

The *Husbando* Super-App: Tracing “Player Investment” with *Love and Deepspace*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a work-in-progress investigation into how and why players come to be invested in games. Investment is here construed as occurring at both a material and affective level, and we argue that it both shapes and is shaped by a game’s design and its player community. Using Papergames’ *Love and Deepspace* (2024) (LADS), as a case study, we outline five dimensions of player investment (monetary, temporal, storage, affective, and fandom). Though certainly non-exhaustive, this list offers insights both into LADS’ design and its players while suggesting that investment is a fruitful lens for understanding how neoliberal capitalism shapes leisure time.

LADS exists at the intersection of several popular games. It is a free to play mobile game (Alha 2020), an *otome* game (a romance game for women typically produced in East Asia) (Andlauer 2018), and a *gacha* game (games with a reward system in which players “pull” for random resources, usually characters, of varying value and rarity as a means to encourage increased player spending) (Harzheim 2019; Blom 2023). LADS is also one of the most lucrative and successful examples of all three (Aune 2025), making it an ideal case study for investigating how and why players become *invested* in games and what investment can mean in a game context.

Before the rapid rise of free-to-play games, common wisdom suggested that the price of a game should reflect its playtime (Gault 2018). Much has been written about how free-to-play complicates this logic, especially along gendered lines (Chess 2018; Anable 2018), but money and time are only two dimensions for understanding player investment. Following the conference theme of Intersectional Pleasures and its call for critical explorations of how games invite and restrict pleasures, this paper uses LADS to explore five related but non-exhaustive forms of player investment.

FIVE FORMS OF INVESTMENT

A *monetary* investment refers to the spending of real-world currency that games elicit from players. Free-to-play games have long been scrutinized for their exploitative monetization practices (Albarrán-Torres 2018), including random reward mechanics like lootboxes and *gacha*. Free-to-play *otome* games often leverage women’s affection towards the male characters to encourage spending (Ganzon 2022). LADS

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features many resources that are earned through play or purchased with real-world currency. Crystals, for example, can only be acquired via microtransactions, and offer the easiest way to unlock romantic or intimate content which is otherwise only available for a limited time (Blom 2025).

A *temporal* investment refers to the amount of time players spend engaging in a game. Free-to-play has been associated with the “casual games” label, suggesting titles that demand little player commitment (Woods 2022). One of LADS’ currencies is “energy,” which must be spent to take many in-game actions. Players’ energy refreshes at a fixed rate over time (though one can pay to circumvent this), meaning that players can optimize their playtime. Still, LADS features many mini-games and side-stories that cost no energy, encouraging players to play for much longer, complicating existing free-to-play models.

Storage investment is arguably more important and less observable than ever. In the US, approximately 95% of videogames are purchased digitally (Lahiguera 2025), suggesting it is increasingly rare for games to take up physical space in the home. In contrast, the file sizes of games are becoming larger (Walton 2019) which reflects higher graphical fidelity but also increasing ecological and labour demands on the production of what we play (Stone 2025). Considering it is made for tablets and mobile phones, LADS is gigantic, requiring upwards of 20GB of storage space. LADS is thus a fruitful example of how players make space for games in their lives and their devices.

By *affective* investment, we mean the emotional attachments that exist between player and game *within the game itself*. Affect emerges through players’ embodied responses to LADS as a media text (Lamerichs 2018; Anable 2018). The game facilitates romantic, parasocial relationships with the male characters through player interaction (Tosca and Klastrop 2020) by, for example, framing the gacha system as “memories” collected through “wishes.” The nonthreatening nature of the male characters also recalls work on cuteness and commodification (Ngai 2012; Yano 2013) and discussions of how games produce comfort (Scully-Blaker 2024).

Finally, *fandom* investment refers to emotional attachments that manifest *outside of the game*. It is well established that games invite audiences to participate, and thus invest, in activities of textual productivity. Through this “participatory culture,” fans create derivative works like fan fiction, art, cosplay, and other game-related works to reimagine the stories and characters that they love (Jenkins 2006; Wirman 2009). For example, LADS encourages players to share moments of play on social media in exchange for resources, and the game has an official Discord channel that is carefully curated. The non-trivial labour of being a fan recalls work on “passion” and Post-Fordism (Hong 2022) and it necessarily intensifies other forms of player investment, bringing the game into other facets of life.

CONCLUSION

Discussions of these various forms of investment already exist in the literature on free-to-play games, but this paper will show that LADS brings these forms of investments together and intensifies them in a way that recalls Steinberg, Mukherjee, and Punathambekar’s concept of the “super app,” which are “do-everything apps that bring together an expansive suite of services within a single interface” which includes multiple functions into a single app or an app family under a single brand banner (2022, 1407). In what we are framing as a ludic interpolation of the “super-app”

framework, LADS combines elements of different game genres (e.g., *otome*, *gacha*, cozy games, card games, and a battle system that employs rogue-like and RPG elements) with different app functions (e.g., productivity and sleep trackers, period trackers, journaling, photography) that are all mediated through the player's romantic attachments with the love interests. The coalescence of these functions and these forms of diegetic and non-diegetic investment indicate that LADS is an important object of study for deepening scholarly understanding of women's leisure, the quantified self, and the encroachment of neoliberal self-management on our leisure time.

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