA 2007: 51–54.

it is instead a response to events that intersect with and preoccupy the imaginative environment in which *Otomeki* circulates. There is no attempt at actual nuance between feminist positions, nor is there any attempt at framing Yui, or any other characters, as queer.

While a queer reading of Yui can be attempted with fruitful results—as the game’s *dakimakura* can attest—such readings are greatly weakened when the affordances of anime-manga media production, circulation, and reception are taken into account. The parafictional nature of *Otome sekai no arukikata* makes it so that, for its parafictional assemblage to function, the user has to accept that the position occupied by Yui is not one of queerness. Instead, users have to take a position of fragile masculinity articulated through anime-manga media practices. To go beyond the bounds is to break the mechanism, and thus to produce something different than *Otome sekai no arukikata*.

Does this mean that so-called anime-manga dystopias should be examined solely as works embedded in the anime-manga imaginative environment? No—especially if the reperformance of dystopian representational modes, which includes its critical lenses, is considered, as this allows for connection and juxtaposition with other works of dystopian fiction. The precedence of anime-manga representational affordances, however, produces complications that require a continual re-examination of the factors determining the assumptions and presumptions a given work relies on and embeds into its narrative. As shown through this article, consumption of pornographic content—including its role as an instrument that stimulates sexual desire—is one such factor.

Aesthetic affordances, potential interactions, and character archetypes are not only unconscious factors determining the makeup of a specific medium; they are also, in fact, what enables circulation in the first place. The enabling role of anime-manga aesthetic and field-specific narratological affordances in circulation—and later, imaginative co-creation by the user—brings such media closer to video games in a way that does not happen with genre fiction. To circulate as prose, a work needs to be written in prose. To circulate as a platforming video game, a game must include a series of interactive elements such as obstacles to overcome, jumps to perform, etc. If not, it cannot circulate as a platforming video game. Similar conditions apply to anime-manga media and character intimacy games.⁸⁵

Another pertinent example is the framing of long-standing tropes inherent to pornographic anime-manga media as dystopic within another character intimacy game, the Qruppo’s *Nukigē mitai na shima ni sunderu watashi wa dō surya ii desu ka?* 抜きゲーみたいな島に住んでる貧乳（わたし）はどうすりゃいいですか？ (“What to do when you are a flat-chested girl on an island straight out of a fap game?” = *NUKITASHI*, 2018–2019) series: setting the game on Seiran-tō 青藍島, a fictional island regulated by an absurd set of laws that encourage perverted (*dosukebe* ドスケベ) sex at all times and in all places, and where

⁸⁵ AZUMA 2007: 101–103, 130–131.

celibacy is punished by stripping, fellatio, and coitus by the police. Protagonist Tachibana Junnosuke 橘 淳之介, a proud “gentleman pervert” who believes sex should happen within meaningful relationships, founds a resistance group, NLNS (No Love, No Sex), to overthrow the authorities. The absurd premise is used to discuss issues internal to the imaginative environment, such as the obsession with virgin sex, and what it means to establish sexual relationships with other people. *NUKITASHI* even connects with issues such as Japan’s population crisis, a recurring theme in Japanese dystopian fiction. The dystopian lens is present, as are warnings and critical perspectives on the everyday, but they are articulated in a way that makes it challenging to discuss in connection with non-anime-manga works. In summation, the (anime-manga) form, through its own affordances, is continuously at risk of obscuring the actual narrative.

6 Conclusions

This paper has explored *Otome sekai no arukikata* as a case study through which to understand how anime-manga media articulate dystopian imaginaries that do not necessarily map onto traditional or literary dystopian frameworks. Rather than framing dystopia as a warning about political or ecological collapse, *Otome sekai no arukikata* constructs its dystopia through the codes and assumptions of the anime-manga imaginative environment. In doing so, it not only represents but actively stages a world in which concerns over pornography, male sexuality, and media censorship are experienced not at the level of national politics or institutional authority, but at the level of the imaginary environment itself in its everyday articulations. This reorientation of the dystopian lens toward the conditions of media consumption and interaction—particularly in relation to explicit anime-manga media—requires a reevaluation of what makes dystopia in contexts shaped by co-creation practices, aesthetic affordances, and genre-specific circulation logics.

The embeddedness of *Otome sekai no arukikata* within the anime-manga media environment is not a mere backdrop; it rather enables the narrative in the first place. Drawing from Azuma Hiroki’s theorization of game-like realism, *Otome sekai no arukikata*’s framing of player vulnerability through fragile masculinity emerges from the performative and aesthetic logics of the imaginative environment. The game’s dystopia thus cannot be understood without acknowledging the specific anxieties and debates that traverse its imaginative world—such as anti-pornography feminism and perceived threats to the freedom of consuming explicit content. At the same time, *Otome sekai no arukikata* positions its player as both subject and co-creator of the ‘anime-manga dystopian experience,’ articulating vulnerability not only as content but as a requirement for meaningful interaction within its narrative assemblage.

Yet, as this study has shown, engaging with these affordances is significantly hampered by persistent issues: there is limited access to archives or otherwise stable resources that

may help establish a basic knowledge of circulating practices in anime-manga media production, circulation, and reception, as well as a lack of formalized *specific* terminology or critical consensus on how to describe and analyze these texts. Much of the discourse occurs within fan or creator communities, which in turn results in limited academic approaches. Scholars within Japanese studies, and more generally, scholars preoccupied with Japanese media, require different methodologies for approaching niche texts. It is necessary to both acknowledge the specificity of sectorial media—recent theorization of anime-manga as media⁸⁶ and media environment⁸⁷ is an important step forward—while also situating them in broader critical conversations. This paper has presented one such approach, treating *Otome sekai no arukikata* not only as a dystopian narrative but as a media object shaped by, and in turn shaping, the affordances and anxieties of the anime-manga imaginative environment.

Otome sekai no arukikata is thus an interesting case in how to engage with sectorial fiction in Japanese cultural production, and how it may be possible to draw connections and comparisons. However, there is still a systematic lack of specific approaches to Japanese character intimacy games, and the lack of comparative research approaches leaves significant knowledge gaps in how genre fiction adapts and is adapted to the affordances of opaque languages in cultural production. Additional approaches, including historical and comparative methods, could provide further insights.

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⁸⁶ SUAN 2021; BERNDT 2018.

⁸⁷ LAMARRE 2018.

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