

Towards a gendered procedural rhetoric: Simulating feminine domesticity in the *Atelier* role-playing game series¹

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Abstract (300 words)

The *Atelier* series is unique among Japanese role-playing games (RPG) for being the only major brand to consistently feature female protagonists. This paper studies the history of the series, focusing on what Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric," the persuasive organization of rules framing the game text. It examines three games, *Atelier Marie* (Gust, 1997), *Atelier Rorona* (Gust, 2009), and *Atelier Ryza* (Gust, 2019), showing how the series began as a simulation of everyday life that explicitly criticized masculine adventures typical of RPGs before progressively developing into an adventure-game where this simulation aspect became ancillary to the story's development. As characters and narrative became progressively more important, the series's procedural rhetoric also increasingly mirrored the linear adventure narratives of traditional RPGs. If early *Atelier* protagonists were introverted and organized, by *Ryza*, *Atelier* became the story of an extroverted tomboy who identified with the external world of adventure before the domestic space of the workshop. These character changes are reflected in the evolution of the game's procedural rhetoric, such as the fleshing out of the narrative and the removal of the game's "time attack" element. A comparative study of the procedural rhetoric in *Atelier* helps us appreciate the implicitly gendered nature of the RPG genre, offering a critical perspective on Japanese games.

Keywords (5-10)

role-playing game, gender, procedural rhetoric, JRPG, simulation, narrative, shōjo, gal game

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Introduction

This article examines the Japanese video game series *Atelier*, a popular role-playing game (RPG) with a history of over two decades. *Atelier* is produced by the developer Gust, which was established in 1993 and became a wholly owned subsidiary of Koei Tecmo in 2011 (Gust, n.d.). Gust published the first *Atelier* game, *Atelier Marie: The Alchemist of Salburg*, in 1997. An unexpected hit, the series became Gust's economic backbone, with a new game published roughly every year. As of writing in January 2023, twenty-three *Atelier* games have been published in the main series, not counting spinoffs. A study of *Atelier* is useful to shed light on the gendered nature of the Japanese RPG (JRPG), usually developed with a male protagonist for male players, bringing attention to not only the implicit gendering of the RPG's narrative, but also of the game's procedural mechanics. Though *Atelier* today is most frequently classified as a RPG, it was originally intended to be an anti-RPG and continues to distinguish itself from other major RPGs on two aspects. The first is its "alchemy" or "synthesis" system, where players collect ingredients to build complex items like weapons, tools, and other ingredients. The second aspect is *Atelier*'s consistent use of female protagonists. Of the *Atelier* games released so far, only six have a male protagonist, of which four were stories with dual protagonists, one male and another female. Over its twenty-five year history, *Atelier* has repeatedly struggled with its identity as an aberrant RPG, regularly incorporating and removing adventure elements in response to user demand. A study of *Atelier* is thus also an examination of the gendered limits of the RPG genre.

This article studies three important games in *Atelier* series to argue that the Japanese RPG is a masculine genre not only in terms of representation, but also in the very simulation of the rules of play, what Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost, 2007). Bogost defines a "procedural genre" as "assemblages of procedural forms" such as "the platform, the first-person shooter, the turn-based strategy game, and so forth" (Bogost, 2007, p. 14). Just as the structures of different literary genres have different audiences, the procedural genres of different video games will be implicitly gendered as well. I contrast two earlier games in the *Atelier* series, *Atelier Marie* (1997) and *Atelier Rorona* (2009), which I argue are feminine, simulation-oriented games, with the more recent game *Atelier Ryza* (2019), which I argue is structured as a masculine, story-oriented RPG. Though all three games feature female protagonists and the alchemy mechanic, the historical evolution of the representation of protagonists and the relationship between alchemy, capitalism, and time results in substantially different gameplay experiences. As C. Thi Nguyen argues, games are an art

form that "enable, encourage, and even construct aesthetic experiences of agency" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 121) by providing "consciously sculpted versions of...everyday experiences" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 13) through collaborations between developer and player. Depending on the set of rules and motivations in each game, the player's aesthetic experience differs accordingly. It is therefore useful to consider how even the implicitly gender-neutral *rules of the game* may become imbued with socially-inflected gender norms that determine what sorts of personae the player inhabits.

There has been a great deal of recent work on Japanese video games, much of which treats the RPG (Hutchinson, 2019; Hutchinson & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022). I build on this existing scholarship by noting not only the implicit masculinity of this genre, but also how this masculinity seeps into the very rules that configure how the game is experienced. When I describe a game as "masculine," I mean that it reflects social norms determining the lifestyles expected by men, lifestyles whose ideal forms are realized through simulation. As Yuhsuke Koyama describes, JRPGs have a narrative style that is "split into two distinct types," a "narrative RPG" that relies on a "single narrative path" and "the enjoyment that players get from conversing with other characters," and the "dungeon-crawler," where players conquer dangerous dungeons (Koyama, 2022, p. 24). As my analysis will show, early games in the *Atelier* series explicitly rejected the linear storyline, character growth, and dungeon exploration standard in the genre, replacing it instead with a stubborn, self-managed femininity who grows through the development of her capital rather than her character. To explain these changes, I have drawn from the significant body of literature on Japanese women's games (Andlauer, 2018; Kim, 2009) and women's youth culture (for instance, Dollase, 2019; Yoda, 2017) to aid my analysis. Though the *Atelier* series never targeted an exclusively female audience, its initial success among female players reflected a conscious rejection of masculine cultural norms on the part of its developers that was inseparable from the rejection of the procedural genre of the standard RPG.

The sections in this paper examine *Marie*, *Rorona*, and *Ryza* in succession, paying particular attention to how surface-level discourse and procedural rhetoric intertwine within each work, and how *Ryza* differs substantially from its two predecessors. These three games are chosen because they are important turning points within the series: if *Marie* began the series, *Rorona* and *Ryza* reversed long periods of declining sales.¹ This comparative study of development, rather than a focus on a single game, lets one draw out nuanced differences between individual works that appear at first glance insignificant or nonexistent. An important subtheme in this paper is thus the changing function of *capitalism* and *temporality*

between successive works, most notably in the disappearance of finitude between *Atelier Rorona* and *Ryza*. This in turn coincides with important changes in how femininity is simulated, from a cute, antisocial manager to an erotic, outgoing adventurer who nevertheless preserves a maternal femininity. The Conclusion summarizes the results.

***Atelier Marie* (1997): Capitalism and domesticity**

Atelier Marie (Gust, 1997) was designed from the beginning to contrast with the masculine universe of traditional Japanese RPGs. Its "catch copy," used to advertise the game to buyers, was "I've already given up on saving the world" (@GustAtelierPR, 2020). The game would distinguish between the standard world-saving narrative typical of RPGs and the simulation of everyday life in *Atelier Marie*. Its opening sequence would drive this message home, introducing the player to the game with the following text:

There was a world where light and darkness, order and chaos, and swords and magic mixed together.

A world where legendary heroes and fin-de-siècle monsters fiercely grappled with each other...

Now, truly, the world's rise and fall are to be entrusted to them—the hands of the chosen ones.

However—it is fine to leave the responsibility for these heroic narratives to them.

For most of the people in the world, neither heroes nor monsters have any importance. Because doing what they can themselves do, if they can live peacefully through today, Everyone will be satisfied with that... (Gust, 1997)

Atelier Marie mocks narratives about "chosen" heroes with the power to determine the fate of the universe, arguing that in this same universe they save, the majority of people only care about getting through with their everyday lives. Saving the world is not a moral responsibility for *Marie's* protagonist, but rather a decision that those who want to take the "responsibility" can bear. How directly the desire to create an anti-RPG affected Gust's decision to use a female protagonist is unclear. Perhaps a female character was chosen because the rejection of masculine adventuring was rendered most compelling through a contrast with feminine domesticity. When writing about *Angelique* (Ruby Party, 1994), an influential Japanese women's game influenced by the styles of shōjo (young women's) manga, Hyeshin Kim quotes developers as saying that "Boys may be happy enough with saving the world (as in typical video games). But we thought that girls couldn't care less about a planet or two as long as they could find true love" (Kim, 2009, p. 173). This account certainly matches the case with *Marie*. Though, much to the disappointment of some female fans (Mizusawa, n.d.),

no romance takes place in *Atelier Marie*, *Marie* repeats this same disinterest in domination and conquest that clearly has substantial purchase among female gamers.

Like *Angelique*, *Atelier Marie* was also influenced by shōjo manga and targeted female players. According to Yoshiike Shin'ichi, who came up with *Marie*'s concept and led its development from 1996 to 1997, at the time, shōjo manga had become more popular, even among male audiences. With the release of the Playstation, furthermore, the number of female players rose. A female protagonist would help the game appeal to women in addition to men (Romanshingu Saga, 2017). This decision was also influenced by Yoshiike's personal interest in children's literature, and Yoshiike explicitly notes that the "base" for *Atelier Marie* was the children's novel *Anne of Green Gables*, an influential story in twentieth-century Japanese female youth culture (Uchiyama, 2014). The relationship between Marie and Schia, the two leading characters in *Atelier Marie*, for instance, was influenced by the friendship between Anne and Diana within *Anne of Green Gables* (Yamoto, 2018). This wager proved successful. Not only was the game an unexpected commercial success that spawned annual sequels that continue until today, but Yoshiike estimates that half of the game's playerbase was female (Romanshingu Saga, 2017).

Unlike a RPG, the story in *Atelier Marie* is threadbare. The protagonist Marie is a student at an alchemy school at risk of not graduating because of her low grades. Her professor Ingrid lends her a workshop and challenges her to synthesize one high-level object from alchemy within five years. The story evolves in real time, as actions like traveling to gather materials and crafting objects require investments of different lengths of time depending on the distance of the site and the complexity of the object. After five years, Ingrid examines Marie's progress, and the story's ending differs depending on how successful Marie has been as an alchemist: whether she has cured Schia's illness, reached Level 50, completed her encyclopedia of items, or crafted the Philosopher's Stone (Sutajio jikkenshitsu & Nobuoka, 1997). There is even an ending achievable if Marie saves Salburg by defeating a demon lord at the highest floor of the dungeon Erfolg Tower, thereby ironically rejecting *Marie*'s rejection of the RPG. In this ending, when Ingrid reviews Marie's results at the end of her fifth year, she advises Marie that her decision to study alchemy may have been a mistake given her skill as an adventurer (Gust, 1997). If the player identifies with Marie, she is nevertheless not taken along on Marie's adventure, but rather can choose how she develops her own story.

On the other hand, unlike women's games like *Angelique*, which are framed by the player's evolving relationships with male love interests, characters in *Marie* are undeveloped

and interpersonal relationships largely nonexistent. Though the game introduces a substantial set of adventurers that Marie can hire to accompany her on gathering excursions, characters other than Schia have limited interactions with Marie. Ruven, for instance, is the first adventurer Marie meets, but has only two possible events: one where he introduces himself, and a second where he leaves the party permanently (Sutajio jikkenshitsu & Nobuoka, 1997). Character events furthermore do not take place unless certain hidden conditions are met, such that casual players will miss many if not most possible events for their ignorance of the required flags needed to activate them.



Figure 1: Marie in her atelier.

The heart and origin of the *Atelier* series is neither story nor character, but rather its alchemy mechanic, also known as "synthesis" (*chōgō*). In simple terms, alchemy involves magically transforming objects from the game-world into other objects the protagonist needs to progress in the story. Alchemy is like cooking according to a recipe. Each final product requires preparing a list of ingredients, and these ingredients can be obtained through purchase from a store, gathering from the wild, or synthesis from other items through alchemy. The concrete methods of alchemy as well as the technique's complexity and relative importance differ from game to game. In interviews given decades later, Yoshiike, who brought the idea to Gust, explains that as an RPG gamer, he was the type of player who tended to never use consumable items. Realizing this tendency, Yoshiike thought that the very collection of items could be fun for players, explaining that "I wanted users to collect items and smirk (*niyaniya suru*)."¹ Within *Atelier*, players would enjoy collecting items and

filling up the data within their encyclopedias (*zukan*), and, inversely, feel bothered if a gap within this same encyclopedia remained unfilled (Yamoto, 2018).

The driving motor of gameplay in *Atelier Marie* is neither heroism nor romance, but rather the management of time and resources. Yoshiike describes that in his mind, *Atelier Marie* was a "time attack" game similar to shooting games where within a limited amount of time, the player aims for a high score. To encourage this high score, Gust prepared different endings based on the player's results. Yoshiike wanted players to compete to see how good of an ending they could achieve within the time frame (Romanshingu Saga, 2017). To achieve the best possible ending, the player needs to be extremely strategic; inversely, achieving a normal ending is easy, and the game can be potentially cleared, without cheats, in less than ten minutes (Osha, 2020). To improve one's success in the game, the principal resources to be managed are time and money. All actions in the game require time, including synthesizing concoctions, visiting sites to gather items, and sleeping to recover depleted health and mana. Because some events only take place on specified dates, the ambitious player must take care to not be busy synthesizing or exploring if she wants to benefit from the rare bonuses and flags given by these events.

The other major resource is money, which Marie can invest in hiring adventurers, hiring fairies, and buying equipment and ingredients in Salburg. Adventurers who Marie hires protect her from the occasional enemies that threaten her gathering trips. Gathering sites farther from Salburg are more dangerous, and stronger adventurers are more expensive. Marie herself is a weak fighter, useful primarily for supporting her hired adventurers with items. Defeating strong enemies, then, is principally an issue of items and financial resources rather than character level. Fairies are employees in Marie's atelier that Marie can hire after clearing a certain point in the game. In exchange for a regular salary that differs depending on the efficiency of their labor, Marie can order these fairies to collect material from gathering sites or synthesize items in her stead. Lastly, Marie can use money to buy various things in Salburg. Buying equipment from the weapons shop strengthens her adventuring party, while buying ingredients from the academy shop saves her the time lost searching for them in the wild. Marie can also buy various alchemical equipment and reference books from the academy shop. Books teach her new recipes, whereas equipment raises her likelihood of successful synthesis and are necessary for certain concoctions. Marie can also purchase rumors from the adventurer's guild, the Hishōtei, which potentially raises event flags that make new gathering locations available. The principal ways to make money, on the other hand, are selling synthesized goods to the academy shop and completing quests from the

Hishōtei. As these quests are always requests for Marie to supply items, remaining financially solvent is closely intertwined with crafting the correct items. Running out of money, inversely, means that Marie can no longer hire guardians to help her procure rare items and fairies to work in her stead.

As the importance of time and money suggests, capitalist accumulation is an important undertone within *Marie*. The parallels are obvious. To borrow Marxist terminology, Marie divides her productive capital between her fixed capital invested in alchemy equipment and her more important circulating capital, divided in turn between the variable capital used to purchase the labor-time of fairies and capital invested in other expendable means of production, particularly ingredients (Marx, 1992, pp. 244-245). The atelier is a factory where Marie and her fairies realize the circuit of capital, turning their money capital into commodity capital, adding value to the commodity through the means of production and labor, and reselling this value-added commodity, ideally for greater money-capital than originally invested (Marx, 1992, pp. 132-133).

The products that Marie creates for sale on the market take on fetishized commodity-forms, such that the idealized processed object, rather than the labor and intention processed in its creation, takes on the semblance of objectivity, "a thing which transcends sensuousness" that presumes "the equal objectivity of the products of labour" (Marx, 1990, pp. 164-165). Gathering trips where Marie and her fairies collect ingredients also turn pure objects into commodities. When gathering, Marie "separates" plants and other resources "from immediate connection with their environment" by transforming them into raw material that can be later sold and synthesized (Marx, 1990, pp. 284-285). Like work in the atelier, Marie not only removes resources from the wild, but also adds value to them through her labor-time. Because the product rather than the quality of the labor is valued, furthermore, Marie is encouraged to speed up production through an endless drive to maximize her time. As Marx writes in his *Grundrisse*, "capital itself is the contradiction," for even as the worker seeks to minimize the ratio between necessary and surplus labor time, that is, labor spent on reproduction versus labor creating surplus value, surplus labor can only exist as a surplus of necessary labor (Marx, 1993, p. 543). Similarly, the player of *Atelier Marie* never has enough labor-time, which is principally valued not in itself but for the commodities it produces, and which must be rationalized to maximize the relative labor time spent adding objective value.

Commodity fetishism is also, however, the point at which Marie most significantly differs from capitalist production. Where for the capitalist, the reification of objects is tangentially necessary for greater accumulation, for Marie, the collection of as many different

reified objects as possible is its own ambition, similar to a medieval scholar compiling an encyclopedia of all objects in the world. The player is awarded for completing an encyclopedia of a hundred items and not for amassing wealth, even if playing the wealth game is necessary to fill one's encyclopedia. If the capitalist transforms money into commodity and then back (M-C-M'), *Atelier Marie* transforms commodities into money, which is used to produce more commodities (C-M-C'). The enjoyment of *Atelier Marie* is found not the abstract desires of capital accumulation, but rather the discovery and possession of seemingly concrete objects through buying alchemy books, synthesis, or gathering.

The collection of objects is not contradictory to the accumulation of capital, however. The player is encouraged to spend the majority of *Atelier Marie* making money by efficiently fulfilling orders from the Hishōtei and selling synthesized goods to the academy bookstore to fund Marie's collecting quest. The irony within *Marie* is that though Marie is presented as self-employed and therefore un-alienated, the objects she creates embody no artistry, instead being mutually substitutable commodities. The products of Marie's atelier have an illusory concreteness providing a sense of finality and presence, matching the image of the everyday laborer working on practical, mundane trades. All objects that Marie collects are commodities, and the world in *Marie* appears as a list of reified objects that can be gathered, synthesized, and sold. The young girl's discovery of this world through alchemy, in turn, also slips into a misrecognition of the object's commodity form with the object as produced by human labor.

This triangulation between a rejection of the heroic RPG, commodity fetishism, and young female subjectivity forms a curious, often unconscious core to *Atelier Marie* and later *Atelier* games. Everyday life, in opposition to heroic adventuring, is identified with feminine domesticity. Domestic life, in turn, is equated with the practice of alchemy, which concretely involves the accumulation of different commodities. The effective accumulation of commodities requires efficient management of one's atelier, which involves maximizing one's economic output within a limited time frame. This economic dimension is in turn overlaid with an aspect of gender liberation: the player follows Marie as the young girl grows from an utter novice to an alchemist with talents exceeding even her teachers, from a frail maiden needing the protection of adventurers to a powerful warrior defeating demon lords with explosives and special attacks. Indeed, perhaps in opposition to the lower status women have in society, Marie's personality is brusque and humorously disrespectful towards social norms. This bluntness is particularly evident when, throughout the story, Schia repeatedly visits

Marie to invite her to different social events. In one scene, for instance, Schia invites Marie to attend the Flea Market, and Marie replies as follows:

MARIE: Eh? The Flea Market, isn't that that thing where suspicious guys get together and give bargain sales of suspicious items?

SCHIA: Marie... You're not completely wrong, but a lot of prejudice has entered [your statement]...

MARIE: It doesn't matter, that [whether I am prejudiced]. (Gust, 1997)

The exchange that occurs when Schia invites Marie to the summer festival is similar:

MARIE: Eh, even if people call it the summer festival, isn't it only that everyone just chats in the plaza? It's not a festival.

SCHIA: W-well, if you put it that way that may be so... (Gust, 1997)

In these scenes, Marie expresses disinterest in socialization and suspicion towards social events. She would rather stay at home brewing her cauldron than engaging with the outside world. The domestic environment of her atelier, where the player spends most of the game, therefore becomes for the young woman a space of liberation, where she can mind her own business and focus on her job as an alchemist. This dual function of the atelier as a site of feminine freedom and a factory for capital accumulation is the conservative underside of *Atelier Marie*, where the excuse of becoming a better alchemist encourages the player to collect more stuff, discover virgin lands for exploitation, and be strategic about where she spends her time and money. The atelier is a factory and alchemy is the production process; if alchemy promises to liberate weak, unskilled women like Marie, its mechanic implies that personal growth involves the correct management of private capital for ostensibly non-capitalist ends. Marie's unsociable nature becomes even endearing, and indeed, it is what keeps her in the workshop's interior, domestic space.

***Atelier Rorona* (2009): A turning point**

The *Atelier* series develops through successive subseries, each including two to four games. Games within the same subseries inherit the same world universe and some characters, though the protagonist in each game usually changes. The development of a new subseries usually responds to declining sales in the previous one and involves some strategy to win back players. In the three subseries over the decade following *Marie*, as *Atelier*'s sales saw a gradual decline, Gust tried to win back players by incorporating more elements of traditional RPGs. The five games composing the *Atelier Iris* (2004-2006) and *Mana Khemia* (2007-

2008) subseries included male protagonists in heroic, linear storylines. Sales did not improve significantly, however, until the release of *Atelier Rorona: The Alchemist of Arland* (Gust, 2009), the first game in the *Arland* subseries (Ky, 2012). A decade later, Hosoi Junzō, the current producer of the *Atelier* series, still describes *Rorona* as the most important "turning point" in the series's history (Yamoto, 2018).

According to Okamura Yoshito, who directed *Rorona*, the game was thematized as a "return to origins" (*genten kaiki*) (Ky, 2012). Indeed, the patterns between *Rorona* and *Marie* are apparent. *Rorona*'s narrative is also bare: the eponymous protagonist is the disciple of Astrid, a talented alchemist who nevertheless slacks off and teaches Rorona nothing. The kingdom of Arland, where Astrid and Rorona live, threatens to shut down the atelier unless they can prove its utility over the span of three years. Astrid passes on to Rorona the atelier along with the responsibility of fulfilling the government's demands. The game occurs during this three-year period, during which the government will request that Rorona accomplish twelve successive orders, each proclaimed in three-month intervals. All but one of these orders involve the provision of specified items (Dengeki purēsutēshon, 2009, p. 210). To avoid a bad end, Rorona needs only accomplish the bare minimum required by each order, but to achieve better endings, she must deliver beyond what is requested while also raising her public reputation by completing side-quests. The story aside from the government's intermittent requests is relatively limited, and the player is free to decide how to spend their time crafting and exploring.

Though achieving *Rorona*'s best endings no longer requires the completion of Rorona's encyclopedia, perhaps because of the exponential number of new items, the production and sale of items remains central to the game. Both royal requests and public quests generally involve provisioning some gathered or synthesized item, for which Rorona must often adventure in the nearby wilderness. On her gathering trips, Rorona requires the protection of adventurers, as she has significantly lower stats than all other playable characters with the exception of her friend Cudelia (Dengeki purēsutēshon, 2009, pp. 105-111). Following Marie, Rorona herself is most effective in battle by using offensive and defensive items she synthesizes, and which no other character can use. More distant gathering sites are more dangerous and take longer to reach, but promise rarer items; as more powerful adventurers cost more, being better-protected requires more money for the trip. Gathering trips are also limited by Rorona's available basket space and the health of her party, as defeat means wasted time and lost items. Though alchemy equipment (fixed capital) other than reference books have disappeared, Marie's fairies (variable capital) are replaced by Hom, an

unpaid homunculus who helps Marie with gathering and synthesizing. In addition to the primary endings, *Rorona* also has an "adventurer ending" where Rorona gives up on alchemy to become an adventurer; a "wealthy ending" if Rorona collects more than one million Cole, the in-game currency; and a "pie ending" if Rorona synthesizes all of the game's pies. Like in *Marie*, the player of *Rorona* is encouraged to use her time and wealth economically to pursue a variety of non-economic goals that would unlock the desired conclusion.



Figure 2: Rorona crafting in her atelier.

Rorona's character is also similar to Marie in her ignorance towards social norms. Rorona never blames Astrid, for instance, for being a useless teacher and shoving responsibilities upon her. Other gags include Rorona's inability to understand Esty's desire to find a husband and Rorona's obliviousness to Tantris's flirting. Like Marie, Rorona's failure to concord with society contrasts with her increasing social influence and power, in turn derived from her cumulative experience in her atelier. The workshop, and Rorona's production within it, thereby becomes a site for liberation without socialization, where she can achieve freedom and influence by producing what she and those around her need. As is the case with Marie, the player never has a sense that Rorona *matures* through her experience.

Rorona's principal antagonist is Meredith, an important minister in Arland who wants to shut down Rorona's atelier to turn the area into a factory zone. As Marx writes, capitalist

production relies on the "very rapid centralization of capital" that has "their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself" (Marx, 1990, p. 940). In her fight against Meredith, Rorona succeeds in protecting her private property from expropriation, critiquing anonymous capitalism by contrasting it with Rorona's own personalized, human production. Rorona's successful completion of the government's orders shows her capacity to overturn prejudices about alchemy being socially useless while also transforming Rorona from a weak novice to a powerful master, just like what occurs to Marie. As in *Marie*, the proper management of the domestic space of the atelier is equated to the character's independent liberation from her initial apprenticeship. Though Rorona's personalized production is explicitly placed in opposition with Meredith's anonymous capitalism, the player is encouraged to manage time as would a capitalist to ensure the best and most items produced within the minimum amount of time.

While borrowing significantly from *Marie*, *Rorona* also hinted at future developments in the series. Though alchemy remains largely identical to *Marie*, for example, it is complicated by the addition of differentiable attributes to specific items. Where each commodity in *Marie* is identical, continuing a trend developed in prior subseries, items in *Rorona* have "quality" and "special effects" attributes that substantially alter its strength. Higher-quality weapons and equipment are stronger in battle, and its difference from a low-quality object can be like night and day. For gathered items, quality and effect are determined at random, whereas for synthesized items, they are determined by the ingredients used to create them. To ensure that her final items are useful, then, the player is incentivized to carefully select the items they gather and synthesize for the best possible properties. As items became increasingly complex in later games, alchemy's cornerstone would shift from efficiently producing commodities for collection and sale to producing the ideal forms of the same commodity for use in battle. *Rorona* also fleshes out the storylines of minor characters and introduces potential character endings based on Rorona's friendship levels with them. Though Okamura described this distastefully as a "game that sells characters" (Ky, 2012), characters rather than alchemy would progressively become the series's main attraction. Alchemy gradually becomes not *Atelier*'s selling-point, but rather a challenging side-game necessary to advance character stories and the main plot.

***Atelier Ryza* (2019): Femininity and time**

Like *Rorona*, *Atelier Ryza: Ever Darkness & The Secret Hideout* (Gust, 2019) reversed a gradual trend in declining sales. The two games immediately preceding *Ryza* sold poorly,

with *Atelier Lydie & Suelle* (2017) selling only 37,000 copies in its first week (Dengeki onrain, 2017) and *Atelier Lulua* (2019) selling roughly 49,000 copies in total (Gēmu uriage teiten kansoku, n.d.). In contrast, *Ryza* sold over 500,000 copies worldwide within its first year, becoming by far the most popular game to date (Yokoyama, 2020). *Ryza* headed the most recent "Secret" subseries and features as the protagonist Ryza, a girl from rural Kurken Island. While out adventuring with her friends one day, Ryza encounters the alchemist Empel, who welcomes her as a disciple. Using her newly developed alchemical skills, Ryza and her allies eventually stop an impending invasion by otherworldly creatures called Philuscha, protecting their everyday lives on Kurken Island. At the story's end, Ryza's allies all leave Kurken Island, having discovered new goals through the adventure, whereas Ryza remains on the island as the local alchemist. The developers at Gust consciously envisioned *Ryza* to be a wholesale change, "reconsidering all points that were obvious until now" to create something "completely new" (TOKEN, 2019). This included changing from turn-based to real-time battles and creating an alchemy system based more on intuition than puzzles, like in the preceding *Mysterious* subseries (Madoka, 2022). Fans, in turn, praise the game for the eroticism of Ryza's thighs, the quality storyline, and how its simplicity welcomed new players.

The most important change, however, is the protagonist's role. *Ryza* spawned two same-character sequels, *Ryza 2* (2020) and *Ryza 3* (2023), a first for the series. Though Gust produced these sequels partly because of *Ryza*'s success, the possibility for sequels had been planned into *Ryza*'s original conception. In an interview, Hosoi explains that subseries sequels tended to sell more poorly than the original, a phenomenon that staff at Gust saw as inevitable. Hosoi hypothesized that the real reason for declining sales could have been, however, that users wanted to experience the continued growth of the same protagonist. Hosoi gives the example of *Harry Potter*, which satisfied a demand readers had of witnessing Harry's personal development (Henshū O, 2020). The idea of growth correspondingly plays a central role in *Ryza*'s theme. Hosoi explains that "summer" and "youth" are the themes of the *Secret* subseries that *Ryza* forms. He compares this to a student's summer vacation, during which youth share secrets with each other and gain experiences by achieving some goal. The end of summer, in turn, signifies the end of youth (Hidenosuke, 2022). Embodying this bittersweet end of youth, *Ryza*'s catchphrase would be "bye bye Atelier," meaning that "if there are encounters, then there will also be farewells" (Otsuki, 2019). The story in *Ryza* concretizes these themes, and narrates the summer adventure of a group of young boys and girls. Though they mature through this adventure, they disperse in different directions at the

end to pursue the individual goals they have discovered in its process. The second and third games continue this pattern by narrating further steps in the characters' development, also during the period of summer.



Figure 3: Ryza crafting in her atelier.

Ryza differs from earlier protagonists in *Atelier* not only because the story emphasizes her personal growth, but also because of her personality. Where *Atelier* protagonists tend to be cutesy and childish, Ryza acts aggressive and bossy. As Hosoi describes, in contrast to the standard *Atelier* heroine, Ryza was created with the intent of designing a "healthy countryside girl" (Taori, 2022). Though rustic femininity is hardly new to the *Atelier* series (Marie also came from the countryside), the notion of "healthy" includes erotic implications not found in preceding games. Ryza wears hotpants rather than the standard skirt, giving viewers a pronounced view of her thick thighs. Her tight-fitting camisole exposes her bellybutton and offers a clear view of her large chest, which visibly swings about when she runs. Her personality also contrasts with the generally subdued, passive attitudes of other protagonists. A tomboy, Ryza's two closest friends are men, and the game's first scene involves Ryza dragging these two unwilling accomplices on an adventure in a nearby forest. Though the daughter of a farmer, Ryza finds agricultural work boring and desires to make her everyday life exciting through adventure. Ryza therefore identifies with both the domestic space of the atelier and the masculine space of the wilderness in a way that Rorona and Marie do not.

Ryza's erotic vitality signifies her femininity, but also the violent power that lets her step into the traditionally masculine space of adventure. In contrast to the socially awkward, domestic lives of Marie and Rorona, Ryza is vivacious and outgoing.

If *Atelier Marie* was a workshop management simulator with a rudimentary storyline attached, *Ryza* is a standard RPG with an alchemy gimmick. Where previous protagonists mature in their atelier, Ryza matures while out on adventure, whereas time spent in the workshop is only preparatory for the real adventure to be had in the outside world. *Ryza*'s procedural rules reflect this difference. The game encapsulates recent trends in the *Atelier* series towards the abolishment of multiple endings, normal after *Atelier Sophie* (2015), and the abandonment of time limitations, standard after *Atelier Shallie* (2014). With only a single ending and endless time available to reach it, players have no reason to organize their time to achieve desired goals. They can now spend as much time as they wish gathering ingredients, synthesizing, and exploring. Explaining this trend, in an interview, Hosoi describes the current "taste" of *Atelier* as "I think we should also do our best tomorrow" (*ashita mo ganbarō ka na*), adding that

In today's world, isn't it that there are lots of things that cause stress? Whether it's working or studying, the regulations get stronger and stronger, and even though the regulations are supposed to make it easier for us, we somehow feel cramped. Under such circumstances, I don't want [players] to feel cramped even within the game. (Romanshingu Saga, 2017)

Without time restrictions, players in *Ryza* can challenge bosses frequently without incurring lost time in case of defeat. They also no longer need to worry about running low on health or basket space when gathering, for a return to the safety of one's atelier incurs no penalties. If they discover they lack a necessary ingredient when synthesizing, they can immediately head out to gather this object without considering whether this trip is worthwhile. Money is also less of a problem: without time, money cannot be invested to save time, just as time need not be invested to make money. One's wallet is no longer necessary to hire adventurers, anyhow, as party members are no longer mercenaries, but unpaid friends.

In his *This Life*, Martin Hägglund argues that Marx distinguishes between capitalist measures of value that valorize "how much work we have done or have to do" from socialist measures of value that ask "how much disposable time we have to pursue and explore what matters to us" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 257). The possibility of measuring disposable time, furthermore, relies on an initial finitude in which "the question of what I ought to do with my life...presupposes that I understand my time to be finite" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 5). If the

political philosophy for which Hägglund argues is finite and socialist, the game systems in *Atelier Marie* and *Atelier Rorona* are finite but capitalist, whereas the game system in *Atelier Ryza* is infinite but socialist. The player in *Atelier Marie*, limited by finite time, always asks herself what she ought to achieve with it; she concludes, in turn, that the measure of success is "how much work [she has] done," materialized in the form of commodities. The player in *Atelier Ryza*, in contrast, has the possibility to "pursue and explore what matters," but only because she has unrealistically infinite time. Indeed, *Ryza's* non-temporality matches Hosoi's desire for recent *Atelier* games to not "feel cramped even within the game." The player of *Ryza* removes precisely the temporal restrictions felt by players of *Marie* and *Rorona*, yet this element of finitude was precisely that which mediated the player's identification with the protagonist managing her atelier. Though the player feels pleasure as *Ryza* learns new recipes and synthesizes increasingly complex objects, the player no longer feels satisfaction as she gradually improves her ability to manage her time. The metric for time becomes not the player's management, but the speed through which she advances the linear storyline.

Continuing a trend from *Rorona*, intellectual decision-making previously used on time-management is now used synthesizing the perfect items. Where synthesis in *Rorona* required the player to consider quality and attributes when choosing items to synthesize, *Ryza* additionally requires the player to complete a puzzle in which the best completion requires not only choosing which ingredients, but *where* to place them on a puzzle-board. Gathering ingredients, too, becomes more complicated, as unlike *Rorona*, *Ryza* synthesizes different gathering tools like axes and hammers to gather different types of ingredients on the field. Like in previous games, improving one's alchemy is necessary to advance the game, especially as bosses cannot be defeated without synthesizing strong equipment and items. The collection and creation of these items, furthermore, can be just as if obsessive as in previous games, if not more. Unlike *Rorona* and *Marie*, however, performing alchemy is not only unrewarded by any end sequence, but also useful principally to advance the main story, which follows the pattern of standard RPGs. Even if *Ryza* also spends much time synthesizing at home, the story narrates not her domesticity, but the summer adventures of her growth from child to adult. This growth involves adventures in the dangerous outside, for which periods in the atelier serve only as preparatory phases for the next great adventure.

If Gust developed *Atelier Marie* as a feminine game by rejecting the narratives and game rules in standard RPGs, *Atelier Ryza* follows the rules of a masculine RPG while featuring a female protagonist. Indeed, though *Ryza* is organized around adventuring in a way absent from the previous games, *Ryza's* femininity is never in doubt. Her fight against the

Philuscha culminates in the defense of the everyday lives of the same village that bored her at the story's beginning, and at the story's end, Ryza is the only character who chooses not to leave it. Ryza fights a protective battle, disinterested in power and fame, and culminates as a motherly representative of the hometown from which her friends all depart, and from which she awaits their return. *Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy* (2020) further underlines Ryza's maternal femininity, as the "secret fairy" Fi was incorporated so that players could feel Ryza's "motherly" aspects as she fights to protect her fairy child (Henshū O, 2020). On the surface, as a symbol of the maternal hometown, Ryza appears to represent the same feminine domesticity as Marie and Rorona. In terms of game mechanics, however, if this domesticity is represented in *Ryza* in the story narrative, *Ryza* does not *simulate* it in the way as *Marie*. Domesticity is inscribed within the very rules that make *Atelier Marie* playable, and the proper simulation of household management is critical to the player's success in a way absent in *Ryza*. If *Ryza* as a game is discursively feminine, *Marie* and *Rorona* are procedurally so.

Conclusion

Within the *Atelier* series, there is a subtle but significant gap between recent games like *Atelier Ryza* and older games like *Atelier Rorona* and *Marie*. Older games simulate operating an atelier, where achieving a high score involve a race against time. The game's endings correspondingly reward the player according to how efficiently they have achieved the goals laid out for her. Without this timed aspect in later games, in contrast, the focus shifts from workshop-management to adventure, specifically, a feminine adventure focused around the defense of everyday life and the discovery of one's identity. This differs from earlier games like *Rorona*, where the protagonist remains an innocent, nonviolent airhead from start to end. If *Marie* and *Rorona* are games about opening a good atelier, and where the failure to accomplish this signifies a bad end, *Ryza* is a game where Ryza is tasked with saving her community from otherworldly monsters, and where a bad end is quite literally the destruction of her hometown. If Ryza can be distinguished as a feminine character just like Marie and Rorona, her femininity is nevertheless combined with an aggressive masculinity entirely absent in the prior two games.

The different procedural rules between these game therefore have gendered implications. A good player of *Marie* and *Rorona* knows how to manage their time, whereas a good player in *Ryza* knows how to craft the strongest items to clear its bosses. Character development and even socialization are therefore of secondary importance in the former

games. Marie and Rorona's maturation are simply byproducts of their atelier's growth rather than their personality change. The very living of their everyday life proves to be a criticism of the gendered, masculine adventure of the standard RPG. *Ryza*, in contrast, both incorporates this masculine adventure and constructs its goals through the protagonist's personal growth. If *Ryza* is feminine, it is not through her management of everyday life, but rather through the defeat of enemies with a team of allies, with the caveat that her growth must never contradict with her being a woman with "motherly instincts" and an attachment to her hometown. Stripped of its management aspect, alchemy in *Ryza* becomes a frustrating puzzle game useful only to progress the main story.

Using the case of the *Atelier* series, this paper has argued that not only the characters and narrative, but also the procedural rhetoric in games is implicitly gendered. The rhetoric in a game informs the player of what actions are valuable and what goals are reasonable. Through comparisons between different games and different series, it is possible to go beyond surface representation and use gender as a category of analysis to also critique the aesthetic experience of games, and raise topics for potential further study such as the relationship between gender, gaming, and capitalism.

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ⁱ Limited official data exists regarding game sales, and the data that does exist cannot fully account for international sales and sales between different consoles. Unofficial, fan-compiled records of historical sales, however, show similar trends in spite of recording different exact numbers and match public comments given by Gust's leaders. Consult @obenkyounuma. 21 July 2020. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/obenkyounuma/status/1285590741067067393>