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Narrative Possibilities in Mystery BL Games

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Abstract: This article seeks to analyze the narrative possibilities offered by Visual Novels in relation to horror-mystery narratives by analyzing *PigeonBlood* (PIL/SLASHXXX, 2014), a Boys' Love game with horror-mystery elements. The first part presents the connection between game systems and interactive narratives, focusing mainly on the inner system of the choice-based gameplay that rule most Visual Novels, trying to further understand what makes it engaging. The second part analyzes the use of these systems to structure horror-mystery narratives by analyzing the game *PigeonBlood* and its approach to the horror-mystery genre elements, such as scattering valuable hints and information thorough the different routes, using the branching narratives to offer crude and oftentimes gruesome endings as a way of increasing fear and suspense, and utilizing a main character that actively refuses to resolve the mysteries, leaving plenty of unanswered questions for the player to ponder upon.

From their early beginnings, visual novels have been strongly connected to mystery and horror themes. Sound Novels, widely understood as integral precursors of the genre, find their origins in mystery/horror narratives such as Chunsoft's *Otogiriso* (1992) and *Kamaitachi no Yoru* (1994) (Morooka 2018, 112-113), not to mention the active effort to translate mystery works, such as Jiro Akagawa's novels, to the medium across the 90's (Yahiro 2005, 215). Even now, the wider genre of text-based Adventure Games popularized by mainstream franchises like *Ace Attorney* (Capcom, 2001) and *Danganronpa* (Spike, 2010) keep the aesthetics and narrative elements of murder-mysteries while expanding on gamified and anime-like elements.

As such, it is no surprise that many works in the specific sub-genre of Visual Novels revolve around mystery and horror elements, such as *Kara no Shoujo* (Innocent Grey, 2008) and *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni* (07 expansion, 2002).

In fact, the smaller sub-market of female-oriented BL games¹ includes a wide variety of both mystery and horror themed works, with some of the most highly-regarded and popular stories falling in these genres². In this article I would like to explore the narrative possibilities offered by the medium of visual novels to create engaging, suspenseful narratives in BL works by analyzing the 2014 game *PigeonBlood* by BL game brand PIL/SLASHXXX.

1. Interactive narratives and game systems

The idea of interactive fiction is, of course, not exclusive to the realm of videogames, or even computers. We can see it in *Choose your Own Adventure* books, live radio and tv programs, and even serialized comics allowing audiences to vote for their desired outcome³.

Still, the possibilities offered by the digital medium cannot be overstated, as they have allowed for even more intricate attempts. One of such, hyperlink fiction and its nonlinear yet interwoven fragments, which the reader is prompted to piece together and give meaning to (Chaouli 2005, 603).

As divisive as it often appears in academic discussions, many videogames also attempt to be interactive narratives, even if the desired ‘interactivity’ might differ from game to game. Adventure games such as *Ace Attorney* and *Danganronpa*, for example, increase player engagement by offering interactivity in the way of point-and-click sequences or (somewhat) free-roaming spaces, following the exploration and quest resolution style popularized by the early works of the genre (Jiang 2019, 37). However, they have the downside of constraining the player to a single linear path; their heavy text-based approach, as well as the intricate, often interconnected narratives being woven through the multiple cases presented in each game, complicating the inclusion of branching paths or alternative endings. As such, if you fail to prove your client’s innocence in *Ace Attorney*, or to reveal the culprit on a *Danganronpa* trial, the game will simply send you to a generic game over.

On the other hand, narrative-heavy Visual Novels offer no free-rom sections or mini-games to engage the player; their ‘low-interactivity’ gameplay loop often described as mindlessly clicking forward to advance text, and occasionally picking between a set of predetermined choices (Azuma 2007, 199). However, the few choices that do appear have the impact of significantly altering the story. A number of diverging paths and possible endings, all with a certain level of plot-relevance, bringing them closer to hyperlink fictions or *Choose your Own Adventure* books. A different, but equally valuable attempt at ‘interactivity’.

Parting from Swink’s theory, interactivity would involve an exchange of information between player and computer, with the player inputting commands on a control and the computer displaying the results on a screen. However, as Matsunaga mentions in “The aesthetics of Videogames”, both the control and the screen are merely mediums for the player to communicate with the otherwise invisible ‘program’ of the game; the black box of code that parses the player’s actions and mobilizes the game in response (Matsunaga 2018, 52).

This ‘invisible program’, the ‘system’ beneath the game’s surface, is what the player truly interacts with, and in the case of Visual Novels, is what allows for the construction of complex and challenging narratives.

So, how does the player interact with the system of a Visual Novel?

As mentioned in Jiang’s 2019 article, while you may open a book on any given page at any given time, you may not do the same with Visual Novels. By virtue of the medium, a player may only move forward from the point they are at, often line by line by pressing a button. The only way to read a specific scene is to ‘find’ it in the complex flowchart of branching storylines that form the game by making the appropriate choices. The save/load system then, akin to a bookmark, allows the player to jump between previously played scenes in order to search and experience different possibilities.

As such, most of the game’s narrative becomes intrinsically locked behind a ‘condition’. This may be

as simple as reading in order from beginning to end, or as complex as making a very specific set of decisions across multiple hours of gameplay.

To better explain how this works, I would like to make a quick explanation of the types of choices that may appear in a Visual Novel, at least from the perspective of the game system. I consider there to be three system of choices in visual novels: 1) Instant choices, 2) Point choices and 3) Flag choices.

1) Instant choices are the most basic type. Like jumping to a specific page in a *Choose your Own Adventure* book, their consequences are immediate and independent of any other actions previously taken by the player. This might mean entering a branching line, or more often than not, a bad ending. Common in insta-death games and visual novels with minimal options.

2) Point choices manage an often-hidden set of variables, adding or subtracting ‘points’ from it. For example, a game with a likeability system might have a ‘0-100’ variable set for each love interest. Each choice may increase or decrease that number arbitrarily (say +20 for giving them a present or -10 for making an untasteful comment). In this type of system, getting a good ending often depends on the player’s ability to obtain enough points to clear a specific threshold (i.e. 70% for a good end, 90% for the best end).

While a point system allows for a rather sizeable number of small choices to be included in the game, the proportional impact of each choice may feel lesser. As Yahiro criticized in his book, it also risks breaking the illusion of the love interest being ‘a person’, by overly gamifying the interactions, turning the character into an attainable object (Yahiro 2005, 52).

3) Flag choices create ‘flags’ — an internal variable that allows the computer to parse whether a certain condition has been cleared (on) or not (off) (Yahiro 2005, 221). For example, a flag might activate (turn on) when the player first clears the game, making it so that on a second playthrough, a new choice or different scenario becomes accessible. Flag systems can become quite elaborate, with choices not only activating flags, but sometimes deactivating previous ones.

Now, even though some games make use of a single system, recent BL games often use a combination of them to create narratives that are often unpredictable to a first-time player.

This also allows for some content to be shared between routes or characters; a relevant advantage when considering the length of these games⁴.

BL games, for example, will often start with a ‘common route’ — a mostly linear section where the characters and story are introduced. Choices here will not result in immediate branching, but will add up to determine what route the player will follow later on.

In these cases, each choice will both offer the player an immediate reaction, short but evocative (i.e., a scoff from the character might indicate your choice was not appreciated), and alter the hidden variables that affect the game system (be it a flag or a set of points). With a sizeable number of scenes, routes and endings only accessible through a very specific sequence of choices, part of the entertainment value and interactivity of these games comes from figuring out the game system and strategizing around it.

While some games, given their extreme complexity, will offer in-game flowcharts detailing the branching points and the number of scenes in existence⁵, most BL games will leave players mostly in the dark — a completion percentage or a number of empty boxes in an ‘Extras’ screen (often available only after clearing at least one good ending) the single point of reference as to how much of the game has been unveiled and how much is left to discover.

Of course, maintaining engagement through this mostly-blind process of repetition can become difficult, which is why some games will include covert ‘hint’ systems and lock plot-relevant content (or

what they predict to be more desirable routes), behind conditions such as ‘clearing all other endings’. In fact, many games will encourage players to find every bad end and scattered scene by including a small reward, such as a special graphic for a full-completion.

2. The hidden structure of Visual Novels and mystery — Case Study *PigeonBlood*

2.1 Choices and narrative structure in *PigeonBlood*

As to further exemplify how Visual Novels, and specifically BL games, allow for complex narratives, I will analyze *PigeonBlood*, a mystery horror BL game published in 2014 by PIL/SLASHXXX.

As a game published after the standardization of the genre at the end of the 00s, it takes many of its elements; from pre-established top/bottom roles, to the emphasis on complex narratives marked by numerous bad endings (Nishihara 2019, 232-233). It is also part of a wider phenomenon of BL game brands being sister brands of male-oriented adult game brands, mainly inheriting their style and tone (Nishihara 2019, 229), with PIL/SLASHXXX being a sister brand of PIL, a brand known for their intensely erotic SM games.

Although *PigeonBlood* lacked in popularity and general reception in comparison to other mystery/horror games by the same brand, such as *Shingakko ~Noli me tangere~* (2012) and *Paradise* (2017), the game makes some interesting attempts towards a unique narrative experience, which I consider a valuable topic of analysis.

The story of *PigeonBlood* follows Kazuki Kirishima, the sheltered second child of a reasonably affluent family, who, after the sudden death of his last living relative — his older brother Mizuki —, finds himself saddled with the responsibilities of taking over.

Since he is required to perform the funeral rites for his brother during the next 49 days in an unusual tradition exclusive to his family, he is set to spend his summer vacations at the Kirishima country house — an occidental-style mansion deep in the mountains, isolated from the rest of the world — along with his butler and childhood friend Kaoru Izumi.

However, such plans are interrupted by the sudden arrival of four heirs from affluent families: Mimasaka, Tachibana, Yukinomiya and Mizusawa. Their holiday trip to a secluded onsen spot on the mountains cut short as their car suddenly (and inexplicably) stops working, forcing them to stop by the Kirishima state.

Led by Mimasaka, the group plans to violate Kazuki and record the activities to later use as blackmail. Although their attempt is thwarted half-way through by a chandelier almost falling over them (an incident that is presented as supernatural in nature), the video data remains. Embarrassed by the prospect of someone seeing it, Kazuki confronts them only to be tangled into a ‘game’ where he must either find the SD card (which Mimasaka hides somewhere in the manor), or kill one of the four intruders in the next month.

Concurrently, Kazuki’s dismissal of the funeral rites during the fateful night has also allowed for a monstrous creature, the ‘Oni of the Kirishima’, to be released from the secluded tomb — a series of gruesomely mangled corpses soon appearing around the state.

The game’s structure follows the aforementioned style of including a ‘common route’, made to introduce the story and relevant characters, before branching into each character’s route. This common route would appear to follow a point system, where enough positive interactions with a character allows

you to enter their route at the branching point, while a failure to do so will lead to the common bad ending “Crimson Lotus”. Afterwards, the routes appear to mainly use a combination of flags and instant choices to determine the different outcomes.

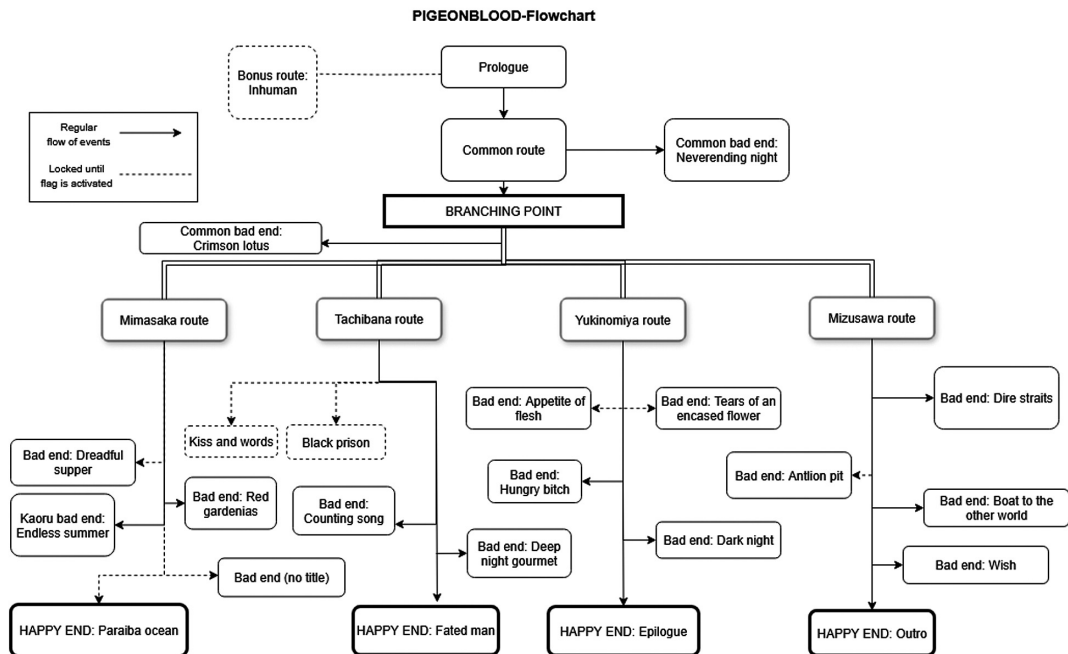


Figure 1. PigeonBlood — simplified structure flowchart, including only branching points and available endings (Names translated by author).

Take for example, Yukinomiya’s route. Early into his route, Kazuki and Yukinomiya enter a romantic relationship, which disrupts Mimasaka’s ‘murder game’. As retaliation, Mimasaka attempts to ‘take’ Kazuki from Yukinomiya by making him into his ‘mistress’. In this scene, the player is allowed to either accept or reject this proposal. While rejecting Mimasaka will invariably lead the player to progress forward — with Kazuki fleeing the scene and Mimasaka being attacked by the Oni—, accepting will lead into two different bad endings (“Appetite of flesh” or “Tears of an encased flower”) depending on the players previous choices.

In a similar fashion, the choice that leads to the bad ending “Antlion pit” on Mizusawa’s route is only accessible if the player chose to dismiss Mizusawa’s concerns about Kaoru’s odd behavior earlier.

Another example comes from Mimasaka’s bad ending, “Dreadful supper”, found by choosing ‘not to follow’ Mimasaka to the riverbank later in his route. However, if the player has made enough positive choices before then, the game will *force* Kazuki to follow Mimasaka regardless. This means the player has to actively pick mostly negative choices along this route and *then* pick ‘not to follow’ in order to get this ending. In this same route, failing to properly balance Kazuki’s relationship with both Mimasaka and Kaoru will inevitably lead to Kaoru’s bad ending “Endless Summer”, effectively locking the player from accessing Mimasaka’s good ending.

Something that might become apparent upon reading this, is how besides Mimasaka’s good ending,

most of the ‘difficult’ to obtain endings are all ‘bad endings’. Something worth considering, since *PigeonBlood*’s mechanics include an ‘Easy Mode’.

The Easy Mode can be toggled on and off from the main menu and will apply to any save files. On Easy Mode, each time a choice is presented, a pink butterfly will signal the choice needed to reach the ‘Happy Ending’. Considering the high content of gore, violence and other unsavory subjects touched upon on the bad endings, the concept of an Easy Mode makes sense — in fact, some special content, such as the Bonus and Tachibana’s alternative route, only require you to clear the ‘happy endings’ in order to be activated.

However, that makes it so the bad endings are the more difficult, and by consequence, interesting to obtain. In fact, there is even an unnamed bad ending (marked (no title) in Fig. 1) with no presence on the Extras menu, and no effect on the full-completion status of the game, which the player might find if they are curious enough to pick ‘Kaoru’ in the final choice of Mimasaka’s route.

2.2 A narrative of unsolved mysteries

On the previous section I focused mainly on the game system and how it affects the structure of the game. However, in this section I would like to explore how this relates to the game narrative, mainly from the perspective of it being a horror mystery.

PigeonBlood’s setting and story are strongly marked by classic mystery elements; an isolated manor in the mountains with a limited amount of people, the mysterious death of Kazuki’s brother, a murder game, an item that must be found between a time-limit and a series of gruesome corpses (first of animals, later of humans) being discovered in the mountain.

And yet, there is no ‘detective’ to resolve these mysteries. In fact, the main character, Kazuki, seems mostly uninterested when not reluctant to engage with them.

Take for example the location of the SD card. Although this small mystery should be Kazuki’s main concern as the source of his embarrassment and his one chance to avoid ‘killing someone’, he gives up on finding it relatively early on — his attention shifting to the mystery of the corpses and its relation to the Oni of the Kirishima. In fact, there is not a single route in which Kazuki is able to acquire the SD card on his own.

There are, however a number of ‘hints’ being offered in the different routes. Mizusawa is able to find it early on, which would indicate that the location is either in the visitors wing or on one of the shared spaces. Additionally, both Yukinomiya and Tachibana will mention Mimasaka’s likelihood to pick a place with some sort of symbolic meaning; possibly something related to incest as the insinuations of an unsavory relationship between Kazuki and Mizuki seemed to have been particularly irritating to him early on. Still, Kazuki never truly capitalizes on any of these hints, the issue being resolved in most routes by him either receiving the card, or deciding he no longer needs it.

In the same line, Mizuki’s sudden death, along with what seems to be some unsavory sides of him, are hinted at as points of interest across the whole game. The constant questioning of whether he truly died of a heart attack, a fragmented childhood dream where Kazuki follows Mizuki into the forest just to see ‘something horrifying’, and a photo album in Mizuki’s room, full of pictures of Kazuki, all violently scratched up by what appears to be impossibly sharp nails, are some examples. And yet, Kazuki’s strong idolization of his brother makes it so he adamantly refuses to give these oddities any further thought.

The same can be said of Kaoru. Despite him often getting in the way of resolving the mystery of the

Oni, clearly hiding fundamental information and even attempting to kill some of the love interests, Kazuki is quick to forgive him, never pushing to find out more about his reasons. Not to mention, Kaoru's ubiquitous absence from all good endings prevents the player from getting any actual resolution on these aspects, leading to some frustration.

The tension generated by including strong mystery elements while simultaneously employing a character that refuses to follow through on any of them, makes for a somewhat frustrating and maybe even 'unsatisfying' experience, which is balanced by offering the player the satisfaction of a happily concluded romance in each route. However, I believe there is some narrative value in this intentional subversion from the expected resolution of all mysteries, loose ends and emotional tension seen in most entertainment media (Oomori 2013, 228).

After all, as every cleared route offers the player 'clues' rather than 'answers', it allows for the mystery to remain engaging even after finishing the game once, while also making it possible to complete the routes in any order without compromising player entertainment.

The lack of a detective, then, might work in favor of the game — bypassing what Oomori calls an intrinsic understanding by audiences that the detective, as the person who must solve the mystery in the end, is in no real risk of dying, hence reducing the feelings of suspense, dread and fear (Oomori 2013, 229).

PigeonBlood not only lacks a detective, but as virtue of being a Visual Novel, and one from a BL brand known for their gruesome content, preps the audience for the uncertainty of the characters' fates. Unlike mystery games directed to general ages, the expected R18 rating of BL games⁶ makes it so they can offer a unique level of both narrative and graphic gruesomeness as they kill-off the characters in the bad endings— from the squelching sound of flesh being torn apart and the overly realistic graphics to go along with it, to the somber depiction of controversial topics such as incest, cannibalism and bestiality.

And, while it could be argued that the lack of a detective character and a decisive resolution invalidates *PigeonBlood* as a mystery narrative, the clues to solve the mysteries are present. Scattered through all four of the routes, sometimes exclusive to a specific character; like Mizuki's album appearing exclusively on Tachibana's route.

As such, the only person capable of obtaining all pieces of the puzzle, and consequently putting it together, is the player. The player would then be the one to take the role of arm-chair detective, never in risk of harm as they resolve the mystery from a safe distance.

Of course, not all players might be that involved with the story, but the structure of the narrative seems to hope that at least *some* will. Even the eventual 'solutions' presented in-game seem to confirm the feasibility of deducing the answers.

For one, Tachibana's secret route (only available after clearing Tachibana and one other character's happy endings) includes not only two additional endings (which are oddly not labeled as such in the Extra menu or included in the requirements to get the Bonus), but a scene where Tachibana reveals the location of the SD card — a spot an attentive player could have deduced with the offered hints.

Finally, starting a new game after watching all happy endings will give the player the option to enter a 'Bonus'. Narrated from the perspective of Kazuki's brother, Mizuki, this small route concludes the story by resolving the remaining questions, offering attentive players an opportunity to check their answers.

Conclusion

While one might say that *PigeonBlood*'s style makes for unsatisfying endings and a loose mystery that is never resolved by the characters — only in a narrated backstory by the culprit in question —, I believe it to be a valuable attempt to utilize the medium of Visual Novels to create an intriguing mystery. One that is meant, not for the characters, but for the player to resolve.

Additionally, and although only briefly mentioned in this article, it is also worth mentioning how, as a game standing after the establishment of the BL game genre, *PigeonBlood* is both a clear representative of it, and an example of how it can be expanded upon. In this case, the sexual content (and sexual violence) expected from BL games worked both as a building block for the initial narrative and an additional layer of horror and tension across the narrative. Bad endings like 'Antlion Pit', 'Appetite of flesh' and 'Black Prison' managing to mix sex and carnage in uniquely horrifying scenes, surely worth examining more carefully.

Hence, the romantic and sexual content intrinsic to the genre cannot be dismissed. Not only for its entertainment value for players (including those who only engage superficially with the mystery), but as the core of the human and emotional side of the narrative.

There is much left to discuss when it comes not only to *PigeonBlood* but horror/mystery BL games in general. Analysis on the balance between erotic content and horror, the structure of the romance aspect in these games, and even the recurrence of topics such as cannibalism and incest, some possible avenues of further exploration.

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NOTES:

- 1 Boys’ Love is a popular genre characterized for their focus on romance between men. It is widely regarded as a genre for and by women. BL games are the Visual Novel extension of this genre.
- 2 13 of the Top 20 BL games from 2022 as published by magazine *Cool-B* can be classified as either mystery, horror or a mix of both. (*Cool-B*, November 2022, 35)
- 3 An often-referenced example of this is “A Death in the Family”, a Batman comic storyline released in 1988, which allowed readers to vote for the survival of a core character through phone-calls.
- 4 The full text of some Bishojo games can easily surpass 840,000 Japanese characters (Yahiro 2005, 37)
- 5 An example of this might be the intricate map of choices available in *School Days* (Overflow, 2005)

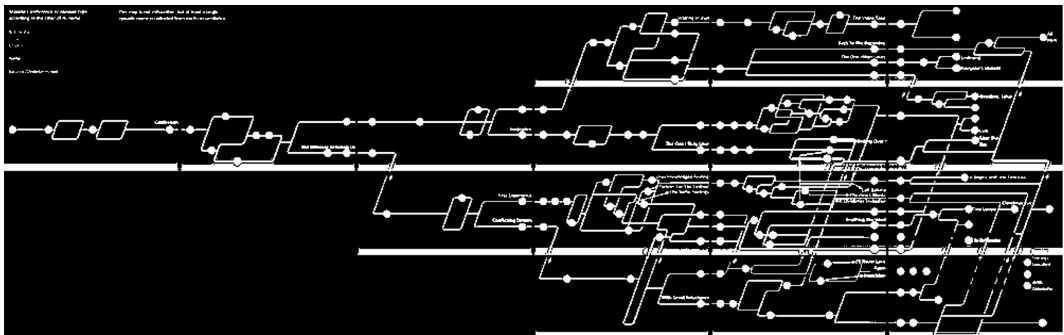


Figure. 2 “Route map” from *School Days* — a flow chart available in-game detailing the branching choices available.

- 6 Although unrated (PG-13) BL games do exist (console ports of popular games and *doujin* works come to mind) most of the BL game market consists of PC games rated R18, which include explicit adult content (Nishihara 2019, 226).