

Digital Romance: Investigating The Drivers of Otome Games' Increased Popularity in China Based On "Undoing Gender"

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Abstract. Otome games are virtual romance games in which the player takes on the role of a female character and interacts with several male characters. This type of game initially originated in Japan has gradually become a hit in China in recent years. "Love and Deepspace" is the latest achievement of the current domestic otome games. From their appearance to their professional status, the female characters in this game are independent and mature individuals. Also, the plot and lines are more powerful than those in previous games of the same genre where the female characters used to be delicate and vulnerable. Meanwhile, game characters do not simply display "masculinity" or "femininity" in line with their gender, and personality traits that are simply divided by gender are overridden and reshaped. Back in the real world today, more and more women are no longer constrained to marriage and family. Instead, they are enjoying a life of celibacy, free from the implicit norms imposed on women by society's "doing gender". They seek the right to freely express their feelings and have fun, and the space provided by otome video games has fulfilled their demand. Combining with Butler's theory of "undoing gender" and reflecting on the current social reality, this paper attempts to analyze how gender performs in "Love and Deepspace" and explore how the game subverts the traditional heteronormative relationship model and resists the binary opposition between men and women, thus gaining the popularity of many female players.

Keywords: Undoing Gender; otome games; female-oriented games; "Love and Deepspace".

1. Introduction

Since "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" was released by Papergames in 2017, it had suddenly become popular among young female players. "Love and Deep Space", launched by the same company at the beginning of 2024, has rapidly gained popularity in a short period of time, with downloads staying at the top on major mobile game platforms, and its first-week revenues reached 123.6 million yuan [1, 2]. As otome games rise in the domestic video-game market, female players are shaking up the male dominance in the game field. Compared to previous otome games, what highlights "Love and Deepspace" has, and what improvements have been made to attract modern females to spend money on this game are questions worth pondering. In contemporary China, the Chinese feminist movement is gradually on the rise, with more and more women paying attention to and actively participating in discussions about gender equality, women's rights and social status. Female gamers' passion for otome games, their love for virtual male sex and emotional fulfilment are all grounded on the concept of "undoing gender" in the new era.

Judith Butler's theory of "undoing gender" states that gender is neither one's identity nor what one owns. She defines gender as a bridge where masculine and feminine are produced and normalized with the effects of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performative [3]. It is clear that the reference to gender is rich in connotations, and that the simple division of gender into male and female, or the conflation of the expression of gender with its definition, consolidates a normative definition of gender that is obviously incomplete. Therefore, Judith Butler also noted that separating "gender" from both masculinity and femininity is an action to guard a theoretical view where one could explain how the binary of masculine and feminine exhausts the semantic field of gender. Such phrases as "gender trouble", "gender blending", "transgender" or "cross-gender" all suggest that the naturalized binary should be taken in another way [3]. In this paper, it is hoped that the qualities of gender performances in the current popular otome games could be discovered under the guidance of the theory of "undoing gender".

2. Literature Review

Most existing research on domestic otome games focuses on the impact on players and points out the illusory and misleading nature of otome games in light of the actual experiences of female players via analyzing and summarizing the internal operating rules of these games. Scholars Caiyun Wen and Xuanren Zhou analyzed how female-oriented romance games such as "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" satisfy the psychological needs of players based on theories like Goffman's "dramaturgy" and Mead's "self". The two scholars argue that "daydreaming" is a key factor in the popularity of such games, without addressing the specific manifestations of gender in the games [4]. The other scholars, Yunrong Han and Xingyu Wang, have reflected on the psychology of female-oriented games catering to player audiences on Horton and Wohl's theory of "parasocial interaction", and also referred to Goffman's theory of "dramaturgy" in order to comprehensively sort out and integrate female-oriented games in China [5]. The article "The Influence of Otome Video Games on Female Gamers' Views of Ideal Love" starts from Horton and Wohl's concepts of "parasocial interaction" and "parasocial relationships" and explores the role of otome games in the construction of parasocial relationships and the shaping of female players' views about marriage and love through a quantitative research method. The study focuses on the real-life experiences and self-perceptions of individual female players and does not mention female players' perceptions of gender performances in games [6].

There are also studies showing that the trend of otome games is constantly progressing. The article "Negotiated Resistance: Female Image in Domestic Feminist Games", based on post-feminist theories, points out that the multidimensional trend in the portrayal of female characters has enriched and reconstructed the image of female characters in previous games. It has also put forward a preliminary resistance to patriarchal discourses and patriarchal culture, showing a negotiated resistance to the binary model of gender dominated by patriarchal culture [7]. Moreover, the emergence of "Love and Deepspace" is an exact continuation and development of this "negotiated resistance" to the patriarchal world. Following the research above, the questions of how domestic otome games in their rising stage have gained recognition from many female players, how "Love and Deepspace" breaks down the dichotomy of male and female, and how female players perceive the difference between relationships in the real world and those in games have yet to be answered.

3. "Undoing gender" in "Love and Deepspace"

3.1. Subverting the Traditional Relationship Model Where Women Should Be Taken Care of and Protected by Men

In an otome game, the main part of the game for the players is to interact with multiple male characters including plot development, side-by-side battles, dress-ups, trips, etc. The main things that can represent the image of the female character played by the gamer are the plots and lines where the male and female characters exchange their thoughts and feelings. When it comes to the portrayal of female characters, "Love and Deepspace" has made significant changes. In contrast, previous games of the same genre, such as "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" and "Light and Night", used to portray female characters as fragile and soft, with small, delicate faces and innocent expressions, often wearing dresses and exposing much of their skin, which conformed to the stereotypical image of females in the actual world. At the same time, the female images correspond to the aesthetic taste of males, residing in a position of waiting to be protected and supervised from a male perspective. In "Love and Deepspace", female players are able to design their own game images according to their personal preferences whether they want it to have a sweet appearance or behave in a detached manner. Their initial clothing is a trouser suit in line with their professional identity as hunters who fight for city security, so they no longer need to wear a revealing dress for the sake of so-called beauty and sexiness, and there is no need to hide edges and eliminate aggressiveness.

In terms of plot and lines, "Love and Deepspace" continues the overall framework of "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice", where female and male characters are humans with various special powers called

“Evol” and share the common goal of saving the world. Instead of inheriting the old formula of gradual growth for female characters, “Love and Deepspace takes players on a journey to witness how a mature strong female character works to find the cause of her family's death and protect the weaker through her own efforts. In some past otome games, once a female character is caught in a storm, the male character would immediately appear and save her, so the female character tends to act helpless and inferior, and her attitude towards the male character's flirting is numb and acquiescent. For example, in “Mr. Love: Queen's Choice”, when the female character is being chased by a reporter with nowhere to escape, the male character Mo Xu suddenly appears and takes her away from the scene:

Player: (I was just making a sharp turn into an alley, only to be crashed by a man) Ah, sorry! (Familiar scent surrounded me) Is it Xu Mo?

Mo Xu: What's wrong?

Player: I'm sorry, I can't say hello to you now, bye!

Mo Xu: (as if understanding something, he pulled and drilled me into a small wooden room on the roadside.....) Do not speak.

In “Light and Night”, the female character is mocked by the male character Yi Xiao when she is frightened and distracted:

Yi Xiao: (He pulled hard, "click", the door opened) It seems that not only is your courage little, but your strength is also small. You are welcome. (He looked straight into me, a smile swept across his eyes)

Player: I haven't said thank you yet

Yi Xiao: Oh, then why don't you make up for it?

Player: thank, thank you.

In “Love and Deep Space”, the female character has the ability to withstand risks and protect herself on her own. She is adept at obtaining information favorable to herself through interpersonal relationships. As a result, the female character is dominant in the relationships with the male characters. When the male character Yu Qi complains that the female character is too busy with her work to neglect his existence, the female character does not hesitate to express her true thoughts:

Yu Qi: So, I hate waiting for people, and you ended up making me wait all day again.

Player: Well, I'm sorry

Yu Qi: Who wants your apology? You must promise me that you'll never make me wait for you again.

Player: But, for me, work is always the first priority.

3.2. Weakening "Masculinity" and Strengthening "Femininity" in Male Characters

Love and Deepspace" introduces three male characters, Xinghui Shen (a deepspace hunter and co-worker of the female character), Shen Li (a doctor and attending physician of the female character), and Yu Qi (a painter who meets the female character by chance). According to the stereotypical image of men, they must shoulder huge responsibilities in family and society. Meanwhile, men are forbidden to show their weakness for they must be courageous to fight. Such concepts have shown that men are not seen as humans with free thoughts and feelings, and it is the price of preferential treatment for men in the patriarchal system. In the game world, men and women are relatively equal, so the line between the so-called "masculinity" of bravery and purpose, and the "femininity" of serenity and gentleness has been gradually blurred. Also, the fragile side of male characters can be seen and respected, for example, Shen Li is a serious, cautious doctor on the one hand and an avid sweets-lover on the other. Yu Qi can create priceless paintings but has an insatiable fear for cats. Whether it is sweets-obsession or timidity, these traits are common in women by default. When they appear in men, they are often perceived as a defect, and in fact, such prejudices must be corrected.

Since " Mr. Love: Queen's Choice " became a hit in 2018, it has successfully opened up the market for domestic otome games, and some scholars view this year as "the first year of Chinese otome games" [8]. It has been seven years since the earliest games actively seek transformation, and even

more new forces to emerge in a look that meets more requirements of contemporary female aesthetics and thinking. Actually, these changes in otome games are closely related to social variations and the reconstruction of gender. The following section will explore the reasons for these changes from the perspective of contemporary young women's views on romantic relationships in the real world and their own pursuits.

4. Contemporary Young Women's Barriers to Find a Suitable Male Partner and Their Pursuit of Independence

4.1. Women Who Are Actively "Left Behind"

According to the data of the Seventh National Population Census, the number of unmarried women (15 years old and above) in the country is 4,577,406, and the number of divorced and widowed women is 769,614, and 1,456,868, accounting for 19.4 %, 3.3 %, and 6.2 % of the total number of women at 234,969,665, respectively, showing that the percentage of unmarried women in the country is much larger than that of divorced and widowed women [9, 10]. Under the traditional marriage model, women tend to be weaker than their male partners in terms of education and income. As their educational level and income have risen, their weaker position has changed, so they would have higher expectations of men when looking for a partner. Not only are educational level and income taken into account, but also family background, hometown, and other complex factors matter. By now, men's dominant status in the marriage market is no longer significant, and they even appear mediocre and backward when compared to women of the same age.

In the theory of "doing gender", West and Zimmerman state that doing gender is creating distinctions that are unnatural, non-biological and non-essential between girls and boys and women and men. If these differences are constructed, they would be used to enhance the "essentiality" of gender [11]. This is the case, the implicit norm that women should perfectly make a balance between their work and family is still deeply entrenched in society through "doing gender", and more and more women who have achieved success in their careers find themselves unable to fulfill this requirement. At the same time, it is possible that men tend to pursue women younger than themselves when choosing a partner for the sake of better control over her or to facilitate the establishment of their own "manly" image. As women grow older, the number of men available to them in the marriage market is also decreasing. It is clear that many women have found spiritual satisfaction in the cause and lives they fought for and have freed themselves from the past script of raising children, running the household and struggling to be docile wives. Instead, marriage is no longer a necessity for them, so they enjoy their life themselves.

4.2. Spaces Where Women Can Express and Enjoy Themselves Freely

According to Tencent News, in the first month of its launch, "Love and Deepspace" had achieved an estimated global revenue of more than 600 million yuan, and its single-day water flow peaked at 40 million to 50 million yuan [12]. These figures not only directly show that the game is sought after by many female players, but also reflect the fact that women are happy to spend money on their own pleasure. Some costumes and cards of the male characters in "Love and Deepspace" show the charm of the male body through exposure to satisfy the desire of female players to gaze at men, which carries a certain erotic connotation. Meanwhile, the game inverts the unsatisfactory way of interaction between the two genders in reality, thus creating a cyber-utopia for women where they can watch and talk about the male body at ease. It is noteworthy that female players are not really developing a relationship with the virtual male characters in otome games: the interaction between the two is more akin to real-world "flirting" and does not have a beginning, middle and end of a full-blown relationship, so many of the female players just enjoy the pleasure of immersive experience in role-playing. Although the pleasurable feelings female players get from their gaming experiences are

similar to what they get from real relationships, they do not play such games only to fill the absence of real relationships, but more to please themselves.

5. Conclusion

Looking at China nowadays, as the feminist movement carries out, many women are united, either bravely speaking out against gender inequality in society, working hard for more women's rights and interests, or working to help their compatriots get rid of the situation of remaining silent and being alienated. More and more Chinese women are paying more attention to their own feelings and needs, desiring to be seen and respected rather than a second-sex male appendant. The reason why otome games are becoming more and more popular among women is that they are striving to "undoing gender", breaking down the traditional dichotomy between men and women, and creating a utopia where both genders could work, live, and love equally. It is because otome games have counteracted the notion of "doing gender" in the real world that they are able to briefly liberate women from the social expectation of becoming good wives and mothers, and temporarily satisfy their dream of gender equality and free development. Though "Love and Deepspace" has done a lot, there are still defects like the female characters being thin and weak, which does not meet the requirements of a qualified hunter. However, the transformation it already made is worthy of recognition, and the future development of domestic otome games is worth looking forward to. Similarly, the future of the Chinese feminist movement is also flourishing.

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