

Virtual Love Experience in Love and Producer: Exploring Perceptions of Love, Romance and Gender in Otome Game Player Communities in China

Yirou Wang

Guoli Notary Public Office, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610041, China

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Abstract: As a game genre with a theme of simulating love, Otome games (Female dating simulation games) are highly popular worldwide. In China, this type of game is also enjoyed by a large number of female players. This article will explore the expectations and motivations pursued by female players in a mobile game "Love and Producer" launched by Papergames in China, and how these games may meet the needs of Chinese women in games and reality. The Otome game "Love and Producer" provides a new way for female players to entertain, and it reflects their perceptions of love, romance, and gender in subtle ways, becoming a medium for women's voices that may not be heard or expressed in real life.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the growth of mobile gaming with the popularity of smartphones and tablets has driven the rapid growth of the gaming industry. According to a report published by Newzoo, half of global gaming revenue comes from mobile games, and similarly, mobile games are becoming increasingly integrated into Chinese society and culture, bringing a wider audience to the games industry^[1]. As the number of female players increases and the market demand grows, more and more game developers, publishers and designers are beginning to realize the potential of the female gamer community and see female players as a market with huge business value. As women continue to expand into the gaming market, a type of game specifically designed and sold for women - Otome games - is gradually gaining attention.

Romantic relationships are at the heart of Otome games (McDonald, 2018)^[2], and the engagement and emotional development of games such as Love and Producer has fostered a female fan space. This space is a complex cultural phenomenon involving multiple levels of gender, identity, power, language, expression, etc., which cannot be simplified and described by female interaction alone (Bury, 2005)^[3]. The female fan space can be seen as a community of people who share common interests, culture, and values, with members expressing opinions and emotions in a variety of ways. Female players express their beliefs about relationships through their works and create new ways of expressing them, reflecting their unique perspectives on love, romance, gender and other issues. However, the female fan space also faces challenges and risks, such as the pressure

and complexity of social reality may affect creativity and expression, and the creation and expression of love, romance, gender and other issues may cause social controversy and criticism.

Despite the growing popularity of mobile gaming among female players, there is still relatively little academic research on gender and mobile gaming. At present, the research on mobile games mainly focuses on game design, players' technical ability, application of game technology in education, mobile game experience and so on. There is some valuable research, such as best practices in game design, ways to improve players' technical abilities, and research into the use of games in education. Although some studies have also looked at the relationship between gender and video games, this area of research still needs to be deepened and expanded. Considering the rapid development of mobile games, focusing on some mobile games could be a breakthrough research direction. These types of mobile games are mainly aimed at female players and are often about forming romantic relationships, there is a deeper understanding of the needs and experiences of female players. Expanding this type of research into this area could lead to a better understanding of female players' feelings, desires, expectations, and perceptions of romantic relationships, and could also gain more traction in academic research and market promotion.

2. Literature Review

Video games have always been regarded as male-dominated activities, or an activity that at least has significant characteristics of masculinity, no matter they are discussed in the context of researches, employments or leisure activities. Although the number of female players is already comparable to that of male players, the gaming industry and subculture still primarily focus on the identity of male players (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun, 2008)^[4]. This may be due to video games being originally designed as male-dominated activities, a phenomenon that has existed throughout the entire gaming history. In particular, in popular video games, most researchers tend to believe that young white heterosexual men are considered typical video game players (Consalvo, Caplan, Williams and Yee, 2009)^[5]. An example is World of Warcraft (a multiplayer online role-playing game), where the majority of the core characters exhibit white and patriarchal masculinity (Everett, 2009)^[6]. There are relatively few game products targeting female players, but this does not mean that female players have a naturally low demand for games. On the contrary, female players also hope to be recognized for their existence and have the opportunity to become target consumers of video games (Cassel and Jenkins, 1998)^[7].

Inspired by Cassell and Jenkins (1998), research on women and video games has evolved from the perspective of identifying "invisible female players" (Bryce and Rutter, 2002) to finding evidence that female players do indeed exist^[8]. The motivation for this transformation stems from exploring what female players truly enjoy and how to sell more electronic games to this emerging market (De Castell and Jenson, 2010)^[9]. Early research mainly described the relationship between female and video games from two perspectives: games for female and femininity (Taylor, 2007)^[10]. The perspective of female games attempts to view female players as independent game types to encourage more female players to participate, but this perspective is often driven by commercial interests. On the other hand, the perspective of femininity attempts to break social norms regarding female players, create a sense of empowerment for them, and advocate that female players could enjoy any type of game, including those traditionally considered male games (Liimatainen, 2015)^[11]. At present, the research focus in this field has shifted to focusing more on breaking stereotypes and studying whether electronic games still have gender characteristics through different types of games. One of the benefits of this transformation is that "gender and video games" have become the preferred name in the field, replacing "girls and video games" or "female and video games" (De Castell and Jenson, 2010)^[9]. With the development of this field, the public's understanding of all

types of electronic games is also deepening, while also resisting traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Bryce and Rutter, 2002)^[8].

3. Romantic relationships form the core of the Otome game

Otome games, also known as female oriented games, have attracted a large group of female players in the game market with storylines and romantic elements. These games typically feature female protagonists as the main characters, engaging in romantic or fantasy stories through interactions and interactions with different male characters (Chen, 2014)^[12]. In addition to interacting with male characters, Otome games usually contain other interesting elements, such as cultivation elements, adventure elements, and puzzle elements. These elements provide players with more choices and gameplay, making the game more attractive and interesting. Early Otome games mainly imitated the style and plot of *Shōjo* (Girls) manga (Chen, 2014), thus they may have many similarities in artistic style and storyline^[12]. These games and manga often have a strong emotional color and feminine atmosphere, as well as women's unique insights and experiences on love and life, allowing female audiences to have a unique experience and exploration space that is different from traditional male-dominated. In other words, in addition to responding to women's desires and expectations, they also provide a protected space for female readers to explore adult annotation (Shamoon, 2012)^[13].

Love and Producer is a romantic simulation game in which players play as a female TV producer who saves her father's production company from bankruptcy, saves a hit TV show that is in trouble, and develops romantic entanglements with four male characters with superpowers. The setting of the game includes a modern urban world view and supernatural forces full of fantasy and surprise. The four male characters are a young founder and CEO, a Special Forces soldier, a gifted scientist, and a mild-mannered pop icon. The gameplay includes the story, character relationships, interactive links, etc., thus players feel the fun and romantic feelings of the game.

Simulation and character collection are common themes in Otome games, especially when romantic relationships are central. *Love and Producer* combines all of this to create romantic relationships with male characters, collecting different cards, and deepening relationships with each character through professional development. In order to maintain the normal operation of the studio, players need to make proper use of a variety of rare "combination cards" to produce high-quality shows that can bring various key advantages to the company, such as decision-making advantages and creativity advantages. The game also rewards players when they complete missions, but if players are willing to pay real currency, they are able to earn cards faster. Notably, *Love and Producer* features an innovative communication system that allows players to text, chat, and even call male characters. There is an in-game interactive communication area where players can post and reply to posts from male characters. However, player only reply through a pre-prepared list of replies, and within these pre-set replies, they can choose to take the story in different directions.

4. Dive into the role of *Love and Producer*

Male characters in most video games tend to be emphasized for their strength, ability, or will, rather than their sexual orientation or desires (Clough, 2018)^[14]. Even when male characters appear naked, they tend to show masculinity and physical strength. The male character's lack of desire and sexual attraction has to do with the basic assumption of the male gaze. Mulvey pointed out in 1975 that the attraction of male movie stars may not be due to the erotization of the gaze, but to the audience's initial conception of a more perfect, complete, and powerful ideal self^[15]. Similarly, heroes or protagonists in video games tend to be men, who are often the core drivers of the story, acting as actors, agents, change-makers, and competitors (Clough, 2018)^[14]. In other words, male

characters are admired for their bravery, perseverance, or strength, not their appearance, sex appeal, or charm, or any other pleasurable trait. In effect, this assumption is built on the core maxim of the male gaze that the audience is always predominantly male and that any sexual content is primarily aimed at a male audience (Clough, 2018)^[14]. Rethinking identity and desire may be one way to change or subvert the rules of the male gaze. Based on the above description, it is hypothesized that treating women or other genders as active participants in video games allows them to possess desires for male characters.

While attractive female characters are ubiquitous in games, attractive male characters are also ubiquitous in Otome games like *Love and Producer*. McDonald (2012) points out that some of the most commonly cited attractive characters possess qualities such as confidence, humor, intelligence, mystery, wit, detachment, sensitivity, and even a little anxiety — all of which can be used to make a male character attractive and sexy^[16]. When players see a character show anxiety, they may relate to their own emotional experiences in the face of stress and difficulty, resulting in emotional resonance and identification. They will have some drawbacks, but they are realistic and not too extreme (Miller, 2018)^[17]. If a male character has only positive traits such as confidence and humor, then he may appear monotonous and boring. The combination of traits appeals to a broad female audience without making these characters too perfect.

Creating an attractive sexy male character in an Otome game can be a delicate and complex process. Although no two people have exactly the same charisma, each character must have some kind of unique appeal to truly stand out. Part of making any male character (or any type of character) sexy is deciding what kind of attraction their character has. The presence of a sexy or attractive character can help reframe the image of a sexy female character: not as a surrogate for men or as a sexual object for women, but as a presence that is sexually attractive to all audiences, both male and female (Clough, 2018)^[14].

5. The motivation to establish romantic relationships in *Love and Producer*

Female players invest their time and emotions in *Love and Producer* for both objective and subjective reasons. Objective reasons include achieving game goals and unlocking new modules, while subjective reasons include enjoying the game, playing with friends, and the desire for romantic relationships. The player takes on the role of the heroine who needs to make her company successful by hiring staff and producing a TV show. She meets male characters on almost all routes, and at some point she helps or even saves them, which gives the hostess some initiative instead of passively accepting help from male characters. Through portraying women as the primary objects of player identification and action, rather than objects of desire, it normalizes the notion that women themselves are active subjects (Clough, 2018)^[14]. The role division and romantic choices in the game engage the player, while the female character becomes a positive force in the narrative, driving the plot and normalizing the female player's sexual agency, independence and power (Lucas, 2008)^[18].

Video games can satisfy a universal desire for escape and fantasy (Leonard, 2003)^[19]. In *Love and Producer*, players can immerse themselves in romantic relationships and experience emotional satisfaction unlike in the real world. The role division and romantic choices in the game provide the player with emotional satisfaction and attachment. At the same time, there is relatively little conflict and uncertainty in the game, allowing players to immerse themselves in the virtual world and feel an emotional connection with the male character. This source of fun is one of the reasons why so many female players love the game. Players experience growth in the game by building emotions, attachments, and intimacy with their characters (Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, 2018)^[20]. In the virtual game world, unrealistic fantasy romance becomes reality. In addition, the heroine played by

female will not be defined as a slut, and can freely switch love objects (Azuma, 2009)^[21]. This is why 62.32% of respondents are not opposed to falling in love in a game (Figure 1).

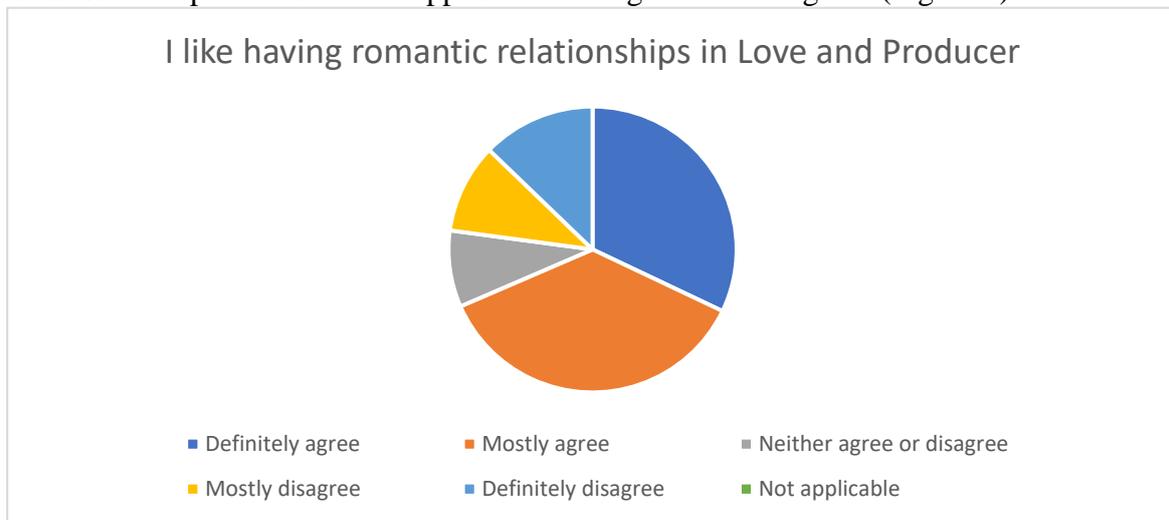


Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following sentences regarding playing Love and Producer

6. Fan creation: A safe space to portray romantic relationships

Games, especially those designed for female players, are proving to be a means of emotional expression and exploration. These games often allow female players to explore their feelings and opinions through the storyline of romantic relationships, providing a whole new space for female players to express themselves. The dialogue, choices, and outcomes in Love and Producer give the player direct emotional expression (Miller, 2018), allowing them to express their feelings and thoughts more freely^[17]. However, when players were no longer satisfied with the game's romantic relationship options, they began to look for other means of expression (Stein, 2015)^[22]. At this time, the fan community spawned by the Internet provides them with a new platform. In this cultural space, players gain insight into each other's desires and feelings through co-creation. They enter a new world of excitement and joy, a world constructed exactly to meet their fantasies and emotional needs. In addition, fans create a place of comfort and belonging through collective action, where everyone involved can feel fulfilled and recognized. For women, the platform is not only a safe place to explore romantic relationships, but also a place to be able to match an idealized self in a fantasy space with an attractive character that provides a complex emotional backdrop.

Fan creation focuses the player's attention on the depiction of female and heterosexual relationships, expanding the safe space to a wider female audience. In traditional sexual consumption, female body is the object of male gaze as well as female gaze, and women face the risk of moral condemnation for violating the passive setting. In fanworks, women can actively pursue male roles and have sexual freedom without criticism. Men become emotional objects because their construction as "characters" refers to an ideal rather than the complex social and emotional issues associated with real men. This way of providing a safe place and distance for women to better imagine and express ideal romantic and sexual relationships.

The player community of Love and Producer not only provides a platform for female players to explore relationships and sex, it also has the potential to be subversive. In mass media, women are often marginalized due to technological and labor constraints (Thorn, 2014)^[23]. However, fan creation as a low-cost medium has attracted a large number of female participants. This allows women to freely express and explore their feelings, desires, expectations, and perceptions of

romantic relationships in isolation from men. This free exploration not only contributes to women's personal growth and development, but also provides a more inclusive space for society to recognize and embrace different modes of emotional expression.

7. Conclusion

Otome games may create a world based on romantic relationship fantasies, provide a way to think about women's agency in the game, and allow women to experience a variety of fantasies and identities (Kim, 2009)^[24]. While these games seem to tend to treat women and men as passive consumers of certain stereotypes, reviving traditional ideas of femininity and heterosexual romance, it does not mean that they are committed to creating a virtual world to regulate femininity, masculinity, and heterosexual relationships. Even if the heroine and male characters in the game reproduce certain stereotypes, female players can assume the role of the heroine they approve of and build imaginary relationships through practice outside of the game.

Fan works, while limited by the context of the game, offer participants a vision for choice and interaction. In the player community, the female player community generates sexual and sexualized content and focuses on their favorite characters. Some successful Otome games such as *Love and Producer* have highlighted the importance of attractive and sexually active male characters in attracting female players. While feminist ideology in games is limited, creating a private, interactive, and creative space can be powerful for women (Shamoon, 2012)^[13]. The space constructed by the fantasy of a romantic relationship allows fans to re-immense themselves in an atmosphere that takes refuge and comfort from gender pressures by offering "something out of the ordinary" (Nakamura and Matsuo, 2003)^[25].

As the games industry has become more female-oriented, it has become increasingly important to examine the discourse. These discourses cover a variety of women's issues and feature female as subjects and players. Such shifts have had a broad impact in the gaming industry, driving greater inclusion and diversity, and providing a more fair and friendly gaming environment for female players. As a result, female players have more opportunities to participate and express themselves. The study of building fictional romantic relationships through fan creation helps to discuss the success of the game industry in meeting the real-life needs of female players, and what needs to be improved in the future.

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