

Ludic Lovers: Locating the Ideology of Romance in *Otome* Games

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INTRODUCTION

By forefronting female desire during gameplay, the understudied game category of *otome* games occupies an interesting niche amid the current masculine Hegemony of Play (Fron et al. 2007). *Otome* games are dating simulations that cater to the heterosexual female gaze. Gameplay is oriented around the player making the correct in-game choices to obtain an archetypal romantic happily-ever-after ending with a chosen male love interest (Andlauer 2018). While the games industry has traditionally prioritised male gamers, the distinctly female-centred production and consumption practices underlying *otome* games offers marginalised female players an opportunity to *actively* pursue their own romantic fantasies through interactive gameplay (Kim 2009), hence challenging norms of female passivity. Feminist game scholars have consequently located how *otome* games can *empower* marginalised female players through romantic fantasy, but scant research has situated these games as cultural artefacts that have inherited the *conservative* ideological traditions of heterosexual romance media (Berlant 2012; Galician 2004; Modleski 2008; Radway 1991). This is particularly true of the genre's heteropatriarchal ideals which limit the emergence of truly transgressive desire. The construction of romantic fantasy in *otome* games therefore presents a critical paradox for feminist game scholars, as these games simultaneously privilege female desire while valorising heterosexual coupledness.

In this paper I address this research gap by exploring how *otome* games ludically construct romantic fantasies for their predominantly female playerbase, as well as investigating whether these games ultimately produce, reproduce or subvert heteropatriarchal romantic ideals and gender norms. To do so I employ digital feminist qualitative textual analysis, grounded in theories of gendered gazing from feminist media scholarship: Laura Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory and Stephanie Jennings' (2018) alternative game-centred feminine gaze theory. As these theories consider how the male/activity/subject–female/passivity/object paradigm is portrayed within differing heteronormative media forms, I use them to explore how patriarchal gender norms are constructed in the context of ludic romances on both a representational and spectatorial level. With these theories in mind I performed a situated feminist close reading of romance storylines associated with four popular male archetypes in *otome* games: 1) the flirt, 2) *kuudere*, 3) *tsundere* and 4) *yandere*. These personality-based archetypes were selected due to their alignment with hegemonic masculine traits identified in Levant et al.'s (2007) revised masculine roles norms inventory, including aggression, restrictive emotionality and social achievement. Four story routes per archetype were analysed from a range of six major titles all developed by dominant *otome* game market player Otomate, which were deliberately chosen due to their shared production team, similar narrative length and

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global popularity. The selected games were *Birushana* (2022), *Piofiore* (2020), *Amnesia: Memories* (2022), *Code: Realize* (2020), *Cupid Parasite* (2020) and *Olympia Soirée* (2021). Upon completing the textual analysis, I identified emotional unavailability, taboo, non-relational sexuality, patriarchal leadership and hyper-masculine violence (including sexual, physical and verbal abuse) as prominent gendered themes that contained significant implications for female players.

The headline finding is that *otome* games do indeed offer diverse and (occasionally non-normative) romantic fantasies constructed for marginalised female players, but that gendered transgression in *otome* games is still limited through a narrative and ludic commitment to upholding normative sexuality. This affects how gendered characters are represented and the in-game choices available to players. Structured around the gameplay goal of the romantic happy ending, I show how *otome* games demonstrate an ideological investment in conservative myths of romance, which uphold normative heterosexual coupledness. In alignment with Ganzon's (2017) analysis of *Code: Realize*, I demonstrate that narrative dialogue and player choices frequently revolve around managing the *male* love interest's emotions. To maintain the utopian illusion of romance, gendered violence committed by male leads of varying archetypes is frequently romanticised, with there being few ludic options for players to intervene and the frequent resurrection of the common damsel-in-distress trope. Despite their focus on female-centred fantasies, *otome* games often reactivate the male/activity/subject–female/passivity/object binary. Paradoxically, transgressive potential was mostly located during this study in the storylines of the hyper-masculine antagonist archetype, which frequently featured non-normative fantasies like taboo relationships and offered more opportunities for players to exercise ludic agency.

While *otome* games significantly diverge from the violent narrative and gameplay goals of masculine domination manifest within hegemonic gaming culture (Gelūnas 2023), female fantasies in *otome* games do not necessarily subvert existing gender norms. This paper therefore hopes to complicate readings of *otome* games as being inherently feminist *or* anti-feminist, contending instead that *otome* games are simultaneously capable of producing, reproducing and challenging gender norms. Game-specific features, like in-built interactivity and immersivity, can introduce new confines *or* expand the contours of existing romantic fantasies in popular romance media. The masculine Hegemony of Play's endurance means that it remains vital for researchers to examine non-conforming games in order to visualise how games can contribute to new feminist horizons, as well as their failings or issues.

BIO

Kelly Li is an incoming PhD Candidate who will be based in the Sydney Games and Play Lab at the University of Sydney. She works in the interdisciplinary field of feminist media studies, with a particular focus on video games, video game cultures and digital intimacies. Her PhD project will involve a study of dating simulations and their game counterpublics through the lens of cultural pleasure and cultural transgression. She completed her honours thesis last year, which analysed the ideologies of romance contained within *otome* games.

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