

Affective Predation: Gendered play, Monetisation, and Precarity in Otome Gacha Games

Tianyi Zhangshao

University of Sydney
A20 John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW

tianyi.zhangshao@sydney.edu.au

Wenqi Tan, Yiwen Wang

University of Sydney
A20 John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW

wenqi.tan@sydney.edu.au , yiwen.wang1@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

gacha games, monetisation, otome games, gender, feminist game studies

INTRODUCTION

“[I]t’s not even a gamble ... it’s a carnival game that’s rigged for you to lose.” This is how one *Love and Deepspace* (LADS; Infold Games 2024) player characterised the game on a Reddit thread where several people shared their frustrations with LADS, with many citing the game’s monetisation strategies as a key point of discontent. In contrast, another discussion featured players openly defending their spending habits, one even admitting they “genuinely love spending money” on their favourite love interest. Launched in January 2024 by Papergames/Infold Games, LADS is a globally popular otome title, a genre centred on romance narratives marketed toward women. What distinguishes LADS further is its live-service gacha model, where advancement and interaction with its five male protagonists depend on a lottery-style mechanism that requires players to spend in-game currency for a random chance at winning specific characters or items.

These gacha features sit at the centre of both LADS’ praise and criticism. They drive the game’s profitability and support its free-to-play model; by August 2025, the game had reportedly generated more than US\$750 million in player spending on Google Play and the App Store, a figure that excludes mainland China—its biggest market—as well as additional revenue streams such as merchandise and live events (Astle 2025). At the same time, critics argue that its monetisation is predatory, mirroring broader debates that characterise gacha systems as unethical or quasi-gambling because of their randomness and the strong incentives to spend real money.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Why players take part in gacha systems is multifaceted. While much of the existing research on gacha titles highlights gambling-adjacent behaviours and motivations (e.g., Xiao, 2021), newer work foregrounds the emotional attachments that drive players to continue engaging, especially the “profoundly personal relationships” they build with game characters (Woods, 2024, 833). Our study expands this perspective and further builds on Blom’s (Blom, 2025) critique that “L&DS [Love and Deepspace] is a symptom of predatory monetisation in Games as a Service trend”. Specifically, we examine how LADS, as a female-oriented gacha game, leverages the conventions of the otome genre and entrenched gender inequalities within the gaming industry to draw its predominantly female audience into unstable cycles of commodified desire and intimacy. We argue that gacha in otome games operates as a distinct form of **affective predation**, encouraging players to cultivate romantic bonds with characters and to invest—financially and emotionally—to maintain those relationships.

By affective predation, we mean the iterative process through which otome gacha game systems cultivate and exploit emotional attachment as a monetisation mechanism. That is, spending in LADS requires, curates, and deepens affective investment, generating a recursive feedback loop in which desire, intimacy, and expenditure mutually reinforce one another. Our theorisation draws loosely on Sara (2004) account of affective economies: how affects circulate and accrue value through repeated association. However, we specifically turn attention to how the game platform deliberately architects and exploits these affective circuits—structuring romantic progression to be attainable only through continued investment. In this sense, players are not only drawn into economies of time and money (Woods 2022) but also into an **economy of emotion**, where progressing a romance requires continual emotional and monetary investment.

Importantly, this does not imply that players lack agency. We instead highlight the varied reasons players willingly participate in these economies—such as the desire to support a game they find meaningful. LADS’ cultural impact underscores these dynamics: it became the first otome game to win *Best Mobile Game* at Gamescom 2025 and has been widely discussed in media and scholarship for its largely female development team, a rarity in the male-dominated games industry (Lamb 2025).

This raises several key questions: What aspects of the otome-gacha hybrid encourage players to spend in LADS? How do players interpret, negotiate, or justify the game’s gacha mechanics? And how do both player and developer practices relate to broader inequalities in game culture and production? To address these issues, we adopt a feminist game-studies lens that traces how digital systems “compel us to join in through the temptations of community, pleasure, and convenience, and repel us through the pains of discrimination, exploitation, and alienation” (Portwood-Stacer 2014, 298). Following Chess’ (2017, pp. 5–6) concept of the “player two”—the idealised female consumer imagined by the industry—we interrogate how LADS similarly constructs profitable gendered audiences through its design and monetisation.

Our analysis draws on an application walkthrough of LADS, focusing on its gacha system, and a discourse analysis of discussions on Reddit and RedNote. These methods allow us to examine how gender, affect, and monetisation intersect and to propose a framework for understanding how economic and affective structures co-produce gendered forms of play. Early insights indicate that LADS uses otome conventions to translate gacha pulls into moments of romantic advancement or

intimate engagement, thereby enrolling its largely female playerbase into a precarious cycle of affective predation.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117–139.
- Astle, A. 2025. “Anime-Style Dating Sim Love and Deepspace Surpasses \$750m.” *Pocketgamer.biz*, September 2. <https://www.pocketgamer.biz/anime-style-dating-sim-love-and-deepspace-surpasses-750m/>.
- Blom, J. (2025, June 16). Love as a service in otome games. Abstract Proceedings of DiGRA 2025: Games at the Crossroads. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2025i3.2580>
- Chess, S. 2017. *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: U of Minnesota Press.
- Infold Games. 2024. *Love and Deepspace*. iOS & Android, Version 4.5.0. Shanghai, China: Infold Games.
- Lamb, J. 2025. “Love And Deepspace’s Creator Discusses The Mobile Game’s Success.” *Forbes*, September 3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshualamb/2025/09/03/exclusive-love-and-deepspace-creator-discusses-the-mobile-games-success/>.
- Portwood-Stacer, L. 2014. “Feminism and Participation: A Complicated Relationship.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11 (3): 298–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2014.926246>.
- Woods, O. 2022. “The Economy of Time, the Rationalisation of Resources: Discipline, Desire and Deferred Value in the Playing of Gacha Games.” *Games and Culture* 17 (7–8): 1075–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221077728>.
- Woods, O. 2024. “The Affective Embeddings of Gacha Games: Aesthetic Assemblages and the Mediated Expression of the Self.” *New Media & Society* 26 (2): 823–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211067756>.
- Xiao, L. Y. (2021). Regulating loot boxes as gambling? Towards a combined legal and self-regulatory consumer protection approach. *Interactive Entertainment Law Review*, 4(1), 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.4337/ielr.2021.01.02>