

Love is not Around: Wandan-likes & Narratives of Self-Actualisation

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Keywords

wandan, masculinity, china, chinese games, romance, bishojo, dating

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will analyse *Love is All Around* (Intiny, 2023, also known as *Wandan! Wo bei meinv baowei le*) and other wandan-likes. Wandan-likes are one-male many-female dating games which present short video clips with branching narrative choices and multiple endings (Cao, 2024), emerging from (mostly) China over the last year. They generally employ a saccharine tone, as the male protagonists are treated with an undeserved longing often stemming from serendipitous encounters.

While dating games are not unfamiliar entries inside the Chinese market, *Love is All Around* reached an unprecedented cultural zeitgeist, even outside of its intended *bishojo* fan audience. Since its release, *Love is All Around* has managed to amass around 1.64 million purchases (SteamSpy, 2024) with almost 65,500 concurrent players and 44,000 reviews (SteamDB, 2024).

Moreover, it has been successful enough to spawn a sub-genre of dating games. While none have been quite as successful as *Love is All Around*, their ease of production and development, Chinese gamers' history with both FMV (Eyman et. al, 2024) and dating games, and the genres' prolonged positive reception over the past year have incentivised other developers, both Chinese and otherwise, to spawn games that are heavily inspired by the original.

I argue that the *Love is All Around's* unexpected success and wandan-likes' continued popularity stems from how the games address disenfranchised masculinity, often characterised by self-depreciation (Szablewicz, 2012) and hopelessness (Tan & Cheng, 2020), by offering a semblance of control over their (virtual) romantic fates. However, this bleak reflection still comes with the price of female objectification, as women are characterised as out-of-reach commodities rather than equal sufferers in a post-capitalist society.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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Method

For this paper, I conducted a thematic analysis of 16 different wandan-likes. Considering the number of wandan-likes currently keeps increasing on a regular basis, I have curated my current selection based off of 1) having at least 500 ratings and Very Positive or higher ratings on Steam.

By conducting this content analysis, I am gathering various data points on the main characters such as what they like about the dating candidates (and vice versa), whether they have been maligned in the past (and whether the story presents a reversal of fortune), and whether they have a male friend that provides little other than comic relief. I am also analysing whether the games use similar procedural mechanics such as affection meters, reaction markers, achievements, and reversal of story choices.

Results

Through this analysis, I will show how wandan-like mechanics emphasize romantic control, through reversible story lines that necessitate success to progress, branching narratives which immediately show how effective your choices are, and achievements gained through exhausting your romantic options.

However, this analysis will also show that the male main protagonists not only offer nothing but their interest, but that the female characters act as socio-cultural mobility proxies and markers of individual success. This can be seen through various endings where romantic success equals social mobility, increased spending as the story progresses, as well as competition for the main character's affection as the male protagonists' luck reverses.

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