

Schrödinger's Feminist Cat: The Positional Feminism of *Five Hearts Under One Roof*

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Introduction

What makes a game feminist? Given that games operate in global contexts, how can feminist values be expected to hold up to these fundamentally different contexts? Do games come with values pre-embedded within, or do players—and their local contexts—encode these values themselves? Rachel Hutchinson describes how when players play games they are participating in the worldviews and politics of the game designers (Hutchinson 2017). The pleasures of playing a game is not uniformly distributed, echoing the privileges of class, race, and gender. Just as pay-to-win strategies gatekeep the fun of success behind barriers of economics, do games that engage in gender representation similarly withhold pleasure from those of a differing political ideology? While the global gaming industry has historically resisted queer content (Ruberg 2018), Korean heterosexual dating simulation games—games traditionally coded as non-feminist—are now, puzzlingly, being viewed by some groups of online Koreans as communicating feminist values, albeit at the perceived expense of traditional masculinities. This paper aims to examine the ways in which anti-feminist Korean-speaking reviewers imagine themselves to be denied the pleasures afforded in the globally popular, South Korean-developed dating sim *Five Hearts Under One Roof* (Storytaco 2024).

Five Hearts Under One Roof (Five Hearts), is a South Korean full motion video dating simulator that promises the player the chance to find romantic love as they embody a 30-something male office worker-cum-boarding house landlord. As is common within the genre, players must choose which of the women they pursue romantically as they engage in gameplay designed to simulate the real-life pitfalls of modern heteronormative courtship (Kretzschmar and Salter 2020) in a romantically-charged comedy. The gameplay, which while sexually suggestive, largely follows tropes and standards found within Japanese fan-service anime (Russell 2008) and romantic K-dramas (An 2022), where any form of graphic sexualization is eschewed in favor of softer representation. Storytaco partnered with local Korean content production

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house Milk Film to leverage its influencer celebrities as love interests. It is however its visual presentation that caused outrage in some online Korean communities as the presumably male audience felt the target of prejudice. Throughout the game, players allege to the use of the *jibgaeson* hand gesture¹ (집게손), a reference to a mid-2010s Korean feminist movement popularized by the now defunct website, Megalia. This gesture was viewed by detractors as an attempt to ridicule Korean penis size. Korean language reviews derided the game as a vehicle of misandry, promoting perceived feminist values that ultimately deny players from participating in the visual, sonic, and ludic pleasures that such a game would typically traffic in. English reviews of the game were not subject to the same offenses and largely praised the artistic direction, fully enabled to consume the predominantly heterosexual fantasy offerings.

While the global popularity of contemporary Korean pop culture across media lends itself to greater global inquiry, it remains important to understand how Korean game culture exists at the intersection of domestic gender issues (Choi 2021), these issues can seemingly be ignored by global audiences. Foreigners benefit from a blissful ignorance of Korean cultural contexts that allow them to enjoy the game purely as a vehicle for entertainment. This study draws upon a bilingual textual analysis of Korean (n=265) and English (n=2311) steam user reviews from the game's official release (October 2024) until May 2026 to examine how *Five Hearts'* acts as an object that illustrates the paradoxical superposition of Korean dating sims as both incel-adjacent sexual objectification and that of Korean feminist ideology.

Five Hearts Under One Roof's broad global appeal should invite optimism. In fact, some English reviewers interpret the game as evidence of emotionally engaging gameplay. However, a closer look at the rhetoric that characterizes the game's reception between different regional player groups tells a different tale. Rather than seriously engage in the game's sexually-charged content, Korean anti-feminist rhetoric chooses to almost entirely ignore *Five Hearts'* playful romantic, and sexual elements, decrying the motives as insidious attempts to instill feminist culture. The perception of such feminist messaging prohibits domestic Korean anti-feminist counterparts the same opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of Korean visual aesthetics. What remains at stake is more than access to the pleasures of a FMV dating simulation, but rather the need for deeper localized cultural analysis when examining the products of regional game industries. The features of (anti)feminism are not uniform across cultures, what is understood as "woke" and sexist in America often does not register outside of its cultural and geographic boundaries. Korean gender politics operate by logics distinct from American and European discourses around identity and power, and require clear, distinctive engagement with local conditions to be properly understood. Looking at games as transnational vehicles of pleasure, it behooves us as researchers to remember that games are polysemic and representative of local social imaginaries (Martin 2018) and, whenever possible, to situate games within their local and regional contexts.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ A hand gesture where the forefinger and thumb are positioned closely together, as one might use to measure something small.