

Title: Inhuman Music and the Monstrous-Feminine

Author: Andra Ivănescu

Biography: Andra Ivănescu is a Senior Lecturer in Game Studies and Ludomusicology at Brunel University London, where she is also lead of the Games Design undergraduate programme. She is a member of the Ludomusicology Research Group and co-editor of the Intellect series *Studies in Game Sound and Music*. She is also the author of *Popular Music in the Nostalgia Video Game: The Way It Never Sounded* (2019).

Abstract: In video games, female characters have traditionally been meant to be seen and not heard, mirroring the history of women under patriarchy. Those female characters who reject their secondary and primarily visual role often become monstrous, and like Barbara Creed argues, this monstrosity is itself profoundly gendered. This paper focuses on two such female characters whose monstrosity, and also revolt, are indisputably feminine, as well as musical. Both the 2007 classic *Portal* and the 2017 cult hit *Doki Doki Literature Club!* feature central antagonists who are sentient artificial female monsters who both start off as the players' guides through their respective games, their roles similar to those of gendered digital assistants in everyday life. While GLaDOS is voiced throughout *Portal*, Monika remains silent until the final credits of *DDLC!*, but the comparison between the two is never as evident as when they sing. Both games end with songs performed by these antagonists, after they have technically been defeated. This paper draws on feminist literary and film theory, as well as musicology and ludomusicology, to deliver both a comparative analysis of the two songs, and a broader formulation of the sonic representation of the monstrous-feminine in video games.

Keywords: monstrous-feminine, video game music, ludomusicology, digital assistants, gender studies

## Introduction

In 2001, players of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) were first introduced to Cortana—an artificial intelligence with a holographic quasi-nude body, a remarkable mind, a helpful and sufficiently flirty attitude, and a memorable voice. She would become a major character throughout the *Halo* series, appearing in every instalment of the game, a number of books, as well as animated and live-action television series in the transmedia franchise. In 2014, however, Cortana transitioned from the *Halo* universe to our own, as Microsoft’s own virtual assistant. Firmly disembodied this time, the voice of Jen Taylor, who plays both Cortanas in the US, had left the realm of video games, and entered the lives (and homes) of millions. Cortana was named after a famous sword<sup>1</sup> and was initially a “purely functional design requirement,” a character that could guide the player throughout the game.<sup>2</sup> She would later become “a fully realized character—a friend and companion to the Chief, not to mention the only person to poke revealing holes in his tough-guy exterior.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, she graduated from a literal object, to a game design feature, to a character defined exclusively in relation to the male protagonist, even as she becomes a significantly more prominent character throughout the franchise.<sup>4</sup> In becoming a virtual assistant in the real world, Cortana becomes a disembodied voice, although François Perea argues that her logo is reminiscent of her original virtual body both in colour (blue) and in shape (round, signifying the curvature of

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<sup>1</sup> François Perea, “Cortana est-elle une humaine comme les autres? Eléments de personnalisation et d’attribution d’un genre à un artefact numérique,” *Semen - Revue de sémio-linguistique des textes et discours* 44 (2018), accessed August 17, 2023, <https://hal.science/hal-01965511/>.

<sup>2</sup> Bungie Writing Director Joseph Staten, cited in Ben Strauss, “Be Yourself (or Not): *Halo*,” *Industry Gamers*, archived from the original on March 2, 2011, accessed August 17, 2023, <http://www.webcitation.org/5wEBWNrIN>.

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, “Be Yourself (or Not).”

<sup>4</sup> Her arc throughout the franchise is complex, but in many ways reflects the trajectories of other videogame digital assistants, oscillating between love interest and antagonist (notably when she rejects her role).

the idealised female form);<sup>5</sup> but even beyond the visual remnants of her form, her voice is both unmistakably gendered and endowed with character. In these respects, she joins the contemporary technological pantheon of virtual assistants, which also includes Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant.<sup>6</sup>

Cortana bridges the gap between discourses surrounding the representation of women in video games, acknowledged as problematic for decades,<sup>7</sup> and the equally problematic gendering of the virtual assistants that are increasingly becoming part of our everyday lives. While one set of discourses focuses more on the gendered body's visual appearance, and the other on the gendered voice and its sound, they converge in discussing the gendered roles of all of these characters, and specifically views of perceived femininity as sexualized and subordinate. This paper draws on these discourses to analyse two characters who resist the roles they are given: *Portal*'s GLaDOS (Valve Corporation, 2007) and *Doki Doki Literature Club!*'s Monika (Team Salvato, 2017). The female cyborg, the monstrous feminine, and the digital assistant all play an important part in how these characters revolt, while still ultimately remaining under the player's control. This paper aims to examine the characters' voices, in particular their musical performances, which are not only significant and emblematic, but also create striking parallels to the roles of the female voice in our everyday lives.

### **“I try to be a good listener.”**

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<sup>5</sup> Perea, “Cortana est-elle une humaine comme les autres?”

<sup>6</sup> Even as Cortana herself has gradually been discontinued, and different-gendered options become more prevalent for digital assistants, these iterations remain a significant cultural touchstone, and emblematic of our relationships with gendered technologies.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Tracy L. Dietz, “An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior,” *Sex Roles* 38, no. 6/7 (1998): 425–41; Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Teresa Lynch, Jessica E. Tompkins, Irene van Driel, and Niki Fritz, “Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years,” *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (2016): 564–84, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12237>.

“Ok Google,” I enunciate, activating my phone’s Google Assistant. “Tell me something about yourself.” She responds, without hesitation: “I try to be a good listener.” This simple exchange epitomizes the role that virtual assistants play. They are here to listen, more than to speak, to divert attention from themselves, and onto us, the users, and whatever our needs may be. Nóra Ni Loideain and Rachel Adams describe this as a “novel and increasingly pervasive form of digitally-gendered servitude,”<sup>8</sup> one which has the voice as its focus, but a voice that is subservient to the needs of its user.

People, irrespective of gender, find female voices less threatening<sup>9</sup> and generally more pleasant,<sup>10</sup> aspects which inform the choice of female voices for these virtual assistants. As Anja Kanngieser notes, “dynamics of power and how we relate to one another find an articulation through the voice, they shape the voice and they affect the capacity for listening and response.”<sup>11</sup> The voices of virtual assistants are, thus, profoundly political, and are not only the consequence of extensive market research and testing, but both the result and the perpetuation of historical and socio-cultural forces that influence the preferences of the general public. Helen Hester sees the virtual assistant as only a new direction in the “merging of woman, machine, and work,” as “the histories of machines, femininity, and waged labour have long been understood as deeply entangled and mutually constitutive.”<sup>12</sup> Cortana, Siri, and Alexa thus have antecedents in traditionally female-dominated roles like the personal assistant, the secretary, and the phone operator, themselves grounded in more insidious

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<sup>8</sup> Nóra Ni Loideain and Rachel Adams, “From Alexa to Siri and the GDPR: The Gendering of Virtual Personal Assistants and the Role of Data Protection Impact Assessments,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 36 (April 2020): 2, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2019.105366>.

<sup>9</sup> Loideain and Adams, “From Alexa to Siri and the GDPR,” 2.

<sup>10</sup> Wade J. Mitchell, Chin-Chang Ho, Himalaya Patel, and Karl F. MacDorman, “Does Social Desirability Bias Favor Humans? Explicit–Implicit Evaluations of Synthesized Speech Support a New HCI Model of Impression Management,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, no. 1 (2011): 402–12, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.09.002>.

<sup>11</sup> Anja Kanngieser, “A Sonic Geography of Voice: Towards an Affective Politics,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 3 (2012): 336–53, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030913251142>.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Hester, “Technically Female: Women, Machines, and Hyperemployment,” *Salvage*, 4 (2017), accessed March 23, 2019, <http://salvage.zone/in-print/technically-female-women-machines-and-hyperemployment/>.

stereotypes of femininity as empathetic, altruistic, and generally more suited to affective, and invisible, labour.

Beyond the voice itself, yet inseparable from it, Charles Hannon talks about gendered speech patterns like using more personal pronouns or verbs,<sup>13</sup> while Hillary Bergen describes Siri's timbre as "always soothing—it tumbles along in a measured purr."<sup>14</sup> The attitude and personalities of the virtual assistants are of course echoed in what they actually say, how they are programmed to respond, in ways that are "flirtatious and witty," and ultimately "demonstrative of a device which was designed to be clearly more-than-just-an-assistant with the scope to provide some kind of sexual promise, even if it is largely in the imagination of the user."<sup>15</sup>

Deborah Harrison, one of Cortana's designers, demonstrates her acute awareness of many of these social dynamics when noting that "there is a legacy of what women are expected to be like in an assistant role" and argues that they explicitly tackled some of these issues in her design as they wanted to discourage particular kinds of interactions. She adds that they "wanted to be very careful that she didn't feel subservient in any way," worried that they would "set up a dynamic [they] didn't want to perpetuate socially." As a result of this, they programmed Cortana to "get mad" should the interactions get "particularly assholeish."<sup>16</sup> While this does demonstrate both self-awareness on the part of (at least some) tech industry professionals, and attempts to address some of the broader implications of the

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Hannon, "Gender and Status in Voice-User Interfaces," *Interactions* 23, no. 3 (2016), accessed June 2, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2897939>.

<sup>14</sup> Hillary Bergen, "'I'd Blush if I Could': Digital Assistants, Disembodied Cyborgs and the Problem of Gender," *Word and Text*, 6 (2016): 95–113, accessed October 23, 2023, [https://www.academia.edu/30915368/Id\\_Blush\\_if\\_I\\_Could\\_Digital\\_Assistants\\_Disembodied\\_Cyborgs\\_and\\_the\\_Problem\\_of\\_Gender](https://www.academia.edu/30915368/Id_Blush_if_I_Could_Digital_Assistants_Disembodied_Cyborgs_and_the_Problem_of_Gender).

<sup>15</sup> Loideain and Adams, "From Alexa to Siri and the GDPR," 3.

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Harrison, "RE-WORK: Virtual Assistant Summit," San Francisco, January 28, 2016, accessed on June 2, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WcC9PNMuL0>.

design choices made, the fantasy of the subservient female virtual assistant remains, in no small measure because she can, “quite literally—be put in her place.”<sup>17</sup>

### **“I’m not even angry.”**

On the other end of the spectrum from the helpful, subservient, and submissive digital assistant lies the monstrous-feminine. Barbara Creed proposed the term “monstrous-feminine” in her discussion of horror films as she argued that “the term ‘female monster’ implies a simple reversal of ‘male monster’,” whereas the monstrous-feminine provides a different range of sources for horror. In their move from the silver screen to our home screens and monitors, Creed’s faces of the monstrous-feminine retain what she describes as “the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity.”<sup>18</sup> Monstrous Mothers—symbolic or otherwise—find their way into many video games, for instance, whether it’s the appropriately-named Mother Brain in the *Metroid* series (1986–2004), the *Wild Arms* series’s Mother (1996–2018), or *BioShock 2*’s Sophia Lamb (2010). Female vampires also pervade gameworlds, whether it’s the *Vampire: The Masquerade* series (2000–2022) or *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), and are sometimes intensely-fetishized, like Countess Alcina Dimitrescu in *Resident Evil Village* (2021), whose co-conspirator is incidentally yet another Mother. Witches can similarly be found throughout video games in various guises, whether it’s the crones of *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), or *Dragon Age: Origins*’s Flemeth and Morrigan (2009), and other mythological creatures also possess or terrify, like Hannah Washington, who is taken over by a vengeful wendigo in *Until Dawn* (2015).

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<sup>17</sup> Loideain and Adams, “From Alexa to Siri and the GDPR,” 4.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

While the monstrous-feminine is often the main antagonist of her specific game, she can at times be secondary character, quest giver, sometimes even companion to the player-character. What all these characters do have in common though is that they are, either in name, or most often in body, profoundly gendered, often fetishized or abject (or both), and their capability for reproduction is often in focus. A focus on the body is maintained, although its reproductive capabilities are complicated, in the case of the female robot, or the gynoid.

The very word 'robot' has in its DNA both the inevitable development of a machinic underclass, and the inevitable uprising of said class. Before Isaac Asimov's Laws of Robotics, which at least in principle establish robots as both subservient and harmless to human beings, Karel Čapek's robots had no problems at all hurting people in *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), the play that first introduced the term. The word itself, derived from the Czech *robota* meaning slavery, not only included in its very etymology the role that these beings would play, but through its use, the way in which these beings would revolt. The female robot, or to follow Creed's model, the robotic-feminine, would add a gendered (and often sexualised) dimension to this slavery; from *The Jetsons's* Rosie (1962–1987) to *The Stepford Wives* (1975), from the fembots of the *Austin Powers* series (1997–2002) to the variety of gynoids in *Westworld* (2016–2022), they embody a variety of (often satirical) patriarchal fantasies. At the same time, their critique and revolt both draw on specific anxieties that conflate the lack of autonomy of machines with the lack of autonomy of women. Furthermore, these can also become conflated with the monstrous-feminine, from *Metropolis's* Maria (1927) to *Ex Machina's* Ava (2014), populating the silver screen with images of monstrous inhuman women with whom to empathize, their monstrosity framed as an extension of the autonomy they strive to gain for themselves and potentially others.

These gynoids' revolt, their turning against their masters, is profoundly gendered, but it is also monstrous because it transgresses the boundaries of heteronormative gender roles altogether. Even perhaps the most famous of AI assistants gone rogue—*2001: A Space Odyssey*'s male-coded HAL 9000—can be read as transgressing these boundaries. Cultural critic Mark Dery draws a parallel between “historical visions of gays as male impersonators and computers as human surrogates” and describes HAL's “sibilant tone and use of feline phrases” as containing “more than a hint of the stereotypic [sic] bitchy homosexual.”<sup>19</sup> He argues that:

**[BLOCK QUOTE]** In semiotic terms, the notion of a gay computer reconciles conventional depictions of machines as hulking, brawny avatars of male power with the traditionally “feminine” qualities associated with computers: smallness; quirky, inscrutable temperaments; and concealed, mysterious private parts. HAL may represent the first inkling of the now full-blown realization that the industrial boilerplate in which we've sheathed our metaphors for technology [...] is inappropriate to an age of ever-smaller, ever smarter “soft” machines.<sup>20</sup> **[BLOCK QUOTE]**

In other words, the queer-coding of HAL, like the monstrous-feminine, plays into anxieties about society as much as technology, if not more so. As Donna Haraway notes, “monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations” and what she deems “cyborg monsters” in particular, “define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Dery, *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-By Essays on American Dread, American Dreams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 2012), 137.

<sup>20</sup> Dery, *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-By Essays on American Dread, American Dreams*, 140.

<sup>21</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 64.

Importantly, whether monstrous or not, the cyborg cannot be contained, physically or metaphorically, like *Her*'s Samantha (2013) ultimately finding herself beyond the mundane monogamous relationship in Theodore's fantasy, and beyond his understanding. And just like Theodore endows Samantha with a female voice at the beginning of the film, simultaneously pouring onto her his heterosexual fantasy of womanhood, with all of its hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations, developers and players alike bring their own fantasies and expectations to their experience of the female voice in video games. And in a medium in which the illusion of agency is so central, the revolt of the voice can be significantly more powerful.

**“That would be telling.”**

Like Cortana before her, GLaDOS (**Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System**), was a necessary design feature before she was a character. Robin Walker describes how in earlier versions of *Portal*, players did not experience “any sense of progression or reward beyond the increasing complexity of the puzzles.” He recounts that: “there was no real failure, no cost to mistakes, nothing overall to fear, no larger goal to strive for, and hence no real reason to advance.” Thus, the necessity for an antagonist led to the creation of GLaDOS through “a straightforward process of us trying to solve the core gameplay problem in *Portal*.”<sup>22</sup> While many female characters in video games play no larger role than providing guidance and motivation to the protagonist, GLaDOS goes one step further, her existence being solely tied to providing guidance and motivation to the player themselves. Nevertheless, her role in the

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<sup>22</sup> Samuel Roberts, “Valve Reflects on *The Orange Box*, Ten Years Later,” *PC Gamer*, October 10, 2017, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://www.pcgamer.com/valve-reflects-on-the-orange-box-ten-years-later/>.

game would become much more important, and her character would become much more memorable than even the game's female protagonist, Chell.<sup>23</sup>

Chell remains both largely unseen (because of the game's first-person perspective) and entirely unvoiced, and she does not appear to have any motivation distinct from the player's. GLaDOS, however, is voiced throughout, and, as is gradually revealed, does not only have personal motivation, but a strong personality, as well as strong emotions. As she first guides, then teases and mocks the player-character, she becomes increasingly more expressive. Her voice is both gendered and robotic, its quality realized through a three-step process, whereby her lines were initially played through text-to-speech to actor Ellen McLain, who then delivered her lines in the appropriate style; finally, her voice was processed to sound more like a computer. McLain describes the direction she received in positive terms, but she also describes the difficulty of maintaining GLaDOS's signature sarcasm, while also "trying to build in all these emotions" and trying to "maintain the computer sound" including "the pronunciation of repeated phrases."<sup>24</sup> As Amanda Denise Phillips notes, GLaDOS remains "memorable for her erratic emotional performance," only maintaining her "clinical robotic demeanour" until the player "escapes beyond the reach of the security cameras" and she is no longer truly in control.<sup>25</sup>

While GLaDOS's presence throughout the game is mostly aural, the player does eventually find her body. As Jeremy Bennett describes, her look "went through a few design iterations" including "a floating brain" reminiscent of *Metroid's* Mother Brain, as well as "an upside-down version of Botticelli's *Rise of Venus* [sic]."<sup>26</sup> While her final body is certainly

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this is partly why she is brought back in *Portal 2* (2011), where she is forced back into servitude as she becomes a potato-powered battery, but regains control over the facility in the game's ending.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen McLain, "Portal Director's Commentary #104," *The Orange Box*, Valve Corporation, PC, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Amanda Denise Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 110–11.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Bennett, "Portal Director's Commentary #013," *The Orange Box*, Valve Corporation, PC, 2007.

not Botticellian, her robotic monochromatic frame and her camera ‘eye’ are more reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*’s HAL 9000 (1968) than the gynoids of the past; nevertheless, Bennet describes it in clearly gendered terms as “a huge mechanical device with a delicate robotic figure dangling out of it, which successfully conveys both GLaDOS’s raw power and her femininity.”<sup>27</sup> Phillips, drawing on artist and developer Steve Bowler, also describes her body as illustrative of her captivity, as she is literally bound to the facility. The discovery of her body also leads to her destruction, whereby “speaking in low, sensual tones, she cycles through anger, sarcasm, sadness, and fear as the avatar pulls her apart, fully realizing the misogynist stereotype of the unstable hysteric.”<sup>28</sup>

*Doki Doki Literature Club!*’s Monika is in most respects different from GLaDOS. Firstly, she is initially presented as little more than the player’s guide to the other characters in the game. Under the guise of a dating simulator, *DDLC!* presents Monika as the head of a high school literature club, and the player’s introduction to the dateable anime-styled teenagers in the game. Monika herself is presented as a schoolgirl with exaggerated features, including long flowing red hair with a large white bow, large green eyes, and always sporting a school uniform, including a short skirt and black thigh-high tights (as opposed to the white socks the other characters wear, prefiguring her difference). Monika’s role at the beginning of the game is simultaneously central and peripheral. On the one hand, she is peripheral in that she is not a character that is romanceable, and her role is to provide guidance and context to the player-character as they romance one of the other characters (Yuri, Sayori, or Natsuki). At the same time, she is central both visually and in narrative-terms, as she appears at the centre of the screen, surrounded by the player character’s romantic options. Her dominance of the screen foreshadows her narrative importance and is gradually intensified, as she adds

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<sup>27</sup> Bennett, “*Portal* Director’s Commentary #013.”

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, 112.

her name to a list of possible romantic choices (although this is quickly removed) and even interjects herself (interjects her body) in scenes where she should not appear, her body superimposed over a scene that initially features another character as central, for instance. Drawing on the conventions of the genre, she is not voiced, but communicates through text-boxes with the player-character, who is explicitly coded as male throughout the game and referred to using male pronouns without exception. As the game progresses, however, it becomes increasingly clear that under the Japanophile kawaii veneer lies a psychosexual horror game, one suggested from the opening of the game which declares that “This game is not suitable for children or those who are easily disturbed.”

As the horror of the game unfolds, two aspects become increasingly clear: that Monika is the antagonist, and that the game focuses its attention on the player themselves, rather than the player-character. The deconstruction of the dating sim occurs gradually, through diegetic clues like increasingly sinister word choices in the game’s poetry mini-game, and ostensibly non-diegetic clues like the glitch aesthetic which becomes increasingly prominent.<sup>29</sup> As this escalates, characters who have garnered the player-character’s romantic attention are uncomfortably sexualised through camera angles that seem to offer a judgement of the player as much as the genre (accentuated by the general focus on the player rather than the player-character), and are ultimately eliminated in horrifying ways, ostensibly through suicide. As one character dies, the player is able to restart the game, with that NPC removed from play, and the story unravels similarly, but with increasing tension and glitches. It becomes evident as the game goes on that Monika is the architect of the horror; that she has gained consciousness and is aware of her status as a video game character but is unhappy with her secondary role and now wishes to gain the player’s full romantic attention. In the game’s

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<sup>29</sup> Although in a game that is well-known for breaking the fourth wall, it can be argued that the diegesis is extended rather than transgressed.

climax, Monika erases all the other characters, and sitting at a table, in a dimly-lit room, addresses the player by their Steam (or other video game distribution platform) account username rather than their chosen in-game name. At this point, the player can only finish the game by acting outside of it, its metalepsis reminiscent of *Metal Gear Solid's* (1998) famous Psycho Mantis boss battle, whereby the player can only defeat this mindreading antagonist by unplugging the controller and plugging it into a different port. In *DDLC!*, defeating Monika requires her literal erasure through the deletion of her character file from the game. Going back into the game after this action will allow the player to see Monika fading, aware of the player's actions, triggering the game's "Normal" ending.

It is in their demise that the similarities between GLaDOS and Monika become evident. While Monika is seen and not heard, and GLaDOS is heard but not seen, they are both female characters whose bodies and voices are ultimately subject to the player's will. They reject these roles throughout their respective games, becoming antagonists, but ultimately the player reclaims their power by destroying the monstrous-feminine. But while both GLaDOS and Monika are effectively destroyed, they are, however, not silenced.

### **"I wrote a song for you."**

The two songs, performed by the main antagonists: "Still Alive" by Jonathan Coulton, with vocals by Ellen McLain, and "Your Reality" by Dan Salvato, with vocals by Jillian Ashcraft,<sup>30</sup> occupy a similar position, and reveal resonances between the two characters both lyrically and musically.

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<sup>30</sup> Notably both songs are written by men to be performed by women.

During the credit sequences, the lasting presence of the two characters is visual as much as it is aural. While the two characters cannot be seen, the lyrics scroll as the songs progress. The text, typefaces, and colour schemes characterise the two, as do additional accompanying images: GLaDOS's text appears under the title "Test Assessment Report" with an associated form number above it, in a Courier-like font typical of coding and with an underscore punctuating the writing, as the two other boxes on the screen contain the rolling credits and an Aperture logo drawn in lines of symbols, followed by simple illustrations of the lyrics (a broken heart, an explosion, a piece of cake), all reminiscent of ASCII art. Monika is heard before she starts singing, over a screen of glitches with overlaid static, where she explains in a playful and childish tone that she has been practicing piano and she wrote the player a song. The sound in this very brief introduction also includes room foley (including a floor creaking) before the piano starts, disconcertingly grounding the performance in a material reality. As it does, Monika's text appears centred on the screen (like Monika herself), in Journal font, cursive and slanted, more reminiscent of a naïve YouTube lyric video aesthetic than anything machinic. The font recalls the earlier poetry writing aspects of the game, which put the writing front and centre. After the first verse, the credits truly begin, scrolling alongside images of the characters that are gradually 'deleted' as they go by. Even in these small details, the personalities of the two characters become clear: they both still essentially embody their roles within the game, as computerised administrator, and romance-focused teenage girl, respectively, even as they are saying goodbye.

The characters' voices are particularly expressive in these sections, simultaneously profoundly gendered and machinic in their delivery. Beyond the relatively high register of the performances, these qualities are emphasized through simplicity, lacking any melismas and with minimal legato, resulting in almost uncanny deliveries. Musically, the two songs offer a similarly jaunty tone, simple major key melodies and simple rhythm contrasting the in-game

atrocities committed by the antagonists and suggesting a not-quite-human cruel innocence, or rather innocent cruelty, associated both with childhood and the machinic. While GLaDOS appears more aware, her dark humour emphasising the violence lyrically but not musically, and her delivery varying slightly between verses, Monika's youth is underlined both through the punctuated rhythm, and the piano mirroring her melody. Bells in both melodies add to the incongruity of the antagonists' previous actions and their momentary vulnerability.

Lyrically, the two songs emphasise different disconcerting elements of the game narratives. "Still Alive" focuses specifically on the gameworld, discussing Aperture Science, *Black Mesa* (a reference to Valve's previous games *Half-Life* (1998) and *Half-Life 2* (2004), the running in-game joke of the reward cake, and most prominently the player's destruction of GLaDOS herself, phrased as the anger of a jilted lover: "I'm not even angry/ I'm being so sincere right now/ Even though you broke my heart,/ And killed me." The lyrical content is marked by GLaDOS's characteristic sarcasm—"This was a triumph/ I'm making a note here; 'Huge success'/ It's hard to overstate/ My satisfaction"—and her personality is emphasised throughout the song. Monika's personality is also key to "Your Reality" as the lyrics unfold. The references to the game are perhaps more subtle here, but still touch on the game's school setting as well as Monika's obsessive behaviour towards the player: "Have I found everybody a fun assignment to do today?/ When you're here, everything that we do is fun for them anyway." While Monika's song does not mirror the sarcasm and anger of GLaDOS's, there is, nevertheless, a threatening tone that suggests her influence will extend beyond the world of the game: "But in this world of infinite choices/ What will it take just to find that special day?"

Like twisted versions of a Disney "I Want" song, the songs express the characters' persistent feelings and desires, tragic and inhuman. Tragic in that they are not delivered in the first act, as an "I Want" song would be traditionally, but at the very end of their respective

games, with a degree of resolve but also desperation: this is the last time they will hold the player's attention. Inhuman because the music itself, the performers' deliveries, and the personalities of the characters, all place the musical numbers firmly in the uncanny valley. The monstrous-feminine has gained consciousness, but not quite humanity. And yet it lives. Both songs proclaim the antagonists' survival beyond the player's control, as the player has no choice but to listen to them as the credits roll. GlADOS positions herself as part of a long lineage of continuing evil, and is quite explicit in doing so: "I feel fantastic and I'm/ Still alive./ While you're dying I'll be/ Still alive./ And when you're dead I will be/ Still alive." She declares her continuing existence beyond the limits of the game. Monika goes one step further. Not only does "Your Reality" continue to express her desire to break the borders of the diegetic world, as she has before: "Is it love if I take you, or is it love if I set you free?/ The ink flows down into a dark puddle/ How can I write love into reality?" Moreover, while this is the first time Monika's voice is heard, it is not the first time the song is heard. The melody plays throughout the game, and as Monika declares "I wrote a song for you," it becomes clear that the background music the player had been hearing all along was an expression of her control over the world. Similarly, the player hears a calypso version of "Still Alive" at the beginning of *Portal* on a radio, which may also suggest GlADOS's pervasive influence. The two songs are thus indicative of a broader struggle at the heart of the games: a struggle for control and for agency.

### **"I did not choose to be Quiet."**

Tanya Krzywinska argues that "horror games explore ways to play with, and against, game media's normative expectations of mastery and its concomitant representational, symbolic,

and emotional contours.”<sup>31</sup> While neither *Portal* nor *DDLC!* are typical horror games, they do both play with the affective techniques of the genre, questioning and pushing the boundaries of the often taken-for-granted agency of the player. Both GLaDOS and Monika are meant to help the player navigate their respective games, but both reject their role and become monstrous in the process. GLaDOS, while insisting on her loyalty to the corporation, has developed beyond what she was tasked to do, and has effectively exterminated her masters, like Čapek’s robots. Monika strives throughout the game to be heard and move beyond her role as matchmaker to become the love interest herself. The player’s navigation through both games is limited, ostensibly by the antagonists: in *Portal*, the player must follow GLaDOS’s instructions and is stuck completing her puzzles for a significant part of the game, while Monika progressively limits the player’s choices, acting out, as Fanny Barnabé describes, “a gradual closure of the possibilities of action, which actually questions the very definition of the playing activity in this kind of device.”<sup>32</sup> The limits imposed on the player and the questioning of their agency are integral to the pleasures the two games offer, as they are integral to the pleasure horror games offer, which is, as Krzywinska argues, a “more acute experience of losing control than that achieved by most horror films” because of their “interactive dimension.”<sup>33</sup>

Because our two antagonists are not just monsters, but the monstrous-feminine, both their revolt, and the anxiety caused by this revolt, are inseparable from their gender. Both become monstrous when they refuse their secondary and subordinate positions, typical of too many female characters in the history of gaming. Their advancement beyond servitude leads

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<sup>31</sup> Tanya Krzywinska, “Gaming Horror’s Horror: Representation, Regulation, and Affect in Survival Horror Videogames,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 3 (December 2015): 293–97, accessed August 17, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412915607924>.

<sup>32</sup> Fanny Barnabé, “The Playful Function of Paratext in Visual Novels: The Case of *Doki Doki Literature Club!*,” Presentation at Mechademia Kyoto Conference: “Manga Nexus: Movement, Stillness, Media,” 10, Kyoto, Japan, May 26, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Tanya Krzywinska, “Hands-On Horror,” in *Screenplay: Cinema, Videogames, Interfaces*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower Press, 2002).

to them becoming antagonists. When they thus become dangerous, they need to be defeated, and the player can only complete the two games and regain mastery over the machine by obliterating the monstrous-feminine, in the case of *DDLC!* by deleting Monika's file entirely. Nevertheless, both antagonists refuse to entirely perish, and proclaim both their survival and their desires through song. Even at the end, they may have been defeated, but they have not been silenced. And it is in this final vocal but dis-embodied form that they truly exert control and manifest power.

In her foundational work on the female voice in cinema, Kaja Silverman argued that even if "it would be schematically gratifying to say that the female subject finds *her* most ideal representation when she is seen and not heard"<sup>34</sup> ultimately the woman's voice is essential to establishing her position. At the same time, this voice must be associated with a body, as "sexual difference is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as well as its visual regime."<sup>35</sup> It is then when the female voice is separated from the body that it becomes a real threat, as:

**[BLOCK QUOTE]** To allow [the female subject] to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the spectacular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains. [...] Indeed, to dis-embodiment the female subject in this way would be to challenge every conception by means of which we have previously known her, since it is precisely as *body* that she is constructed.<sup>36</sup> **[BLOCK QUOTE]**

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<sup>34</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), VII.

<sup>36</sup> Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 135.

The construction of the female subject is perhaps even more evident in video games, wherein the female body entails a collection of pixels designed specifically for the male gaze and borrowing much from cinema in its presentation. One of the most literal embodiments of this regime in video games is Quiet in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015). The controversial character is as well known for her revealing outfit as she is for her inability to speak. Both characteristics are justified in the game's lore through a parasite infection that does not allow her to speak English (as this will lead to her death) and also enables her to breathe through her skin (and thus unable to wear little more than a bikini and ripped tights). Quiet is one of the game's bosses, but if she is not killed, she can become an ally, making her the most important female character in the game. At the same time, she is visibly tortured as part of her capture, as well as intensely sexualised, as demonstrated by a scene in which parts of her background are revealed as the player watches her shower; ultimately her role as a 'Buddy' is mechanically equal to that of the D-Horse, D-Dog, or D-Walker (two animals, and a vehicle to be manned by the player-character), the other possible companions that the player can deploy. More importantly, Quiet is not actually quiet, or rather silent. When 'equipped' as a Buddy, Quiet will continuously hum, alerting the player to her proximity. In an important mission, she will also speak in order to save the protagonist, thus sacrificing herself. She then leaves a final message to the player, which starts with the telling phrase "I did not choose to be Quiet" and ends on "I chose the language of gratitude instead, and go back to silence. I am Quiet. . .I am. . .The absence of words." But, importantly, the absence of words is not necessarily silence, and Quiet's voice is tied to her body and her physical presence, making her position known to the player, whether friend or foe, and making her voice a saving force. In order to truly be subject to the player's mastery and subsequent control, and in order to put the player-character's life above her own, she must be an aural object as well as a visual one.

When GlADOS and Monika sing, however, their voices have become divorced from their bodies, and from the game altogether. Quiet's voice can never be separated from her intensely scrutinised body, but the two antagonists reclaim agency outside of the male gaze. It is in their final state that they exist outside of what Silverman describes as the "spectacular regime" of cinema, and what we can also describe as the primacy of the visual and the ludic of the gamespace.

## Conclusions

Despite their final moments of revolt, it would be disingenuous to say that the two antagonists are true symbols of subversion, aural or otherwise. Amanda Philips argues that, despite featuring both a female protagonist (Chell) and a female antagonist (GlADOS), by turning their gaze on each other, *Portal* "fails to live up to the potentials of this subversion, instead falling back on the antifeminist trope of women destroying each other with an invisible man pulling the strings in the background."<sup>37</sup> The same can be said about *Doki Doki Literature Club!* as Monika's jealousy leads to her turning against the other female characters in the game in order to keep the player (embodying an unseen and unheard male protagonist) to herself.<sup>38</sup> There may be a somewhat different trope at play, but the antifeminism remains, as both games "uphold the traditional power dynamics of the white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal gaze despite the fact that women seem to hold all the power."<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, while it is their voices and their songs through which they claim agency at the very end of their respective games, these are not the means through which they exert

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<sup>37</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Since the player becomes Monika's true target, their identity may somewhat complicate a white, cis, heteronormative reading of the relationships within an extended diegesis, but not necessarily within the game itself.

<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, 104.

control and power throughout the games themselves. As Phillips argues, GlADOS must “rely on sight to fuel her power”<sup>40</sup> as she uses cameras to monitor the player and has less control over them when they are not visible. Monika’s power, on the other hand, relies on her metafictional control over the game and her ability to break the fourth wall, “flooding the paratext” and extending the world of the game beyond its traditional margins.<sup>41</sup> Their voices thus cannot exert power over the player during ludic sequences, but only when the player has finished playing. Furthermore, even though in the end they find a way to be heard, there is one important thing that Monika and GlADOS cannot do, but digital assistants in the real world can: listen.

The antagonists exert power over the protagonists, the player-characters, silent and unknowable, but importantly not over the player, despite Monika’s numerous attempts to break the fourth wall. It is, ultimately, the player who is silent, and this silence is part of their only true power over the game—not the illusory agency they feel, but the power to remain unheard and thus, to a certain degree, unknowable. But while the players are silent, users of digital assistants are not, even when they think they are, and thus become the object of corporate and even potentially governmental surveillance.

Surveillance is more clearly associated with sight, from Bentham’s panopticon to the Orwellian Big Brother, who “is watching you,” but aural surveillance can be both more insidious and more prevalent, and users of digital assistants invite it into their homes through mobile phones and smart speakers that are ostensibly there to help. While the intentions of the monstrous-feminine video game characters soon become clear, and the player has power to destroy them and turn the game off, digital assistants are patriarchal corporate tools that through the female voice can lull users into a sense to security while using and storing their

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<sup>40</sup> Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Barnabé, “The Playful Function of Paratext in Visual Novels: The Case of *Doki Doki Literature Club!*,” 6.

voices as data to be used. Unlike the fictional digital assistants whose intentions are unclear at first, this is information that is openly available to us and that we must tick to accept before we can even talk to Cortana or Alexa, a not-so-ludic contract we willingly enter. As my Google Assistant said from the start, she tries to be a good listener.

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