Micro-Resistance in Romance: Gender Identity and Agency in a 3D Otome Game

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Keywords

INTRODUCTION

Otome games, which originated in Japan, are a niche category targeting a female audience. In recent years, female gamers account for nearly half of China's gaming population, and otome games have become a major hit in China's gaming market. Despite the immense popularity of video games which are specifically designed for female players, scholarship still lacks sufficient exploration of female gaming (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019), and research on Chinese otome games and players is still scarce (Ganzon, 2019). Existing studies on Chinese otome games have explored romantic beliefs (Song and Fox, 2016), the images of female characters (Huan, 2022), and gendered gaming culture (Liu and Lai, 2022). However, the dynamics between female players' in-game experiences and gender identity have remained relatively unexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining *Love and Deepspace*, China's pioneering 3D otome game. Through the multi-modal analysis and semi-structured interviews, this research investigates how 3D visual elements, game mechanics, and the player ecology in the game community shape female gamers' perceptions and experiences, contributing to the negotiation of their gender identity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1988) and Judith Butler's (2004) approaches, this article examines how interactions between players and *Love and Deepspace* reflect and reshape broader socio-cultural norms around gender.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project employed the multi-modal analysis of the game *Love and Deepspace* and conducted semi-structured interviews to explore players' gaming experience, to capture in-depth perceptions on gender issues as female players interact with *Love and Deepspace*.

This research used a multi-modal analysis (Arafat, 2020; Sun, 2023), combining formal, textual, and visual levels to investigate video game dynamics and representation in *Love and Deepspace*. A game system consists of a group of objects which are interrelated, and it can be investigated by exploring and describing the game rules, components, goals and their relationships. This study further combined the analysis of *Love and Deepspace*'s system with its content, and finally generated an understanding of how this game creates a space for players to negotiate their gender identity, shedding particular light on the potential of interaction and its 3D visual elements.

The semi-structured interviews were adopted in this research to facilitate participants' expression about relatively sensitive issues, like gender stereotypes or sexual attractions, during the data collection process. To gather players' experiences and perspectives of *Love and DeepSpace*, this research recruited 16 female participants with at least six months of in-game experience in *Love and Deepspace* and familiarity with its 3D gaming environment. Participants were recruited from social media and game communities. The interviews were conducted via online video conferences on the Tencent Meeting, with an average duration of 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis.

The research divides the basic interview outline into six different themes: basic information, gaming experiences with *Love and Deepspace*, gender roles in the game, agency, 3D graphics, and player ecology in the game community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Love and Deepspace offers a myriad of daily interactions – such as taking photos, playing cards, and playing the claw machine with a male character – that together create a more immersive life experience. Players can interact with the character anytime and trigger random events without entering a specific storyline. It is also the first otome game that integrates 3D visual representations, providing a realistic construction of self-image and a more straightforward depiction of the sexual elements of the male characters.

Foucault (1988) stated that freedom can always be exercised within complex power relations. Despite the fact that the game industry is male-dominated and otome games are still trapped in the traditional unequal power relations, this article demonstrates the micro-resistance that female players are empowered to exert in *Love and Deepspace*. The random events triggered in daily interaction with the male protagonist enable players to have greater autonomy beyond the limited choices in main storyline. The unique 3D figure of the player, as well as the male character's individualized feedback with 3D visual effects, mirrors the Foucauldian emphasis of the contingency of freedom. It exemplifies players' agency and implies their micro-resistance in the existing social structure.

Judith Butler (2004) argues that gender is constructed through social behavior and performance rather than fixed biological characteristics. Although the game offers a degree of character customization and freedom to interact, these gender-related parts of the performance are still limited by traditional gender norms. In the existing mechanics and narratives, the four main male characters occupy roles as protector and leader, whereas the female protagonist remains constrained. For example, the player and the male character are ostensibly in a common mode of fighting monsters, but the decisive role is not the female player's gaming skills but the level of the male characters' combat power. This unequal combat setting reflects how the female protagonist is constructed as weaker and more marginalized compared to male characters. The above analysis of the game is, to a certain extent, supported by the semi-structured interviews, as reflected in the following three aspects.

Gender negotiation and contradictions in 3D gaming environment

The interviews suggested that players' use of 3D customization tools (e.g., creating neutral self-gender features) emerged as a potential site of Foucauldian micro-resistance, allowing small challenges to normative gender presentation within the game's structural constraints. While the base character models conformed to traditional gender norms, the face-shaping system allowed players to disrupt this normativity, for example by assigning androgynous facial features or vocal tones to their avatars. However, by placing a hyper-visual male body at the center, the 3D visual elements also intensified the gendered appeal of male characters. The tactile realism of skin textures, detailed facial expressions, and "sexually charged" card illustrations (e.g., towel scenes) contributed to an objectifying gaze that reinforces female-centered visual pleasure, often discussed by players as "female gaze" or even "idolization."

Crucially, limitations in 3D graphics, such as restricted choices and passive viewing angles, often undermined players' sense of agency during key story moments. Participants frequently described feeling more like spectators than active shapers of the interaction. Nevertheless, the incorporation of action-based combat sequences, enabled by 3D graphics, represented a partial break from genre conventions of otome games. This design choice acknowledged female players' broader gameplay competencies beyond romantic simulation, even if the combat interface suffered from issues such as awkward camera transitions and unresponsive weapon feedback.

Female agency: Structural constraints and interpretive resistance

While the game positioned the female player as the narrative protagonist, interviewees consistently voiced concerns over constrained agency. Dialogue choices within 3D scenarios often lacked meaningful impact, producing a sense of predestination. As one player described, "It felt like I was watching two people interact from a first-person camera, not actually shaping the interaction myself." The game's mechanics, in this sense, simulated the illusion of choice without enabling substantial narrative intervention.

Nevertheless, players' engagement with these mechanics also reflected their desire to reclaim interpretive control. Many participants reframed passive plotlines through emotional projection, headcanon-building, or selective interpretation of ambiguous gestures and dialogue. Such practices highlighted the complex ways in which female

agency in digital romance was both constrained by structure and extended through play.

Community as cultural mediator: Reinventing otome tropes

Beyond individual gameplay, the surrounding fan ecosystem offered further insight into the socio-cultural positioning of the game. On platforms such as strategy forums and *Xiaohongshu* (*Rednote*), there was a partial shift in player orientation, from the traditional otome model of "dating a fictional character" to a more fandom-like "idol-chasing" behavior. This shift was supported by the game's marketing strategies which was similar to celebrity branding and emphasized character charisma and real-time updates.

Despite the game's mechanical innovation, the interviews with players suggested a continued prioritization of romantic routes aesthetic customization over gameplay performance. This persistent focus resonates with Butler's concept of performativity, indicating how established gender norms and genre conventions continue to shape player engagement and interpretation. Ultimately, this underscores that, even as *Love and Deepspace* opened new avenues for gender expression, player communities still reproduced familiar patterns, highlighting the complex interplay between innovation and adherence to genre norms.

These findings point to a core tension: the game simultaneously facilitates spaces for expression and micro-resistance, while being constrained by persistent norms and conventions. This duality underscores the complex negotiation of gender identity within the game and its community.

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