

Discursive Construction of Female Sexuality in the Game *VA11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of female sexuality in the visual novel game *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*. Previous research on female sexuality in video games has primarily focused on visuals, leaving a gap in language-based analysis. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), using Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional model and Nussbaum's (1995) objectification theory to examine four dialogues from the game. The results indicate efforts to challenge the traditional stance on sexuality, however further linguistic analysis reveals contradictions to these intentions. The analysis also highlights an emphasis on physical attractiveness and fragmented body parts for the enjoyment of others. This emphasis is achieved through language shaped by the Western Anime subculture community of practice, aligning character appeal with player expectation. The article concludes that the sexualized portrayal of female characters aligns with dominant discourses on sexuality, contributing to the perpetuation of this cultural phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

While often overlooked as a pastime for young people, video games are also prone to criticism due to their contents; from the depiction of violence to that of the sexualization of their characters, particularly women (Beasley & Standley, 2009; Lynch et al., 2016). The sexualization of women is by no means a phenomenon exclusive to modern media. Agustin and Udasmoro (2018) discuss the sexualization of women in Apollinaire's collection of French poems from 1915, revealing a construction of women as sexual objects and as subordinate to men. This observation demonstrates that the portrayal of women through a male-centric gaze has persisted across various narrative forms. Given the historical continuity of this trend, video games —like literature— must be recognized as cultural texts that perpetuate certain societal ideologies. Considering the widespread influence of video games in contemporary society, they warrant the same level of critical analysis as traditional literature.

Given the concerns about sexualization in gaming, it is important to define what constitutes sexualization. *Sexualisation* entails assessing someone in terms of their physical appearance and how sexually gratifying they are (American Psychological Association, 2007). In discussions of sexualization, the term *objectification* is a

related term, which is defined as the act of perceiving others as merely sexual objects. Due to the scope of this study, the two terms are used interchangeably or as a unified *sexual objectification*. It is also crucial to differentiate sexualization from sexuality. The relevant definition of sexuality in this study is the human capability to experience or act on sexual feelings through fantasies, desires, and relationships, among many (Marshall Cavendish Reference Books, 2010). While much of the discourse on sexualized female characters focuses on mainstream video games, visual novels present a unique case for analysis.

Visual novel-type games have been gaining popularity in the West (Valens, 2016). The popular fast-food chain, KFC, even made a visual novel titled *I Love You, Colonel Sanders!* integrate their brand mascot into modern pop culture (Needleman, 2019). A visual novel is a form of text-based game that predominantly consists of dialogues and narratives, although significantly aided by the visuals of the characters. The genre originates from Japan and is usually characterized by Anime-style illustrations. Individual and small development teams often adapt the visual novel conventions to make games that are intended for the Western audience and depict cultural or social issues that are relevant to them. One such visual novel is *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* (hereafter referred to as *Valhalla*).

An award-winning game for the indie game category at Tokyo Game Show 2017 (Wozniak, 2017), *Valhalla* was released in 2016 in English by Sukeban Games. The game follows the daily life of the protagonist, Jill, a bartender who works in a fictional cyberpunk city. Cyberpunk in this context refers to a society that is dominated by technology (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-a). Although *Valhalla* has an upcoming sequel titled *N1RV Ann-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*, this article solely focuses on the first instalment of the series.

Although the game has intricate worldbuilding, the game focuses on character development. Jill, in particular, stands out as an engaging protagonist. She is portrayed as a fully realised character with flaws, dynamic connections with other characters, and even a mundane job—deviating from the conventional hero archetype. Female characters with nuanced representation like Jill have been positively received by players, as evidenced by Lynch et al. (2025), who found that playing as complex female characters in video games fosters empowerment. Similarly, Robianto et al.'s (2024) study demonstrates that nuanced characters like Jill, who exhibit relatable human traits, are appreciated by contemporary gamers rather than idealized, perfect heroes of the past. *Valhalla*'s emphasis on character depth extends beyond Jill, particularly in its exploration of female sexuality.

Through its predominantly female cast, *Valhalla* challenges the traditional stance on female sexuality. Aside from Jill, other female characters of *Valhalla* are also layered and expressive; one aspect of note being their sexuality, body, and sexual experience. This subverts the idea of women as passive recipients of sexual advances (Segal, 1997). Despite efforts to portray empowered women of diverse identities, *Valhalla* was criticised for sexualization and unrealistic portrayal of female characters (Cross, 2016; Robertson, 2016). The discussion on sexuality intersects with other aspects of the characters' identity, in particular, their occupation and sexual orientation. Two characters are known to be providing sexual entertainment as a part of their job. The protagonist, Jill, is attracted to both men and women. As her sexuality is never specified, the present study uses the umbrella term LGBTQ+ or queer. These aspects are considered to provide a nuanced analysis. This study recognizes the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals and people who take part in sex work; however, the primary lens of the analysis remains on sexuality.

The discussion of female sexuality has not yet been explored in prior studies on *Valhalla*. Existing studies on the game discuss the cyberpunk setting (Xu et al., 2023), its class representation, and gameplay (DeJong &

Blamey, 2022; Iantorno et al., 2021; Kunzelman, 2022). The most relevant study about sexuality is one by Liu (2019), which discusses elements of lesbian romance in the game. However, this discussion primarily focuses on how elements in the game create immersion for the player. An online article by Cross (2016) examines the depiction of sexual conversations in *Valhalla*. While insightful, the article primarily briefly touches on other aspects of the game as well as providing perspective as a queer player of the game. Therefore, it can be concluded that studies on *Valhalla* have not yet explored in detail the expression of its female characters' sexuality.

In studying previous papers with similar topics of interest, there are two main concerns regarding the objectified portrayal of women in video games: portraying strong women as a literal object for combat and voyeuristic enjoyment, and portraying women as innocent damsels in distress, dependent on the male hero (Pugh, T., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2020). Similarly, the study of Lynch et al. (2016) examines the sexualized and passive portrayal of secondary female characters in games. This, in turn, reduces the relevance of their character down to their physical appearance.

Conversely, Devčić and Sabol (2024) note that recent games have increasingly featured realistic female characters in central roles. A study by Summers and Miller (2014) also notes that the representation of female characters has shifted from damsels in distress into being superheroes, albeit often sexualized. Observations such as the one by Heritage (2022) note that while female characters are portrayed as stronger and more capable, a glass ceiling effect persists in some video games. Similarly, studies such as those by Beasley and Standley (2009), Miller and Summers (2007), Anupama and Chithra (2022), and Kurniawan et al. (2023) express similar concerns about the revealing clothing worn by female characters, as well as their underrepresentation and predominantly passive role.

A comparison of the previous studies and a study by Lynch et al. (2016) suggests that sexualized characters appear predominantly in the fighting game genre. Therefore, it is unsurprising that most studies have thus far emphasized examining the physical characteristics in the characters' design. This research finds a research gap in the topic of sexual objectification of female characters in the scope of its language-focused representation. As a result, visual novels are seldom studied using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which primarily focuses on language. One study by Abe (2023) employed CDA to analyze the use of a visual novel in promoting tourism in Japanese prefectures. In addition, this study incorporates visual elements of the game. Beyond Abe's (2023) analysis, studies focusing on visual novels' textual features remain relatively limited. Studies such as Heritage (2022) and Kurniawan et al. (2023) include analysis of the language used to describe female characters in various games. However, these studies do not focus on visual novel-type games and do not employ CDA as their method.

Unfortunately, other language-based studies on female representation in the Anime-style media, particularly visual novels, not to mention Western-produced ones in English, are scarce. This gap is significant, as language plays a crucial role in visual novels by shaping the characters' portrayal, defining speech patterns, and framing their roles in the story. This study addresses this research gap by scrutinizing the game dialogues and uncovering how female sexuality is represented in the game. To achieve this aim, this research formulates the following questions:

- What are the notable linguistic devices used in the construction of female sexuality in *Valhalla*?
- How does *Valhalla* reflect the current prevailing discourses on sexuality, particularly in Western society?
- How do the production, distribution, and consumption aspects of *Valhalla* influence the linguistic choices in the game?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis

This article employs Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional framework of CDA to study the language usage in the game, how it indicates the societal nuances regarding female sexuality, and how the production processes influence linguistic choices. CDA posits that language is an element of social practice that is directly related to real-world social structures (Fairclough, 2001). In addition, Fairclough (2001) details that language revolves around power and the struggle against it, in which ideology plays an important part. Fairclough (2010) proposes that language can be used to make ideologies appear as common sense in a process called naturalization. By making ideologies appear as simple as common knowledge, it is less likely to be seen with a critical lens and challenged.

Objectification Theory

The objectification theory by Nussbaum (1995) is also employed to provide a deeper analysis of the data. The theory serves as a framework to evaluate the narrative of sexuality and desire in *Valhalla*. This theory is used to critically analyze whether the depiction and construction of sexuality in *Valhalla* align or diverge from the criteria of sexual objectification. Utilizing this theory creates consistency in the analysis, as well as providing a clear point of reference. Derived from Nussbaum's (1995) work titled *Objectification*, there are seven means of treating someone as an object:

- Instrumentality: Treating someone as an object to fulfill a purpose.
- Denial of autonomy: Treating someone as lacking in autonomy.
- Inertness: Treating someone as lacking in agency and activity.
- Fungibility: Treating someone as dispensable.
- Violability: Treating someone as lacking in boundaries, that is, they can be violated.
- Ownership: Treating someone as property that can be owned, bought, and sold.
- Denial of subjectivity: Treating someone's feelings and experience as irrelevant.

Nussbaum (1995) has also brought up a fascinating conundrum of objectification in consideration of the text's context and circumstances that surround it (e.g. assessing portrayals of consenting intimate partners). This should be taken into consideration when analyzing sexual objectification. The present analysis believes that this theoretical framework fits into the context of the corpus, as the data that is analyzed contains social nuances of romance, attraction, and desires.

This article integrated Fairclough's (2001) CDA and Nussbaum's (1995) theory to examine the linguistic construction of female sexuality in *Valhalla*. CDA provided a systematic method for uncovering ideologies embedded in the game's language, particularly those naturalized as common sense. In turn, Nussbaum's (1995) Objectification Theory serves as a complementary and focused framework to analyze how the game's narrative constructs female sexuality based on the ideologies identified through CDA. By combining the two approaches, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis of how language both reflects and reinforces dominant ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality in *Valhalla*.

METHOD

The research was conducted using qualitative research methods. The data was collected from the digital game platform *Steam* and presented as a transcript of the game's dialogues. Four dialogues were selected as they

effectively represent *Valhalla*'s portrayal of female sexuality. As previously discussed, the game's narrative emphasizes character development. Therefore, the four dialogues feature interactions between the protagonist, Jill, and key characters—Donovan, Dana, Dorothy, and Streaming-chan. These specific dialogues were chosen because they represent different aspects of female sexuality within the game and capture the overall tone of *Valhalla*. Given the game's predominantly female cast, the perspective in the data mostly comes from them, except for Donovan's dialogue. Each dialogue transcript is grouped into sub-headings based on their thematic relevance for the analysis. A short description to explain the context of the dialogue is provided before the analysis.

The analysis used Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional framework. It includes the three stages: description, interpretation, and explanation. The description stage focuses on the vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures of the text and examines features at the surface level of the text. The interpretation stage focuses on how the text is understood from its production, distribution, and consumption processes (discourse practices). Finally, the explanation stage examines the social context of the discourse uncovered in the text, which is related to power struggles.

However, the current analysis was conducted in two stages, that is, 1) description, and 2) interpretation and explanation. The description stage focused primarily on linguistic features, making it distinct, while the latter stages were combined in this analysis as they were closely linked. In analyzing discourse practices, particularly consumption, the player's perception is deeply tied to the game's broader social context. The integration allows for a cohesive analysis of how meaning is constructed. As Armayanti (2019) explains, the use of CDA allows the examination of how linguistic features reflect social life—in the case of this article, both the game's social setting and broader real-world contexts.

This method follows Safdar et al. 's (2022) adaptation of Fairclough's (2001) framework. As previously mentioned, visual novels are rarely explored using the CDA model. Although Safdar et al. (2022) examine gender representation in a novel rather than a video game, their study provides a relevant method due to its focus on dialogue as the unit of analysis. Similarly, Visual novels like *Valhalla* heavily rely on dialogue to facilitate the narrative progression and create meaning. Therefore, Safdar et al. (2022) approach offers a structured analytical framework to examine the role of language in shaping gender representation in interactive media.

In the interpretation and explanation stage, the objectification theory by Nussbaum (1995) is used for the analysis. At the end of each data analysis, a brief conclusion is drawn. Secondary sources such as relevant previous studies and media related to the game are also used to discuss the text, in addition to the data from the game.

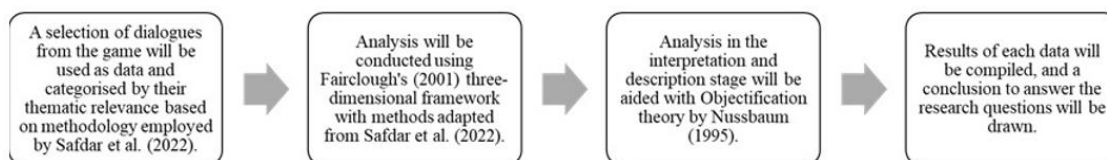


Figure 1. A flowchart illustrating the use of theoretical frameworks in the analysis process

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resistance to Traditional Power Dynamics in Sexuality

In the following dialogue, a bar patron named Donovan enters the bar in search of a female robot (robots in this universe are called Lilims), who is hiding from him. He then asks the bartender, Jill, about the robot's

whereabouts. In this dialogue, the idea of traditional power dynamics between males and females pertaining to sexual relations is challenged (Baldwin, 2003; Nussbaum, 1995). The robot characters in *Valhalla*'s universe have humanoid appearances and coexist alongside humans.

Dialogue 1

- | | |
|--|--|
| (1) Jill: Um... so... | (17) Donovan: I want to know just how detailed those King-Class CH1A models are. Personally. |
| (2) What brought you here? | (18) Jill: And so you followed her. |
| (3) Donovan: Oh, right. Didn't you see a Lilim coming in here? | (19) Donovan: I've yet to meet a woman that can resist the charms of Donovan D. Dawson. |
| (4) Blue hair, big tits. | (20) Jill (<i>inner monologue</i>): You're in front of one. And I'm guessing you have quite the selective memory. |
| (5) She's the one from the encore concert coming up. | (21) Like I said, don't you have a family or something? |
| (6) Jill: Not really. | (22) Donovan: A wife, but that woman cheats on me as much as I cheat on her. |
| (7) Donovan: Did she jump to the roof then? | (23) In fact, I'm pretty convinced she gets off on the thought of me cheating on her. |
| (8) Jill: Why were you looking for her? | (24) Jill: ... |
| (9) Did you want an interview? | (25) Donovan: So that Lilim isn't here, huh. |
| (10) Donovan: Not really. Just hitting on her. | (26) I'll have to find a busty enough replacement tonight or I'll explode. |
| (11) Jill: ... | |
| (12) Donovan: Hey, I said hitting ON her, not hitting her! Stop glaring! | |
| (13) Jill: Why though? | |
| (14) Are you that bored? Don't you have, like... a family or something? | |
| (15) Donovan: Have you seen that girl? Hot as tits! Also hot as ass n' tits. | |
| (16) I'm suffering the weirdest combo of being hard as fuck and curious as shit right now. | |

Figure 2. The first dialogue data, featuring the protagonist, Jill, and a bar patron, Donovan (Sukeban Games, 2016)

Description

Donovan's dialogues are characterized by extensive use of informal, rather vulgar vocabulary and phrasal verbs, as well as evaluative adjectives to describe women. Donovan tends to describe women's body parts with sexually explicit words such as "tits" and "ass" (Lines 4 and 15). He also tends to use informal phrasal verbs when talking about women, such as "hitting on her" (Line 10 and 12) to indicate flirting and "gets off" (Line 23) to indicate achieving sexual climax. Although not related to body parts, it should also be noted that Donovan uses expletives in this conversation (Line 16).

In addition to using vulgar words to describe the robot woman's body, Donovan also shows a pattern of using certain adjectives to describe said body parts. For instance, he describes the woman he is pursuing as having blue hair and big breasts in Line 4. In Line 26, Donovan uses the adjective "busty", which describes a woman with big breasts. However, the adjective is used to modify the noun "replacement", rather than "woman" or "girl". Line 26 also shows the use of conjunction "or" that logically connects Donovan's statements: "I'll have

to find a busty enough replacement” with “I’ll explode”. The latter statement is a hyperbolic statement, which shows Donovan’s emotional intensity and urgency to find another woman. Notably, Donovan also consistently refers to the woman he’s pursuing as “a Lilim” (Line 3) or “that Lilim” (Line 25) and “that girl” (Line 15). He also describes his wife as “that woman” (Line 22). This results in the identity of the women being vague. Another characteristic of this conversation is the flexible turn-taking. It is also often prompted by silences from Jill (Lines 11 and 24). Jill’s dialogues also contain many interrogative sentences directed at Donovan, which can be seen in Lines 8, 9, 13, and 21. In addition to her interrogative dialogues, filler words to show hesitation like “Um... so...” (Line 1) and “...like...” (Line 14) are also evident. Jill also uses the discourse marker “Like I said” in Line 21 to emphasise her statement. This is notable, as in comparison, Donovan’s dialogues do not show any signs of hesitation. On the contrary, his lack of filler words or modality shows that his speech is straightforward and certain.

Discussion

Overall, Donovan's speech shows certainty, persistent excitement and disregard towards women in this dialogue. The identity of the woman he is pursuing is vague in the dialogue, and Jill, a female bartender who handles his assertion displays indirect resistance through interrogative sentences, but her speech still shows hesitation in responding to Donovan’s demands.

This extract challenges the traditional gender dynamics of the assertive masculine character and the passive female character. The asymmetrical power dynamics of the two genders is a universal experience in most countries and cultures, including the West (Nussbaum, 1995). Although she hesitates due to her role as a bartender to Donovan as the customer, Jill's resistance towards his assertion shows the writer’s awareness that such domineering behaviour is inappropriate.

Referring to Nussbaum's (1995) objectification theory, the obfuscated agency of the unknown woman combined with the constant mention of her body parts is consistent with criteria three (lacking in agency and activity) and five (lacking in boundaries). This dialogue is also in line with criteria one and four: treating someone as an object to fulfill a purpose and treating them as dispensable.

Throughout the dialogue, Donovan demonstrates overtly assertive and coercive behaviour, as he persistently seeks the robot woman to satisfy his sexual curiosity. Upon failing to locate her, his statements show his belief that the woman is replaceable with another woman with similar physical features. It is also important to note that while the woman is a robot (“Lilim”), Donovan seems to perceive her like any human woman, save for referring to her as a Lilim. This is consistent with the game’s cyberpunk universe where humans, cyborgs, and robots coexist.

However, as the game’s narrative is from Jill’s point of view, Donovan’s behaviour can be interpreted as bothersome or even offensive. Although the fragmentation of the woman’s body is consistent with objectification, the excessive use of vulgar vocabulary, expletives, oversharing anecdotes, or simply the fact that the woman is hiding from Donovan, demonstrates that the creators intend to depict Donovan as an overbearing and unwelcome patron. In addition to her subtle resistance, the humour seen in Line 20—where it suggests Donovan’s obliviousness to women not being attracted to him—may be intended for the player’s enjoyment. The humour can provide the players with a sense of satisfaction to see an obnoxious character receiving sarcastic remarks in return, albeit in an inner monologue.

Concerning the first research question, notable linguistic features in the dialogue were identified, such as informal choice of words, evaluative adjectives, and interrogative sentences. Donovan’s speech lacks modality

or filler words, which presents him as assertive, compared to the reluctant Jill. Although not directly present in the dialogue, the robot woman Donovan is pursuing is important in this analysis. Her identity is unclear, and Donovan's descriptions of her lack any personal characteristics beyond physical features he finds sexually attractive.

In light of the second research question, textual features in the dialogue aid in portraying the traditional gender dynamics concerning sexuality. That is, the man is the assertive party who objectifies the woman as an object of desire, while the woman receives the man's assertion passively. However, the dialogue demonstrates resistance to this idea, which shows the intention of the writers to reject traditional views of sexuality. However, this rejection is not blatant and straightforward but rather presented with humour and sarcasm.

Attraction Between Female Characters

Similar to the previous data, emphasis on the character's physical attractiveness and body parts is also identified. Said emphasis is used to portray romantic attraction in addition to sexual appeal. In the following dialogue, Jill is chatting casually with her boss, Dana, while drinking beer at her apartment. As Jill gradually gets intoxicated, she starts to admit her attraction towards a friend of hers, Alma, a hacker and bar regular. In this data, the portrayal of queer romantic attraction can be seen.

Dialogue 2
(1) Dana: You've made the bar more lively yourself, you know?
(2) Jill: How so?
(3) Dana: Well, with the regulars you've earned of course.
(4) Like that blonde titty hacker. I can't remember her name.
(5) Jill: Alma?
(6) Dana: I was gonna say Armitage.
(7) Jill: Well, she's hot, I'll give her that much.
(8) She's also a nice person in general, but damn, she's hot.
(9) Dana: Are you alright, Jill?
(10) Jill: Yeah, why?
(11) Dana: It's... weird to see you say so openly that someone's hot.
(12) Jill: What? Even you can see she has a hot body, Boss.
(13) Dana: ...you'll find no objections here.
(14) Jill: I mean, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about taking her to a room and...

Figure 3. The second dialogue data, featuring the protagonist, Jill, and her boss, Dana (Sukeban Games, 2016)

Description

Jill's admission of her attraction to Alma is characterized by the consistent use of the informal adjective "hot" to describe Alma and her body (Line 12). In Line 8, "She's a nice person in general" and "she's hot" is

connected by the conjunction “but” followed by the exclamation “damn”. This implies a contradiction as perceived by Jill. The implication is that Alma being a nice person is less important than her physical attractiveness.

Similarly, in Line 4, the phrase “blonde big titty hacker” consists of “hacker” as the head noun, which “blonde” and “big titty” modify. This shows more emphasis on Alma’s body, more than her occupation or speciality. It is important to note that since Line 4 is uttered by Dana, this shows her agreement with Jill’s assessment of Alma’s physical attractiveness. This is also evident in Line 13, where Dana subtly affirms Jill’s statement, although with a hint of hesitation as shown by the ellipsis at the beginning of the sentence.

Jill’s hesitation in admitting Alma’s attractiveness is shown throughout the data. For instance, in Line 7 she uses the idiomatic expression (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) “I’ll give her that much” to admit that Alma is indeed “hot”. In Line 14, she also starts the sentence with the filler “I mean” and follows with a “I’d be lying if...” before stating that she has thought of taking Alma into a room. Considering the nature of the discussion, the phrase “taking her into a room” in Line 14 has a euphemistic meaning of intimate relationship.

Discussion

As explored in the previous data, the game’s dialogues serve as entertainment for the player using the characters’ interactions and personalities. In this case, the writers consciously show Jill hesitantly confiding her attraction to another woman to show more facets of her character. Portraying characters in this endearing way relates to how the game is marketed with heavy elements of the *waifu* concept. *Waifu* (“Wife” in Japanese phonology), often used in anime subculture, means female characters that fans have deep affection and attraction for. The word is often used to show appreciation towards a character (Garg, 2019).

It is important to note that although anime subculture hails from Japan, *waifu* is more commonly used in anime subculture practice in the West, including English-speaking countries. In the game distribution platform Steam, where *Valhalla* is distributed, the game’s description reads: “*VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* is a booze em’ up about waifus, technology, and post-dystopia life.” The domain name of the game’s official website also contains the term. This clearly shows the producers’ intention behind showing casual, affectionate interactions between characters. For clarification, dystopia refers to a fictional society where people are in a state of suffering, usually after something catastrophic (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-b).

Concerning the *waifu* concept, emphasis on the characters’ physical attractiveness is also consistent in this data to illustrate queer attraction of the female protagonist to another female character. The dialogue’s focus can be interpreted as a representation of the LGBTQ+ relationship, which has gradually gained more acceptance in Western society, as well as a representation in Western pop culture. A similar pattern in objectifying female characters based on physical attractiveness was also identified in the previous data, which was used to illustrate the unsettling assertiveness of a male character. In the present data, it is used to illustrate an affectionate romantic confession of the female protagonist to a female friend. Moreover, in this data, there is no resistance to this idea, nor is the dialogue being portrayed in a negative light. Casting aside Alma’s personality traits or specialty in favor of her physical attractiveness is also in line with treating her experience as irrelevant, which is consistent with criteria seven of Nussbaum’s (1995) theory.

To answer the first research question, the analysis finds a consistent use of the informal adjective “hot” to indicate the physical attractiveness of Alma. A combination of conjunction, exclamation and strategic syntactic composition portrays the idea that Alma’s attractiveness is more important than other qualities she has. These notable linguistic features are seen mostly from the perspective of Jill, which can be interpreted as *Valhalla*’s

depiction of same-sex attraction. Therefore, in portraying Alma as an object of desire, the dialogue reveals Jill's romantic feelings towards her. The writers' way of expressing Jill's crush affectionately corresponds with the *waifu* concept, which has been used explicitly in the game's marketing, and thus distribution. This finding is relevant in answering the third research question. Overall, the findings in this data are contradictory to the previous data, where the objectification of the female body is used to portray a character in a negative light.

Demand for Sexuality

The following dialogue shows an instance of *Valhalla*'s intricate worldbuilding through its characters. Dorothy is a robot sex worker and another regular of the bar. In this conversation, Jill asks if all the robots of the same type as her look like children. Then, Dorothy confides in Jill about her personal feelings about her job and appearance. In this data, a depiction of sex work and the power dynamics that come with it can be identified. This power dynamic entails a degree of control over the sex worker's appearance.

Dialogue 3	(13) Jill: Will you go through it?
(1) Jill: There's something I've been meaning to ask you...	(14) Dorothy: I don't know. Right now, I'm a rarity.
(2) Dorothy: Yes, I'm single and I don't mind that you're a girl.	(15) You don't find many like me in my line of work, so I have an advantage.
(3) Jill: Do you actually mind what anyone is?	(16) And I really need that advantage, you know?
(4) Dorothy: Not at all.	(17) Jill: How so?
(5) Jill: Anyway, it's not about that...	(18) Dorothy: When people hire me, half the time it's not because I'm me.
(6) Do all DFC-72s look like kids?	(19) The amount of roleplaying I have to do on a normal night is ridiculous.
(7) Dorothy: Yes and no.	(20) So, if I stop looking underaged, I'll lose my advantage over everyone else.
(8) Out of the factory, we look like kids because our development needs to be as close to human as possible.	(21) Jill: I didn't think about it that way.
(9) Jill: Then you look like babies outside the factory?	(22) (<i>Inner monologue</i>) Should I think about it at all?
(10) Dorothy: Nope, every fresh DFC-72 looks about 10-13. It makes it easier to upgrade later.	(23) Dorothy: I mean, maybe I'll go through with it if I ever decide to retire or something.
(11) Jill: Upgrade?	(24) But right now I'm fine the way I am!
(12) Dorothy: Once a DFC-72 passes three "maturity tests," it can opt for a factory upgrade. Said upgrade alters its body to something older. Some go for it, some don't.	(25) Jill: I see.

Figure 4. The third dialogue data, featuring the protagonist, Jill, and a bar patron, Dorothy (Sukeban Games, 2016)

Description

This dialogue revolves around Dorothy's feelings about her work and youthful appearance. Furthermore, the dialogue reveals an unsettling link between her work, which is sexual in nature, and her childish appearance.

Starting with the vocabulary in the dialogue, Dorothy is a robot, and DFC-72 refers to her serial number, which is indicated by Jill, who specifically asks Dorothy about this in Lines 6 and 9. Her appearance, as well as other robots with the same model, are described in the dialogue with the noun “kids” or the adjective “underaged”, as in looking like one (Lines 6, 8, and 20), as well as the age range “10-13” as in looking like children or young teens of that age (Line 10). Notably, it directly characterizes Dorothy’s appearance as that of a child. While it is possible to describe her appearance with other adjectives such as “youthful” or “baby-faced”, the writers opted for a straightforward description.

In describing Dorothy’s occupation in the sex work industry, euphemisms and other specific choices of words can be identified. Dorothy euphemistically refers to her occupation as “...my line of work” (Line 15), without explicitly stating its nature. Regarding her child-like appearance, Dorothy refers to it as an “advantage” (Lines 15 and 16). This shows that she considers it an important aspect of her job. Her choice to look young is also deliberate, as it is indicated in Line 12 that it is possible to alter her appearance to a more mature one. Lines 18-20 reveal that this decision is influenced by her clients. In Line 18, Dorothy uses the word “me” twice with different pragmatic meanings. “When people hire me...” refers to her in relation to her occupation as a sex worker, on the other hand, “...half the time it’s not because I’m me” is in relation to her in a personal sense. This is confirmed in Line 19 when she mentions how often she must perform roleplaying. Considering Dorothy’s occupation, she is most likely referring to sexual roleplay, hence the different usage of the word “me” in the preceding line. She also describes the frequency of roleplay as “ridiculous” in Line 19.

In addition, the agency and identity of Dorothy’s clients and competitors are obfuscated. Dorothy’s clients are referred to simply as “people” in Line 18, and her competitors simply as “everyone else” in Line 20.

Discussion

The dialogue above portrays sexuality, particularly in the realm of sex work, which demands that workers cater to specific interests in appearance or even fetishes. Dorothy’s dialogue shows the extent to which she has done her job, that is, to construct a version of herself that can satisfy her clients’ sexual needs. The power relations between customers and sex workers indeed constitute a degree of control over the service (Horley & Clarke, 2016), and *Valhalla* reflects such reality through Dorothy’s story.

Similarly, a study by Sanders (2005) shows how sex workers manufacture a separate identity to capitalize on their sexuality. This parallels the word choice in Dorothy’s dialogue in Line 18 where she implies a manufactured “work identity”. The dialogue also exposes that Dorothy’s child-like appearance plays a major role in this manufactured identity to commercialize her sexuality. Dorothy’s agency in this dialogue, therefore, is debatable; while she actively chooses to appear like a child for her benefit, her choice is also influenced by her clients. In Line 23, she states that she may alter her appearance if she “...ever decides to retire”, which reinforces that her choice of appearance is strongly related to her current occupation. In this regard, Dorothy’s experience pertains to criteria three (lacking in agency and activity) and six (treating someone as property that can be bought) of the Objectification theory. However, Nussbaum (1995) also acknowledges the nuances of context in assessing objectification. In this case, this paper recognises the complexity of sex work, which cannot be assessed with one theory alone. Nevertheless, this analysis primarily focuses on the construction of female sexuality; one relevant point is the emphasis on physical appearance, which is evident in the current data.

Unlike in previous data where colloquial, or even vulgar words, are used to describe physical attractiveness, the language used in this dialogue focuses on describing the struggles and insecurities of a character. This is further shown by Dorothy’s use of euphemism, which can be interpreted as her professional attitude towards

her work. Therefore, the dialogue's nuanced and carefully chosen phrasing may also be intended to invoke a sense of sympathy in the players for the character.

Furthermore, the deliberate choice of diction by the writers in describing Dorothy's appearance also reflects a community of practice in the anime subculture. *Loli* characters in the anime subculture are characters who are portrayed as young and child-like, usually in a sexual manner. Just like the *waifu* term, *loli* is also used in the Western anime community practice with a negative connotation and resistance (Galbraith, 2017). The word choice in the dialogue that describes Dorothy as looking like a child, as well as the game's heavy reference to the anime art style and subculture (Robertson, 2016), makes this comparison unavoidable.

Regarding the first research question, the specific choice of words is used to explicitly illustrate Dorothy as looking child-like, rather than a youthful adult woman. Additionally, to portray Dorothy's experience working in the sex industry, euphemisms and pragmatic meanings are strategically employed.

Concerning the second research question, this data reflects the writer's choice of depicting the power relations in sex work or specifically, how clients have control over a worker's appearance. This, in turn, depicts a dilemma in women's agency over their bodies; while Dorothy makes her own decision to look childlike, her choice is heavily influenced by the desires and interests of her clients. The child-like appearance of Dorothy in this context parallels the *loli* concept in the Anime community of practice, including the Western community, despite its controversial nature.

This finding contributes to the third research question, particularly on the production and consumption aspects of *Valhalla*. It also parallels the aforementioned struggles and choices sex workers have to make to survive in their industry, which is related to the second research question. Overall, the emphasis on the character's appearance in this dialogue portrays her struggles, which evokes a sense of sympathy from the players.

Commodification of Sexuality

Dialogue 4 (1) Streaming-chan: I'm Streaming-chan! Giving you a live video feed of my life and adventures 24/7! (2) Bathroom time and naughty moments only available to Premium users. (3) It's only \$99.99 a month, go premium noooooow! (4) Jill: Um... (5) Streaming-chan: It's Friday night, and you all know what that means! It's time for Streaming-chan's Escapades! (6) Today's Escapade is brought to you by Shining Fingered dot moe. (7) Leaders of VR adult entertainment since 2069. (8) Buy a year of premium membership and you'll get a code! (9) Exchange the code for a free trial of a VR experience modeled after yours truly! (10) Jill: Excuse... (11) Streaming-chan: Today I picked the shoddiest, nastiest, smelliest, ugliest bar I could find downtown. (12) And sadly, it actually looks half-decent inside. So much for going to a crap hole bar that smells like dog urine. (13) Gillian: Heheh... (14) Jill: Excuse me... (15) Streaming-chan: But no matter. Tonight, I'll give you an escapade you'll never forget. (16) Hey you! Where's the bartender? (17) Jill: You're talking to her. (18) Streaming-chan: Very funny. Where is he, really? (19) Jill: Right in front of you.	(20) Streaming-chan: ... (21) Hey, you! The pretty boy over there. Where's the bartender? (22) Gillian: You're looking at 'em. (23) Streaming-chan: N-No way! (24) No hot, shirtless guy playing with fire and serving drinks while flirting with you? (25) No sexy, scantily-clad girl jiggling around the place? (26) Jill: Yup. (27) Gillian: Seems that way... (28) Streaming-chan: ... (29) Jill: Is that a problem? (30) Streaming-chan: Of course it's a problem. Friday nights are peak viewing hours! (31) I need something sexy or enticing to keep them interested. Oh well, there's an easy solution to that. (32) Jill: There is? (33) Streaming-chan: Yeah. Just take your top off. (34) Jill: ... (35) Streaming-chan: You might need to take off your bra too, depending on how the traffic goes. (36) Wait, you're quite flat. Do you even use a bra? (37) Jill: ... (38) Streaming-chan: Is that piercing glare a "no"? (39) Come on! One of us is gonna take their top off and it ain't gonna be me. I already did that once today.
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Figure 5. The fourth dialogue data, featuring the protagonist, Jill, and a bar patron, Streaming-chan (Sukeban Games, 2016)

The previous analysis has explored the power dynamics of a sex worker and her clients. In this dialogue, the representation of another character with a similar occupation is examined. An online streamer who goes by “Streaming-chan” enters the bar and makes a scene by boisterously talking to her viewers. Her conversation with her viewers and the bar staff, Jill and Gillian, reveals the sexually explicit nature of her livestreams. This dialogue’s use of language to portray an overt sexualization for the sake of financial gains parallels the discourses in the hypersexualization of women in Western society.

Description

Like in Dialogues 1 and 2, colloquial and sexually explicit language can be identified in Dialogue 4. Unlike in the previous examples, it is used to describe the Livestream service that Streaming-chan is promoting. Phrases such as “naughty moments” and “bathroom time” (Line 2), although euphemistic, these expressions allude to sexual content that serves to entice her viewers. Regarding the sexually explicit services Streaming-chan offers, terms such as “Premium users” (Line 2), “premium membership” (Line 8), and “free trial” (Line 9) are characteristics of advertising language often used in the English-speaking social media sphere. Similarly, phrases such as “...brought to you by” (Line 6), “Leaders of VR adult entertainment since 2069.” (Line 7), and “Go premium now” (Line 3) are promotional phrases to signal sponsored content, emphasizing a company or sponsor’s period of success, and a call to action respectively. Additionally, “It’s only \$99.99 a month...” (Line 3) is also a common marketing strategy which provides a numerical value to potential customers. The combination of sexually suggestive phrases and specific marketing terms and phrases shows that Streaming-chan’s livestream offers adult content behind a paywall that is actively being promoted.

Aside from her services, Streaming-chan’s dialogues also show a casual, but demanding demeanor. This can be seen in her choice of colloquial language and imperative statements. Firstly, in describing the bar, she uses three superlative words to exaggerate the condition of the bar: “Today I picked the shoddiest, nastiest, smelliest, ugliest bar...” (Line 11). She also describes the bar as a “craphole” (Line 12). She predominantly uses imperative statements towards the bar staff, such as “Just take your top off” (Line 33), “You might need to take off your bra too...” (Line 35), “Come on!” (Line 39). Expressions like “Hey, you!” (Lines 16 and 21), also show her persuading and commanding the bar staff. On the other hand, the bar staff, particularly Jill, responds with polite phrases akin to customer service such as “Excuse me...” (Line 14). When met with Streaming-chan’s request to take off her undergarment in Line 33, as well as when asked whether she wears a bra, Jill’s dialogues are written as ellipses, which indicates silence and thus unwillingness to answer such a prying question.

Discussion

Linguistic choices in the above dialogue portray commodification of sexuality; namely, revealing clothes and fragmented body parts. They are then marketed as something stimulating and exciting for financial gain. As previously discussed, deliberate choices in linguistic features can show the author’s awareness of the present cultural phenomenon. In this case, the present analysis believes that the dialogue above represents a hypersexualized cultural climate that encourages women to sexualise themselves and other women (Levy, 2005). Although sexualized images of women have existed long before the internet, the current technological advancement makes it impossible to avoid such oversexualized representations of women (Barton & Mabry, 2018).

In the description stage, combinations of linguistic features and casual speech are used to portray Streaming-chan sexualising and commodifying both herself and Jill. This aligns with criterion five of the objectification theory about the lack of boundary. It is evidenced by the use of sexually suggestive phrases and advertising

calls to action to entice viewers into accessing adult content behind a paywall. Furthermore, as Streaming-chan frames both herself and Jill as marketable figures, this falls under criterion six of the objectification theory about treating someone as if they are a commodity. Colloquial vocabulary combined with imperative statements portrays her easy-going yet forceful manner. In the context of customer service in the dialogue, the power dynamics between Streaming-chan and the bar staff make it difficult for the latter to establish their boundaries to the former's sexual requests. In this regard, Levy (2005) argues that hypersexualization does not necessarily entail the liberation of women but instead is closely related to the commodification of sexuality in the Western world. In terms of player perception, a study finds female characters with an emphasis on sexualization often feel out of place and unnatural.

On the other hand, live streaming is also an activity that is often associated with the gaming industry. For example, the live streaming platform Twitch hosts many different live streamers who not only play video games but also exhibit their personality as a part of their brand (Nilsson, 2020). In addition, *Valhalla*'s portrayal of a live streamer displays the writer's intention to reflect English-speaking livestream culture. Streaming-chan's boisterous personality and enthusiastic dialogues to promote her services are reminiscent of internet live streamers. Portraying characters doing activities that are familiar to *Valhalla* players' community of practice can potentially encourage familiarity or affection for the characters. Not only does Streaming-chan reflect a familiar cultural phenomenon to the players, but her over-the-top personality and minimal resistance from the bar staff suggest that this character is not only meant to be eccentric, but also entertaining, even humorous.

On the other hand, the explicitly sexual nature of Streaming-chan's online activity also reflects the tendency of female streamers in real life. As Anciones-Anguita and Checa-Romero (2024) highlight, female Twitch streamers are more sexualized than male their male counterparts, often resorting to self-objectification and even infantilization to attract viewers. Similarly, Ruberg et al. (2019) highlight how female streamers are often scrutinized for their physical appearance rather than the content of their stream. At the same time, they also face significant discrimination and sexism. In this sense, it is no wonder that Streaming-chan puts so much emphasis on the sexual content of her streams.

In response to the first research question, linguistic features in the above data portray a character who engages in commodifying her sexuality as well as that of others. This is achieved through sexually explicit words and phrases combined with advertising terms and calls to action. In addition, to portray sexualization concerning power dynamics, the dialogue uses a combination of colloquial language and imperative statements. Such acts can be identified with the problem of proliferating hypersexualization of women in the West, particularly in the media. This shows another instance of *Valhalla*'s parallel with the current prevailing discourses on sexuality, which is the aim of the second research question. The dialogue reflects the writers' awareness of this issue and how technology amplifies the spread and influence of this phenomenon.

Similar to dialogue 1, Jill as the protagonist subtly resists being sexualized by Streaming-chan. The humorous tone of the dialogue shows that the writer does not intend to portray the sexualization evident in this data to be an outright harmful or offensive act. This humorous portrayal is possibly intended for players' enjoyment, which corresponds with the third research question. At the same time, it reflects a concerning reality of self-objectification by female streamers.

CONCLUSION

The construction of female sexuality in *Valhalla* based on the findings of this paper shows a trend consistent with sexual objectification. This includes highlighting the characters' body parts, as well as physical

characteristics and attractiveness. As the female characters themselves are pivotal to the game, this construction of sexuality is utilized to present the characters as charming and entertaining to the players. In light of the first research question, the identified linguistic choices are consistent with fragmenting characters' body parts and describing factors that lead to sexual allure in different contexts. Some notable linguistic choices are informal or sexually explicit diction and phrases, logical connections between sentences (primarily conveyed through conjunctions), and euphemisms. The aforementioned linguistic features as well as discussions that highlight the enjoyment of female characters' physical attractiveness and its commodification create a cohesion that points to representing the characters as objects of desire. This, in turn, portrays them as dispensable and having their boundaries transgressed. Furthermore, while the dialogues indicate female characters exhibit agency over their bodies, their choices remain shaped by the desires and preferences of others.

Expanding upon the second research question, *Valhalla* also reflects real-life discourses such as sex work, hypersexualization, and queer attraction through the narrative of its characters. Some characters are portrayed working in the sex industry or providing adult entertainment as online content creators. In the process, the characters are shown to commodify their sexuality, as well as other women's. This article acknowledges that portraying characters engaging in sex work is not inherently problematic; however, the game's emphasis on their appearance upholds the construction of female sexuality that prioritises physical attractiveness and its perceived sexual allure. This construction also holds in *Valhalla*'s portrayal of queer romantic attraction, which ultimately focuses on the characters' sexual appeal. Pertaining to the third research question, the production of *Valhalla* as a mainly text-based genre of video game—a visual novel—makes it rely on its textual features to construct this representation of female sexuality. On the distribution and consumption stage, this analysis finds the influence of the Western Anime subculture's community of practice in the game's use of language to present its female characters. This presentation makes the characters resonate with the players, appear endearing, and most importantly, emphasise their physical attractiveness. In *Valhalla*, the characters themselves serve as the entertainment, especially with its predominantly female cast.

Although this paper has contributed to the understanding of the discursive construction of female sexuality in *Valhalla*, it has some limitations. The analysis has predominantly focused on the textual elements of *Valhalla*, specifically on the topic of female sexuality; and thus, limited to the female characters in the game. Although this article provided an in-depth analysis, its findings should be interpreted with consideration of the limited data analyzed. While production factors and real-life discourses reflected in the game have been discussed, other embedded themes warrant further research. Future studies could investigate the few but important male characters of *Valhalla* in greater detail. While the current analysis examines depictions of LGBTQ+ relationships in the game, only one dataset includes this theme. There remains more extensive data in the game to be analyzed. Lastly, the game's depiction of cyborg humans and their coexistence with robots, as well as many lifestyle factors around it is also a compelling research opportunity. Visual novel games' emergence in Western pop culture is a phenomenon that must not be understated. Its distinctive combination of textual and interactive elements and its recent emergence in the Western world offer a novel opportunity for storytelling. Visual novels, like any form of popular culture, merit academic exploration.

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