# Love as a Service in *otome* games

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 2024, the Chinese developer Papergames released *Love and Deepspace* (Papergames 2024) (*L&DS*), an *otome* game that represents romantic relationships between a female avatar and four male companion characters. Despite it being a free-to-play game, *L&DS* became the fastest-growing game in Japan in terms of revenue (SensorTower 2024) since its release and created a global surge in revenue for the 'interactive story' subgenre of mobile games globally (SensorTower, IDC, and Mistplay 2024). A quick search on the Reddit forum for *L&DS* shows that it is riddled with confessions by players on how much money they spent (r/LoveAndDeepspace *n.d.*). Some communicate regret, while others share their strategies on how much money to spend to guarantee obtaining the game's most sought-after goods: romantic intimacy with the companions.

This presentation presents a qualitative work-in-progress on *gacha* games from East Asia designed for women players on a transnational scale. The work aims to highlight the problematic aspects of free-to-play games for women that tend to combine affect with predatory free-to-play monetization schemes through which games leverage player data and channel player behaviour towards increased consumption (Whitson and French 2021; Blom 2023). This particular presentation presents *L&DS* as a case study that crystalizes this trend in *otome* games, because *L&DS* channels player behaviour through continuous encouragement of affective reception (Lamerichs 2018) for its companion characters. This affective reception is monetized through the gambling-like *gacha* mechanic through which players try to obtain character memory cards that contain romantic relationships with the companions.

## GAMBLIFICATION AND PREDATORY MONETIZATION

*L&DS* is a symptom of predatory monetization in the Games as a Service (GaaS) trend (Kerr 2017). *GaaS* turns games into assets that provide constant game content updates and player stimulation with gambling-like, predatory monetization mechanics to keep player retention (Alha 2020; Lehtonen, Vesa, and Harviainen 2022; Bernevega and Gekker 2022). This is known as the "gamblification of digital games," which occurs across the intersections of games, gambling, and consumption practices (Brock and Johnson 2021, 3). Gamblification has become incredibly successful to monetize games; gambling-like mechanics such as lootboxes and *gacha* made up 15% of the mobile phone game titles in 2022, which generated 73% of the total worldwide

revenue of mobile phone games (SensorTower 2023, 31). Furthermore, *character collection* was the most dominant monetization feature to encourage player spending among the top 10 mobile phone games in worldwide gross revenue (2023, 32).

Institutions such as the European Games Developer Federation and the Entertainment Software Association are aiming for responsible gameplay and player safety with self-imposed industry measures, such as in-game purchase transparency through labels and other tools (Video Games Europe and European Games Developer Federation 2024; Entertainment Software Association 2024). However, research has shown that gambling-like mechanics are increasingly camouflaged in affective layers like gift-giving between players (Whitson and French 2021), and they encourage fraudulent player practices (Blom 2022). Self-imposed industry measures and compliance with law regulations also have much to improve (Xiao *et al.* 2022; Xiao 2023). Considering DiGRA's theme 'Games at the Crossroads,' L&DS' affective monetization should thus be critically challenged.

## Gacha games

*Gacha* games like *L&DS* are a form of such gamblification of digital games consisting of a randomized in-game reward system in which players try to *pull* a desired item or character through the accumulation of in-game resources (Nielsen and Grabarczyck 2019; Woods 2022). Character collection is a central feature of *gacha* games. *Gacha* games are designed so that the characters are deemed desirable by players, but difficult to acquire, which encourages increased spending (Hartzheim 2019, 244). The *gacha* mechanic usually offers a set of characters with only one character as a reward at the same time (Sato *et al.* 2023, 22). The centrality on character collection is enabled by media mix franchises from East Asia, in which characters proliferate across a range of media and products (Steinberg 2012; 2019; Sato *et al.* 2023). Within these franchises, *gacha* is a common feature, often found in the form of small collectibles, playing cards or mobile games (Ito 2005; Steinberg and Ernest dit Alban 2018; Blom 2023).

## OTOME GAMES

The gamblification of digital games occurs parallel to the growing popularity of *otome* games. *Otome* games provide a temporary fantasy for players to construct imaginary relationships with male characters (Kim 2009). These games have become increasingly available worldwide on mobile phones (Andlauer 2019) and rely increasingly on players' feelings towards their characters for monetization (Ganzon 2022, 84). This echoes current digital media practices that create mediated intimacy (Andreassen Petersen etc. 2017). For example, games and other popular media are increasingly designed to facilitate affective responses from players to fictional characters (Lamerichs 2018; Elvery 2022; Koike, Loughan, and Stanton 2023) As such, contemporary *otome* games occupy a position between the gamblification of digital games and the rise of mediated intimacy that encourages players to have an affective disposition towards characters, which can then be monetized.

This paper provides a close playing (Aarseth 2003) of *L&DS* to explore the potential predatory and affective monetization scheme of current *otome* game monetization. *L&DS* is an illustrative case study of *otome* game development that monetizes *snippets* of intimacy with fictional characters. Premium formats of *otome* games usually depict romantic relationships in their main story lines, but although *L&DS* has a main story,

players must use its *gacha* mechanic that offers character *memory cards* for any romantic development between the companion characters and avatar. It is only the rare five-star memory cards that offer fully visual and romantic interactions and only these cards supplement the game's backstory. These scenes are not only rare and randomized, but they are also locked behind a paywall, are only available for a short period of time, and some scenes even require a matching pair of cards to unlock. Players must spend hours of grinding to gather enough resources to use the *gacha* mechanic for free or spend money to have a chance to obtain a rare five-star card. Hence, this paper will argue that *L&DS'* monetization scheme, which combines affect with gambling-like mechanics, represents love and romance as services that players will only experience if they pay enough money and get lucky.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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