

4.1 Selected Topics in Game Engineering focusing on Issues in Gender Studies:

Mechanics of Identity (780.413, 21S)

Seminar Paper

輪廻転生

Rin'ne Tenshō

Tom Tucek, 01325775

Assoc.-Prof. Mag. Dr. René Reinhold Schalleger

Sen. Scientist Dr. Felix Schniz, M.A.

February 28, 2022

Word count: 2617 (Main body: 2048)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction..... 3

2. Inspirations..... 4

3. Story 5

4. Mechanics and Implementations..... 7

5. Gender and Identity..... 11

6. Conclusion and Reflection 12

7. List of Sources and References 12

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Example of a question targeting the player, allowing them to build an identity..... 4

Figure 2: Meguru and Rin awaiting the player character after they died 6

Figure 3: Starting screen after zero, one, or two playthroughs..... 7

Figure 4: Playing through the game the first time – entering a player character name 8

Figure 5: Automatic use of the previously entered name on subsequent playthroughs..... 8

Figure 6: Commentary by the character themselves to stress the phenomenon 8

Figure 7: Updated preferences menu with a "Reset Everything"-button..... 9

Figure 8: Code for purging the player's save-game data 9

Figure 9: Example for the art style and UI design in *Rin'ne Tenshō*..... 10

Figure 10: Excessive use of red color to signal the death of the player character 10

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explain the development process of a game prototype called *Rin'ne Tenshō*, as well as to discuss and reflect on how gender and identity are depicted and utilized within its context. After explaining the context, inspirations, and story outline of the game, a detailed explanation of some implemented mechanics is provided, followed by an analysis of the topics of gender and identity within the prototype's narrative.

The title of the game reads *Rin'ne Tenshō* (輪廻転生), after the Japanese word for *Samsāra*, which is, in turn, a Sanskrit (and Pali) word, describing the concept of cyclic death and rebirth (see also Capriles 2000, 41). It is also often translated as "the circle of transmigration", signifying a concept of the ever-turning wheel, which one has to break out of, if one wants to achieve enlightenment (*Nirvāṇa*), especially in Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

Rin'ne Tenshō (the game) was designed with the central idea of allowing the player to create an identity for themselves, and then to aid them in deconstructing it, with the eventual goal of showing the expendability and negative aspects of clinging on to the material and impermanent, such as an identity. However, ultimately, it is up to the player to decide whether they see value in the identity they constructed for themselves, and whether they want to discard it, or not. The game presents this explicit binary choice at the very end, with one option deleting all of the player's save-game data, while the other allows them to go back in time to other saved points within the game.

The game is a visual novel, consisting of text, hand-drawn character sprites and backgrounds, as well as royalty-free music and sound effects from third parties. It was created in the Ren'Py engine (Ren'Py 2022) and has a non-linear, cyclic story, similar to time loops in popular fiction (see Langford 2017 and García-Catalán & Navarro-Remesal 2015), which unfolds over multiple play-throughs and changes slightly depending on choices made by the player.

2. Inspirations

The main inspiration for the game stems from a discussion on the *Moodle Forums* (see Hanušek & Hellenbrand 2021), which thematized the idea of overcoming one's identity, and why one would want to do such a thing. Following the Buddhist idea of reaching enlightenment via *The Three Marks of Existence* (also called *The Three Dharma Seals*, namely: impermanence, non-self, and nirvana; see Hạnh 1998, chap. 18), the idea of a game which has to be played through three times, with the ultimate goal of overcoming one's own identity, was born. For that purpose, the game aims to have players put some of their own identity into the main character – similar, but fundamentally the opposite of how media oftentimes depicts characters that people are identifying with (see also Cohen 2006 and Smith 2011).

Figure 1: Example of a question targeting the player, allowing them to build an identity



Players are presented with many chances to pick choices they identify with, especially in regards to hobbies, likes and dislikes, or ideologies (see Figure 1). Once they have built up an identity for their character, which ideally corresponds to what they identify with themselves, the game aims to

have both the player and the player character realize those aspects as masks they wear to interact with society, rather than as essential parts of themselves (see also Stein 1998: 105-108 for the Jungian idea that the Persona acts as the medium between the Ego and the environment).

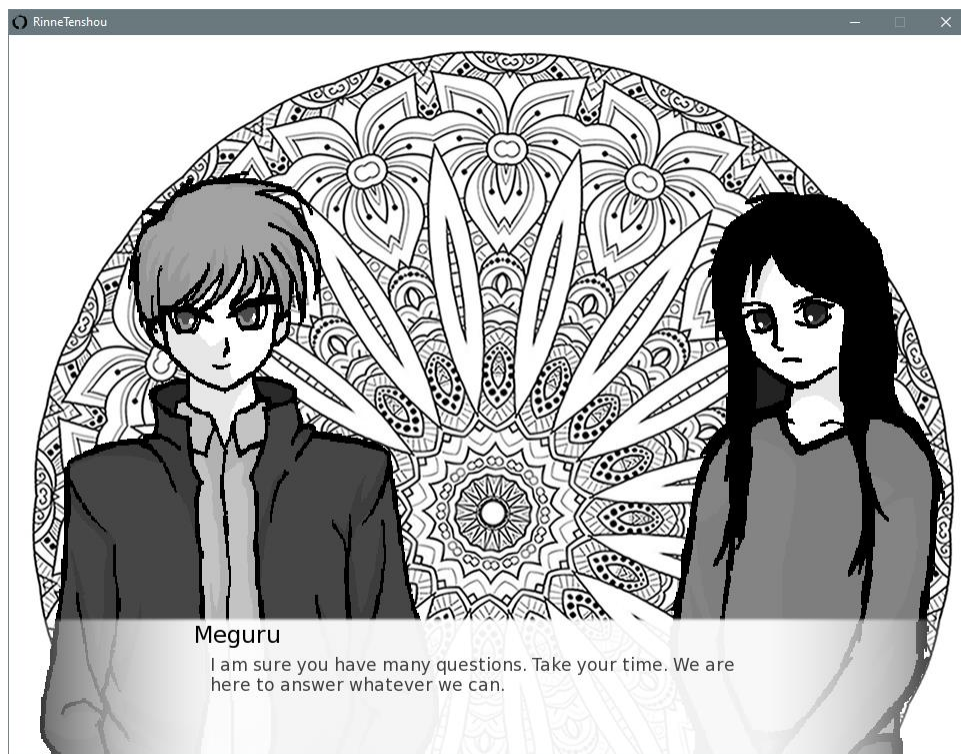
Aside from Jungian philosophy (especially the concept of Persona, Anima and Animus), literature we read and discussed during the seminar (see also Woodward 2012, Smith 2011), and Eastern philosophies and religions, other media have also served as inspirations when creating *Rin'ne Tenshō* – especially games with time loops or cyclic story-telling, such as *Nier* (Cavia 2010), *NieR:Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017), and *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo 2000). Visual novels have used a similar narrative structure before as well, both in Japan with *Higurashi When They Cry* (07th Expansion 2002) or *Steins;Gate* (5pb and Nitroplus 2009), as well as in the West with *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato 2017). Certain stories on reincarnation and solipsism, oftentimes mixing Western and Eastern philosophies, such as *The Wheel of Time* series (Jordan 1990) or the short story *The Egg* (Weir 2009) also influenced the development of this game. Finally, *Limbo* (Playdead 2010), in combination with traditional Eastern ink painting and calligraphy, served as inspirations for the black-and-white art style of the game, as it also represents the limbo-like state the player character finds themselves in.

3. Story

The story of *Rin'ne Tenshō* follows the player-named protagonist through the last three days of their ordinary school life. They are kept as much of a blank slate as possible on purpose, so that players can fill in their own identities. In school, they give answers to questions about themselves, so as to help them build or find their identity. They also make friends with two students, called Rin (輪, named after the first Kanji in *Rin'ne Tenshō*, meaning 'wheel'), a femme-presenting

character, and Meguru (廻, named after the second Kanji, meaning 'turning'), a butch-/male-presenting character (see also Brunner 2008). Depending on their choices within a playthrough, players will likely join one of the two characters' after-school clubs, and thus engage more with one of them throughout the playthrough. There are no other characters with explicit names or portraits in the game.

Figure 2: Meguru and Rin awaiting the player character after they died



After progressing through the first three days of the game, the player character suddenly dies in a traffic accident. They wake up in an unknown space with the two figures of Meguru and Rin watching over them (see Figure 2). After a conversation about what just happened, it becomes clear that this must be some form of afterlife, and the two others are some sort of guides. Whether they are part of the player character's psyche (akin to Jung's ideas of *Anima and Animus*), or actual external guides to lead the player character towards enlightenment (akin to the concept of

bodhisattva in Buddhism) is left ambiguous and unanswered on purpose. The first two times this happens, the player character will not be able to accept their death, and thus the game continues by starting anew (which is explicitly mentioned by Rin as well, so as to make sure players understand that the game is not yet completed when they return to the title screen). The story then repeats two more times, before the choice is left up to the player whether they want to let go of everything and accept to move on, or not. If they decide to accept it, all their save game data will be deleted, whereas otherwise, they will always be able to return and make the choice again.

Furthermore, the starting screen changes every time a playthrough is completed (see Figure 3). The masks are supposed to be symbolic of the parts of their identity, that the player character might have freed themselves from.

Figure 3: Starting screen after zero, one, or two playthroughs



4. Mechanics and Implementations

The game makes use of a wide number of mechanics using persistent data throughout playthroughs. This is mostly achieved using persistent variables provided through the Ren'Py engine, but some custom python code had to be written as well. One example of this is the dynamic starting screen shown in Figure 3. By accessing data that is stored separately from save-game data, the title screen will remain changed even after a playthrough is finished, or even when save games are deleted

manually. This system of persistent data is also used for keeping track of some decisions by the player, as well as their name. As such, they will only enter it on their first playthrough – the game will remember it in subsequent playthroughs and no longer ask for it (see Figure 4 to Figure 6).

Figure 4: Playing through the game the first time – entering a player character name



Figure 5: Automatic use of the previously entered name on subsequent playthroughs

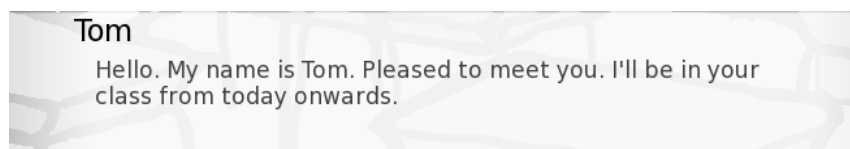
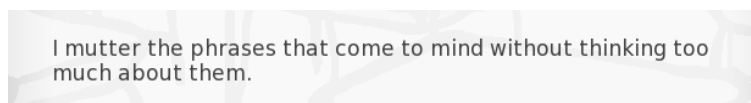


Figure 6: Commentary by the character themselves to stress the phenomenon



To allow players to completely get rid of all data, including save-game files and persistent variables, a new button was added to the preferences menu (see Figure 7), as well as a custom function (see Figure 8), which is also used when the player finishes the game and accepts to lose their identity.

Figure 7: Updated preferences menu with a "Reset Everything"-button

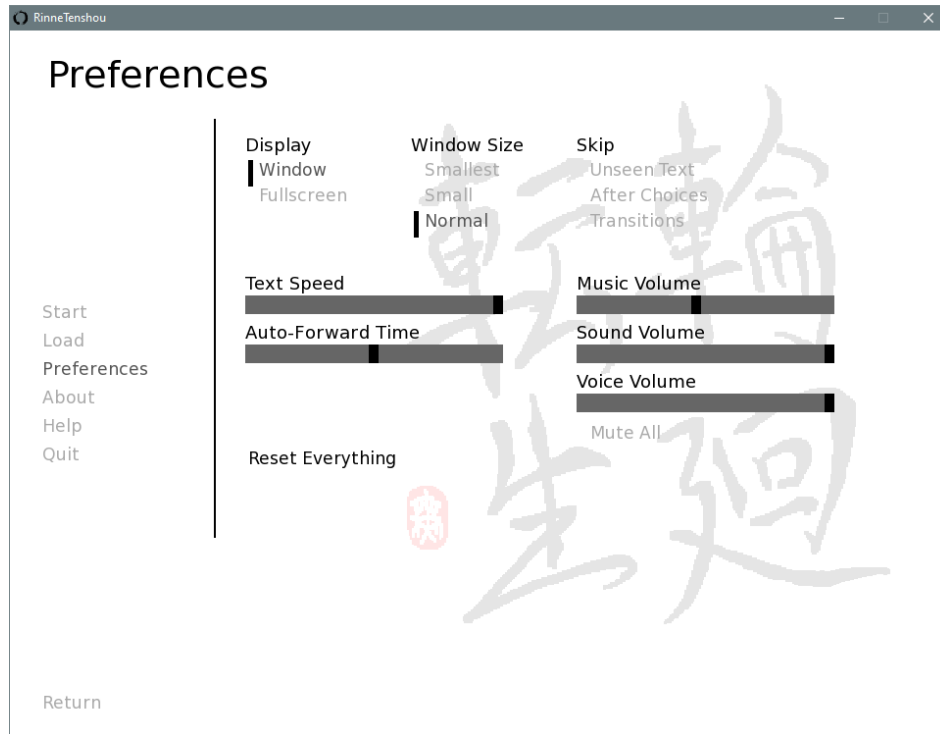


Figure 8: Code for purging the player's save-game data

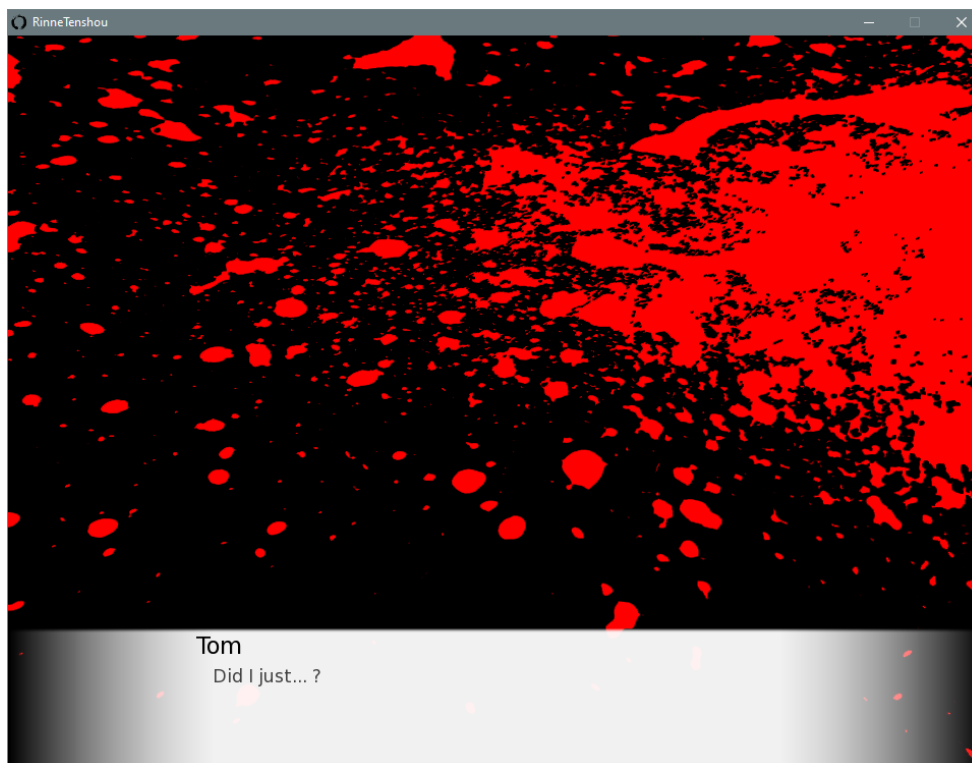
```
5 init offset = -1
6
7 init python:
8     def purge_saves():
9         saves = renpy.list_slots()
10        for save in saves:
11            renpy.unlink_save(save)
12        return
```

Other special implementations include an animated background, which can be seen in Figure 2 – the wheel-like *Mandala* behind the characters is spinning constantly. Also, as already mentioned before, the overall style of the game was kept minimalistic on purpose – thus removing additional menus on the screen that are included with a default Ren'Py project (see Figure 9). The art is kept in shades of grey almost exclusively, with red used as the only color, and only at specific points for emphasis, such as the main menu or when the player character dies (see Figure 10).

Figure 9: Example for the art style and UI design in *Rin'ne Tenshō*



Figure 10: Excessive use of red color to signal the death of the player character



5. Gender and Identity

Rin'ne Tenshō focuses on building up and deconstructing the player character's identity, so it is naturally one of the most important aspects of the game. Meanwhile, gender and sex take much less prominent roles, but are seen as potentially important factors when constructing one's identity nonetheless. Characters' genders are kept vague, although they might present a certain way (see also Brunner 2008). The player (character) is given the chance to express their own gender and sexual orientation at one point of the game as well – or to refrain from doing so. The other characters' reaction to that also depends on the player's choices.

Other aspects used to build up identity, difference, and also comradeship (see also Woodward 2012) with non-player characters include hobbies, preferences, ideologies, as well as the academic, financial, and national background. After the player character dies, they are eventually confronted by the two other characters about their choices and answers, and are asked indirectly how much they truly cling to their constructed identity. After the second playthrough, the player character's ambitions are put into focus during that segment. Finally, after the third time, they are asked to lay down and give up all of what they consider their identity (mechanically represented by the game's save files) but are also given the option to refuse without judgment.

Players identifying with characters of the game takes an unusual dynamic in this game, as consumers of media will oftentimes latch on to characters that they identify with on the basis of virtues or relatability (see Cohen 2006 and Smith 2011). Even though Rin and Meguru might be relatable to some players, they are not designed to fill such roles. Instead, the player should identify as much as possible with the player character, so as to engage with a more personalized experience throughout the game. While it is impossible to restrict players from roleplaying a completely different identity or an idealized version of themselves, they are heavily encouraged by the game

to project and put some of their own actual identity into the player character. Other approaches might also yield interesting results, however.

6. Conclusion and Reflection

To conclude, *Rin'ne Tenshō* was started as a project to overcome one's own identity and ended up as a strange narrative, mixing elements from Eastern and Western philosophy and psychology, trying to tell a meaningful story on a personal level to each player. Of course, such a goal is ultimately unreachable, but if it helps some players understand their own identity a little better, it can already be considered a success. Designing and developing this game also helped me gain insights into my own identity on multiple levels, such as new understanding through reading sources, writing different characters, trying to imagine what answers players would want to give to certain questions, or even when designing and implementing the mechanics of the game.

7. List of Sources and References

- 07th Expansion. 2002. ひぐらしのなく頃に [*Higurashi When They Cry*]. Tokyo: 07th Expansion.
- 5pb and Nitroplus. 2009. *Steins;Gate*. Tokyo: Nitroplus.
- Brunner, Cornelia. 2008. "Games and Technological Desire: Another Decade". In: Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (eds.). 2008. *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. Cambridge/MA and London/Engl.: MIT Press.
- Cavia. 2010. *Nier*. Tokyo: Square Enix.
- Capriles, Elías. 2000. *Buddhism and Dzogchen: The doctrine of the Buddha and the supreme vehicle of Tibetan Buddhism*. Vitoria (Spain): Ediciones La Llave.
- Cohen, Jonathan. 2006. "Audience identification with media characters." *Psychology of entertainment* 13: 183-197.
- García-Catalán, Shaila and Victor Navarro-Remesal. 2015. "Try Again: The Time Loop as a Problem-Solving Process in Save the Date and Source Code". In *Time Travel in Popular*

- Media: Essays on Film, Television, Literature and Video Games*, edited by Matthew Jones and Joan Ormrod. 206–209. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.
- Hanh, Thích Nhất. 1998. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*. New York: Broadway Books. Random House eBooks.
- Hanušek, Benjamin Joseph and Matthew Nicolas Hellenbrand. 2021. "Identity as a Neurotic Death Rattle". *Moodle an der Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt*, March 11, 2021. <https://moodle.aau.at/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=163164>.
- Jordan, Robert. 1990. *The Eye of the World*. New York: Tor Books.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. 1959. *Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Langford, David. 2017. "Themes: Time Loop". In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls, Graham Sleight. London: Gollancz.
- Nintendo. 2000. *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. Kyoto: Nintendo.
- Platinum Games. 2017. *NieR:Automata*. Tokyo: Square Enix.
- Playdead. 2010. *Limbo*. Redmond, Washington: Microsoft Game Studios.
- Ren'Py. 2022. *What is Ren'Py?*. Accessed February 28, 2022. <https://www.renpy.org/>
- Smith, Greg. 2011. *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Stein, Murray. 1998. *Jung's map of the soul: An introduction*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.
- Team Salvato. 2017. *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. Unknown: Team Salvato.
- Weir, Andy. 2009. *The Egg*. Accessed May 18, 2021. http://www.galactanet.com/oneoff/theegg_mod.html
- Woodward, Kathryn. 2012 (1997). *Identity and Difference*. London/Engl. et al.: Sage.