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IDOL WORLD IN MOBILE GAMES
A look into Japanese idol games and the world built in them

ABSTRACT

Henna Tuominen: Idol World in Mobile Games: A look into Japanese idol games and the world built in them

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This thesis asks, how fictional idol worlds are built in Japanese idol mobile games. The two games chosen for this research are global versions of *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live*. Qualitative content analysis is used as the method, and it is supported by the idea of building blocks by Clara Fernández-Vara.

There is not yet much English research on idol game genre, which connects to the unique idol culture in Japan, and anime culture with anime-styled visuals. The games may also be a part of a larger franchise, connecting them to the concept of Japanese media mix. Background on this thesis discusses the context of researching Japanese games outside of Japan, and looks into the concept of Japanese media mix. It also discusses real idols and fictional or virtual idols in Japan and research done on them.

Analysis revealed four main categories found on the two games, *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, which are *Idol*, *Player*, *Connections*, and *Representation*, each of them including different subcategories. Idol-category focuses on what is said about idols in the game's world and what idol characters do and say. Player-category includes what kind of role the player is given and what kind of character the player is supposed to be. Connections-category reveals the game's story connections to earlier franchise and real-life events. Representation-category looks on how the game represents itself as an idol game.

Discussion focuses on how these categories bring out similarities and differences between the two games, and how they reflect earlier research on real idols and fictional or virtual idols. For instance, idol characters' appearance is described in more detail in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, but in both games the player character is assumed to be a female, which is not always the case with idol games. The games also have ways of mixing reality and fiction.

Keywords: idol games, qualitative content analysis, love live, utano princesama, mobile games

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Idol culture is something that can be hard to pass if you are in Japan. Idols are highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities, who perform across genres and appeal to various demographics (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2). You can see idols appearing on TV on talk shows, films, and advertisements, while their pictures can be spotted in Tokyo's metro stations, train cars, and on screens around the city, as I learned during my exchange year in Japan. During those days I was especially used to seeing male idol group *Arashi*'s members everywhere, learning their names even without being a fan, and started feeling familiar with them just because they were always there. Idols stand in the center of media in Japan, and the movement of commodities is also greatly influenced by their appearance in advertisements, which makes them as celebrities more visible and important part of the culture than anywhere else in the world (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 3–4).

Idols are not limited to the real world, but instead there are multiple mobile games in Japan with idol characters. Idol game genre can be said to be unique for Japan, and it belongs in the popular genres on smartphones in Japan (Shibuya et al. 2019, 2–3). Some of these games have gotten a global release, such as *Love Live! School Idol Festival* series (2014, 2020) and *Utano Princessama Shining Live* (2018), but there are also popular games only available in Japanese, such as *THE IDOLM@STER* series (2005–2018) and *IDOLiSH7* (2015). These games are made with anime-styled visuals, which can attract players without the interest in real idols, but instead in the Japanese animation (anime) and comics (manga). I am a player of these games, but I have not specifically been looking for idol games, but just games that seem interesting to me. I think knowing and experiencing the Japanese idol culture can help in understanding these games better, as they may some ways even connect to the real world.

As I am doing research on chosen Japanese idol games, I need to consider my position as a researcher and a fan, and as a person living outside of Japanese culture and society. Playing games as a researcher is different from playing games as a fan, but my background as a fan can sometimes provide helpful in searching information. In this thesis I am researching fictional idol worlds in the games. The games are also a part of Japanese media mixes, which I will also discuss within this thesis. In the Japanese context, media

mix is an important term in the discussion of convergence, and it refers to a system of media and commodities in relation to one another (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 15). For example, *Love Live! School Idol Festival* is not only a game series, but the franchise includes manga and anime series, wide range of merchandise and real concerts held by the games' voice actors.

Idol game genre has been said to be unique for Japan, but there does not appear to be much research for the genre yet, at least in English. The genre connects to both real idol culture and anime culture, which also gives specific cultural context not visible in other genres. I find it interesting how these idol games may mix fiction and reality, whether it is in their context or as their part of Japanese media mixes, as the franchises can be brought to real world in different ways.

I am focusing on idol games with rhythm elements in them, but there are also other anime-styled rhythm mobile games apart from the idol games. These titles would include such titles as *BanG Dream! Girls Band Party!* (2017), focusing on girl bands, *Hypnosis Mic - Alternative Rap Battle-* (2020) basing on rap battles, and *D4DJ Groovy Mix* (2020) with DJs as its theme. For this thesis I decided to focus on mobile games with idols as their theme, as there are multiple popular titles within this genre. Idol-genre is also interesting within Japanese games since idol culture in Japan has its unique features.

In this thesis I am researching two globally released idol mobile games: *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princessama Shining Live*. I am looking into how the fictional idol worlds are built in the games, including how idols are described in the game and what is the player's part in this. As a method I use qualitative content analysis, backed with game analysis ideas by Clara Fernández-Vara (2015), who has written about building blocks that can help in analyzing a game. I am focusing on building blocks called *the fictional world of the game, representation, and relations to other media*.

I will start by discussing the background for this study in chapter 2. I will begin with the cultural context that is important to consider while making this research. Then I will move on to the real idols and fictional or virtual idols in Japan, and bring out also the importance of voice actors in the Japanese anime and game culture. The background will also include discussion on Japanese media mix and how this is meaningful relating to the games in this research. In chapter 3 I will introduce earlier research on idol games, and games that

can have some similar characteristics, as there is not much research on idol games alone. Then I will continue to chapter 4 on methods and data. There I will introduce game analysis and building blocks, basing on Fernández-Vara, and qualitative content analysis. The two idol mobile games for this study, *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, are also introduced within this chapter. I will again discuss the context within this study and explain my way of starting the analysis, and clear the research question. Chapter 5 will concentrate on the analysis and explains the categories that were found within the two games. I will then continue to discussion on chapter 6, and give concluding remarks on chapter 7.

2 BACKGROUND: CONTEXT, IDOLS AND JAPANESE MEDIA MIX

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background for this research. I will start discussing the context and cultural background, which is important since I am studying Japanese games outside of Japan. I will then move on to discussion on idols in Japan. I will talk about real idols and their importance in the entertainment industry, and continue to fictional and virtual idols found in anime and games. I will also bring out the voice actor industry in Japan, as it has elements different to other countries, and voice actors do not only stay behind the (idol) characters. Lastly, I will discuss the Japanese media mix and its importance when the mobile games within this study are a part of a franchise, and media mix. I will discuss earlier research done on idol games in chapter 3.

2.2 Japan and the West

This chapter will look into the cultural context surrounding this study, as I am researching Japanese games outside of Japanese culture. I have a longtime interest in the Japanese culture, including anime and games, and I have been on a student exchange in Japan, which I see as helpful for this study. It is still important to note the cultural context while I am making this thesis.

Chris Kohler reminds that Japanese video games are products and models of Japanese culture, the actions and reactions of Japanese population, which are presented nearly unaltered for Western consumption. Kohler also points out that even though Japanese anime character design usually lack any ethnically Japanese features, the style still cannot be said to “lack nationality”, as they are creations of Japanese artists, different from American or European comic artwork. (Kohler 2005, 2–7.) Fernández-Vara points out that the socio-cultural context of the game is essential to understanding games produced in cultures different from the researcher (2015, 58). Japan has a strong cultural history with anime, manga and kawaii (cute) that is also reflected in games, and that may be why characters are an important part also in games (Neogames 2020, 19).

Japanese culture, including Japanese games, manga, and anime, have spread around the world. The development of digital communication technologies, the speeding up of transnational media culture flows, and the diversification of media access has changed the global media landscape, which has been accompanied by the further marketization of culture. In this light the Japanese media culture has spread globally and the notion of “Cool Japan” has denoted this in a celebratory manner. Koichi Iwabuchi also states that “Cool Japan” is officially defined as “the phenomenon that Japanese cultures are internationally acclaimed and/or those contents that are internationally acclaimed.” (Iwabuchi 2016, 33-36.) The “Cool Japan” concept was invented in 2002 to describe Japan’s emergent cultural power, and visible symbols for the trend have been Japanese anime, manga and games (Sakamoto and Nakajima 2014, 786).

The products of contemporary Japanese popular culture can be seen as having a powerful seductive appeal of their own, which Susan J. Napier connects to “soft power”, a term which political scientist Joseph Nye defined as seductive and attracting, co-opting people rather than coercing them. Japan’s influence on popular culture worldwide came in many forms by the 1990s, including music, fashion and horror movies. However, it could be said that the most penetrating impact on a global cultural scale has been on manga and anime and the fan culture following them. (Napier 2007, 6, 125.) The significance of manga and anime to Japanese visual culture has not only been economic, but it has increasingly been linked to Japan’s culture and national image. Manga and anime have been connected by academics to various aspects of Japan, including popular culture, social life and customs. (Norris 2009, 237.)

Napier states that in the Western imagination Japan has existed as an object of respect, fear, derision, admiration, and yearning, and sometimes it could have been all at once. Japan is said to be the embodiment of a variety of fantasies to the West, with the “fantasy” referring to a range of connotations. Even though generally fantasy is interpreted in a positive light, such as wish-fulfilling dream, there are also dark fantasies. Napier thus brings out the difference between times, and also reminds about the cultural connotations. For example, the term “otaku” can have cooler meaning in Western countries compared to Japan, where the term can be loosely translated as “obsessive fan” or “technogeek”, giving it a different feel. (Napier 2007, 2–3.) In Japan the term “otaku” also has a history of being connected to a murderer in late 1980s with “otakus” described as being without basic communication skills, which has affected the general perception (Azuma 2009, 4).

In the West, on the other hand, the term can be used as an anime convention name without having darker connotations. I would see “otaku” in the West referring to fans of anime and manga, while in Japan “otaku” is a wider term, which can be applied to fans of other media and products as well.

Hiroki Azuma states that “otaku” can be generally used to refer to those who submerge themselves in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, anime figurines and so on. He identifies this form of subculture as “otaku culture” in his book. The so called “otaku market” in Japan has become a major economic force, which in 2007 was estimated to be 186,7 billion yen, about 1,7 billion dollars, market. The otaku culture has earned a large following globally and has strongly influenced the popular culture also outside of Japan in Asia, United States and Europe. (Azuma 2009, 3; Abel and Kono 2009, xv.) Visible parts of the otaku culture are for example anime conventions held around the world and manga finding their way in the book stores.

It is not just the popular culture that can be said to be influenced by Japan. Digital games industry in the West has historical and cultural roots, along with strong business interests, in areas outside of the West, particularly in Japan. That influence and power can be said to extend to Japanese game companies, Japanese visual styles, such as anime-like images, and to a wide list of games that have influenced game designers around the globe. (Consalvo 2007, 736.)

The case of Japanese media mix, and its difference from convergence culture in North American context (Steingberg 2012b, 72), can also be seen within the game industry. In the Japanese context, media mix is used to refer to a system of media and commodities, which are in relation to one another (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 15), and I will discuss this further in chapter 2.4. Some of successful game companies in Japan, such as Bandai Namco, have a background in toys and amusements, giving them a different form of engagement with the world of cross-media and cross-product promotion, which is different from Western media corporations. In this kind of Japanese model, the central characters or a theme or a world is created first, and gradually filled in by various media products, none of which may take center stage, unlike in the American model which usually claims a particular canon for some universe. Japanese companies, like Bandai Namco, have a largely diversified set of business segments, which allows them to create

greater synergies or convergences across media forms and fictional universes. (Consalvo 2009, 137–140.) Examples from Bandai Namco’s franchises would be idol series *THE IDOLM@STER* and *IDOLiSH7*.

2.3 Idols in Japan

2.3.1 Real-Life Idols

The word “idol” as it is used in Japan is mostly associated with young performers who sing, model and appear frequently in the media. Idols can be female or male and they tend to be young, or present themselves as such, and they appeal to various demographics. Idols perform across genres and interconnected media platforms simultaneously. (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2–5.) Idols are found in the top of the music charts in Japan. In 2014 the bestselling album was female idol group AKB48’s *Tsugi no ashiato*, and during the same year their CD singles monopolized all top five spots in the Japanese Oricon music charts with each of their CD singles selling over a million copies. (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 4.) Arashi has been said to be the most popular male idol group, generating 14,4 million yen (\$180 million) in CD and DVD sales in 2009, but they have decided to take a break in the end of 2020 (Nagaike 2012, 97; The Japan Times 2019).

Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin state that even though AKB48 may seem like the “national idols” their producers and promoters call them, they are ultimately idols supported by a small group of passionate fans who buy their CDs and increase the sales rankings, as fans are encouraged to buy multiple copies of the same CD for extra privileges (2016, 4). Idols are said to be coterminous with consumption for the Japanese consumer who is immersed in a culture of celebrity. Idols are produced and packaged to maximize consumption from popular music to photo albums to fashion and accessories. At the same time, idols are said to be the currency of exchange in the promotion and advertisement of all kind of other products and services. The Japanese media system is organized around idols and the consumer gets to be positioned as a fan. For the fan-consumer the idol is said to be an object of desire, which resonates with a deep affective or emotional meaning. (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2.)

Idols are said to create a familiar and intimate link to audiences through their appearance across media genres and platforms, while their management companies control the image of the idol that is sold to the fans, television networks and advertisers (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 6–7). Idols stand at the center of the entertainment industry of music and television, organizing and holding it together. The movement of commodities is also greatly influenced by the use of idols in the advertisements. Galbraith and Karlin state that nowhere else in the world do celebrities hold such an integral and visible part of the culture. (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 3–4.)

The world “idol” (aidoru) was becoming common in Japan after a French film *Cherchez l'idole* was released in 1963 under the name *Aidoru o Sagasu* (In Search of an Idol). The “idol phenomenon” (aidoru genshō) began in the 1970s and it is estimated that between 1971 and 1975 around 700 idols debuted in Japan. The career of most idols in Japan is quite short, and especially most female idols have their active career last up to three years. Hundreds of new idols get produced in Japan, but they get competition from idols from overseas, especially South Korea, who are attracted to the Japan’s rich sales market for CDs, DVDs, and goods. These days real idols must also compete with “virtual idols”. (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2–24.)

Idol performances emerged in general category of popular music at first, and unlike their predecessors which were mainly targeted at adults with more mature subjects, idols came to represent adolescence. Typically, idols are young, soft-core singers, but it is possible to also include young artists from other genres, such as rock and hip hop. There are activities meant to build and maintain social solidarity between idols and their fans, which are carried out to a degree and uniformity that it is said not to have apparent equivalent in the American pop-star scene. These activities include handshaking events, public photo shoots where idols strike poses for amateur photographers, get-togethers with fans where fans can talk and play games with their favorite idol, and periodic correspondence with fans by letter. (Aoyagi 2003, 147, 164.) Uniformity can be seen during concerts as well, where fans wave their glow sticks in unison, with colors dedicated to the idol group or its individual members.

The most common feature for idols until the early 1990, for enhancing the sense of companionship, was cuteness. In the 1970s and 1980s *kawaiiko-chan*, “cute girls and boys”, became a synonym for idols. Cuteness was expressed in a heartwarming style,

such as singing, dancing, and speaking in a sweet, “adorable” way. Handwriting was also consistent with the cute style, with rounded characters, written laterally in contrast to normal Japanese script. By mid 1990s, the cute style was declining, with one potential explanation being the large number of idols and idol-like characters, which let the term to be applied to almost any genre as long as the performers were cute. This throughout penetration of cute style weakened the public appeal and the commercial value of cute idols. The cute style might have also itself declined, as young performers with more sensual and powerful images appeared to the scene, creating a new category “post-idol”, or “idol dancers”. They marked an era in which idols could not anymore attract the audience by simply being cute, and a new sexual assertiveness emerged. (Aoyagi 2003, 148–156.)

Apart on the studies on idols overall, there has been also research on specific idol groups. Yuya Kiuchi has written about how idol group AKB48 presents a new trend in the entertainment industry. Kiuchi states that the trend may be presented to be more democratic, but it creates and takes advantage of passionate and sometimes obsessive fans in a unique way. Even more significant is said to be the way in which musical talent matters less than the group’s manipulative image of purity, which is said to lessen the individuality of singers, quiet them, and even expose them to psychological and physical danger, so that the group will be successful. The group is stated to reflect problematic gender dynamics in which women’s sexuality is both idolized and exploited. (Kiuchi 2017, 30.)

AKB48 is an idol group, which during December 2015 had over 130 young female singers divided into five groups. The size of AKB48 makes it different from other popular idol groups. There are “sister projects” similar to AKB48, who are based in Akihabara, but in different locations. SKE48 is based in Sakae, NMB48 in Namba, and HKT48 in Hakata. Similarly to AKB48, they all have their own theaters where they perform and all consists of multiple subgroups. There are even sister projects abroad: JKT48 in Jakarta and SNH48 in Shanghai. (Kiuchi 2017, 32–34.)

The number of members in the group makes it impossible for everyone to appear on television and so forth, which is why fans vote who they want to see the most. The winner earns a middle front-row spot to appear on television and in concerts. The severe competition does not happen just within the music industry, but also within the group

itself. Even though fan popularity voting has been done in the past by other music groups, it has never been done on the scale of AKB48. Merchandise is sold as a medium for popularity voting, which creates a massive marketing machine. In other cases, CDs can come with a ticket for a special event where fans may shake hands or talk to an idol, which is said to give the fans a sense of privilege, but the members are also reminded that their career is directly connected to these fans. The closeness to the fans can increase the sales, but also cause risks for the singers if sufficient security is not provided for them, which happened in May 2014 when two members were attacked during a handshake event. (Kiuchi 2017, 30, 35–39.)

AKB48 members are expected to be pure, which means that the singers rarely, if at all, voice their own ideas and opinions. The members are encouraged to be individual, as many fans have a favorite singer from the group, who they follow and support more than the others. AKB48 grows because of the fans who support specific, individual singers. The members are also not allowed to date, which is common for Japanese idols. Dating is considered to be a distraction from idol's profession, and it is also seen as a factor that could taint their image as an idol who is innocent and pure. Even though the members are expected to be pure, they are still sexualized for promotional purposes. (Kiuchi 2017, 31, 40–42.)

While majority of AKB48's fans are male (Kiuchi 2017, 42), j-pop idol band SMAP, with five male members, is groomed to appeal to young female market, according to Fabienne Darling-Wolf. SMAP partly differs from others in their success, as many young Japanese stars tend to rise and fall from fame rather quickly, but SMAP members have been a significant presence in the Japanese media scene, and since their break-up in 2016 the members have been involved in different solo projects. It is stated that SMAP was not known for musical talent, as even their fans agreed that their idols could not sing, and the members themselves used to joke about being out of tune in live performances and stated a lack of confidence in their singing ability. Their concerts were still so popular that they were only open to fan club members, with tickets being sold through lottery. The group also had their own weekly variety program, starred in several TV dramas, appeared in commercials and showed up in billboards and magazine covers, and each member held solo shows. (Darling-Wolf 2004, 357–358; St. Michel 2019.)

Darling-Wolf states that there is no doubt the five men's sex appeal had much to do with their success. A member could for example pose for a magazine almost nude. Darling-Wolf also says that the members needed to be "good guys", even if ambiguously so, in order to succeed as perfect female fantasies. In late 2000 news brought up that member Takuya Kimura's girlfriend, who he had allegedly recently broken up with, was pregnant. Kimura later married her in secret and was portrayed as a happy father later on, which Darling-Wolf argues to be the culturally appropriate thing to do. In August 2001 member Goro Inagaki was arrested for endangering a police officer he tried to run off after getting a ticket. Even though his criminal charges were quickly dropped, all his media appearances were cancelled by the agency for six months. (Darling-Wolf 2004, 360–363.)

Idols may need to keep a clean image, but not all idols are found in the real world. Next, I will turn the discussion on fictional and virtual idols, who may be entirely virtual, or mix fiction and reality.

2.3.2 Fictional and Virtual Idols

Japan's first domestically produced idol anime was *Wandering Sun* (Sasurai no taiyō) in 1971. Later in the 1970s the anime industry was searching for new markets and forms of expression, and they turned their attention to the idols active in real world. In 1978 started a TV animation *Pink Lady Story: Angels of Glory* (Pinku redī monogatari: Eikō no tenshi tachi), which focused on the most popular idols at the time, Pink Lady. These were followed by TV animations where real idols started voicing the fictional idol characters. In 1983 a new animation *Creamy Mami, the Magic Angel* (Mahō no Tenshi Kurīmī Mami) started with a newly debuted idol Takako Ōta providing the voice for the protagonist and singing songs signed to the character throughout the series. The release of Takako Ōta's CD singles as a real idol were scheduled to synchronize with idol Creamy Mami's new releases in the fictional story, taking the relation between real and fictional idols and the media mix further than before. (Yoshida 2016, 150–156.)

An interesting case came when idol animations *Idol Legend Eriko* (Aidoru densetsu Eriko, 1989–1990) and *Idol Angel Yōkoso Yōko* (Aidoru tenshi yōkoso Yōko, 1990–1991) named their story protagonists with same names as newly debuted real idols. Now real idols shared a name, singing voice and song list with a fictional character, but the actual

character voice was provided by professional actresses. If these real idols are compared to the fictional idol characters of themselves, the latter were more popular. Masataka Yoshida stated that this was evident from the records of fanzines (*dōjinshi*) and that real idol Yōko Tanako did not release a photo album, but the fictional idol Yōko Tanako did. (Yoshida 2016, 158.)

Yoshida (according to Patrick Galbraith) has argued that idol anime purposely mixes fiction and reality, or encourages their convergence, in order to stimulate fan labor to work through connections and layered meaning. Yoshida has stated that this “illusory scheme” is at the heart of recent media content such as *Love Live!*, which tells about high school idols and in the anime they are frequently seen in the “otaku” district of Tokyo, Akihabara. In the franchise’s music videos these characters are animated, but during real live performances their voice actors appear dressed as the characters, and they sing and dance along the songs, in sync with music videos projected on the stage. According to Galbraith, Yoshida argues that virtual idols are reproduced by the voice actors’ bodies, which act as media. This mixture of fictional and real is stated to be stimulating, as in 2015 *Love Live! School Idol Movie* was the number one film in Japan during its opening weekend, grossing 400 million yen (\$3,42 million). (Galbraith 2016, 145–146.)

Daniel Black argues that an idol which exists only as a digital data, which the fan can “own” and manipulate, holds a promise of a more intimate relationship than it would be possible with a real idol. Black continues that the appeal of video game *THE IDOLM@STER*, and its sequels, utilize the capacity of virtual idols to fulfill a desire to control. In the games within the series the player takes the role of a music producer, who manages the careers and performances of a group of idols. According to Black these games cater to fantasies of ownership over idols, and reflect the real-life gendered power relations between male music producers and the disposable, commodified young idol girls. (Black 2012, 220.)

Fictional idols in animations and virtual idols in games often have voice actors behind them, but there are also virtual idols true to the term “virtual”. In 2004 Yamaha’s Vocaloid software technology was released (Black 2012, 222). Vocaloid software allows the user to drag and drop phonemes on specific musical notes, and these are then strung together into words and melodies to form the particular software’s singing voice (Leavitt et al. 2016, 206). Japanese company Crypton Future Media offers “Vocaloid Character Vocal

Series” presenting Vocaloid voices as anime-styled characters, their most famous and successful character being *Hatsune Miku* (Black 2012, 223–224). *Hatsune Miku* is at the core a peer-produced creative franchise that originated in Japan, and spread around the globe primarily through social media sites. A part of *Hatsune Miku*’s franchise are live concerts, which use songs that are uploaded by the community for free to Niconico platform, instead of Crypton writing or commissioning songs. The concerts feature music sung by *Hatsune Miku* and other Crypton-created Vocaloid characters and 3D models are created or adapted for each song performance. (Leavitt et al. 2016, 205–212.)

Apart from *Hatsune Miku* and other Vocaloid characters, virtual idols usually have voice actors behind them. Voice actor scene in Japan can have its own unique aspects, with voice actors themselves being popular among fans. This will be the next topic for discussion.

2.3.3 Voice Actors

I will discuss the voice actor industry in Japan, as there are unique occupational characteristics and voice actors themselves have gained popularity, instead of them staying behind the scenes (Yamasaki 2014, 196, 199). In *Love Live!* series the voice actors step on stage in real-life to perform songs from the franchise, while some of the voice actors in *Utano Princesama* series have their own singing careers. It is possible that a fan finds a certain franchise through a voice actor they are following, which has been my own reason for knowing *IDOLiSH7* franchise.

Aki Yamasaki discusses how voice actors today are not only engaged to voice acting, but also sing as a part of their professional career with their songs often ranking high in Japanese music charts. Animation-related songs by the voice actors can be called “animation songs” and abbreviated as “ani-songs”. (Yamasaki 2014, 191.) Songs relating to characters can also be called “character songs”. There are also voice actors who have their own singing careers, like Mamoru Miyano from *Utano Princesama* series, or are a part of a band, like Kishō Taniyama, also from *Utano Princesama* series.

According to Yamasaki, Oricon Entertainment Market Report 2010, which deals with music charts in Japan, stated that in the fiscal year 2010 animation-related CDs accounted

nearly 10% of the total sales of all genres. There is active interaction between the anime and music industries and singing voice actors are said to present the very crossover point for the two businesses. Yamasaki states how there are unique occupational characteristics to voice actors in Japan that may be absent in other countries. First of the characteristics is that a voice actor performs a wide range of characters and can provide a wide variety of voices. Voice actors who can play a variety of tones of voice often get a prestigious status. Second characteristic is that voice-acting in Japan is seen as an established occupational category, and Japanese voice actors have full-time careers in voice-acting. In other countries voice acting roles are often done by film actors. Japanese full-time voice actors represent the uniqueness of voice-acting business in Japan and provides an important element of anime culture. Third characteristic is that Japan has a system to train professional voice actors, including specialized institutions, such as training facilities. (Yamasaki 2014, 191–196.)

For a long time, voice actors, who were solely engaged to voice acting, did not appear in public and stayed behind the scenes. There was no big connection between the voice actors themselves and the characters whose voice they played. Voice actors began to sing as part of their careers in 1970s–1990s, and popular voice actors also got roles as radio personalities. Male voice actors who played handsome characters in anime started to gain popularity, and this encouraged voice actors to engage also in singing, and stirred the promotion of such voice actors as idols. In the late 1980s, character songs started to be released, which were released under the names of the characters whose voice roles the voice actors played. With the increasing opportunities for voice actors to sing in public, some of them were getting to be recognized as talented vocalists. From the mid-1990s, many voice actors started to release albums under their own names. As voice actors gradually appeared more in public, this led to the popularity of voice actors themselves. (Yamasaki 2014, 198–199.)

In the mid-1990s, Japanese media was characterized by the wide-spread of *media mix*, which made voice actors' careers to include also video games and radio programs with the anime works. Voice actors started to appear in public more frequently by this trend, in order to attend advertising events. This made more opportunities for voice actors to be recognized by audience who were not anime fans. Furthermore, the success of anime series *Bishōjo Senshi Sailor Moon* (1992–1997) made more attention to be paid also to the voice actors who played the character roles. Around 2000 some anime works, such as

Love Hina, started to feature popular voice actors as one of their selling points. This can be argued to be the time that started the norm in anime consumption pattern, where viewers selected the works based on the voice actors featured in it. (Yamasaki 2014, 198–199.) The popularity of voice actors themselves can sometimes be seen even in Finland, when a local anime convention brings Japanese voice actors as a guest, and some of their fans follow along with them.

Japanese media was already mentioned to be characterized by the media mix, and this is what I am discussing next.

2.4 Japanese Media Mix

Convergence means a coming together of two or more things, but in discussion of media, there can be found some disagreement on what is coming together, how and why. The term was popularized in the academic circles by Henry Jenkins. In the Japanese context, *media mix* is an important term in the discussion of convergence, and media mix is said to refer to a system of media and commodities in relation to one another. Industrial strategies of extension, synergy and franchising are aspects of media convergence that can also be seen in the media mix. Corporations, audiences and media forms are also coming together in both media convergence and media mix. But it should be noted that the discussion of media mix puts more emphasis on characters and affective relationships with them, which is also a dynamic familiar from work on idols in Japan. Media convergence and media mix are still not different phenomena, but they are rather different analytic emphases, with media mix pointing to a system of media and commodities in relation to one another. (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 8, 15–22.)

It is more usual for Japanese media mixes to have a stronger presence in portable media, such as mobile phones, trading cards and character merchandise, compared to United States originated media, which are more likely dominated by home based media (Ito 2010, 86). In its most typical form, a Japanese media mix begins as a manga or novel, then gets adapted to a film or anime series and generates soundtracks, figurines and video games, together with the necessary newspaper articles, magazine features and advertisement (Steinberg 2012b, 72).

Media mix names the entire phenomenon of transmedia storytelling that has been called convergence culture in the North American context by Henry Jenkins and others. It should be noted that there are differences between the practices these two phenomena, media mix and convergence culture, designate. But it is possible to see these media practices past national borders, such as media mix-style practices in North America and convergence-styled practices in Japan. (Steinberg 2012b, 72–73.)

The Japanese media mix is both culturally distinctive and increasingly global in its reach, as stated by Mizuko Ito. Japan originated manga, anime and games are heterogenous, crossing different media types and genres, but they are still recognized as a cluster of linked cultural forms. Manga are usually the primary texts of these media forms, but that is not always the case. Ito has studied two media mixes, *Yugioh* and *Hamtaro*, using the term “media mix” to describe how Japanese children’s media relies on a synergetic relationship between multiple media formats, including anime, manga, games and trading cards. But media mixes are not limited to children’s media; instead, they include a wide range of material aimed at adults. (Ito 2010, 86–88.)

The term “media mix” refers to practices of character franchising that emerged in Japan in the 1960s, and the term was popularized in the 1980s. In 1963 Osamu Tezuka created *Tetsuwan Atomu*, known as *Astro Boy* in English, an animated TV series based on his popular manga by the same name. Tezuka struggled with the animation’s funding and sought out to sponsors for the promotional tie-ups with the series. As a result, the characters existed also on commodities that they promoted and that promoted them, for example character stickers were given to those who purchased Meiji’s marble chocolates. The deployment of characters created synergy and inspired consumption across media and material forms, and as a huge success *Tetsuwan Atomu* has become a model of Japanese media mix. (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 15–16.)

Marc Steinberg states that the term media mix originated as a marketing discourse in the 1960s, but in the 1980s it became to define the anime and film franchising, which the term is currently associated with. According to Steinberg, critic and media producer Eiji Ōtsuka was central to the formulation of the contemporary model of the Japanese media mix. Eiji Ōtsuka worked in the 1980s for Kadokawa Media Office, which is a subsidiary of Kadokawa Books, and a company that was on the frontlines of media mix practice headed by Tsuguhiko Kadogawa. The model of media mix had pioneered by Tsuguhiko’s

older brother, Haruki Kadokawa, as a film-soundtrack-novel bounded model. The model, which was developed around Tsuguhiko Kadokawa in the late 1980s, marked a shift to a relatively unbounded model of the media mix that saw no limit to transmedia serialization. Eiji Ōtsuka developed his theory of narrative marketing within this context. (Steinberg 2012b, 72–74.)

Steinberg distinguishes two applications of the term media mix: *marketing media mix* and *anime media mix*. Both of these media mixes rely on the premise that multiple media in combination exert greater force than a single medium, meaning that they both presuppose the principle of synergy. But these two conceptions differ in their respective models of synergy. The marketing media mix aims to use the synergetic effect of multiple media in order to focus consumers toward a particular goal, which is purchasing the advertiser's product. The anime media mix, on the other hand, has no single goal. Instead, the general consumption of any of the anime media mix's products will grow the whole enterprise. Each media-commodity acts also as an advertisement for further products in the same franchise, which makes this a consumption that produces more consumption. The anime media mix refers to two intersecting phenomena, which are 1) the translation or use of a single work, character, or narrative world across various mediums or platforms, and 2) the synergetic use of multiple media works, which are to sell other such works within the same franchise. (Steinberg 2012a, 136–142.)

The games, and their franchises, within this research can be said to belong in the anime media mix. Next, I will continue with earlier research done on idol games and other similar Japanese games.

3 RESEARCH ON IDOL GAMES AND SIMILAR GAMES

3.1 Introduction

I will start this chapter by discussing the idol game genre in Japan and the research done on it earlier. There is not yet much research done on idol genre, at least not in English that I could find, so I will also discuss similar games within Japan. These games also have anime-styled visuals and may feature elements similar to idol games. I will introduce the games for this research in chapter 4, as a part of the method and data discussion.

3.2 Idol Mobile Games in Japan

Mobile games emerged as a new growing market segment in Japan during the period 2002–2007, but it was in those days considerably smaller than the dominant console and portable game segments (Ernkvist 2016, 100). Today Japan is the third largest country by mobile games revenue in the global iOS Appstore and first in Google Play, and Japan is estimated to hold 28,2% share of mobile game revenues in the Asia-Pacific area. In year 2018 the idol game *THE IDOLM@STER Cinderella Girls: Starlight Stage* reached top 10 mobile games in terms of gross revenue on iOS and Android, getting 10th place. (Neogames 2020, 4, 20.)

According to Shibuya et al. idol games are one of the popular genres on smartphones in Japan. Japan's idol games were originally designed for male players, and the most popular one is said to be *THE IDOLM@STER* series. In a typical idol game, the player's character, typically a male, can be the producer of a female idol or idol group. Some of these games accompany music and rhythm parts, which allow the player to participate in the music sessions by touching their smartphone screens. (Shibuya et al. 2019, 3.) For example, *THE IDOLM@STER Cinderella Girls: Starlight Stage* (2015) is described as “idol rhythm game” (アイドルリズムゲーム) while the newest mobile game in the series *THE IDOLM@STER Shiny Colors* (2018) is described as “idol training and live

competition” (アイドル育成&ライブ対戦) type of game (THE IDOLM@STER Official Web 2020).

Although the idol games in Japan were originally designed for male players, there are games popular with female players and games aimed at women. In typical idol games for women the gender roles are opposite. Therefore, the player’s character is typically a female who can be a producer for a male idol or group, or is a newly comer student. Popular idol games with male groups include *IDOLiSH7* and *Ensemble Stars* (2015). Some of the voice actors playing the roles of characters in idol games have recently become famous and hold fan events, and real idols have emerged from the games and anime series. The idol industry is among the most profitable entertainment areas in Japan, which can make the combination of idol industry and video games a successful business. (Shibuya et al. 2019, 3–4.) For example, idol group *Aqours* from *Love Live! School Idol Festival* series is found in the fictional world, but the voice actors also hold real concerts and have even traveled outside of Japan to Los Angeles (Anime Expo 2019).

Mizuki Sakamoto and Tatsuo Nakajima discuss the contemporary Japanese anime, manga and games, which are part of media whose fictionality penetrates the real world. They are taking a look into what they call a transmedia game, *Utano Princesama*, which has male idol characters who can be called as Princes. (Sakamoto and Nakajima 2014, 786–790.) *Utano Princesama* series has multiple games on console platforms and a mobile game *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, which is so far the only game in the series to have a global release (Utano Princesama Japanese and Global Websites 2020). Sakamoto and Nakajima do not specify if they are analyzing one specific game, as there are differences between the games, such as the number of characters appearing in the game. They specify the important elements of *Utano Princesama* to be Love and Music. The player-controlled female character (on console games) can fall in love with the Prince characters and deepen their bond through music, with the player being able to choose their favorite Prince character. Sakamoto and Nakajima discuss that the game is expanded to the real world by collecting merchandise and attending to festival events. Through these goods, events and Twitter conversations the sense of each Prince’s existence is produced, and all of this contributes to the player’s love for their favorite Prince character. (Sakamoto and Nakajima 2014, 790–791.)

There is not much research on idol games that I could have found, which is why I will also discuss similar type of games in the next subchapter.

3.3 Research on Similar Games

Idol games, such as *THE IDOLM@STER* and *IDOLiSH7* have visual characteristics relating to Japanese animation. Apart from the visuals they can also share conventions from visual novel games, as they involve story parts where player mostly follows the story with little interaction with the game. Visual novel games also feature limited interactions and develop their characters in a way that is consistent with character dynamics found in Japanese anime and manga (Bruno 2017, 93). Therefore, I will briefly look into the research done on similar Japanese games, which are not necessarily idol games.

Kazumi Hasegawa has stated in 2013 that the genre of *otome* games or *ren'ai* (romance) games is in the fastest growing genres in mobile applications and smartphone business market. *Otome* games are overall a popular game genre in Japan; describing games aimed at women and girls with usually female characters exploring romantic love with male characters. Hasegawa analyzes game *Hakuōki* as a way to examine the ways in which Japanese culture allows an opportunity to explore *otome* (maiden) pleasure, sexuality and sensitivity. (Hasegawa 2013, 135–136.) Idol game series *Utano Princessama* in its console versions can be seen to be an *otome* game, as the game has a female character who can find love with the game's male characters. The female protagonist, Haruka, does not seem to be visible in the mobile game *Utano Princessama Shining Live*, which may unable the game to completely fit this category.

Hyeshin Kim researches Japanese women's games, which are said to refer to a category of games developed and marketed exclusively for the consumption of women and girls, and the term is used within the Japanese electronic gaming industry. According to Kim, *otome* term has been used to distinguish games from *boys' love* games, which have romantic relationships between male characters, as opposed to heterosexual romance. Kim states that even though the term "women's game" does not necessarily designate a certain genre, still certain factors distinguish these games. These factors are the possibility for female protagonist to form romantic relationship with the game's usually male

characters; the game's system and game controls tend to be simple; and women's games are intimately related to other multimedia products in terms of content and industry, which can involve creation of manga based on the game and the use of voice actors in order to attract the voice actors' fans. (Kim 2009, 166–170, 185.) The relation to other multimedia products links to the idea of Japanese media mix, which for example can be found with the idol game *IDOLiSH7*. *IDOLiSH7* is a popular idol game for women (Shibuya et al. 2019, 4), even though it does not specifically involve romance between the characters, with the franchise involving manga serializations, anime seasons, a wide line of merchandise, and concerts held by the game's voice actors.

Voice actors are also an interesting part of the equation what comes to idol games among other related media. Voice actors, *seiyūs*, can be seen as inhabiting an interstitial dimension between “3D” reality and “2D” fantasy, which can be referred to as “2.5D”. Voice actors are an interface between different forms of media, between fans and the characters, relaying the characters' voices to fans and animating the characters' bodies. (Nozawa 2016, 170.) Voice actors can hold a big part in idol games, as they do not only voice the characters, but also possibly hold concerts singing the songs from the idol groups within the game series. And as stated by Kim, the voice actors can bring fans over to the series (2009, 170).

Black has argued, using *THE IDOLM@STER* as an example, that idol games promise a more intimate relationship with the virtual idols than would be possible with a real idol (Black 2012, 220). Galbraith, on the other hand, has researched *bishōjo* games, examining the issue of human being with technology through those identified as “otaku” in Japan and the *bishōjo* games they play. *Bishōjo* games focus on interactions with beautiful girls with the central interaction being on dating, which is such a popular and prevalent theme that sometimes these games are called as “dating simulators” outside of Japan. (Galbraith 2011, n.p.) Again, the idol games may lack the clear romance option, which would exclude them from this category, even though the game might have a male player character and beautiful female characters like found on *THE IDOLM@STER* series.

As I have now discussed the background for this thesis and earlier research done on idol games and similar genres, I will continue to methods and introduce the two games for this study.

4 METHODS AND DATA

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methods and data chosen for this research. I will begin by introducing game analysis and the idea of building blocks by Fernández-Vara, and explain my choice of building blocks for this study. Then I will continue to the method of this study: qualitative content analysis. I will explain why I decided on this method and how the use of this method has been discussed. Afterwards, I will introduce the two idol mobile games I chose for this thesis: *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princessama Shining Live*. I will then continue to discuss and remind of the context of this study. Lastly, I will clear my research question and explain how I started the analysis with the chosen methods. I will introduce the analysis and findings in chapter 5.

4.2 Game Analysis and Building Blocks

Fernández-Vara has written about strategies for textual analysis applied to games, which can be both digital and non-digital. Her methods are suited for scholars with a background in social sciences or humanities, who want to extend their appreciation of media to games. (2015, 2–5.) This feels suitable for me, as I have a background in social sciences and have prior done my work on magazines, either looking into text or pictures. The goal of textual analysis in general and Fernández-Vara’s approach is to focus less on making value judgements on the game and more appreciating how we make sense of them. A structuralist way to look into the games as texts is to look for what different games have in common, and finding recurring patterns in their design, topics, aesthetics and so on. (Fernández-Vara 2015, 11.) I find this suitable for my research, which concentrates on the fictional idol worlds in two games, with discussion also on their similarities and differences.

Games can be approached as texts, which allows studying the games as a cultural production that can be interpreted because they have a meaning. Cultural significance of games can be derived from the context of play, which can be about who plays the games, why and how, and how does the practice of playing relate to their socio-cultural activities and practices. Therefore, analyzing games means studying the meaning within the game,

meaningful play, and around it, cultural significance. The text also includes where the text is interpreted and by whom, and is not just limited to the work itself. The audiences can read games differently, and values embedded in the game can also be the subject of interpretation. (Fernández-Vara 2015, 5–7.)

Games as texts can be understood better also by analyzing what Gérard Genette has called *paratexts*. Paratext surrounds the main text, transforming and conditioning how the audience interprets the main text. In video games paratexts can include, for example, the game's commercial website, reviews, and other media that may have been inspired by the game. (Fernández-Vara 2015, 6–7.) The game's website can give an implication of genre, which may direct the player to look at the game in a certain way. A game might be a part of a franchise, which makes it possible for the player to know the game from another context before playing it, and not all versions may be completely related.

Preparing for an analysis the researcher has to be aware of what type of player they are, how they tackle the game, and how that might affect the perception of the game (Fernández-Vara 2015, 29). There are different positions to think about, such as what type of player they are, are they familiar with the genre, and do they keep notes while playing (Aarseth 2003, 3). The researcher should also be aware of the context of the game, as no cultural artifact is created in a void. One way to look into the context of the game is to find what has been written about it, whether it is academic or journalistic. (Fernández-Vara 2015, 33–34.) Idol games do not seem to hold much of discussion, even with the popularity of some of the games within the genre. This could be partly because they are linked to Japanese idol culture, and only a few of the idol games have a global release. I was discussing the context and former research in the earlier chapters, and I will continue to discuss my position and context of this study later within this chapter.

Fernández-Vara provides an overview of a series of building blocks, which can be used to analyze a game. The building blocks are divided in three interrelated areas, which are *the context*, *the game overview* and *the formal aspects*. The context of the game includes the circumstances in which the game is produced and played, as well as other texts that may relate to it. The game overview focuses on the content, providing a summary of what the game is about and who plays it. The formal aspects include how the game is constructed. Each of these areas comprises a series of building blocks, and different pieces

are used instead of others depending on what the analysis is for. The analysis is not limited to one specific set. (2015, 13–15.)

The building blocks most relevant to my study are *the fictional world of the game*, *representation (audiovisual design)*, and *relations to other media*. *Fictional world of the game* is the imagined world where the actions and events of the game take place, and identifying this world helps to establish connections to other game and media as part of their context. *Representation* includes visual design, sound design and music, and includes questions such as how the audiovisual design indicates what the game is about. *Relations to other media* includes the franchise and the questions regarding that. These three building blocks are from different interrelated areas, as *the fictional world of the game* belongs to the game overview, *representation* belongs to the formal aspects, and *relations to other media* belongs to the context. (Fernández-Vara 2015, 83, 104, 150–151.)

I chose these three building blocks to be relevant for this research, because they give insight to the details in focus of this study. *Fictional world of the game* outlines the whole research question, which focuses on how the fictional idol worlds are built within the games. Since that building block is also said to help to establish connections to other media, it links to *relations to other media*, which is important, as the chosen games are part of media mixes. In the analysis I will also look how the games indicate that they are idol worlds, which makes *representation* a suitable choice.

The building blocks still need a theoretical concept to help in the actual game analysis, which is why I have chosen qualitative content analysis as my method.

4.3 Qualitative Content Analysis

I refer as qualitative content analysis the method of describing a document verbally, as opposed to quantitative descriptions, as described by Jouni Tuomi and Anneli Sarajärvi (2018, n.p.) in Finnish as *sisällönanalyysi* and *sisällön erittely*, even though Janne Seppänen (2005, 145) argues there is not a difference between the concepts. Klaus Krippendorff questions the usefulness of the distinction between qualitative and quantitative content analysis, as ultimately all reading of texts is qualitative even if parts of it is later converted into numbers (2013, 22). I will use the distinction qualitative

content analysis to avoid confusion, as the term is used by researchers such as Margrit Schreier (2012) along with Tuomi and Sarajärvi.

Qualitative content analysis can be both used as an individual method, and as a loose theoretical frame, which can be linked to different analytical bodies. It is a textual analysis method, which can be used in analyzing documents systematically and objectively. Documents are considered in a loose way, which includes books, articles, speeches, and so on. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, n.p.) As games can be understood as texts, they should fit into this category as well.

Qualitative content analysis is used to gain a description of the analyzed phenomenon in a summarized and generic form. It can only gather the data to be organized for conclusions, and studies made with qualitative content analysis might be criticized for that reason, if a researcher presents the data without discussing it. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, n.p.) Seppänen uses content analysis for researching visual culture, and states that content analysis can give information on how individual representations are a part of a bigger data (2015, 144). The point of analysis is to create verbal and clear description of the phenomenon under research. Content analysis is used to organize the data in a compact and clear way without losing the information within it. Analysis is used in clarifying the data in order to make clear and valid conclusions about the researched phenomenon. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, n.p.)

Content analysis can be separated into a data-based approach and a theory-based approach, with my own study belonging into the data-based approach. Data-based approach can be described in a simple way as a three phased process, which includes simplifying the data, grouping the data, and creating the theoretical concepts. The data being analyzed can for example be a document or a written interview. During the simplification of the data all the unnecessary information is reduced. One way to do this is to mark similar written expressions with the same color, thus separating different cases with different colors. After this comes the grouping of the data, and expressions describing the same case are grouped and combined into main categories and subcategories. What kind of categories can be found on the data is not clear until the analysis progresses. This is followed with the creation of theoretical concepts and conclusions. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, n.p.)

Margrit Schreier states that qualitative content analysis is a method used to describe the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way. Coding frame is at the heart of the method, and you assign parts of the material to the categories within the coding frame. The data does not have specific meaning of its own, but the recipient constructs the meaning with their own individual background, including what they know of the topic and the situation in which they encounter it. (Schreier 2012, 1–2.) The researcher also has their background through which they perceive the material, which is why I have been stating my own background in comparison to the material.

Qualitative content analysis is interpretative as it is applied to symbolic material that requires interpretation and it focuses on personal or social meaning. It is also naturalistic, as the data is not changed in any way. The researcher needs to take context into account when arriving at their interpretations, and qualitative content analysis acknowledges their reflexivity by taking other perspectives into account when creating a coding frame, and helps to make the grounds for interpretation transparent. Steps in qualitative content analysis, according to Schreier, include (1) deciding your research question, (2) selecting your material, (3) building a coding frame, (4) dividing your material into units of coding, (5) trying out your coding frame, (6) evaluating and modifying your coding frame, (7) main analysis, and (8) interpreting and presenting your findings. (Schreier 2012, 6, 35.)

Qualitative content analysis as a method involves selecting certain key aspects of material and focusing on those, instead of trying to keep track of everything at once. The coding frame is built around these aspects, which can be called as main categories of the coding frame. Main categories are the aspects in which the research is focused on. After specifying the main categories, the next step is to identify what is said in the material about these aspects. It is possible to work in a data-driven way, which means looking what is in the material, or in a concept-driven way, which means drawing upon what is already known before looking at the material. It is possible to also use both ways. The specifications then serve as the subcategories, which specify what is said about the aspects of interest, main categories. (Schreier 2012, 59–60.)

The coding frame is a way of structuring the research material, and it consists of main categories specifying relevant aspects, and of subcategories under each main category specifying relevant meanings. The coding frame acts like a filter, as anything outside of the main categories is not visible anymore. There are different requirements to remember

when building a coding frame. *Unidimensionality* refers to each main category capturing only one aspect of the material. *Mutual exclusiveness* means that a unit of coding can be assigned to one subcategory only within the main category. No subcategory should remain empty. The coding frame may also be the most important finding in itself. (Schreier 2012, 61–62, 71–77, 219.)

Qualitative content analysis involves segmenting the research material. The material is divided into units in a way that each unit fits into one category of the coding frame. Three types of units are particularly important, according to Schreier, which are units of analysis, units of coding and context units. *Unit of analysis* is constituted of each case on which qualitative content analysis is carried out. Each unit of analysis contains several *units of coding*, which fit within one subcategory of the coding frame. *The context unit* is that portion of the surrounding material that is needed in order to understand the meaning of a given unit of coding. (Schreier 2012, 127–133.)

Segmenting material means dividing the units of analysis into units of coding. Segmentations involves three steps, which are (1) marking the relevant parts of the material, (2) deciding on segmentation criterion, and (3) marking the units of coding. (Schreier 2012, 139.) Units of analysis in my thesis are the two games that are analyzed with qualitative content analysis. I looked into story chapters and the episodes within them, making the sentences in the stories as the units of coding. After collecting what is said in the game, I colored the phrases based on main categories they belonged to. I am discussing my decisions further in chapter 4.6. When conducting qualitative content analysis, I followed Schreier's (2012) ideas and took also notice of Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018).

4.4 Idol Mobile Games in This Research

I will now introduce the games that I chose for this research, which are the two Japanese free-to-play mobile games, *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princessama Shining Live*.

I have chosen these two games, as they seem to be well-known within anime-styled idol games, and both are available in English. There would be other suitable titles in Japanese, such as *THE IDOLM@STER* series, *IDOLiSH7*, and *Ensemble Stars*, but for the scope of

this study I am limiting the dataset to two games. I decided to choose the games that also have an English release, which are scarcer to find. Therefore, I chose these two games that I know to have a global release, and they suitably center around female idols (*Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*) and male idols (*Utano Princesama Shining Live*). Since they are translations, I have to be aware that there might be some changes in phrasing compared to the original Japanese text. Both games are also part of a franchise, or Japanese media mix, which means they have connections to other media formats.

4.4.1 Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars



Picture 1: Splash screen of Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars

Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars is the latest mobile game for the *Love Live!* franchise, which was launched in 2010 as a school idol project, and the game is developed by KLab Inc. The franchise has developed across different media formats, including music, anime, and live events held by the voice actors of the characters. I chose *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* among the two *Love Live!* mobile games available in English, as it is the newer one released globally on February 25th 2020, and in Japan on September 26th 2019. (KLab Inc. 2020a.) It is also advertised as “the biggest and best

idol game” in the official website, which describes its genre as rhythm action RPG (Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars Global Website 2020).

The game celebrated hitting 1 million downloads in Japan on September 30th 2019, and the global version on May 1st 2020. These numbers could be assumed to go up since the global version of the earlier mobile game, *Love Live! School Idol Festival*, reached 45 million downloads worldwide in November 2018. The mobile games are not the only ones reaching millions in the franchise, as in 2015 the anime movie, *Love Live! The School Idol Movie*, was a hit with over 2 million customers and box office taking exceeding 2,8 billion yen (\$26,6 million). (KLab Inc. 2018a; KLab Inc. 2020b; Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars Japanese Website 2019.)

Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars is said to be based on the concept of the “ultimate idol game” and it includes 27 school idol members from *μ's* (pronounced as "muse"), *Aqours* (pronounced as "aqua"), and *Nijigasaki High School Idol Club*. For the first time in the *Love Live!* series, the player is the protagonist of the story, a student attending Nijigasaki High School who supports the school idols. The gameplay includes story parts, training and improving the character cards, and playing “live shows” as rhythm games. (KLab Inc. 2020a; Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars Global Website 2020.)

4.4.2 Utano Princesama Shining Live

Utano Princesama Shining Live is a rhythm game based on Broccoli’s *Utano Princesama* series, and it has been co-developed with game developer KLab Inc., who is also known for the *Love Live!* game apps. The mobile game was released in Japan on August 28th 2017, followed by the global version in early 2018, and it reached 5 million downloads worldwide in October 2018 (the total including players who have downloaded the game more than once). It is part of the *Utano Princesama* franchise, which began as a romance visual novel, or *otome* game, series by Broccoli and Nippon Ichi Software, and the first game was released on PlayStation Portable in 2010. The franchise has then grown to include multiple games, anime series, music, and more. (Anime News Network 2016; Gamasutra 2018; KLab Inc. 2018b.)



Picture 2: Splash screen of *Utano Princesama Shining Live*

Utano Princesama Shining Live has eleven idol characters who the player can follow and communicate with, involving story parts and “live shows” as rhythm games. The two idol groups within the game are called *ST☆RISH (STARISH)* and *QUARTET NIGHT*. The game differs from the earlier *otome* games in the franchise, as they centered around the female protagonist and her relationship with the idols, but the protagonist is not part of this game. Instead, the player is invited to “Immerse yourself in a shining world of just you and your idols!” (Utano Princesama Shining Live Global Website).

4.5 About the Context

It is important to remember the context of this research, which is why I have chosen to discuss it within this chapter. Fernández-Vara introduced building blocks as a way to analyze a game, and I am following her thoughts on this, as discussed earlier. She divided building blocks, which help in an analysis, into three interrelated areas: the context, the game overview, and the formal aspects. The context includes the circumstances in which the game is produced and played, as well as other texts that may relate to it. Ignoring the context could lead to overlooking aspects that may be essential to understanding the text.

(Fernández-Vara 2015, 13–14.) Therefore, it is meaningful to remember that the chosen games in this research are produced in Japan for Japanese audience, where idol culture is more enwoven to everyday life, different from the Western audience. The games also have anime-styled visuals, which can connect them to otaku culture and bring certain type of audience to the games. Fernández-Vara also reminds that localization may change a game, such as a pun not understood if left in its original form (2015, 58), which I am aware when analyzing these translated games.

Relations to other media belongs to the building blocks of the context (Fernández-Vara 2015, 83), and it is important in this research, as both *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princessama Shining Live* are part of a franchise. This links to Japanese media mix, which is a system of media and commodities in relation to one another (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 15). The games could be further divided into the concept of *anime media mix*, which was introduced by Steinberg. The anime media mix refers to the deployment of a single work, character or narrative world across several mediums or platforms, and each media-commodity is also an advertisement for the other products in the franchise. (Steinberg 2012a, 141–142.) Other building blocks included *the fictional world of the game*, which is in the center of my research, and *representation*, which I am using as part of the categories in the analysis.

As I am using qualitative content analysis as the method, Krippendorff reminds that it is important to have a level of familiarity with the phenomena under consideration, in order to read and interpret the text (2013, 128). Therefore, it should be helpful that I am already familiar with the chosen games and their franchise, as it gives me more information on what I am looking at. My time in Japan and interest in the Japanese culture has also given me understanding of the idol culture, which I have deepened by reading the research introduced in the background chapter.

4.6 Research Question and About the Analysis

My research questions for this thesis is:

Q1. *How is the fictional idol world build in the idol games?*

This question drives into the details of the game's world, such as how idols are described in the game, and what is the player's part in this.

After deciding my research question and method, I had to decide what parts would be included as the data material. I am mostly concentrating on the main story parts of the two games, and I played seven chapters (each including around 10 episodes) of *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, and seven chapters (each including multiple episodes) of *Utano Princesama Shining Live*. Both games would have more chapters, but this amount already gave me plenty of material to analyze, and I decided this would fit the scope of the research. Also, in the case of *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, I felt that new chapters may not bring forth new information, and it would have taken time to level up enough to open next chapters. In order to have similar amount of data, I decided to stop playing *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* after seven chapters as well, as the games had given me already multiple pages of data.

As I am using qualitative content analysis, the next step, according to Schreier, was to build a coding frame, as this is at the heart of the method. Main categories of the coding frame are the aspects on which the analysis is focused, and identifying these can be done in concept-driven and data-driven ways. (Schreier 2012, 6, 59–60.) I used both ways to make the main categories, as I used my prior knowledge of the games (concept-driven way) and what was said in the material (data-driven way). Coding frame acts like a filter, so you should gather the material and mark parts that fit your interest, and leave everything else out (Schreier 2012, 62; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, n.p.).

While playing the games, I wrote down relevant parts and later color-coded them according to the main categories. Then I started dividing them into subcategories, which were developed from the material. Schreier reminds that segmenting material means dividing it into units in a way that each unit fits into one category of the coding frame. Coding frame should be *unidimensional*, meaning that each main category should capture

only one aspect of the material. *Mutual exclusiveness* of the frame refers to the subcategories, meaning that a unit of coding can only be assigned to one subcategory. (Schreier 2012, 72, 75, 127.) I kept these in mind when dividing the material. I found four main categories in the games, which I will continue to discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

5 FICTIONAL IDOL WORLDS IN *LOVE LIVE! SCHOOL IDOL FESTIVAL ALL STARS* AND *UTANO PRINCESAMA SHINING LIVE*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the analysis and findings on the chosen idol mobile games, *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live*. In the beginning I will introduce the categories that I found in the games. There are four main categories, *Idol*, *Player*, *Connections*, and *Representation*, each of them including different subcategories. After introducing the categories, I will move on to the categories and findings in the two games. I will start with *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and then continue to *Utano Princesama Shining Live*. I will not go too deeply into discussion on these categories yet, as this is done in more detail in chapter 6.

5.2 Category Descriptions

The four main categories and their subcategories are explained in the tables below. I have described each category shortly to show what they mean to capture from the material. These tables are introduced first in order to help to understand how the categories are built before discussing the categories found within the two games.

1.	Main category
	<p>Idol</p> <p><i>Idols in the game's fictional world. What is said about them and what do idol characters do and say? (Main story chapters of the game)</i></p>
Sub category	<p>Fans</p> <p><i>What is said about fans? How fans behave or how idol characters see them?</i></p>
	<p>Problems</p> <p><i>Are there problems or trouble the idol characters encounter? Or idols overall?</i></p>

	Work <i>What kind of work the idol characters do? How do they work?</i>
	Appearance <i>How idols should look or behave?</i>
	Feelings and Experiences <i>What do idol characters feel and what they experience?</i>

2.	Main category
	Player <i>Player character in the game. What kind of role the player has or what kind of character is the player supposed to be? (Main story chapters of the game)</i>
Sub category	Role <i>What is player's/player character's role in the game? What do they do?</i>
	Character <i>What kind of character is the player in the game? What is said about their appearance or personality?</i>

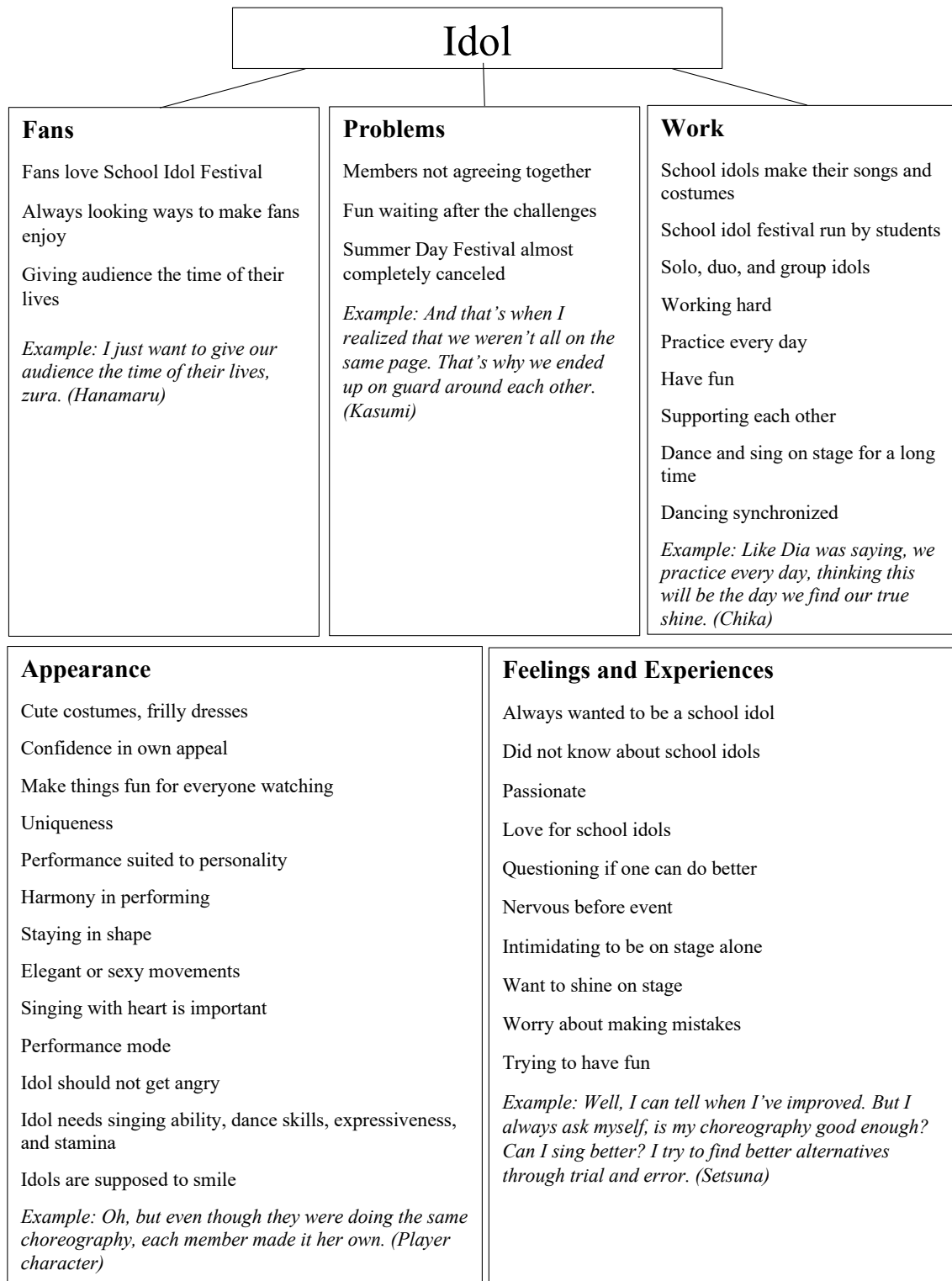
3.	Main category
	Connections <i>Does the story make connections to the game's franchise or real-life events? (Main story chapters of the game)</i>
Sub category	Earlier franchise <i>Is there mentions of the existing franchise? Is something better understood with prior knowledge?</i>
	Real-life <i>Are there connections to real-life events?</i>

4.	Main category
	Representation <i>How does the game overall represent itself as an idol game? (Other than story parts of the game)</i>
Sub category	Audiovisual <i>A look into the game's splash, download and home screens, which is what player sees first after opening the game. What is there to indicate that this is an idol world?</i>
	Gameplay Elements <i>What other elements are there to represent an idol world? What can player do?</i>

5.3 Categories found in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*

Idol-category is the biggest main category with five subcategories, which take a look into the idols in the game's fictional world. In *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* there was more material in subcategories *Work*, *Appearance* and *Feeling and Experiences* compared to *Fans* and *Problems* (Table 1). School idols in the game are mentioned to have cute costumes or frilly dresses, even though they are also expected to be unique with a performance suited to their personality. They can work as solo, duo or as a group. They are in harmony and their dancing is synchronized, which can be assumed to be the result of hard work and continuous practice. They should still have fun and they support each other, and make things fun for everyone watching. Idols should not get angry, but instead they should smile. They may have a performance mode compared to their normal self, and they need different skills, such as dancing and singing.

Table 1. Idol-category in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*



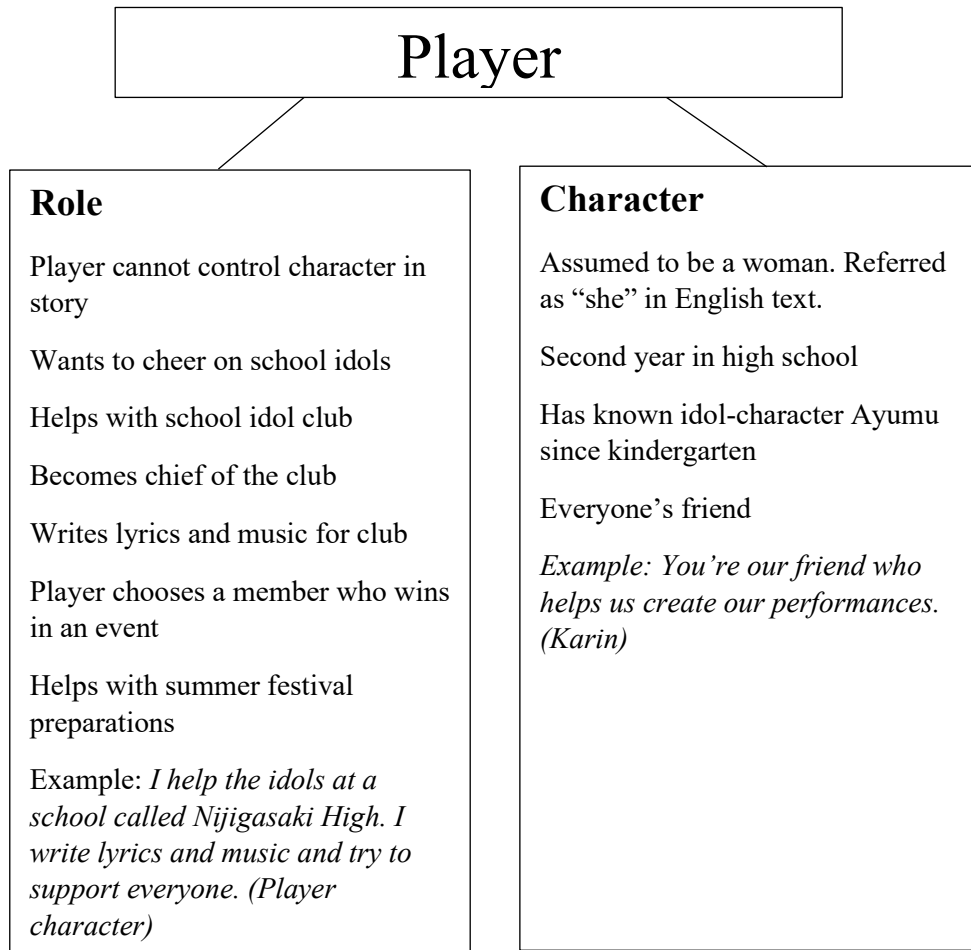
School idols are not mentioned to have such a wide variety of work that idols are known for, but instead they appear to focus on singing and dancing. This is probably due to the role of school idols, rather than being labeled as general idols. They do their own music and costumes without anyone visibly backing them up outside the school idol club.

Not much is said about fans of the school idols, and there are differences whether the idol characters were aware of school idols before becoming one or not. The idols still have passion for what they do, even though they can feel nervous before an event. They can also worry about making mistakes and whether they can do better. The problems encountered were about idol club members not agreeing with each other, which almost led the club to disband. A local event, which some of the characters participated in, almost got canceled, but these issues were eventually resolved. It was mentioned that the fun waiting for after overcoming the problems is special.

Player-category is focused on the player character of the game, and it is divided into *Role* and *Character* (Table 2). Player cannot control the character in the game's story part, but instead the character makes own decisions and player merely follows the story. There is one exception to this, when player is asked to decide who they send a message and this chosen character wins a competition they enter. The role for the player's character is to support and cheer the school idols, and write lyrics and music for the Nijigasaki School Idol Club.

The player character is assumed to be a woman and is referred to as "she" in the English text, but I cannot say whether Japanese version has this gendered pronoun. All characters shown in the game are female and the player character (protagonist) is portrayed as female in the new anime series about the Nijigasaki School Idol Club, called *Love Live! Nijigasaki Gakuen School Idol Doukougai* (2020). The character is said to be everyone's friend and she has known one of the idol characters since kindergarten.

Table 2. Player-category in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*



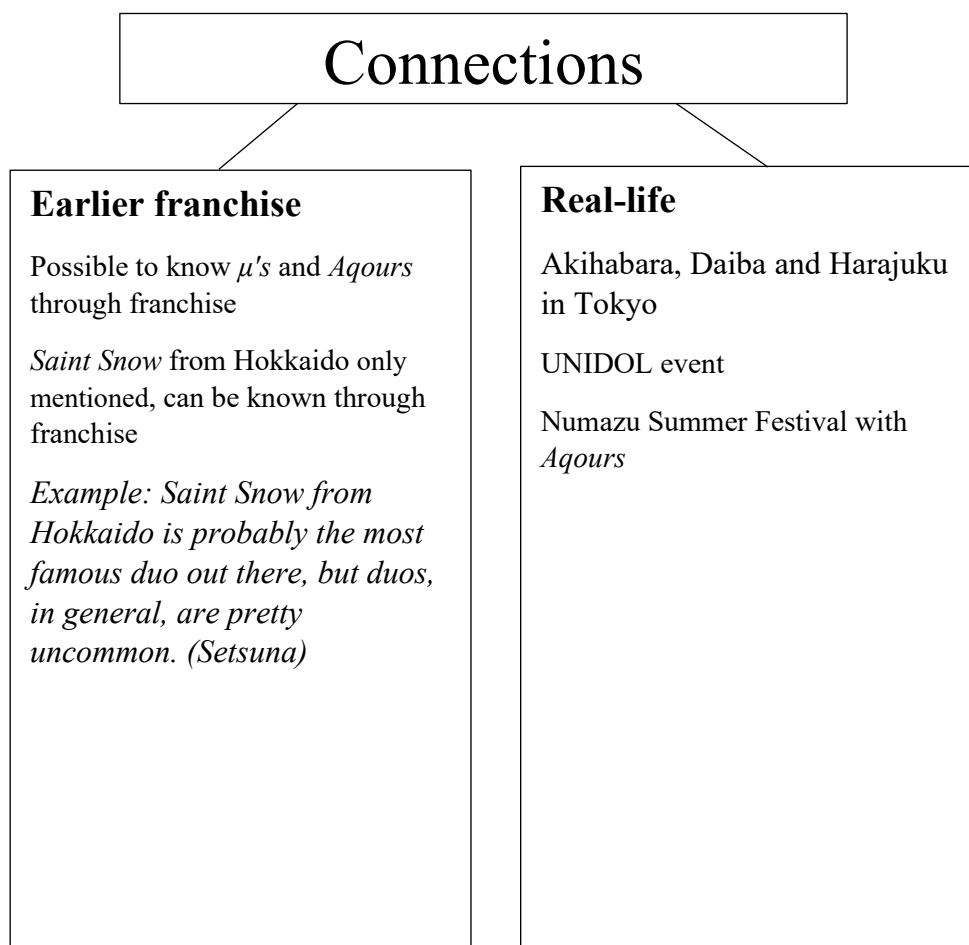
Connections-category is meant to bring forth how the game is connected to the existing franchise and real-life events (Table 3). The game includes three school idols groups, which are *Nijigasaki High School Idol Club*, *Aqours*, and *μ's*. *Aqours*, and *μ's* can already be known from the existing franchise, including the older mobile game and anime series, which tell their stories. The main story of the game also briefly mentions a group called *Saint Snow*, but does not bring further details. Players familiar with the franchise are still aware of this group, which has been introduced in the earlier franchise.

Yoshida has brought *Love Live!* anime series as an example of how idol anime intentionally confuses fiction and reality, and the idols are said to hang out in the “otaku” district of Tokyo, Akihabara (Galbraith 2016, 145). The game too mentions different districts in Tokyo, including Akihabara, Daiba and Harajuku. Galbraith mentions how we are not far from the media world of *Love Live!* as he introduces real-life competition

UNIDOL. UNIDOL started in year 2012, and it is a competition for university students who form groups and perform as idols, similar to the fictional world of *Love Live!*. UNIDOL is described to be an event, which brings together student groups who perform “copy dances of idol groups” and compete to be the number one in Japan. According to Galbraith, there has also been plans for HIGHDOL event featuring high school idols. (Galbraith 2016, 234–238.) The game’s school idols, however, make their own songs and assumedly choreographies too, instead of performing “copy dances”.

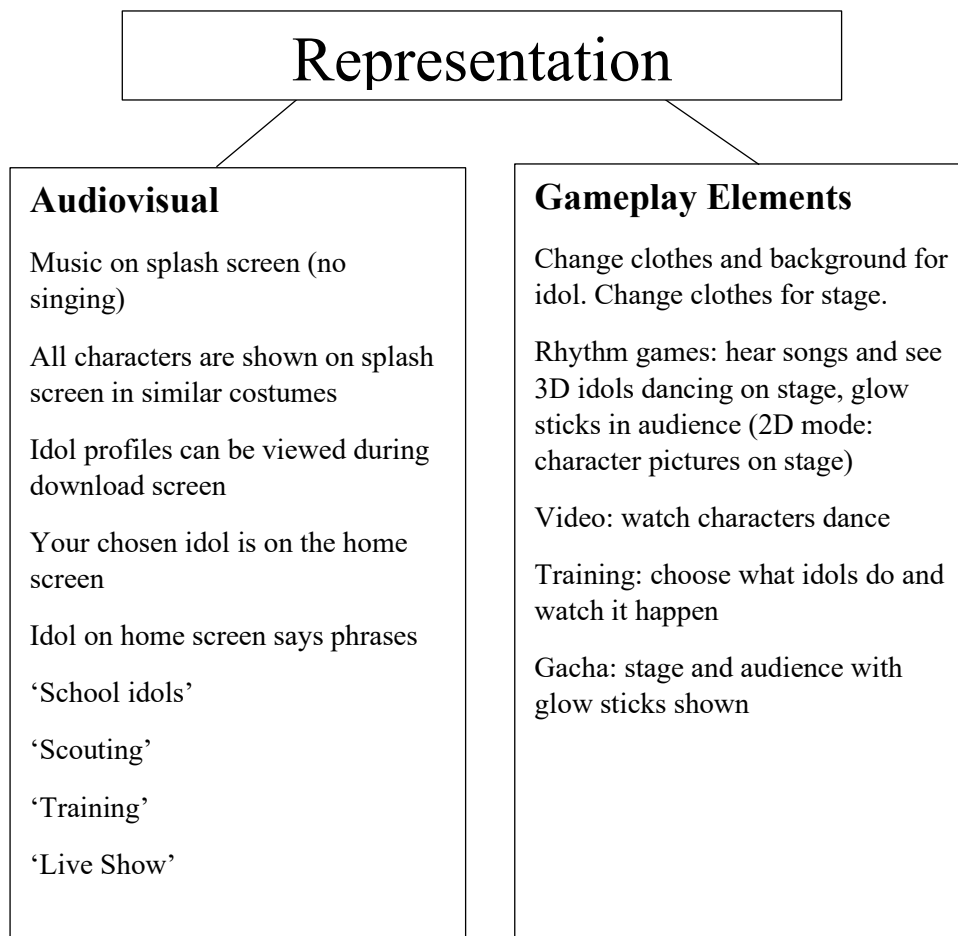
In the game, idol group *Aqours* performs at Numazu Summer Festival. This is a real-life festival where the voice actors of *Aqours* have truly performed. Interestingly, the festival, along with their performance, was cancelled in 2018 due to a typhoon, which holds similarities to the game’s story. (Anime News Network 2018, 2019.) In the game, released in Japan in 2019, a typhoon cancels the first day of the festival, but with the help of the town people the second day can go on as planned and the group is allowed to perform, unlike their real-life voice actors.

Table 3. Connections-category in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*



The final main category is *Representation*, which takes a look at the other elements of the game than the main story (Table 4). Subcategory *Audiovisual* is focused on the splash, download and home screens of the game, which are what the player comes across to first. What makes the game seem like an idol game with fictional idol world? First, when the player opens the game, they are greeted with a splash screen with the idol characters dressed in similar clothes (Picture 1). There is also music on the background, but no singing. During a download screen the player can view profiles of the school idol characters, which give information such as their birthday and blood type (Picture 3), the blood type being linked to personality in Japan (Japan Today 2012). Then the player can access the home screen (Picture 4), which has an idol character in the center, occasionally talking to the player. It is possible to change the character, their clothes and the background, which the player can acquire while playing the game.

Table 4. Representation-category in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*





Picture 3: Download screen of Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars



Picture 4: Home screen of Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars

The home screen has titles, such as *School idols*, *Scouting*, *Training*, and *Live Show*, which links it to an idol world, instead of calling them with different names, such as Characters or Rhythm Game. While playing a rhythm game (*Live Show*), the player gets to see the 3D characters dancing on a stage, with occasionally showing glow sticks in the audience, giving the feel of a real live concert. The player can also choose to watch a “music video” of the characters performing without the rhythm game element. It is also possible to “train” the idols (*Training*), which shows the 2D characters swimming, or running, for example. *Scouting* is actually a *gacha* mechanism (“a random-type item provider system in digital games”, which can be paid for or free (Fujihara and Shibuya 2020, 1)), that is for getting new character cards, and this too is done on “a stage”.

5.4 Categories found in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*

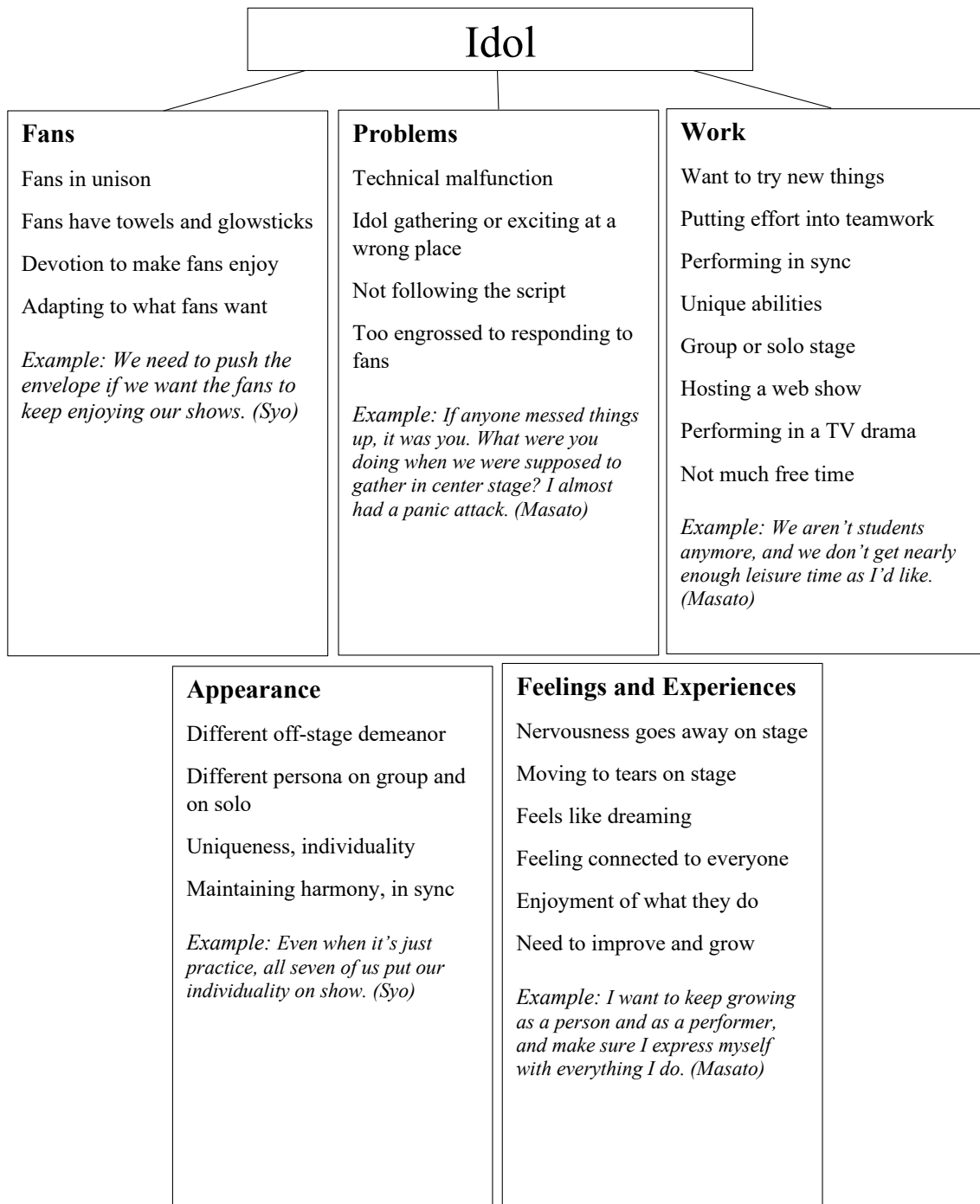
In *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, the biggest subcategories within the *Idol*-category are *Work* and *Feelings and Experiences* (Table 5). Idols in the story would like to try new things and they put effort in their teamwork. They perform in sync and each have unique abilities, which can be shown during group or solo stage. They may also have different personas whether they perform as solo or as a part of a group, and they may nevertheless have different off-stage demeanor. Apart from live shows, they also host a web show and perform in TV dramas, which could be the reason for them to have not much of a free time. They still feel enjoyment of what they do and might move to tears during live shows. They feel connected to everyone and being an idol can feel like dreaming. They still do feel the need to improve and grow.

Unlike school idol characters in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, the idols in *Utano Princesama Shining Live* have a wide variety of work. They clearly have an agency behind them, and most likely their songs and costumes are provided for them, making them less independent than the school idols. The physical appearance is not described in detail, which differs from the variety of details with the female school idols.

The idol characters are devoted to their fans and adapt to what fans want. Their fans are in unison and they are said to have towels and glow sticks during live shows, probably showing their support for the idols. An idol could also be too engrossed to respond to

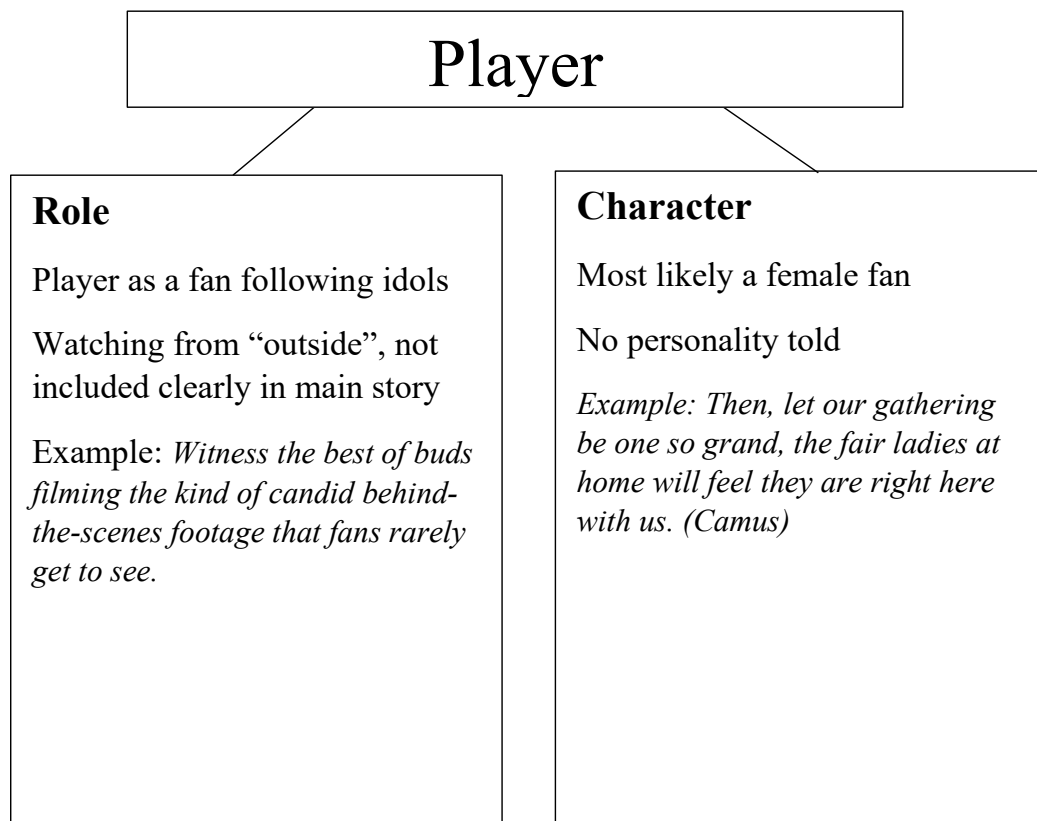
their fans during live shows, which is one of the problems encountered. They also experienced technical malfunction and the idols not following their written script, or they were standing on a different place than planned.

Table 5: Idol-category in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*



Player-category is relatively small within its subcategories *Role* and *Character*, as not much is said about the player’s character (Table 6). The player’s role can be assumed to be a fan following the idol characters. Player is watching the main story from the “outside”, without being directly involved in the story. The main story chapters also have explanations, which positions the player as someone “listening” or “watching” the idol characters on different events. The player character is most likely assumed to be a female, as the characters repeatedly talk to their female fans following them at the moment, maybe assuming that men would not follow them. The player character shows no personality during the main story, as they are not involved in it, and do not talk or visibly act.

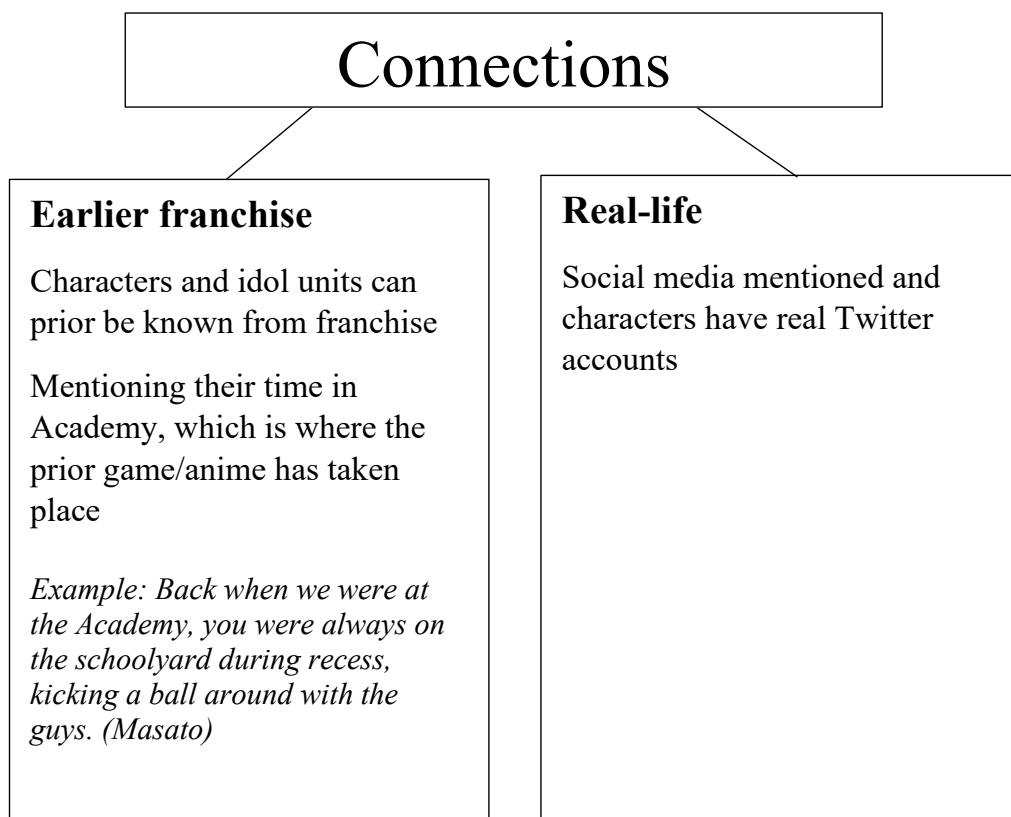
Table 6: Player-category in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*



Connections-category shows the relations to the existing franchise and real-life events (Table 7). The game has two idol groups, *ST☆RISH* and *QUARTET NIGHT*, which are both known from the earlier franchise, including console games and anime series. Earlier part of the franchise includes the time period, when the idol characters of *ST☆RISH* were still students of a musical Academy. This is briefly mentioned in the mobile game, but the whole story behind them is left for the players to see in other parts of the franchise.

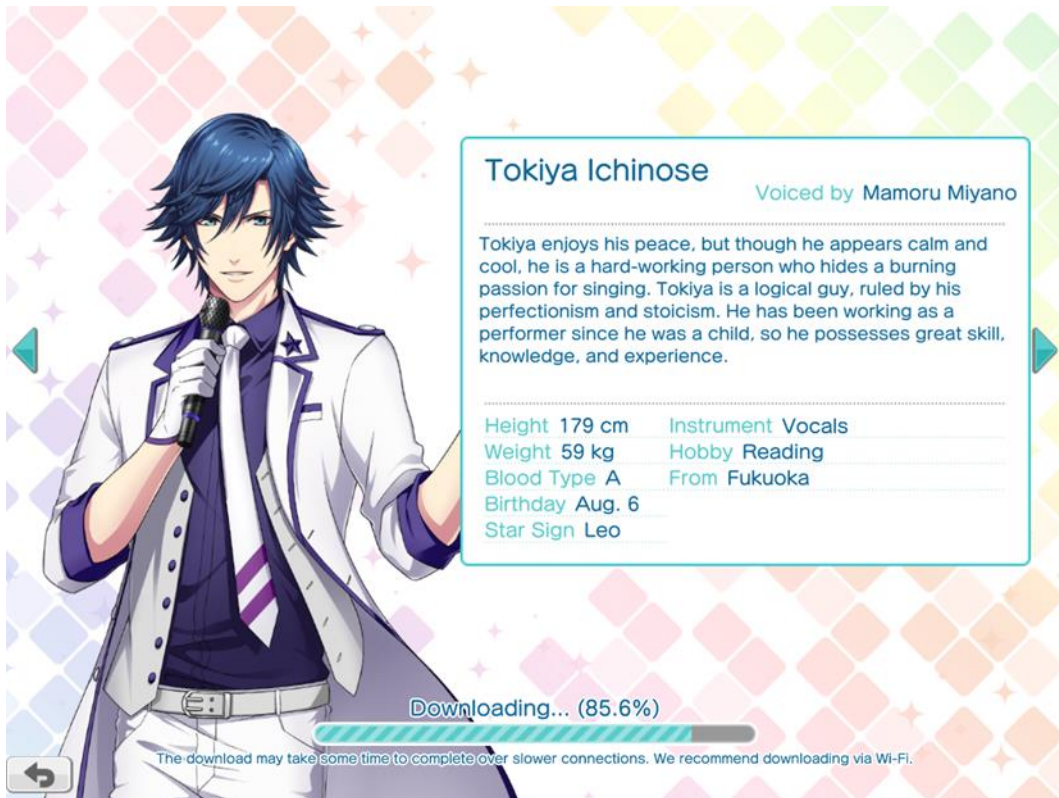
The game does not seem to have such connection to real-life events as *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, but they still briefly mention social media accounts. Sakamoto and Nakajima have looked into *Utano Princesama* series as transmedia games, and they state how each character's existence is produced by goods, events, and Twitter conversations in the real world (2014, 791). There are Twitter-accounts made for the idol characters, as if they were real.

Table 7: Player-category in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*



Finally, the *Representation*-category involves the other aspects than the main story of the game (Table 8). When a player opens the game app, they see a splash screen with the idol characters in similar group costumes (Picture 2). There is a song playing in the background, and the player can hear the singing of the idol characters too. Similarly to *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, the player can look at idol profiles during download screen (Picture 5). The profiles show more information in *Utano Princessama Shining Live*, and they even include the voice actor, which makes the characters feel more fictional, as there is someone behind them. The voice actors behind the characters may be mentioned in this game for their popularity, and for example Mamoru Miyano has his own singing career alongside his voice acting career, bringing possible fans to the game.

The home screen is centered on an idol character, who occasionally says phrases to the player (picture 6). It is possible to change the idol along with their costumes and background, as long as the player has gathered different versions by playing the game. There are titles, such as *Idol*, *Live Show*, *Photo*, and *Lesson* to give a feeling of an idol world. *Live Show* is a rhythm game, where the player can play and hear songs, while seeing 2D idol character cards on stage, different from the 3D characters in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, but nevertheless still showing a live stage with audience. *Photo* is the gacha element of the game, where the player can feel like taking a picture of an idol through camera lens, before getting their character card. The game also holds a real camera option, which allows the player to take real pictures with a chosen idol in them.

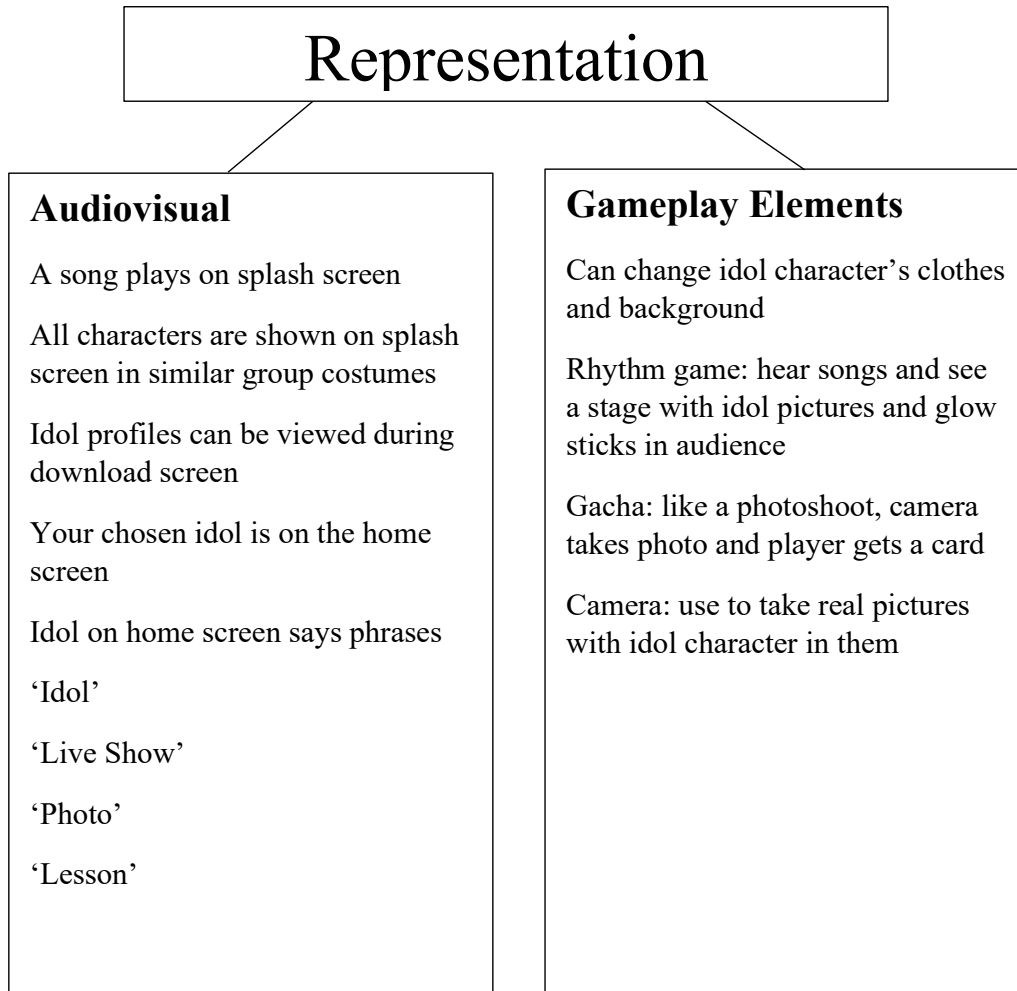


Picture 5: Download screen of Utano Princessama Shining Live



Picture 6: Home screen of Utano Princessama Shining Live

Table 8: Representation-category in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*



6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will discuss the findings on the two games in further detail. I will bring out the similarities and differences between the games, as well as reflect on how these connect to earlier research and discussion on real and fictional or virtual idols.

Looking into the *Idol*-category, there are certain differences and similarities found between the games' stories. In both games the idol characters are devoted to make their fans enjoy, and the idols themselves feel enjoyment of what they do, even though they try to improve even more. The idols also put effort in teamwork and support each other, and they perform in sync. It is possible for idols to perform in a group or do solo work. Both games also mention the characters having limited free-time from their practice and work. Even though the limited free-time was only briefly mentioned, in the case of *Utano Princesama Shining Live*, it could be seen as a negative issue, as character Masato mentions "We aren't students anymore, and we don't get nearly enough leisure time as I'd like."

In *Utano Princesama Shining Live* the idols are described to host a web show and perform in TV drama, which is not within the school idol work in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*, but the school idols make their own clothes and music, different from *Utano Princesama Shining Live*. Real-life idols tend to do a variety of work (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2), similarly to the male idol characters. The male idols in *Utano Princesama Shining Live* seem to be part of an agency, which most likely provides them with music and clothes, while the school idols are independent. This independence is quite different in comparison to real idol group AKB48, who are said to rarely get to voice their own ideas and opinions (Kiuchi 2017, 31). When looking at the problems the characters encounter, there can be seen a difference between the events. In *Utano Princesama Shining Live* the problems are limited to what happened on stage, such as members exiting at the wrong place, while in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* the problems occur outside of the stage, such as a typhoon threatening Summer Festival performance.

I have discussed the subjects found in subcategories concerning *Fans*, *Problems*, *Work*, and *Feelings and Experiences*, but the biggest difference could be seen in the

Appearance-subcategory, which is a lot wider with the female idols. In both games it is mentioned that the idols are unique and can hold different stage persona or performance mode. *Utano Princesama Shining Live* does not describe much how the idols should look or behave, whereas *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* mentions cute costumes, sexy movements, staying in shape and how idols are supposed to smile. As discussed earlier in this thesis, Aoyagi has studied Japanese female idols and states how until early 1990s the most common feature was cuteness. Then the cute-style started declining and there started to be young female performers projecting more sensual and powerful images. (Aoyagi 2003, 148–152.)

Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars could be seen projecting both of these styles with cute costumes and elegant or sexy dance moves. Real idol groups today can still be expected to be pure and innocent, as in the case of AKB48, even though they can be sexualized for promotional purposes (Kiuchi 2017, 42). Less details on appearance for the male idols in *Utano Princesama Shining Live* could make it seem like male idols have less conditions than female idols, but Darling-Wolf's research on real group SMAP discussed how male idols too need to have correct "good guy" behavior (Darling-Wolf 2004, 363). This does not appear to clearly affect the virtual idols, as the male idols' behavior did not get attention in *Utano Princesama Shining Live*.

Uniqueness and individuality of the members are also mentioned in the games, and the characters have detailed character profiles within the games. With real-life idol groups, the members can have their own fans who support them over others members (Kiuchi 2017, 31). This individuality for virtual idols could be used to sell more merchandise, as there is a wide range of merchandise specified for each member of their own, such as pouches or towels. This could encourage a fan to collect multiple similar items, if they wish to own the item of more than one member.

Idols in Japan can be female or male and they tend to be young (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2), which also applies to these idols in the fictional worlds, who all seem young. The career of most idols, especially for female idols, is short-lived and may last no longer than three years (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 16). The school idols in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* are likely active only during their time in high school, but this was not discussed within the story chapters studied in this research. Even though the age is not discussed within the games, it seems to be important for the current *Love Live!*

production, as the producers announced auditions for new characters in the series. Those eligible for audition had to be females residing in Japan, aged between 15 and 22 years old, and they needed to be unmarried. It seems that the production was not only looking for voice-actors, but for members to form an idol unit, as the prior voice actors have performed in real-life concerts as well. (Japan Today 2020.) *Utano Princesama Shining Live* brings closer attention to the voice actors within the game, as it mentions their names within character profiles seen during download-page. *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* does also mention the voice actors if player chooses to access the profiles within the game, but they are not shown similarly on the download-screen.

The voice actors in *Utano Princesama Shining Live* may be more visible for their popularity from other series. These days voice actors appear more in public and this has led to the popularity of voice actors themselves, which makes fans follow voice actors over to the series (Yamasaki 2014, 199; Kim 2009, 170).

The two games do not really mention any negative issues within the idol work, except for the limited free-time. Part of this could be due to the independence of the school idols, who do not have an agency behind them. But it should be noted that both of the games are developed by KLab Inc., which could cause them to have certain similarities, even though *Utano Princesama Shining Live* is based on Broccoli's *Utano Princesama* series. The characters in both games do feel the need to improve themselves, which could be caused by a competition. In real life, idols may need to compete within the group as well as between different groups (Kiuchi 2017, 37), which could make the need to continue improving oneself.

Player's role is different in the games, as with the male idols the player is "outside" following them and not part of the story. With the female idols the player is part of the story, supporting the idols, even though the player has minimal control to what actually happens in the story. In both games the player character is assumed to be a female. This brings an interesting difference to the ideas of Black, who studied *IDOLM@STER* series, and stated how the game caters to fantasies of ownership over idols by reflecting gendered power relations between male music producers and young girl idols, as the player character is a male producer managing female idols. He argues that an idol that exists only as digital data, which can be "owned" and manipulated, promises a more intimate relationship than is possible with real idols. (Black 2012, 220.) Black may also be

referring to a male gaze where the women are displayed as objects by a heterosexual male viewer (Griffin 2017, np.). In *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live* the player is instead given a female role, and they either follow the male idols as a fan or support the female idols as their friend. But the games may bring a more intimate relationship with idols, which is seen already on the home screen with an idol greeting the player specifically, which could not be managed with real idols.

Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars is more connected to real-life events, which goes along with Yoshida's argument of how the idol anime of the series intentionally confuses fiction and reality (Galbraith 2016, 145). *Utano Princesama Shining Live* does not connect similarly to real-life events, but the game brought up social media and the characters really have their own Twitter accounts, and the game enables the player to photograph the characters in real world with augmented reality. Both games give small hints from the earlier franchise and at least part of the characters can be known from before. This can encourage the players to look for the other products in the franchise, as encouraged in the Japanese media mix.

Representation-category shows many similarities, as in both games' splash screen the characters are shown in similar costumes with music in the background, and the download screens allow the player to look at character profiles. The similar clothes can represent the harmony in the group, while the character profiles bring forth their individuality. In the home screen the player always gets a chosen idol with chosen clothes to greet them. Rhythm games are enclosed as "live shows", even though only the female idols can be seen dancing in 3D while the player is playing the rhythm game. *Utano Princesama Shining Live* is the only one to have the option to use real camera and take pictures with an idol character in them, which brings the characters into the real world. Sakamoto and Nakajima studied how the sense of existence of *Utano Princesama* characters is produced by goods, events and Twitter conversations in real-life (2014, 791). This could be said to be continued by the augmented reality option, which lets the player to bring the characters with them to the real world, mixing sense of fiction and reality.

This study was meant to bring more focus to the idol game genre, which does not seem to have much research on it yet. Idol game genre has unique features that connect to the Japanese culture, making it also a cultural discussion. The idol genre is one of the popular genres in mobile in Japan (Shibuya et al. 2019, 3) with multiple games on the market, but

the idol games have mostly not found their way onto the Western market. The only Japanese idol mobile games available in English, which I am aware of, are the two *Love Live! School Idol Festival* games and *Utano Princessama Shining Live*, but the console versions in the franchise are not available in English. This could be the reason why there is not yet much research available on idol games, at least in English, as the games are not that visible outside of Japan. This still does not mean that idol games would only be played in Japan. Quick internet search shows English tutorials to play the Japanese *THE IDOLM@STER Cinderella Girls: Starlight Stage*, and the official YouTube channel for *IDOLiSH7* has recognized international fans and may offer English subtitles for their videos. These franchises too are part of the Japanese media mix, which can make them more visible, as they can be found multiple ways, such as seeing anime based on the franchise.

One reason, why the idol games may not have found their way into the Western market, could be their cultural context. Idol culture has its unique features that may not be familiar to players outside of Japan. But with the growing number of games with anime-visuals in the Western market, it could be that more idol games will be released as well. Similar anime-styled mobile game about girl bands, *BanG Dream! Girls Band Party!*, has a global release and there are plans to release a game about DJs, *D4DJ Groovy Mix*, in English as well (D4DJ Official Website 2021). These games without such clear cultural background may be safer choices to bring in English, but they could also create market to new idol games as well.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis asked, how fictional idol worlds are built in chosen Japanese idol mobile games. The two games researched for this study were global versions of *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* and *Utano Princesama Shining Live* games. These games are also a part of a franchise, which is why the concept of Japanese media mix was introduced in background section. The background of this study also involves work on real-life idols and fictional or virtual idols, and the uniqueness of Japanese voice actors, who do not anymore stay behind the scenes. I also discussed earlier studies on idol games and other similar anime-styled games. In order to analyze the games, I introduced Fernández-Vara's idea of building blocks, and as a method I chose qualitative content analysis. The building blocks meaningful to this study, *the fictional world of the game*, *representation*, and *relations to other media*, were used within the research question and categories found in the games. There were four main categories found within the two games: *Idol*, *Player*, *Connections*, and *Representation*, with different subcategories within them.

Idol-category focused on the idols in the game's fictional world, and had five subcategories: *Fans*, *Problems*, *Work*, *Appearance*, and *Feelings and Experiences*. In both games the idols were devoted to their fans, and *Utano Princesama Shining Live* also mentioned idols adapting to what fans want. In real-life idols can be hugely connected to their fans, who may also favor individual idols within a group, causing competition (Kiuchi 2017, 30, 37). The games' worlds did not discuss issues, such as competitiveness among idols, but in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* idols did have disagreements with each other, though fun was said to wait after challenges. Their performance was also almost cancelled due to typhoon, whereas *Utano Princesama Shining Live* members only faced problems during performances, such as technical malfunction.

Utano Princesama Shining Live idols had more variety in their work, similarly to real idols, but school idols in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* were more independent, making their own music and clothes, for example. Idols in both games were mentioned to either practice every day or to not have much free-time. The appearance of *Utano Princesama Shining Live*'s male idols was not really described, whereas in *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* that was the biggest subgroup. Similar for the idols in both

games was that they were supposed to be unique, perform in harmony, and may have had different performance mode. The idols also felt the need to improve and grow, and felt nervous before stage or event. They were still described to be passionate or trying to have fun (*Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*), or just enjoying what they do (*Utano Princesama Shining Live*).

Player-category had two subcategories: *Role* and *Character*. In *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars* the player was part of the story, supporting the idol characters, while in *Utano Princesama Shining Live* the player was given the role of a fan following the idols from the “outside”. In both games the player character was presumably assumed to be a female, as they were referred to as “she”, or grouped in “ladies” watching the idols from home. This was different from Black’s research on how *THE IDOLM@STER* series reflect the gendered power relations between male music producers (player character) and commodified idol girls (2012, 220). The games in this research did not give a male role to the player, and the player is supporting the idol characters on their side or outside of the screen as a fan.

Connections-category involved *the earlier franchise* and how the games connect to *real-life*. Both games involved characters that can be known through the earlier franchise, and briefly mentioned either idol group or background that can be better known if the player is familiar with the earlier franchise. In *Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*’ case, two main idol groups could have been known from the earlier games and anime series, but they also introduced a new group for the game. The game also had connections to real-life UNIDOL event and Numazu Summer Festival, where idol group *Aqours* performed in the game and the voice actors in real-life. *Utano Princesama Shining Live* did not have such clear connections to real-life, but the characters have real Twitter accounts. This mixture of virtual and real has been earlier observed by Sakamoto and Nakajima, who have discussed how *Utano Princesama* characters existence is produced and expanded to real world through goods, events and Twitter conversations (Sakamoto and Nakajima 2014, 791). Yoshida has also argued how idol anime, such as *Love Live!*, intentionally confuses fiction and reality, and the virtual idols are reproduced by the voice actors’ bodies during live concerts (Galbraith 2016, 145).

Representation-category looked into how the games overall represent itself as an idol game, with subcategories of *Audiovisual* and *Gameplay Elements*. This can help the

player to distinguish the game from other similar anime-styled games, and gives the player a feeling of an idol world. In both games' splash screens, the idol characters are clothed similarly, representing the harmony said about idol members. Idol profiles, showing the individuality of each character, could be viewed while the game downloads. *Utano Princesama Shining Live* also made the voice actors visible on the download screen, which shows the fictional side of the characters, as someone is clearly behind them, and the voice actors may also bring their fans to the game.

The games have also named the game features suitable to the idol world, such as calling rhythm games as Live Shows. Idol characters also greet the player on the home screen, which can create a closer connection to the idol, as suggested by Black, who argues that virtual idols that player can "own" hold a promise of closer relationship than possible with a real idol (2012, 220). The gameplay elements of the game also help to make the idol world more visible to the player, as the player may be able to see 3D idol characters dancing on screen (*Love Live! School Idol Festival All Stars*), or bring the characters to real world with augmented reality (*Utano Princesama Shining Live*).

The idol worlds built in the games showed similarities not only within the two games, but with real world as well. There were differences as well, such as the independence of school idols, even though the idea connects to real-life event UNIDOL. The games also did not bring much discussion on the possible negative sides of the idol industry and world, which can make them more like a positive fantasy. The games in question still do not stay completely fictional, as there are different ways to bring the characters to the real world, such as Twitter accounts or concerts held by voice actors.

Both of the games have been developed by the same company KLab Inc., which can bring limitations to this research, as certain similarities could be caused by this connection, even though *Utano Princesama Shining Live* is based on Broccoli's *Utano Princesama* series. This limitation could not be avoided with the scope of this study and the limited choice on English-translated idol mobile games. It would have been interesting to look further into games that have Japanese-only releases, but that was not possible within this research. This research could be further developed by adding more idol mobile games and analyzing the categories found on the games from different companies.

Future research could also look further to the mixture of reality and virtual. This could be researched in different ways, such as featuring the augmented reality elements of some games, or the voice actors' part of the series, as they perform the game's songs in real concerts. The research would not have to be limited on idol mobile games, as there are similar games, such as *BanG Dream! Girls Band Party!*, which concentrates on girl bands and has four groups to actually perform live concerts (BanG Dream! Official Website 2020).

With this thesis I wanted to bring focus to the idol game genre, which has its connection to unique Japanese idol culture, while the games also connect to anime culture and Japanese media mix with their wide franchises. There would be several ways to further continue the research on the idol genre, or on similar games, which could bring new information for discussion.

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