

# Pleasurable Punishments: Examining Masochistic Play and “Bad” Endings in Otome Games

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## INTRODUCTION

While male fantasies of domination pervade the Hegemony of Play (Fron et al. 2007), otome games emerge as a unique game genre by positioning othered female players as desiring subjects. This female-oriented genre is animated by ideological fantasies, where the romantic happy ending acts as the primary gameplay goal (Kim 2009; Andlauer 2018). In traditional romance media, happy endings typically frame gendered power asymmetries as desirable for female audiences (Radway 1991). The normative purpose of happy endings extends to otome games (Richards 2015) by privileging spiritual views of love marked by chastity; naturalising existing heteropatriarchal relationship arrangements; and idealising heteronormative romantic myths of eternal togetherness. Yet no extensive research has been conducted on their opposite – the *bad* ending – despite their rich potential to subvert the utopian premise of happy endings in otome games. Scholarship thus far has only briefly mentioned the bad ending, where this mechanic is framed as a gameplay punishment occurring when the implied female player-subject incorrectly performs ideal heterofemininity (Richards 2015), resulting in a failure to fulfill the romance through melodramatic narrative circumstances (Ganzon 2018). There is an increasing trend of players who deliberately seek bad endings precisely because they are more likely to feature explicitly sexual, violent and sadomasochistic fantasies which ordinarily contradict the utopian project of romance. However, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the potential, anti-normative pleasures of these gameplay punishments.



Figure 1: An illustration featuring the hero locking the heroine in a cage in one of the bad endings of *Amnesia: Memories* (Otomate 2022)

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In this paper, I address this gap by examining the function of bad endings in otome games, and whether they operate as deeply gendered forms of *masochistic play* and *transgressive representation* within games. While extensive research in game studies has been conducted on the masochistic pleasures of failure in games (Juul 2013) and its queer potentiality (Ruberg 2015), broader feminist scholarship understandably treats masochism with ambivalence due to essentialising myths of male/sadism and female/masochism in patriarchal culture (Bartky 1990). Drawing on theoretical insights from both fields, this paper presents early findings from a doctoral project. I employ digital feminist textual analysis to perform a negotiated reading (Hall, 1990) of bad endings in four otome games. These texts were all developed by the otome game market leader Otomate and were chosen because they expressly position bad endings as erotic sadomasochistic fantasies: *Birushana* (Otomate 2022), *Piofiore* (Otomate 2020), *Amnesia: Memories* (Otomate 2022) and *Olympia Soirée* (Otomate 2021).

This paper finds that while bad endings are hegemonically positioned as “failures” in otome games, they form important counterparts to happy endings by inviting new and explicitly erotic forms of masochistic play. These endings allow female players to engage in alternate constructions of femininity in games by forefronting anti-normative fantasies. These bad endings are also afforded by the ludic format of dating simulations, as these games can facilitate multiple storyline pathways and endings (Azuma 2009) compared to traditional romances. While otome games are traditionally invested in spiritual conceptions of romance (Kim 2009), this paper finds that this genre often leverages bad endings to include erotic content, including anti-normative fantasies verging on the extreme. This complicates existing research which positions these endings as “bad”, where I argue for the generative *and* stultifying potential of feminine masochism in otome games. I demonstrate that the masochistic pleasures of otome games ultimately cannot be considered truly transgressive nor entirely regressive: despite their extreme content, these bad endings still work within patriarchal scripts that overwhelmingly eroticise gendered submission and domination. Yet these bad endings do not always conform straightforwardly to gender norms, since players are able to reparatively leverage these endings for their own erotic purposes. While masochistic pleasures in otome games may not be politically *transformative*, they are nonetheless politically *important* and anti-hegemonic in how they address politically unsanctioned desires of female players.

Rather than framing the pursuit of the happy ending as the only significant gameplay goal, it is important for scholars to examine the diverse ludic pleasures otome games proffer. Bad endings in otome games invite anti-normative and masochistic forms of play where pleasure intertwines with punishment, hence serving as important conduits of erotic fantasy for female players. This paper hopes to offer several contributions to game studies. First, it adds to literature on sexuality in otome games (Cosmos 2018) and broader gaming culture, which remain limited due to stigma (Harviainen et al. 2018). Second, it contributes to modes of textual analysis in game studies – especially those focused on failure in games – by exploring how gameplay reward systems crucially differentiate ludic romances from traditional romance media. Third, it heightens our understanding of the diverse pleasures and fantasies that female-oriented game genres construct and fulfill for their othered gaming publics.

## BIO

Kelly Li is a PhD Candidate and feminist games scholar based in the Sydney Games and Play Lab at the University of Sydney. Her doctoral project works towards an understanding of ludic pleasure in otome games and their gaming counterpublics, exploring how representations of gender, sexuality and transgression form a unique

politics of desire within this female-oriented genre. She has presented her work at conferences such as *DiGRA Australia*, *Replaying Japan* and *Queer and Feminist Perspectives on Japanese Popular Cultures*. Her previous work examined the ideology of romance within otome games.

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