

Player-Character Dynamics in Successful Korean Subculture Games in Goddess of Victory: Nikke and Blue Archive

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Abstract

This paper explores the intimate player-character relationships in two highly successful beautiful girl collectible RPGs that transitioned from a subculture genre to mainstream popularity. Through a comparative analysis of Goddess of Victory: Nikke and Blue Archive, it investigates how their distinct gameplay mechanics, narrative structures, and contrasting mode of fostering intimacy with beautiful girl characters have contributed to their exceptional success in the Korean game market. While Goddess of Victory: Nikke cultivates an intense, intimate bond between players and characters through a drama-driven, post-apocalyptic storyline centered around a hierarchical commander-trooper dynamic, Blue Archive adopts an omnibus format that establishes a spectator-type relationship that allows players to observe and engage with the individual growth and desires of various characters in an academy setting. The study suggests that differentiating the nature of intimacy between players and characters can be a crucial factor in the success and genre expansion of beautiful girl collectible RPGs in order to cater to diverse player preferences and gameplay experiences.

Keyword : Beautiful Girl Collectable RPG, Girl Character, Intimacy, gameplay experience

1. Introduction

Beautiful Girl (Bishoujo) collectible RPGs is a collective term for a genre of games that emphasizes the act of collecting beautifully drawn 2D female characters. Categorized as ‘subculture’ games, Beautiful Girl collectable RPGs (BGCR) were initially perceived as a niche genre, popular primarily among a specific group of enthusiasts who appreciated the moe (萌え, cute and endearing) aesthetic of these games. In the Korean game market, this genre gained prominence since 2017, but by 2019, it entered an overall downward spiral, with only a few games including Last Origin, operating stably. However, in June 2022, the release of Umamusume Pretty Derby, a game that transforms real racehorses into pretty girl characters and allows players to nurture and race them, marked a turning point [1]. This was followed by the release of Nexon's Blue Archive in November 2021 and ShiftUp's Goddess of Victory: Nikke in November 2022. Consequently, the BGCR genre has begun to emerge as a

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mainstream phenomenon in the Korean game market. Notably, Blue Archive is an unusual case where a game developed by a Korean studio was successfully exported to Japan, considered the home of subculture games, and achieved remarkable box office success.

This success can be attributed to a different cultural trend. Subculture games are a genre that centers on interacting with anime-like characters featuring graphic designs reminiscent of Japanese animation. Previously, subculture itself was considered the exclusive domain of a certain group of enthusiasts. However, as the demand for webtoons (web-based comics), web novels, animation, and digital games has increased, it has evolved to a level akin to popular culture. As the name 'subculture' suggests, BGCR, once treated as a non-mainstream genre, have gained a foothold in the game market [2].

Compared to other genres such as first-person shooters (FPS), adventure, and simulation, little has been studies on BGCR. Most of papers tended to focus on the enthusiasm of specific players for subculture games or on analyzing their motivations for playing [3]. While post-relational studies have attempted to analyze the attachment relationship between players and non-human characters by shedding light on the socio-cultural context of the intimacy between players and non-human characters [4][5], subculture games have now transitioned from being a reflection of the specific tendencies of a small group of enthusiasts to the mainstream market. Therefore, it is necessary to further analyze the intimate relationship between players and beautiful girls in these games and closely study the changes accompanying genre expansion.

In this regard, this paper aims to analyze the success factors of BGCR with focus on two games that are currently driving the popularity of the genre, shiftup's Goddess of Victory:Nikke and Nexon's Blue Archive. By analyzing these games, this paper will reveal how the gameplay of subculture games has evolved and examine how the intimacy between players and aesthetic characters, which determines the gameplay experience, has changed. By doing so, it hopes to provide meaningful data for the Korean game industry, which is facing a fierce game intellectual property (IP) war, to create sustainable success stories.

2. Genealogy of Beautiful Girl Games

2.1 A Simulation Game about Raising Beautiful Girls

The concept of beautiful girls, or bishoujo, in games can be traced back to Japanese eroge, also known as bishoujo games played on personal computers [6]. Beautiful girl games are defined as adventure or simulation games aimed at men with the objective of fulfilling a romantic relationship with

a female character drawn in anime-style illustrations, assuming a single player [7]. The genre was born in 1982, diversified in the first half of the 1990s, and reached its peak in the late 1990s when it gained widespread acceptance in South Korea, starting with the upbringing simulation game Princess Maker. Released on May 24, 1991, by Japan's Gainax Games, Princess Maker tells the basic story of a warrior who saves his country and then becomes a father who is raising a daughter. The game spawned five canonical series and more than a dozen titles including spin-offs, and has endured for decades.

In the 1990s, Princess Maker pioneered the parenting simulation genre with its novel system of having male players (fathers) 'raise' female characters (daughters). Players essentially work to increase their character's stats, such as Health, Strength, Intelligence, Elegance, Toughness, Fatigue, Charm, and Morality. For instance, the daughter's dialogue will change slightly depending on her Character stat. If it is low, she will talk back to her father in a semi-sarcastic manner, but if it is high, she will be more polite. In addition to the basic stats, players can raise their daughter through activities such as part-time jobs to increase or decrease stats, acquiring funds, various types of education, and performing martial arts. Depending on these results, the daughter's final outcome will differ, such as becoming a general, a magician, a concubine, a woodcutter, or a farmer's wife, as shown in [Fig. 1].



[Fig. 1] Maria Lindbergh, the main character in Princess Maker 1, and a collection of multiple endings

In a traditional role-playing game (RPG), the player takes on the role of a protagonist in a specific world and enjoys action, battles, and adventures in a virtual environment. Therefore, the player creates an avatar-character to represent themselves while improving their appearance, abilities, and physical strength, and derives vicarious satisfaction through character role-playing. However, Princess Maker deviates from traditional games in that the player does not play the protagonist character but rather 'raises' a virtual female character through the role of a surrogate father. In other words, rather than the player 'projecting' their desires onto a non-human character, the player seeks to 'objectify' the character

through emotional intimacy with the character who has (or is set to have) their desires.

This player-character relationship is linked to VR (Virtual reality), an immersive technology [8], and in 2024, an entertainment training game titled Summer Lesson: Hikari Miyamoto was released. In this game, players take on the role of a tutor and have seven days to raise the grades of high school girl Hikari Miyamoto. As shown in [Fig. 2], players can improve the girl's five abilities including strength, intelligence, mind, insight, and inspiration, and choose from a variety of lesson types including review, memorization, and exercise. The immersive medium of VR allows players to experience pseudo-intimacy with non-human girl characters in a more realistic way.



[Fig. 2] Screenshot of Summer Lesson: Hikari Miyamoto

2.2 Romance Simulation Game with Beautiful Girls

After the success of Princess Maker, a wave of romance simulation games with beautiful girls, also known as *miyonsei*, emerged. Some of the most representative games are *Classmate* (同級生, 1992), *Sister* (愛姉妹, 1994), and *Underclassman* (下級生, 1996). Unlike previous beautiful girl raising simulations, the *miyonsei* genre focuses on the development of multiple characters rather than a single character. Hiroki Azuma explained that *miyonsei* has a basic system where players target multiple beautiful girl characters and are rewarded with pornographic illustrations [9]. However, the reason for *miyonsei*'s long-standing success is not simply the pornographic illustrations. Rather, it is the fact that it allows players to encounter a variety of beautiful girl characters in a single game, each with different backgrounds, dialogues, and situations, as shown in [Fig. 3]. While the number of play turns per character is short for more than 10 characters, the exotic experience of experiencing romantic or sexual fantasies that are difficult to fulfill in real life through the game was appealing to players at the time.



[Fig. 3] Screenshot of Classmate and 11 beautiful girl characters

Following the heyday of *miyonsei* in the 1990s, the 2000s saw the transition of *miyonsei* games from ‘strategy’ games to ‘reading’ games using the visual novel method. A visual novel is a game in which a multi-ending novel with a branching narrative structure is read by selecting text along with images or music on a computer screen. Therefore, the role of the player in a visual novel is quite limited, as the player can only read the text and select the prepared options [10]. Whereas previous beautiful girl games had a strong adventure character with action elements such as intimacy with surrounding characters, money, and events to capture a beautiful girl character who travels through time, visual novel style games have become more passive in terms of freedom.

Azuma Hiroki, author of the book titled *Game Realism*, explains this shift by saying that 2000s games needed to feature multiple heroines and effectively utilize the individuality and charm of each one [7]. This led to a much greater focus on the characterization of beautiful girls. The reason why character archetypes have become such an important part of beautiful girl games is because the game system is based on the premise of multiple stories and multiple endings. Typically, novels are designed to draw the reader into the story and make them fall in love with a single character through a dense narrative and fateful events. However, in visual novel games, when one narrative ends, another love story begins, and the female protagonist changes several times [9].

Therefore, players who have to fall in love with several romantic partners due to the game's structure are forced to respond to the changing characters rather than the story [11]. Consequently, the game should be designed to make players more enthusiastic about each of the many female characters rather than one good story. For this reason, the character's characteristic appearance or personality itself, such as ‘the smart girl with glasses’, ‘the girl who cares for the male player even though she seems indifferent’, or ‘the girl who keeps falling and making mistakes’, already contains a different love story

[12]. In the end, recognizable characterization is more important than a long narrative. For these game rules, the beautiful girls in the game have become more habituated to be able to grasp their personalities at a glance just by looking at their illustrations, and players' mnemonic literacy for beautiful girls has increased significantly. By literacy, players can look at a particular character, read the database of moe-aesthetic designs used for that character, and quickly feel the special emotions associated with it.

2.3 Beautiful Girl Collectable RPGs

From upbringing simulations to multi-romance stories, romance with beautiful girls has become commonplace in the gaming foreground, and a new type of beautiful girl game has been created by mixing with other genres. As shown in [Fig. 4] and [Fig. 5], the biggest difference from the existing beautiful girl games is that they have changed from being text-centered to action games that show dynamic manipulation and production. RPGs with strategy simulations such as shooting, card strategy, turn-based strategy, and tower defense, they have taken on the characteristics of a completely different action game.

Most importantly, BGCRs are distinct in their strategic emphasis on 'collecting multiple girl characters' rather than just one. This genre, typically found in mobile games, involves multiple players who focus on collecting, competing, and developing numerous beautiful girl or boy characters. [13]. As can be seen from this broad definition, the final objective of the game is to 'collect, develop, and compete' with these girls to progress through the game's stages. In addition, BGCRs feature a reward system infused with moe aesthetic sensibility, including romantic interactions with girl characters and the provision of sensual illustrations during events. To enhance the fun of collecting, BGCRs produce a wide variety of different types of girl characters with strong personalities. Most games achieve this by anthropomorphizing characters based on specific themes in order to create hundreds of unique characters that share a common element. Objects such as ships, guns, jewelry, and food are personified as girls by incorporating the object's features into the character's appearance, behavior, and personality. For example, in *Girl's Frontline*, the Nagant Revolver is personified as a girl. Due to the revolver's historical context, this character refers to herself as an old man and speaks in an archaic manner. Male players take on the role of commanders and deploy them in battles. Consequently, the core gameplay of BGCRs revolves around collecting girl characters, assembling various units, and winning battles to increase the characters' likability or love index.



[Fig. 4] Girl's Frontline



[Fig. 5] Honkai Impact 3rd

To summarize, beautiful girls games have changed from romance simulation games in the 1990s to branching narrative novels in the 2000s, and then to action RPGs that involve collecting girl characters like collectible card games. While the genres and rules of these games have changed over time, they are ultimately centered around the intimate relationship between the player and the girl character.

3. Intimacy and gameness with beautiful girls in games

3.1 The player's relationship with girl characters through the combat system

Developed by ShiftUp, Goddess of Victory: nikke (NIKKE) as shown in [Fig. 6] is a beautiful girl

collectible gun-shooting RPG that achieved global sales of USD 100 million within a month of its release. As shown in [Fig. 7], Blue Archive, developed by Nexon Games, is one of the most successful examples of a purely domestic subculture game IP. The IP expansion, including an album package consisting of the game's OST, art books, comic books, and picture products, was also well received.

While both games are often cited as examples of subculture games that have made it to the mainstream, they employ different strategies for success. First of all, the combat system of NIKKE is a gun-shooting action game designed for mobile platforms. It fulfills strategic elements such as different guns and character skill configurations for gunshooting, and provides the convenience of vertical screen shooting on mobile devices. NIKKE follows the common battle system of BGCRs, but it does not make the combat system fun not only for character collection, but also for the combat system itself through a unique third-person shooting play style.



[Fig. 6] Title cover of Goddess of Victory: Nikke



[Fig. 7] Title cover of Blue Archive

Blue Archive, on the other hand, utilizes a line defense combat system where players can build a party through pre-battle character combinations. Thus, victory or defeat is determined by the player's collecting diverse character pool. In particular, unlike other regular battles, the final battle stage, called Total War, features a strong boss, so in order to win, players need to have and develop characters with a range of skills other than the ones they already have. Thus, it can be considered a battle system that focuses on character collection.

3.2 The player's relationship with girl characters through storytelling

The storytelling of NIKKE is set in post-apocalyptic world and shows a dramatic narrative that explores posthumanistic ethical questions about the humanity of non-humans through the conflict between the human player and the android girl. Blue Archive, on the other hand, is an episodic drama that unfolds in a school setting. It consists of small stories that highlight the everyday lives of the school girls. These differences in storytelling impact the game's narrative, character desires, and overall gameplay [14]. The differences between the two games are summarized in [Table 1].

[Table 1] Comparative analysis of storytelling based on the player's relationship with the girl characters

Category	Goddess of Victory: Nikke	Blue Archive
Player-Character Relationship	Intimate	Spectatorial
Genre	Post-apocalyptic	Everyday life
World Building	An underground city that restores the Earth against the mechanical creatures	A giant school city with girl students who combat
Theme	The humanity of Android	A sense of being a good adult
Player-Character Role	Commander - Troopers	Teacher - Students
Storytelling	Drama	Episodes
the way in which the main story plays out	Narrative Arc	Omnibus
Common Goal of Girl Characters	Yes	No
Desire of Girl Characters	Desire for intimacy with the commander (player)	Personal growth

First of all, the beautiful girl character in NIKKE is only interested in the player, the Commander, and has a clear sense of common goal of restoring the Earth. The creates a cohesive narrative where content flow is structured around clearing main stages. In addition, the role-play between the commander and the troops can be characterized as intimate, as the victory or defeat of a fierce battle is determined

by obeying the commander's orders.

Conversely, Blue Archive features episodes that exude the charm of each character. As a result, the game focuses on the characters' individual desires to grow while receiving attention from the player in the position of a teacher, rather than following the player's orders or fulfilling his desires. The main story also takes an omnibus format that allows multiple characters to take the spotlight as protagonists in different chapters. This structure highlights the individuality of each character and includes event stories that focus on characters not featured in the main story. In addition, the loose narrative and world-building of Blue Archive encourage players to add their own imaginations to the original story and create new secondary creations based on the original story. The combat in Blue Archive primarily involves the player watching 3D characters fight in autoplay mode while emphasizing the spectatorial nature of the player's relationship with the characters.

4. Conclusions

This paper analyzes the success of two Korean subculture games that have brought subculture gaming into the mainstream: Goddess of Victory:Nikke and Blue Archive. By examining the intimate relationship between the player and the beautiful girl characters in the game, which is the most critical factor in the playability of girl-collecting RPGs [15], the games can be categorized as intimate and spectator games, respectively. First, Goddess of Victory:Nikke creates a conflict situation through the master-servant relationship between a human commander and a female combatant, which is commonly found in sci-fi post-apocalyptic settings. It drew epic excitement from how the drama would unfold according to the probability of the main story by emphasizing an intimate connection where characters seek approval and intimacy from the player.

On the other hand, Blue Archive consists of an omnibus of small stories set in a school city with focus on everyday scenarios. It highlights the individual desires of the characters and establishes a spectator-type relationship through the role of a teacher who observes and supports them. The game builds a world that allows for secondary creation by watching the interactions of characters with various personalities, rather than following a singular dramatic arc.

In conclusion, while both Goddess of Victory:Nikke and Blue Archive belong to the same genre of Beautiful Girl Collectable RPG in that the primary gameplay involves collecting and battling beautiful girl characters, they differ in their approach to world-building, storytelling, and thematic awareness. These differences are rooted in the varying degrees of intimacy between the player and the characters.

This analysis is significant as it demonstrates different strategies for success within the genre and highlights the potential for genre expansion by differentiating gameplay elements that appeal to players. However, its scope is limited to the Korea market, so further study can be done to analyze cultural difference related to the success of this particular genre and variations in the design of girl characters.

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