

Structured Generation of Virtual Intimate Relationships: Emotional Agency and Subject Construction in Otome Games

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Abstract: Using otome games as the focus of the analysis, this paper focuses on the structural construction and the formation of virtual intimate relationships. Based on this base, it also delves into the rationale underlying the players making choices autonomously and their expressive actions in emotional interactions, revealing the actual state of their emotional involvement. This analytical framework also guides the study to synthesize the particular process and underlying mechanism that creates individual identity in digital spaces. Digital technologies and standardized design support the creation of otome game content with character configurations, branching narrative, and affection mechanics together forming a strict structure. This structure allows the mass production and reproduction of virtual intimate relationships, thus enabling the scalabilization of emotional practice. Players break free from passive acceptance during the interaction process and rely on their own choices to lead the emotional relationship and define the form of intimate relationships, thus completing the expression of emotional agency. Based on publicly available research data and user behavior in the gaming industry, it can be concluded that virtual intimate relationships are not only entertaining emotional experiences, but also an important way for contemporary youth to reconstruct self-identity and shape independent subject consciousness in digital scenarios. This study can provide a reference perspective for interpreting the development characteristics of emotional culture in the digital age, and also provide empirical support for subsequent research on similar issues.

Keywords: Virtual Intimate Relationships, Otome Game, Emotional Agency, Subject Construction, Digital Emotional Consumption.

1. Introduction

The full penetration of mobile Internet and the widespread popularity of anime culture have promoted the game of women B to gradually break through the barriers of subcultures, gain mainstream attention, and become the core segment for women to move into the field of digital entertainment. According to the "Research Report on Female-oriented Games" by the Game Working Committee (GWC) of China Audio and Digital Association, the domestic market for Female-oriented Games will reach CNY 8 billion in 2024, with a year-on-year growth rate of 124.1%, far exceeding the average growth rate of the overall mobile gaming industry [1]; Its core users are mainly educated women born in the 1990s and 2000s, covering two major groups: students and corporate employees. Survey data reveal a clear distribution among respondents: single individuals constitute 61.3% of the total sample. For this particular group, two main motivations drive their engagement with otome games. They seek emotional companionship, and they aim to alleviate pressure from real life. Notably, their consumption behaviors carry distinct emotion-oriented traits.

Existing academic research on otome games has largely centered on surface-level elements. These include narrative structure, visual presentation, and technical application. Yet, dedicated analyses addressing the games' internal operational logic remain limited. Similarly, in-depth explorations of their deeper value connotations are still lacking. The research perspective is also limited to text interpretation and technical description, yet few studies have conducted in-depth exploration of the structured generation logic of virtual intimate relationships, the actual release path of player

emotional agency, and the concrete process of users' digital subject construction in digital scenarios. There is a clear gap in relevant empirical research.

This article is based on the perspective of structured generation of virtual intimate relationships, supported by publicly available data from the Game Working Committee and the practice of top female game products. It breaks through the limitations of single literature references and focuses on analyzing the emotional interaction mechanism of female-oriented games, the behavioral characteristics of players' autonomous participation, and the shaping path of user subject identity in digital scenarios. It deeply interprets the cultural connotation and practical value of digital intimate relationships, and adopts an empirical research approach in line with the academic norms of general journals, providing a new analytical perspective for emotional culture research in the digital age.

2. The Media Foundation and Structured Framework of Virtual Intimate Relationships in Otome Games

Players' demand for stable virtual intimate relationships is met primarily by the mature application of digital media technologies and the construction of standardized content frameworks. This is also a key prerequisite for Otome Games to break through subcultural circles and cover a wide range of players. Compared with traditional emotional media, the popularization of mobile devices has drastically lowered the participation threshold for players. This allows users of all age groups and diverse needs to engage with the games

effortlessly, free from the pressures of real-world social interaction [2], and ensures instant responses to their emotional needs. The implementation of technologies such as Live2D dynamic rendering, high-precision 3D modeling, and real-time voice interaction allows virtual characters to have delicate micro expressions, natural body movements, and precise synchronization of speech and mouth shape. It also frees virtual characters from the limitations of "symbolization" and endows virtual characters with vivid emotional expressiveness, providing a highly immersive concrete carrier for the establishment of virtual intimate relationships, allowing players to truly perceive the emotional characteristics of virtual characters.

The core of supporting the stable generation of virtual intimate relationships is a standardized content framework with a logical closed loop, which includes four core elements that are interrelated and indispensable: firstly, tagged character personas, creating virtual partner images that fit different player preferences with distinct personality traits and clear identity positioning, and achieving emotional resonance; Secondly, the branching plot system provides multiple paths for different emotional orientations, giving players full autonomy in their choices [3]; The third is the quantitative favorability system, which converts the emotional connection between players and characters into intuitive numerical values, guiding players to continuously invest emotions and time; The fourth is the instant feedback mechanism, which provides precise responses to players' interactive operations, unlocks more interactive forms through favorability upgrades, and continuously strengthens emotional connections. The standardized content framework has enhanced its adaptation validity to the diverse emotional needs of different players and made the construction of virtual intimate relationships more targeted and emotionally resonant, and the two key operational indicators of Otome Games' core users—an average monthly active duration of more than 2.3 hours and a payment conversion rate of 12.8%—as presented in QuestMobile's 2024 mobile game user behavior monitoring data, are significantly higher than those of other mobile game categories. This verifies the deep integration effect of digital media technology and the standardized content framework, which not only accurately anchors the core kernel of players' emotional needs but also drives the formation of a replicable and sustainable industrialized development paradigm for virtual intimate relationships, thereby providing solid technical and content-based support for the innovative development of emotional practices in the digital age and laying a solid practical foundation for subsequent academic research and industrial practice in the field of virtual intimate relationships.

3. Emotional Interaction Design: The Path to Generating Virtual Intimate Relationships

Otome Games forge virtual intimate relationships naturally in line with the logic of emotional progression—layered, progressive emotional interaction design serves as the core underpinning, which not only aligns the cultivation of intimacy with the natural pace of players' emotional investment, but also features a distinct immersive developmental trajectory. Shallow interaction is designed with text dialogue and basic selection as the core. "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice" relies on lightweight social interaction forms

such as SMS and Moments to help players quickly establish personality recognition of virtual characters, alleviate the initial sense of unfamiliarity of emotional contact, and effectively reduce the psychological threshold for players' emotional investment. Middle level interaction enriches the interactive experience through multiple design dimensions. "Light and Night" deeply integrates exclusive voice acting, dynamic expressions, and scenario-based interaction, combined with a personalized feedback mechanism of customized voice packs, strengthening the concrete characteristics and companionship of virtual characters. Players actively initiate interactive behaviors to gradually narrow the emotional distance between themselves and virtual characters. Deep interaction is the sublimation of virtual intimate relationships. The core content of "Tears of Themis" is exclusive storylines, confession nodes, and festival linkage, with the addition of exclusive interactive designs such as character commemorative day Easter eggs, achieving the qualitative and in-depth emotional accumulation of the emotional connection between players and characters; Love and Deep Space further enhances the immersive experience of deep interaction through technological designs such as AR real-life interaction and 24-hour voice companionship. As a core connection mechanism that runs through various interaction stages, the favorability system transforms the abstract emotional connection between players and virtual characters into a quantifiable indicator system [4]. The top female-oriented games impose tiered interaction permissions based on favorability levels, and players need to continuously interact to boost their favorability ratings in order to unlock high-level intimate interaction content. This layered interaction design endows virtual intimate relationships with unique controllability and certainty, allowing players to obtain stable emotional feedback and emotional value supply during the interaction process without facing the uncertainty and social anxiety of real social interactions [5]. According to Gamma Data's 2024 research on the female-oriented gaming market, the domestic female-oriented gaming market has reached a scale of CNY 8 billion, with emotional value and companionship becoming the core payment drivers for players. Over 70% of players' spending is concentrated on unlocking intimate storylines, accessing customized interactive content, and related in-game experiences. Single youth are the core group of this type of consumption, which directly confirms the core supportive role of emotional interaction design in the construction of virtual intimate relationships.

4. Player Emotional Agency: From Passive Acceptance to Active Participation

Otome Games breaks the inherent mode of passive acceptance of established narratives by audiences in traditional emotional media such as film and literature [6]. The emotional agency of players becomes the core driving force for the construction and promotion of virtual intimate relationships, which is also a key characteristic that distinguishes Otome Games from other emotional digital products. In the fast-paced modern life, young people generally face the reality of social awkwardness and limited emotional expression. Otome Games provides this group with a digital space to release emotions and express themselves independently, allowing their emotional needs to be seen and

satisfied.

The emotional agency of players is mainly reflected in three specific dimensions, all of which are fully implemented in the design of the top female-oriented games. At the level of decision-making autonomy, players independently control the pace of emotional development through plot branching and daily interactive actions, breaking free from the constraints of real-life social rules; the multi-line strategy design of Mr. Love: Queen's Choice allows players to freely choose their emotional development paths without passively catering to others' needs.

At the level of emotional expression, players convey their genuine emotional demands through prop gifting, dialogue choices, voice messages, etc., and the recording feedback function of Love and Deep Space endows such emotional expression with personalized traits, enabling players to cast off the limitations of social identity and behavioral norms in real life. At the level of relationship definition, players may define virtual intimate relationships as forms of companionship, comfort, etc., based on their own needs [7], and the design of Tears of Themis without mandatory romantic plotlines accurately caters to such personalized emotional needs.

In reality, there remain numerous disciplinary norms in traditional emotional paradigms, while female players' desire for emotional autonomy is growing increasingly strong, and the design philosophy of Otome Games is highly aligned with this desire. There is an essential difference between virtual intimate relationships and real intimate relationships, as they do not require the responsibility and constraints of real-life social interactions, and are more in line with contemporary youth's pursuit of emotional freedom. According to the "2024 Research Report on China's Otome Game Industry" by iResearch Consulting (IRC), the number of domestic Otome Game players has reached 70.0 million, with over 78% of players listing "autonomous control over emotional relationships" as their core demand; QuestMobile's research also shows that the 7-day retention rate of Otome Games with high emotional agency design is 65.8%, far higher than the industry average. This fully confirms the importance of emotional agency design in enhancing product value and provides a new path for emotional practice in the digital age.

5. Digital Subject Construction: Reshaping Self Identity in Virtual Intimacy

The virtual intimate interaction in Otome Games is not only a simple entertainment experience, but also carries the dual value of players' digital subject construction and self-identity reconstruction, which is the core characteristic that distinguishes this type of game from other forms of entertainment. In the process of interacting with virtual characters, players do not passively accept the setting, but actively integrate their emotional appeals, value orientations, and ideal expectations into it, projecting their inner ideal self into the virtual scenarios, gradually shaping a digital subject image that meets their own needs.

In "Tears of Themis", players are set as lawyers with independent professional identities. This character setup enables players to naturally infuse their sense of independence and personal values into gameplay as they control the protagonist to handle cases and interact with virtual characters on an equal basis. With the positive

feedback from virtual scenarios, players can continuously reinforce their self-worth identification. The virtual space constructed by Otome Games abandons the judgment and constraints of reality, providing players with a stress-free emotional trial-and-error arena [8]. Players can freely explore diverse emotional expression modes and interpersonal relationships, gradually clarifying their emotional needs and self-positioning through repeated interactive practice.

Compared to the self-awareness constrained by social norms and gender roles in real life, digital subjects in virtual space are more autonomous and inclusive, especially providing female players with an opportunity to break free from passive situations, enabling them to establish a self-centered subject consciousness in a stress-free environment, gradually improving their emotional expression ability and self-awareness level. According to the "2024 Female-oriented Games Research Report" by the Game Working Committee of the China Audio and Digital Association, over 60% of female players stated that virtual intimate interaction effectively enhances their emotional expression ability and self-awareness. This subject construction in digital scenarios positively empowers the development of self-awareness in reality.

According to a sampling survey of the Just So Soul Research Institute's "2025 Generation Z Loneliness Index Report" under the Soul App, 25.6% of young people fall into emotional loneliness due to a lack of confidants, and Otome Games has become an important emotional support for this group [9]. The emotional comfort and psychological satisfaction that players gain from virtual intimate interactions are not a mere escape from reality, but the cultivation of self-cognition and the alleviation of psychological stress through emotional practice in digital space, thereby achieving a deep transformation from the construction of virtual digital subjects to authentic self-identity. This process, in turn, underscores both the practical application value and the academic research significance of such digital emotional practices.

6. The Realistic Mapping and Cultural Value of Virtual Intimate Relationships

The modern generation of youth experiences long-term emotional stress due to high-paced lifestyles, which have reduced their chances of real-life interaction with other individuals. Social anxiety disorder and emotional loneliness is a common psychological issue in this population [10]. The report titled "The 'Survey Report on Social Mindset of Chinese Young Netizens (2024)'" jointly published by Fudan University and Bilibili Public Policy Research Institute supports the fact that online space has become the main stage of emotional expression and need realization of young people. The games act as the crucial media of reducing stress and creating emotional resonance because young people tend to find equally relaxing emotional interactions without social obligations and forced engagement.

Virtual intimate relationships in otome games are a direct reflection of emotional needs of young people in the digital social contexts. These links are not imaginary desires; they have cultural significance and practical value to meet the emotional needs of the youth - a feature that sets them apart from other digital products.

Aiming at low social pressure and high emotional

flexibility, otome games provide young individuals with a steady emotional partner via daily mild connection and individualized emotional response. They fill the gap between the emotions caused by the mismatched living routines and the lack of emotional requirements in the real life interactions. Virtual relationships do not add any extra obligations to players as compared to actual intimate relationships that may be accompanied by responsibilities and social pressure. Emotions can be found immediately by the youth with keeping the personal boundary, which meets the need of the Generation Z to connect emotionally without losing the freedom of personality and represents the initial intention of otome games.

In terms of culture, virtual intimate relationships have overcome physical boundary and stiff gender conventions associated with traditional intimate relationships. They have made intimate relationships richer in form and meaning and furthered the trend towards self-expression that is autonomous and varied [11]. On page 25 of the report entitled: *The 2024 Women-Oriented Game Research Report* (published by the Game Working Committee of the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, GWC), it is clear that as a key carrier of digital culture, otome games are more than just representations of the dreams of young people of equality, independence, and safety in their emotional relationships, but they also incorporate traditional cultural factors like intangible cultural heritage and Chinese-style aesthetics into their interaction chains and thus serve as a new channel through which young people can pass on cultural traditions and underline the importance of digital media in the re-construction and empowerment of the current emotional culture.

The main idea behind the concept of virtual emotional practice is that it should not be implemented as a replacement of real-life intimate relationships but as an enlargement of the limits of individual emotional practice and offer a variety of options of emotional choices and spiritual support to the youth. In the context of digitalization, these virtual emotional connections have become a significant and practical addition to the emotional life of young people, creating a new opportunity to meet their emotional requirements.

7. Conclusion

This article combines Gamma data, publicly available industry data from the Game Working Committee of the China Audio Digital Association in 2024, and the characteristics of user practice in Otome Games. This study investigates virtual intimate relationships along three core dimensions: media technology, emotional interaction, and user behavior. Findings confirm that such relationships constitute a technology-shaped digital emotional practice that effectively responds to the affective needs of contemporary youth. Otome games rely on structured media design, which in turn provides a standardized framework for the formation and development of virtual intimate bonds. Through a layered and progressive emotional interaction mode, they effectively activate players' emotional agency and help them complete digital subject construction and self-identity reshaping in the game's digital interactive scenarios.

The research results indicate that the virtual intimate

relationships in Otome Games are not simply entertaining emotional experiences, but an important digital field for contemporary youth to achieve autonomous emotional expression and improve self-awareness. It can not only fill the emotional gap in young people's real-life social interactions, but also has a positive promoting effect on the development and innovation of emotional culture in the digital age. With the continuous iteration and upgrading of digital technologies such as Live2D and AR, the presentation form and interaction mode of virtual intimate relationships will continue to be optimized. Its deep impact on individual emotional development and social emotional and cultural construction still requires long-term and in-depth follow-up research.

Respecting the emotional choices of young people and guiding positive and healthy digital emotional practices is the core direction of the development of digital culture. This article focuses on the empirical analysis of the generation mechanism, user emotional agency, and subject construction of virtual intimate relationships in Otome Games. It can provide targeted and practical research references for subsequent academic studies and industrial practices on digital intimate relationships and the development of female-oriented gaming industry.

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