



# Yuri Game: Romance and Characterization in Gameplay

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**Abstract.** Yuri games are generally considered as a category of games that the theme of them focus on yuri relationship and stories between characters rather than gameplay. The concept of yuri originates from Japan and refers to the intense emotional connection in female/female relationship regardless of the sexual orientation of participants. This research explores the method of gameplay in yuri games and the way gameplay can influence the characterization of game heroines, thus have an impact on the story-telling of the whole romance as well as the player experience. The analysis focuses on several typical cases of yuri games.

**Keywords:** Yuri game · Gameplay · Romantic relationship · Visual novel · Interactive movie · Characterization

## 1 Introduction

Yuri games are generally considered as a category of games that the theme of them focus on yuri relationship between women, regardless of their game genre, though a considerable of yuri games are interactive novels or visual novels (*Flowers -Le volume sur printemps-*), which are substantially the same genre, and interactive movie games (*Life is Strange series*), while some yuri games are Japanese role-play games (*Night of Azure series*).

The term Yuri is a Japanese word which means lily flower, first used in Japanese manga to describe romantic or sexual relationships between girls or women, and nowadays it is commonly used in a variety of fields including anime, manga series, movies, fan fictions, and also games. It can be used to refer to female/female relationship in which every one of the participants can be both lesbian or not. The women in yuri relationships might be lovers, friends, family members, teammates or even enemies. This term concentrates on the intensity of emotional connection built by the participants, and the romance they might experience together, as well as the physical reaction, during the process of all the phase of the relationship: its formation, maintenance, evolution, even destruction, more than the sexual orientation of women involved. Meanwhile, the gender or age of creators who build up the yuri connection of characters does not matter, and so does the audience who can enjoy yuri relationship in all kinds of creative works, the only important thing is their perception towards the charters and their interactions.

As for games, it is widely accepted that both yuri games and games with yuri elements exist. Yuri elements in games regularly refer to a wide range of game contents, including intimate friendship between heroines or supporting roles; players can choose their own gender and getting along well with other female roles; same-sex marriage or family allowed in game; one or more of the supporting characters are lesbian or bisexual; all characters in game are female, etc.

Comparing to absolute yuri games, games with yuri elements are more diverse in game genre. It is much easier to find yuri elements in popular genre like simulation game (*Stardew Valley*), role-play game (*Mass Effect* series), roguelike game (*Undertale*), fighting game (*Skullgirls*), first-person shooter game (*Overwatch*), etc. Most of the games with yuri elements do not focus on romance or interaction of characters, instead, these games concentrate more on gameplay and world view even without any romance between roles.

On the contrary, the most important part of yuri games is the romantic relationship (can be called *ship* or *CP* in short) between heroines, and in order to build up the relationship steadily, every part of game should make sense to the characterization: not only the lines spoken by roles and the appearance created by artists but also what players can do in the gameplay is to serve the story telling as well as authenticity of characters. Thus, it is obvious that the amount of yuri games is far less than that of games with yuri elements, which can be part of the reason for the narrow range of game genre that yuri games have chosen.

Although the concept of yuri comes from Japanese, there are different themes of yuri games completed in America, Europe and China. Nevertheless, there is a typical theme of yuri story which is frequently chosen by Japanese yuri game but rarely by games from other countries. It is always a story happens in an imaginary westernized Christian girl school and about schoolgirls who pair with girls from elder school grades (the president of student union and her assistants could always be important supporting roles) each other for instruction and will never leave the school environment during the story. It is a classic story type originated from Japanese yuri novel and has been recomposed in diverse media including manga, anime and game. Two of the most famous series with the girl's school theme is the *A Kiss for the Petals* series and the *Flowers* series. The former one is completely a visual novel without any gameplay while the latter one constructs an innovative form of showing how much other characters like the heroine if players make different choices based on visual novel.

Another recommended yuri game, *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*, also based on visual novel system, is about the daily life of a girl bartender in a cyberpunk world however. The gameplay is well designed to display what a bartender can do in a society of advanced technology and a state of war, while the emotion connection of heroine with both customers and boss of the bar can be influenced by every step player have made.

In spite of visual novel, interactive movie shows more potential in simulating immersive atmosphere, of which *Life is Strange* series is an amazing example. Though there is obvious weakness in the ending chapter, its prequel *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* makes up for it in some circumstances. More analysis of gameplay in yuri game cases will show in other parts of the article.

## 2 Yuri Games and Games with Yuri Elements

### 2.1 The Origin of Yuri

The word *Yuri* is the romanization of Japanese word ヲリ(ori) or ユリ(yuri), which means lily flower and is frequently used as names of girls in Japan. In 1970s, as the concept of *Bara*, the romanization of Japanese word rose flower, refers love and relationship between men, yuri was first mentioned to describe imitate female/female relationship in Japanese magazines. However, the culture of ambiguous or explicit intimacy between girls in Japan can be traced back to the beginning of 20th century when *Girl's Novels* were popular in school girls. At that time, students would like to pair with elder ones to establish an imitate relationship called *Sis* or *Sister* in girls' school. These couples of girl might act just like lesbian lovers or real sisters with consanguinity, and were both the loyal readers and the source of inspiration of *Girl's Novels*. One of most famous *Girl's Novels* writers was Kawabata Yasunari, whose novel *Otome no Minato* had won considerable popularity among teenage girls when published. Therefore, romance happening between girls couple in girls' school has become a classical theme in Japanese novel, manga and anime till today.

With the development of history and popular culture, works featuring romance between women have expanded all kinds of topics and backgrounds from school life to career life or magical fantasy. But when it comes to other countries beyond Japan, fans of these works have different opinions on the definition of the theme. The term yuri was used to infer porn works in Japan decades ago, while *shoujoai*, means *Girls' Love*, was used in the same way in western countries. What's more, GL, short for *Girls' Love*, refers to lesbian porn novels and manga on Chinese internet, while *Les*, short for lesbian, is used in the same way in Japan. It is a complete chaos and supporters of each term quarrel about the definition and the usage of these terms everywhere.

Fortunately, the jargon yuri has been widely accept to describe love and other imitate relationship (like loyal friendship) between women in fictional works nowadays. Whether the protagonists are lesbian or not, their intimacy and experience together is the real one, which is what really matters to this research.

### 2.2 Yuri Games

As the name suggests, yuri games focus on the romantic relationship of characters, and the romance itself is the only important thing the game wants to impress players. Just like other genre of fictional works, impressive ship (short for romantic relationship) based on attractive characters, meanwhile an unforgettable romance can contribute to the characterization of heroines a lot. Compared with novels or movies, games have more agency for players and more methods for developers to build the backgrounds and personalities. However, it brings more challenges to tell a story or create authentic characters at the same time. One of the writer of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, Zak Garriss, mentioned in an interview about the challenges when writing interactive narrative:

“The more agency we give you, the harder it is to create cinematic peaks” [3].

It can explain part of the reason why most of well-known yuri games are visual novels and interactive movies (the following Table 1 lists Top 10 English Yuri Games selected by a game website in 2016, all of the listed ones are visual novel), which are both narrative-focused genre of games. Another possible explanation can be the convenience of making visual novels with game engines free for commercial use like *KiriKiri* or *Ren'Py*, as well as the limited cost comparing with other game genre: only story scripts and 2D graphics can satisfy the minimum needs of a visual novel game. Therefore, it is welcomed by indie developers, especially those whose interests are not so common.

**Table 1.** Top 10 english yuri games selected by a game website in 2016 [14].

Rank	Title	Development company	Game genre
10	Sugar's Delight	Neko★Soft	Visual Novel
9	A Kiss for the Petals – Remembering How We Met	Fuguriya	Visual Novel
8	Dahlia	Cosmillica	Visual Novel
7	Lonely Yuri	Yoru no Hitsuji	Visual Novel
6	Highway Blossoms	Alienworks	Visual Novel
5	Sacrament of the Zodiac: The Confused Sheep and the Tamed Wolf	Kuro Irodoru Yomiji	Visual Novel
4	Flowers – Le volume sur printemps –	Innocent Grey	Visual Novel
3	A Little Lily Princess	Hanabira	Visual Novel
2	Nurse Love Addiction	Kogado Studio	Visual Novel
1	Kindred Spirits on the Roof	Liar-soft	Visual Novel

(Though the ranking of yuri games above may not authoritative enough, it can also show the great percentage of visual game among yuri games.)

### 2.3 Games with Yuri Elements

Due to the reasons either mentioned above or not, both the amount and the genre of yuri games are not satisfying for yuri fans. In order to enjoy yuri in more kinds of games, fans begin to search yuri elements in games in which romantic relationship between women is not the theme. In some circumstances these games have been called yuri games, either, while comparing with games themed yuri, the definition of yuri

games has been extended as generalized yuri games. Take *Overwatch* for example. Several lesbian and gay characters in *Overwatch* cannot change the fact that it is a multiplayer first-person shooter game in which background stories and imitate relationship of characters' matter not as much as the intensity of their battle skills, though their existence might be attractive towards LGBT players and yuri fans. To avoid confusion, these type of games will be defined as games with yuri games.

The range of yuri elements can be extremely extensive, including almost every part of game that can remind players of yuri and offer a reasonable background for yuri stories. Female protagonist games with female supporting roles who get along well with the protagonist are welcomed yuri elements, as well as at least one of the female characters is lesbian or bisexual and it has been confirmed in game explicitly (better with a past yuri romance whether the past yuri partner shows up in the game or not). When it comes to a yuri element judgment with less strictness, customized gender characters with female supporting roles in game is another choice.

In fact, not all the yuri fans are also visual novel/interactive movie fans, and it is a dilemma to choose games with great yuri romance and games with diverse gameplay at the same time. It is the reason why yuri fans will keep searching for yuri elements in games that are not themed yuri relationship until there are as many games of genre beyond visual novels/interactive movie themed yuri as visual novels.

### 3 Case Study: Exemplars of Yuri Games

This part contains spoilers for all the listed games.

#### 3.1 Flowers -Le Volume Sur Printemps-

*Flowers – Le volume sur printemps* – (*Flowers* chapter of spring in short) is the first chapter of the *Flowers* series, which contains four chapters of stories about different yuri couples happened in four seasons at a private girls' school of *Saint Angraecum Academy*. It is a typical visual novel series with choice-driven narrative and part of the dating stimulator system, in which the choices players have taken for the protagonist will influence how main characters feel about the protagonist, and how the story moves on. When playing games, players can only read the story lines, appreciate the graphics and music, sometimes make choices according to the context, then there is nothing more players can paly with. On the other side, the low agency of player enables writers to take better control of story and characterization.

*Flowers – Le volume sur printemps* – is a story of Suoh Shirahane (the name means white feather and deep red color with darkness in Japanese), a teenage girl, who has a habit of reading all kinds of book and a shy personality as well as excellent appearance. Suoh started her first year in high school, where students are supposed to pairs with each other as *Amitié* and roommate at the same time under the construction of teachers based on a survey filled when the admission to school. As she is the chosen one and the protagonist, Suoh has two *Amitié* while a group of *Amitié* contains two students in normal. Obviously, it is a love triangle story between Suoh and her *Amitié*, Rikka

Hanabishi and Mayuri Kohsaka. It is absolutely a classic topic through the history of yuri.

As a visual novel, most of the romance story as well as characterization is accomplished by lines and branching narrative because of the limited gameplay space, however, the *Flowers* series have come up with a great idea to express the inner world of protagonist Suoh on the game interface (see Fig. 1.).



**Fig. 1.** The yuri icon on the dialog box, showing the status of relationship with both Mayuri and Rikka: more blossom the yuri plant have got, Suoh gets along better with Mayuri; on the contrary, when the yuri plant develop into seedling, Suoh can have romance with Rikka.

A splendid metaphor of yuri heroine's love heart in a yuri game is a dynamic yuri (lily) flower effected by her love choice. If the choice is to the interest of Mayuri, the yuri flower will tend to blossom, and if the choice can please Rikka, the yuri flower will tend to close and degenerate to a yuri seedling. It can also be the contrast of different attitude towards sexual orientation of two *Amitié*. Mayuri was always afraid of coming out in *Flowers – Le volume sur printemps* –, while Rikka is straightforward – she will never hesitate to confess her love for people she loves.

### 3.2 VA-11 Hall-a: Cyberpunk Bartender ActionFi

It is about daily life of a female bartender, Jill, working at the bar called *VA-11 Hall-A* in Glitch City, with a background of cyberpunk near future. Though there are biochemical androids, mechanically reinforced human as well as virtual idol in a completely post-dystopia life, people (androids) still need drinks after a long day work. Jill works with her collage Gillian, a hidden assassin but everyone in the bar pretend they don't know this, and Dana, boss of the bar with really hidden mysteries. The work of Jill is bartending drinks as customers' order, but when they think they are familiar with Jill enough, some of the customers begin to order unclearly, expecting Jill can get what they really want.

As for the yuri part, the main storyline of Jill's life was her past ex-girlfriend. Jill got the job of bartender to run away from the breakup, but failed to run away with her broken heart until one day when she finally understood the breakup with help of Dana and ex-girlfriend's younger sister, with the friendship of other customers.

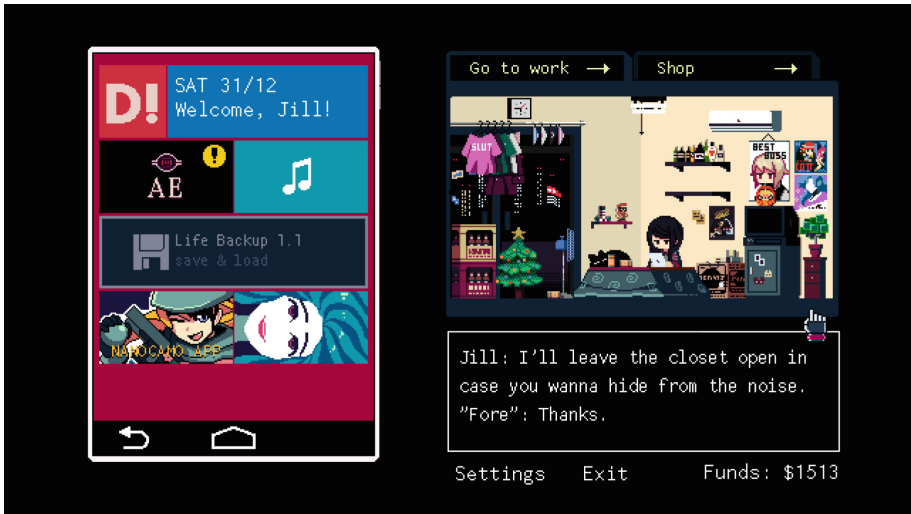
*VA-11 Hall-A* can be a bartender life simulator more than just a visual novel. The bartending system has taken place of text choices, stimulating story branches depending on result of bartending (see Fig. 2.). Different customers prefer diverse tastes and volume of drinks, and the same customer could react differently with the same drinks at the different period of story. It is realistic just like what people usually do in reality, though in *VA-11 Hall-A*, there is neither real alcohol nor beer but variety of imitation for flavors of different wines. In spite of everyone knowing that there is no alcohol in drinks, drinks can always bring trust between customers and three staff of the bar. Characterization of customers is built in these drinks.



**Fig. 2.** The bartending system in *VA-11 Hall-A*. Players can experience work of bartender in this system: left part of interface is the filter of drinks recipes by categories; when player is sure about the name of drinks ordered, according to the recipes one can easily bartend target drinks with different volume of different ingredients listed in the right part of the interface.

When Jill finishes her work and back home, the smartphone interface as well as the scene of her apartment shows her private life at home (see Fig. 3).

In this part, another facet of Jill appears in front of players. Jill likes antique decorations and games in her room, as well as a photograph with ex-girlfriend though she refuses to admit. Jill needs money to pay monthly bills of room and electricity, also needs money for decorations to release pressure. If there is not enough money for bills, Jill will live nowhere; if do not buy decorations, Jill will concentrate on it instead of work the other day, finally result in mistakes and downgrade of income. But however Jill has performed in work, Dana will never forget to leave an additional tip for her with sweet words on the daily income sheet. It is not an easy life even in cyberpunk world, but in this way players can really have an immersive experience in Jill and the *VA-11 Hall-A* bar.



**Fig. 3.** Jill’s home and a talking cat (right), her smartphone (left). On the smartphone, players can help Jill change the background music, decorate the room and read news or BBS, while Jill will have comments on messages on phone. What Jill says will show on the bottom box on the right interface. When at home, players can choose whether go to shop or go to work.

### 3.3 Life Is Strange and Life Is Strange: Before the Storm

*Life is Strange* series may be the one of the most famous interactive movie games and is absolutely more well-known than two yuri games mentioned above. It is a tragedy involving a seaside town and three innocent girls – Max, Chloe and Rachel and not all of them can survive at the end of story.

The heroine of *Life is Strange*, Max, went back to the town and found herself with the superpower of rewinding time at the moment of her childhood best friend Chloe, who haven’t seen her for a longtime since she moved away from the town at middle school, was shoot accidentally in the washing room. The whole story of *Life is Strange* revolves around Max’s superpower and its consequence, which also the main gameplay method through the storyline. Rewinding time makes it possible for nerdy Max to be popular by *predicting* what people would say and save Chloe again and again.

One of the most amazing part of design is in chapter 5, in which Max traveled through collapsed nightmare scenes that she has rewinded in these days to find a way out in order to catch the real murderer and save the town. Players have experienced the rewinding time together with Max, and have been the only ones who can understand Max after so many failed attempts (see Fig. 4.). Even though Max still insist on help Chloe out. The more difficulties Max has faced, the more impressive love for Chloe can be highlighted.

In the prequel *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, without superpower of Max, who has moved away from town and never contacted Chloe on her own, Chloe was extremely upset because of losing her dad and new boyfriend of her mom’s. The gameplay of rewinding time cannot be applied in *Before the Storm*, instead, a new

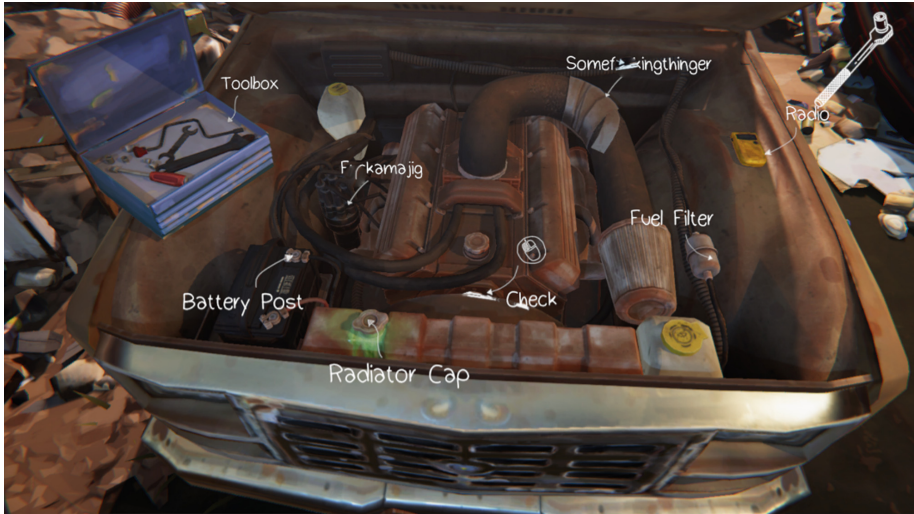




**Fig. 4.** One of the nightmare scenes Max has experienced through the way to the correct time. Walking along this nightmare road, Max and player reviewed the moments shared with Chloe in the few days after Max has brought her back from the bullet using time rewind, finally causing a series of catastrophes that will destroy the whole town.

system of quarrel as power of Chloe has been installed. Though the quarrel system contributes to the building up of romance with Rachel, it is not as impressive as rewinding system. Some part of the script of quarrel system is not convincing enough, especially when you try to frighten a door-guarding bruiser as a teenage girl (Chloe) with only words to get in a midnight live show and finally success.

One the country, the traditional gameplay way of walking-simulator and searching for target object inherit from *Life is Strange* performs well in *Before the Storm* in the case of helping Chloe repair the abandoned car at the garbage yard, because Chloe have learned mechanical maintenance from her beloved died dad William and is proud of her mechanical techniques when cheering up Rachel (see Fig. 5). It is a great combination of gameplay and characterization. All the stories of *Life is Strange* and *Before the Storm* began at that day when Chloe lost her dad and Max moved away. With the absence of Max, Rachel became part of her school life. Since there was no other dad in the reality, Chloe was still filled with sadness and thought of him frequently, so choosing the toolbox once belonged to William and repairing car was her own way of remembering her dad. Moreover, all this effort Chloe has made on the car was for the escaping plan with Rachel to their dream land Chicago. During the car plot, players can easily feel that Chloe was in high spirits imaging leaving the small town and start a new life with Rachel, seems that Chloe can finally emerge from the sorrow brought by dad and Max.



**Fig. 5.** A shot of broken car Chloe is working on. Players need to help Chloe chose the right tools and find some suitable mechanical parts for broken ones to revive the car in order to run away to Chicago with Rachel. (Some potentially offending language has been blurred.)

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