

# Avatar and Real Me: Identity Anxiety of Chinese Mobile Otome Game Players—A Case Study of Papergames

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Chinese mobile otome games, players, identity, avatar

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2017, Papergames released a groundbreaking mobile otome game in China, *Love and Producer*, which not only heralded a new era of otome games, but also broached a tricky question: does the avatar of an otome game require a default name, and can the word “heroine” refer to the avatar? For those unfamiliar with otome games, these concerns may seem trivial; however, for most Chinese otome game players, using a default name compromises their identity in the fictional game worlds and fixed avatar characteristics are avoided in the discourse. Why does this issue emerge specifically in mobile otome games rather than in buy-to-play (B2P) otome visual novels? And what are the underlying reasons behind it?

This paper investigates Chinese otome game players’ identity issue through the cases of *Love and Producer* (2017) and *Love and Deepspace* (2024) developed by Papergames. Through semi-structured interviews, this paper explores the reasons behind the identity crisis, and Papergames’ strategies to minimize it. The interview questions are based on the concept of the acquisition, retention, and monetization (ARM) model, which refers to “the acquisition of new players, the retention of those players, and the monetization of the players” in F2P games (Alha, 2020, p.35). The interviews, then, are aimed towards identifying how the F2P model, as informed by its marketing practices, contributes to player identity construction. Thematic analysis will be employed to examine these datasets around the identity anxiety theme, mainly proposing that three notions of player identity are in conflict in the context of F2P otome games: the player, the believer, and the lover. The discussion section will further integrate the interview transcription, game contents, including narrative and mechanics, and posts from games’ official Sina Weibo accounts to explore players’ dynamic relationship with the game’s love interests (LIs), offering new insights into how players negotiate identity and romantic and narrative agency within the F2P otome genre.

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Otome games, defined as a female-oriented category in Japan, have gained significant popularity in recent decades, especially in East Asia. The games focus on romance, heterosexual relationships and feminine identity construction (Kim, 2009). When first introduced to China, this category retained its visual novel format and went viral on the 66RPG platform (Sun, 2017; Yang, 2024). This user-generated platform allows players to create serial visual novels by using the built-in easy-to-use design tool. This was the first step of Chinese otome games, yet 66RPG remained a visual novel platform. In 2017, *Love and Producer* embarked on a new form of mobile free-to-play otome games, which innovatively divided the game into the main storyline and dating stories. Players can enjoy the main storyline for free, while unlocking dating stories requires players to get the corresponding card, which involves spending real money to roll for a card through a gacha system (Gao et al., 2024).

Existing research on *Love and Producer*, or Chinese mobile otome games, largely focuses on feminism and neoliberalism (Ganzon, 2022; Hasegawa, 2013; Lai and Liu, 2023), and transnational convergence within East Asia (Wagner and Liang, 2021). Nevertheless, the distinction between mobile otome games and otome visual novels remains underexplored. Furthermore, issues of player identity crisis are also omitted. Previous scholarship mainly concentrates on the blurred terms avatar and playable figure (Jørgensen, 2009; Klevjer, 2022; Schröter, 2016; Vella, 2015; Waggoner, 2009). In the otome game field specifically, Song and Fox claim that Chinese buy-to-play otome gamers have “higher identification with their avatars” (2016, p.203). However, this might not be the case with F2P otome games within the same cultural context. Chinese mobile otome gamers reject, or even eliminate avatars within game worlds. Specifically, players’ relationship to the avatar causes feelings of unease, envy, and even fear, as it reminds players that they do not belong to the 2D game environment. This phenomenon seems exclusive to mobile game players rather than their B2P counterparts.

To cater to players’ updated needs, game companies also adjust their marketing strategy for minimizing the presence of the avatar. A compelling example is the name of the avatar. During the development phase of *Love and Producer*, Papergames initially used “Youran” as the placeholder name for the avatar. Nevertheless, after release, this name sparked a considerable controversy: are players there to witness a love story between Youran and LIs, or to experience a romance between themselves and LIs? To mitigate this dispute, one authoritative account of *Love and Producer* officially clarified that Youran is just used for convenience, and the true heroine is the player (Love and Producer break room, 2020). Clearly, Papergames has learned from this lesson. In their second otome game *Love and Deepspace*, they use the heroine’s profession as a placeholder name, referring to players as “Hunters”. This transformation manifests in various ways of the game’s gameplay and narrative.

Furthermore, this paper seeks to deepen the understanding of players’ identity crises through the lens of triple identities of gamers as themes: players, believers, and lovers. Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, claims that play is embedded in all culture forms including religion (1949). Likewise, Roberte Hamayon parallels players and believers, both the “knower and dupe” simultaneously (2006, p.289). This dual awareness mirrors the mindset of otome game players, as they acknowledge LIs are fictional but still believe they are real people (Giard, 2021). Besides, the theory of parasocial interaction is employed to analyze players’ third identity, lovers of the LIs, which strongly affects gaming experience and in-game purchase intentions (Gong et al., 2024).

To the end, this research offers a twofold contribution. First, it aims to distinguish between F2P mobile otome games and B2P otome games through the lens of players' identity construction and how it differs in both contexts. Besides, this analysis is done through tracing the development trajectory of two highly successful mobile F2P otome games and the strategies they employed to address the crisis in player identities and how players respond to these strategies. In light of these perspectives, this paper argues that otome game research should shift its focus toward the multifaceted identities of players, thereby offering a novel framework for understanding the experiences of F2P otome game users.

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