

# Constructing Parasocial Intimacy in Otome Games: A Data-Driven and Autoethnographic Study Based on *Love and Deepspace*

Yuting Zheng

University of Copenhagen Faculty of Social Sciences

Øster Farimagsgade 5

1357 København

+45 91995851

[hfn477@alumni.ku.dk](mailto:hfn477@alumni.ku.dk)

## Keywords

parasocial intimacy, otome games, social data science, player-character interaction

## INTRODUCTION

Building on existing Game Studies research on parasocial relationships and interactive narrative games (e.g. Vella, D., 2015; Chen et al., 2024) and the author's Master's thesis (Zheng, 2025), this study uses *Love and Deepspace* (Papergames 2024) as a case study to examine how parasocial intimacy between players and virtual characters is constructed and sustained in otome games, foregrounding its gendered configuration through specific game mechanics. This study combines forum-based text analysis and autoethnographic reflection to examine how narrative design, interaction mechanisms, and community participation jointly shape immersive emotional experiences. Drawing on parasocial relationship theory, game character design, and game narrative, this paper proposes an analytical model centered on the "player-avatar-character" ternary relationship, elucidating how parasocial intimacy is generated and maintained in the game world and how emotional connections are formed across the virtual-real boundary.

The findings suggest that parasocial intimacy between players and characters is not a singular act of emotional projection, but a dynamic process that is continuously reinforced through the interplay of game mechanics and community participation. This process demonstrates that narrative and interactive mechanisms not only foster players' emotional attachment to characters, but also enable players to reflect on and renegotiate their emotional identities through communal expression. Ultimately, the paper argues that parasocial intimacy should be understood not merely as a form of narrative consumption, but as an emotionally and culturally meaningful mode of game participation, thereby extending the applicability of parasocial relationship theory within the context of interactive narrative games.

Quantitative analysis of Reddit data reveals several recurring patterns. First, players' emotional investment is strongly character-centered. References to individual characters occur far more frequently than discussions of world-building or settings. While plot developments and key narrative events directly intensify discussion activity, they also function as contextual triggers that amplify parasocial relationship construction beyond character developments alone.

Proceedings of GachaCon 2026

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Second, the emotional connection between players and characters presents a gradually deepening dynamic process, which is manifested from the initial expression of emotional stance, the intermediate stage of personality matching and self-identification, to the advanced stage of exclusive fantasy and future situation imagination. In this process, the Reddit community plays the role of affective circulation.

Finally, the distribution and intensity of character-related discussions provide empirical support for the role of character design and narrative structure in constructing parasocial intimacy. Players' emotional orientations toward specific characters vary across event contexts, suggesting that festive and narrative-driven mechanisms are used to strengthen emotional bonds. Character-related discussions exhibit high concentration, expressive richness, and multi-layered emotions, indicating the continued deepening of parasocial intimacy within external communities and the strong resonance generated by narrative design and character charm.

Furthermore, qualitative analysis indicates that players' emotional investment in game characters emerges not only from narrative guidance, but also from players' own emotional projection. Player-driven narrative moments effectively respond to players' emotional expectations, functioning as a key mechanism that strengthens emotional bonds and promotes continuous participation.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Silverstone, 1999; Goffman, 2023), otome games construct an immersive virtual space through symbolic systems such as narrative text, visual art, and sound design. Players have absolute initiative in their perception and interpretation of situations. They not only gain aesthetic experience from visual and auditory symbols, but also gain real emotional support through interaction with characters in the game world. This support is reflected in an immersive sense of companionship, satisfaction in exploring intimacy, and reflection and construction of real emotional identities.

Based on the parasocial relationship theory (Horton et al., 1956), this paper expands the applicability of parasocial intimacy in the context of interactive narrative games. It proposes a multi-level analytical framework in which emotional projection, situational construction, and affective circulation serve as central components of relationship maintenance, demonstrating how parasocial intimacy is co-constructed across game worlds and the real world. This extension makes the parasocial intimacy theory not only applicable to traditional television, idols, or social media contexts, but also to highly participatory and immersive game media, indicating that the generation and maintenance of parasocial intimacy is the result of a complex collaboration between game players and game characters, game mechanisms, as well as social platforms.

From a methodological perspective, while mixed-method approaches are well established in Game Studies, this study adopts a combined approach that is particularly suited to examining the relationship between players' subjective emotional experiences and collective forms of expression, offering an operational and explanatory framework for analyzing emotional participation in digital games.

This study also points out that parasocial intimacy in otome games is essentially still a human-machine interaction and cannot completely replace intimacy in real life, but the emotions experienced by players are real and profound. This also raises an important issue about how to strike a balance between technical efficiency and emotional depth.

## BIO

I am a Master's graduate in Social Data Science from the University of Copenhagen, with a research focus on how otome games construct parasocial intimacy between players and virtual characters. My thesis combines large-scale computational text analysis with autoethnographic methods to examine narrative design, character interaction, and emotional involvement in *Love and Deepspace*. My research interests lie at the intersection of data science, game studies, and affect theory, with a particular focus on how AI-driven character interaction may reshape forms of digital intimacy. I am interested in bridging cultural analysis and computational methods in the study of game experiences.

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