Beyond the Screen: Exploring the Emotional and Social Impact of Otome Games

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Abstract. Following the growing popularity of online Otome games, this short study provides an initial understanding of the gaming experiences and reflections of six Otome players. We investigate parasocial interactions between players and in-game characters, examining how these interactions influence offline relationships, and explore the motivations and emotional needs of Otome game players. The paper also investigates how Otome game settings impact players' emotional and mental wellbeing. Based on these insights, the study proposes implications for game design, encouraging developers to consider inclusivity, player agency, and player-disengagement in creating Otome games that foster player empowerment and personal growth. The study concludes with suggestions for future research directions to further explore these issues, including raising concerns about potential vulnerabilities of teenage players.

1. Introduction

In January 2024, a new real-time mobile-based 3D-modelling featured first-person perspective game, *Love and Deepspace*, was launched globally, following the success of 2D Otome game – *Mr. love: Queen's Choice*, with downloaded numbers reaching 50 million across the world (IGN GLobal Studios, 2024). Attention is given to this game genre – Otome games, as known as *'romantic video games'* or dating simulation games, which originated from Japan, and allows players to incarnate as female avatars to cultivate affection with virtual male characters in a provided storyline (Andlauer, 2018). Whilst Japanese Otome games have traditionally been developed for gaming consoles and PCs, Chinese Otome games tend to focus primarily on mobile platforms (Jia, 2025). In additional to conventional emphasis on 'true love', many contemporary Otome game developers, such as *Light and Night* and *Love and Deepspace*, now openly explore player desires and fantasies (Jia, 2025).

The topic of Otome games has been explored in existing research within the field of Social Sciences and Psychology. For instance, research investigates how the 'love' fantasy, shaped during childhood through mainstream popular culture, is constructed as a pattern within the Otome game industry (Andlauer, 2018). One study on an Otome game called *Mystic messenger*, examined how the game's real-time simulation of emotional labour acts as a means of policing women's desires, reinforcing nurturing roles, and commodifying female players' leisure time (Ganzon, 2019). In the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), existing work that draw attention on players of Otome games is still scarce, and generally focused on young female players based in China (e.g., Lei et al., 2024; T. Liu & Lai, 2024)). Such work takes a gendered and cultural perspective, and seeks to understand how young women emotionally respond to the game whilst trying to seek deep connections of gendered identities and representations of women – or femininity in games (Kim, 2009; E. Y. Liu, 2024; Yun, 2022).

Video games can provide emotional benefits and fulfilment (Lazarro, 2012; Ryan et al., 2006). As a form of emotionally evocative games (Croissant et al., 2023), there remains limited understanding of the unique ways in which Otome players interact and experience various elements of the game. This includes how interactions with avatars and male characters evoke emotions, how players develop relationships with in-game characters, and how they position themselves with the game mechanics and world settings. In this paper, we contribute a deeper understanding of Otome games – both in terms of their design and the interactions that unfold within them (Croissant et al., 2023). This includes their emotional and mental wellbeing, interpersonal and parasocial relationships, and their reflections on the broader societal impacts of the growing popularity of this genre.

As such, in this study we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with both male and female Otome players globally – aiming to offer more holistic insights into players' motivations, experiences and perceptions (Song & Fox, 2016).

Our study was driven by the research question: *How do Otome games influence players' wellbeing, self-perception, parasocial and offline relationships across different cultural and gender demographics?* In this paper we provide initial evidence that male players can also be attracted to Otome character settings, context settings, and storyline developments, whilst also receiving emotional relief from the gaming experiences. Our work also surfaces how players appreciate and benefit from the sense of control they have over the development of in-game interactions. The players enjoy immersing themselves deeply in the stories as an escape from reality. Additionally, we highlight how such games can foster socialisation and hold the potential to positively contribute to the players' emotional and mental wellbeing. We later discuss how female empowerment may be deconstructed through potential monetisation of Otome games (e.g. through advertisements). We also draw attention on the teenager group of players active in Otome games, calling for attention to mitigate potential future harms. Finally, building on existing findings, we discuss study limitations and propose future research directions on how Otome games can be designed to be inclusive whilst also prioritising players' wellbeing through supporting the creation of meaningful social relationships online.

2. Background

Existing research in the field of HCI has explored how video games can be designed to elicit and respond to players' emotions. For example, frameworks for affective interactivity have been proposed to design emotion-driven experiences in video games (Croissant et al., 2023); studies have examined how emotions like frustration can be used to detect and respond to players' emotional states in affective games (Gilleade & Dix, 2004); and dynamic difficulty adjustment mechanisms have been designed to infer players' anxiety levels (C. Liu et al., 2009). Researchers have also defined frameworks to identify and modulate emotional states through game parameters (Nogueira et al., 2021), or invited participants to reflect on emotionally challenging situations to explore their impact on player experience (Cuerdo et al., 2024). Additionally, evidence has shown how games can support various coping strategies, including emotion-focused, avoidance, and meaning-focused coping (Mirhadi et al., 2024), and how social versus solitary modes of play affect player wellbeing (Vella et al., 2015). Other studies have investigated game-influenced relationships, such as how player-organised paper contracts can help players discover their in-game interpersonal relationships (Hofstetter et al., 2024), and how social game design choices shape a sense of community in Online Collectible Card Games (OCCGs) (Türkay & Adinolf, 2019).

Existing research on Otome games in the field of HCI has explored several perspectives, including a study on young Chinese female Otome players of *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice,* which identified four types of social support formed among the players: (1) emotional support via online platforms; (2) informational support

through sharing game mechanics; (3) instructional support for real-life matters; and (4) esteem support that foster personal growth, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. Additionally, Gong and Huang (Gong & Huang, 2023) conducted a study with 615 Chinese female Otome game players through questionnaires and found that as the interaction and intimacy between female and male characters in Otome games increases, the parasocial interaction – one-way interpersonal relationship that players form with fictional characters – may convert to romantic connections. Despite the progress in the field, there remains a need to explore and understand the diverse experiences of Otome game players, including how these games influence their wellbeing, parasocial and interpersonal relationships.

3. Methods

Our study initially conducted seven semi-structured online interviews (4F, 3M) in late-December 2024. However, one male participant withdrew from the study before data analysis, resulting in six participants' data being analysed. Among the participants, one Chinese player was recruited through private Chinese online Otome gaming communities, whilst the remaining five through the online platform Prolific. Selected participants had to have experience in playing at least one Otome game within the past three months. Before the interviews, participants completed an online Google Form, endorsing consent and sharing basic information about the Otome games that they had played and their preferred interview time slots in their respective time zones. The responses were reviewed to confirm that the games listed were Otome games and to ensure demographic diversity among the participants.

Table 1 Participant Demographic Details

Participant ID	Gender (F/M)	Age	Employment Status	Country	Marital Status	Otome Games
P1	F	40	Full-time Employee	South Africa	Married	*Obey Me (Mobile)*, *London Detective Mysteria (PlayStation)*, *Period Cube (PlayStation)*
P2	F	23	Student	South Africa	In long-term relationship	*Paradise Lost (Mobile)*, *Ikemen Vampire (Mobile)*
P3	F	24	Student	Canada	Single	*Love and Deep Space (Mobile)*, *Collar X Malice (Nintendo Switch)*, *Diabolik Lovers: Haunted Dark Bridal (Nintendo Switch)*

P4	M	24	Full-time Employee	Poland	Not specified	*London Detective Mysteria (PlayStation)*, **Amnesia Memories** *(Nintendo Switch)*, **Bustafellows** *(Steam Desktop)*
P5	M	22	Student	United States	Single	*Mystic Messenger (Bluestack Emulator on Desktop)*
P6	F	32	Full-time Employee	China	Married	*Love and Deep Space (Mobile and iPad)*, **Light and Night** *(Mobile)*, **Far Beyond the World** *(Mobile)*

The interviews questions were structured around five key perspective derived from existing literature and identified research gaps: (1) Gaming Experiences: Participants' time spent on each Otome game, in-game purchases, and involvement in online or offline gaming communities; (2) Reflections on gaming: Motivations for playing, needs and requirements during gameplay, interactions with characters, and identification with the heroine, including any resonances or similarities; (3) Impact on Offline Life: How Otome games influence participants' emotions, offline interactions, and distinguishing between reality and the virtual world; and (4) Design Recommendations: Suggestions for designing future Otome games.

The first author (FA) transcribed and anonymised transcripts from audio recordings and adopted an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The FA then coded the data to generate initial themes. The authorship team then collectively reviewed the data and the codes and refined the themes, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of the meanings embedded within the transcripts.

4. Findings

4.1 A controllable escape and immersion into the fictional world

Four participants characterised their experiences with Otome games as an escape into a fictional world, indicating the Otome games' potential in providing mental detachment from mundane realities. Participants P1 and P6 described Otome game-playing as a convenient and accessible way to *'relax'*, *'unwind'*, and seek entertainment. For single female players like P3, Otome games serve as a means to *'kill time when feeling lonely'* whilst providing an avenue to *'escape from the reality'*. This sentiment is mirrored by P5, who described the narratives within Otome games as offering a structured yet *'immersive escape'*, enabling temporary disengagement from external surroundings: *'I play because most of times they provide an immersive escape and let me just explore engaging narratives.' (P5)* P1 and P4 further emphasised the emotional connections formed with the characters,

describing these interactions as *'a simulated reflection'* of how communication and actions can influence relationships and lead to different consequences in real-life.

The ability for players to immerse themselves in the story and connect with the heroine and other characters is a critical aspect of the Otome gaming experience. However, the identity of the heroine plays a critical role for gaming immersion – if the heroine' role is too closely aligned with the players' real-life identities or experiences, it can become *'overwhelming'*, as players seek escapism rather than a replication of their daily routine and real-life stressors. P6 shared that she was unable to enjoy a Chinese mobile-based Otome game set in the legal industry, as its storyline closely resembled her previous work environment. She suggested that future Otome game development should consider softening the specificity of the heroine's role or identity:

> *'I want to mention another game that I have not played, the Tear of Themis. Because the industry of the characters and heroine in the game is too similar to my previous work, so I have to avoid this kind of game setting completely and cannot immerse myself in the story. Many people are unhappy at work. If it were me, I would not be able to play this game anymore. I don't want to go back to work in the game after work.' (P6)*

P2 and P4 expressed similar concerns about the *'stagnant'* nature of the heroine's appearance design, suggesting that greater agency of customisation is needed to enhance immersion. For instance, P2, as a *'black girl'*, expressed difficulty relating to an *'Asian-looking'* heroine.

Whilst participants value diversity and inclusive heroine design, there is also a desire to maintain a degree of separation game worlds and real-life experiences. P4, for example, noted discomfort when certain male characters resembled people in his own life – suggesting that too much familiarity can disrupt the sense of escapism of the gameplay, with real-world associations *'swinging in the back of his head of real-life relationships'*, fostered by a sense of personal investment in the story and its characters.

Four participants specifically highlighted the enjoyment derived from how their choices in Otome games influence the storyline, interactions with the characters, and eventual outcomes. This sense of *'control'* and agency in shaping the narrative distinguishes some Otome games from passive activities such as reading novels or other forms of gaming:

> *'I love Otome game more actually, because you get to create your own story, your own storyline. You get to decide how the ending goes and everything. So instead of reading an actual book, you can just play the game.' (P1)*

4.2 Emotional and Social Fulfilment

Our findings affirm the potential of Otome games to serve as a medium for self-exploration and satisfying *'emotional needs'*, allowing players to experience growth alongside the heroine and other characters. For instance, P6 described playing Otome games as an *'emotional outlet'* and a form of *'venting'*. Through the

progression of the story and character development, P6 experienced a reconstruction of self-identity, fostering personal growth and emotional resilience:

'It is also an emotional need. That is us players, especially people of my age, may have some mental health problems when we grow up, so sometimes they need an emotional outlet. Some people may vent through other activities, but busy people like us vent through games... We, female players, may use the stories in the game to find ourselves and reach self-growth. Some are just looking for some sense of identity.' (P6)

For P6, one of the motives for engaging with Otome game is *'social'*. She joined online player communities on Chinese social media, initially to discuss story plots and share critical reflections:

'On one hand, I want entertainment, on the other hand, I want social interaction, and then I want emotional interaction. The purpose of joining the community is to find some people who play this game together to chat, because sometimes after I finish the plot of the game, I want to communicate with other people.' (P6)

Similarly, P5 joined online Facebook groups to connect with others who played the same Otome game, fostering *'empathy and providing a space to release stress'*. Over time, these communities can evolve into spaces for broader emotional and social support, where players shared daily life experiences and formed meaningful connections. P6 explained:

'I think in every community, people probably won't really discuss the gameplay at a later stage, so I think if you join the game community, you will get to know some good friends, and it may turn into a chat.' (P6)

The friendships formed within the gaming community often extended into the offline world, with P6 noting that playing Otome games enhanced her socialisation, which positively contributes to her mental wellbeing. Within a friendly player circle, she gained *'confidence and satisfaction'*, which positively impacted her offline relationships:

'The positive influence is significant, because before I started playing games, I was very depressed for a period of time, so I seldom went out and did outdoor activities. After playing games, I now go out frequently because I like to participate in offline joint activities. Then this will give me a good sense of self-confidence and emotional satisfaction. When I first went to an offline event, a player praised me for being cute. I felt that my whole mental state was different. Through contact with people, it may have helped me socialise better, and there are also positive effects on my partner, because I was for a year or two in a very bad mood, and it also had an impact on him.' (P6)

In addition to playing Otome games, P6 noted that purchasing peripherals – game-branded merchandise related to game characters serves as a form of compensation for a restrained or traumatised childhood. However, she acknowledged this behaviour can sometimes escalate into irrational spending:

'Another point is that when playing games, I can also buy peripherals. This is also a kind of made up for a childhood regret. Many of our players that I know were very strictly controlled by their families when they were young, or had some childhood trauma, so they are less likely

to buy these things and spend money. Now that I have the financial capability, I can satisfy myself the needs that were not met when I was a child.' (P6)

4.3 Otome game (Dis)Engagement

4.3.1 Disengagement factors

Advancements in technology have enabled greater interaction between players and characters in the Otome games. For example, games like *Love and Deepspace* and *Light and Night* feature language recognition systems, allowing players to vocally communicate with characters on pre-defined topics through keyword triggers. However, the *'freshness'* of these interactions tends to diminish quickly, leading to potential disengagement after the *'initial passion and excitement fades'* (P6).

Both P3 and P6 highlighted that, in addition to enjoying reading storylines and interacting with characters, they also enjoy spending currency to obtain random characters or objects (a mechanism known as *'Gacha games'*) which provides a sense of *'thrill'*. However, to our participants, this resembles a form of *'gambling'*, raising concerns about its potentially exploitative nature: *'It's a type of gambling. It makes you continue to play the game through an excitement similar to gambling.' (P3)*

Other barriers to satisfying gaming experiences include overly complex, multiple-layered interactive setting, which P3 and P6 identified as contributing to uncomfortable and tedious gaming experiences and potentially confusing for new players:

> *'They have so many different interfaces that you have to try everything which I think it might depend on, like someone who's newer to the game style, they might feel a little confused or not check everything out that they should.' (P6)*

> *'Love and Deepspace hides many functions in the second or even third interface level. You have to click, click, click to another interface, and the other interface keeps jumping. This makes me feel very uncomfortable, and sooner or later you will have nothing to do. You will get bored sooner or later.' (P6)*

Both P2 and P3 described a sense of fulfilment derived from building companionships with male characters and feeling connected through their responses. P2 noted that the Otome games *'fulfilled and reinforced expectations of life and love, opening up new desires'*. However, she also highlighted that these games could set unrealistic standards for real-life partners. After entering an offline relationship, P2 found it harder to relate to Otome games, as *'real-life relationships involve more complexity'* and mutual effort. She reflected on the disparity, noting that in this parasocial nature of Otome game relationships, players are *'just the receiver of good things'* – the unconditional positive reappraisals, *'love and appreciation'* – without needing to reciprocate.

4.3.2 Female Empowerment

Although Otome games are initially designed for female players, all participants commented that, everyone, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, has the right to enjoy them. For instance, P4, a male participant, searched for Otome games on Steam, drawn by the idea of '*having conversations with characters*' and engaging with the story content, whilst P5 became interested in Otome game after observing a female friend playing one. However, P6 expressed a desire for male players to engage with Otome games genuinely, rather than seeking attention from female players:

> '*What do I think personally? I don't understand, but I respect his choice. If you say that you are a male player of such Otome games, it means that you may want to get the attention of girls. I think this kind of behavior makes me hate it.*' (P6)

P6 highlighted concerns about the current trend of Otome game propaganda in China, where such games may be increasingly used as tools for capitalism, promoting the notion that '*the amount of money spent in Otome games*' reflects '*female power*'. Additionally, some advertisements employ adult-like content, such as affectionate words or kissing scenes, to attract new players, which often misaligns with the actual gameplay. This not only leaves players feeling '*cheated*' but also risks '*damaging the reputation of Otome games*' among the public. Such misleading and inappropriate advertising, according to P6, undermines the societal perception of Otome games and fails to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of women's status in society:

> '*It does not represent women's sexual liberation in the long term. Adversely, it can lower the standard for the pubic to respect female players. However, it can still be seen as a progress for girls to be unafraid to talk about sex. Nevertheless, it still not equals to women's independency and self-reliance.*' (P6)

4.3.3 Teenager Issues

Many Otome games are intended for players aged 13 or 18 and above, yet P1, P3, and P6 all highlighted concerns about teenagers engaging with these games. Interestingly, P1 revealed that her own daughter introduced her to Otome games but admitted she '*could not do much to stop her [daughter] from playing*'. Although both play Otome games, P1 does not share gaming experiences with her daughter, as her daughter has her own circles to discuss such experiences:

> '*It started to become more and more popular among like even teenagers that are not old enough. Most of them are playing these games. She* [her daughter] *was discussing it with her friends at school.*' (P1)

5 Discussion

5.1 Beyond emotional support

Our study reconfirmed that Otome games hold significant potential in providing emotional and self-esteem support to players, as previously identified in the literature (Lei et al., 2024). These games create a space for players to relax, vent, release emotions, cultivate empathy, and engage in self-reflection. Beyond the act of gameplay itself, the gaming communities that form around Otome games – both online and offline – play an instructional role in rebuilding self-confidence and fostering social interactions, providing emotional, informational, and instructional support (Lei et al., 2024). Our work highlights a nuanced finding: the purchase of Otome game peripherals can function as a form of self-soothing, offering offline emotional comfort and helping compensate for unresolved experiences from players' childhoods.

According to the participants, interactions with in-game characters often foster parasocial relationships, where players receive affection, compliments and validation. Otome games, by providing emotional contexts, may play a significant role in players' appraisal and expressions of emotions. For example, as noted by P3 and P5, these games offer a channel for revealing emotions by immersing players in a fictional context, away from reality (Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). This form of avoidance, emotion-coping and stress-coping, is not uncommon, as highlighted in existing studies (e.g., Blasi et al., 2019; Mirhadi et al., 2024; Reinecke, 2009). The sense of agency and control in creating players' own stories and deciding communications, a key factor attracting both male and female players, aligns with related work exploring human-AI parasocial interactions in the field of HCI (Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024). This experience allows players to envision the possibilities and affordances of interpersonal interactions through the lens of parasocial interactions in Otome games.

Whilst these experiences may contribute to enhancement of emotional and mental wellbeing, as highlighted by P5 and P6, they also merit attention regarding their potential in offline relationships. For instance, these games can promote socialisation and identity reconstruction, yet might also simultaneously elevate expectations for interpersonal interactions, thereby complicating real-world relationships. This finding aligns with existing research, which suggests that Otome games may indirectly shape and influence players idealised romantic beliefs (Song & Fox, 2016). The heightened standards for partners and human connections established in these virtual settings could inadvertently create barriers to offline social engagement. We encourage future research to further explore these nuanced dynamics, particularly the balance between the benefits of emotional and social support and the potential challenges posed by altered interpersonal expectations.

5.2 Reflections on Agency and Design

Our findings provide initial evidence for the reasons that Otome games, though originally designed for female players (Kim, 2009), also attract male players. In the

field of HCI, existing research identifies this as a form of *'transgressive play'* – a symbolic rebellion and against the dominant heteronormative mechanics of a game or genre (Aarseth, 2014; Salter et al., 2018). The perspectives of P4 and P5 in this study reveal that some players genuinely enjoy specific elements of this genre rather than feeling constrained by its initial game intentions. Building on this, we urge game design companies to move beyond viewing Otome games purely targeted to female players. Instead, we advocate for a focus on empowering players by designing games that genuinely foster confidence and self-esteem for all. Our findings echo similar work that calls for greater inclusivity, challenging gender stereotypes and heteronormativity in Otome game design (Lei et al., 2024). This could involve actively listening to players' real-life gaming experiences and involving them in the co-design process with developers, with a special focus on employing affective design strategies (Cuerdo et al., 2024). Our findings also suggest that gamers' sense of agency in shaping game settings could be more effectively integrated into the design of characters and narratives. This indicates the potential for more participatory or customisable setting. Additionally, it may be valuable to encourage greater inclusivity in game design to attract a broader range of players who are drawn to the narrative depth and development these games offer, such as simplifying the multiplayer gaming interface through streamlining navigation and replacing text-heavy instructions. Additional design considerations include designing Otome games as a genre and medium for representing *'love and identity'* for queer narratives, whilst empowering players to express their own voices within the game by exercising their own agency (Salter et al., 2018).

Our results also highlight that Otome game design companies employ female-targeted erotic scenarios as a strategy to broaden their appeal and attract a larger audience. Whilst these interactions are often framed as promoting female empowerment and liberation (Giard, 2025), they may instead serve as a commercial tactic aimed at increasing profit, attracting new players, and monetising feminism through propagandising elements specifically designed to appeal to women's sexual pleasure (T. Liu & Lai, 2024) — a critique also raised in existing work such as Lei et al.'s (2024). However, we observe that these discussions predominantly stem from empirical studies engaging Asian female audiences and their communities. Notably, the female participants from Western cultures in our study did not actively engage in the online social communities nor followed the game event or update promotions associated with the Otome plays they played. As such, future research should explore the role of cultural differences in shaping female players' perceptions and opinions regarding the broader societal impacts of such game design.

Another group of Otome game players that remains underexplored in existing research is teenagers. The rapid development of Otome games has outpaced the implementation of robust mechanisms to prevent teenage players from accessing age-inappropriate content. At a stage where critical thinking, understanding of

relationships, establishment of coherent identity and financial responsibility are still developing (e.g., Alanko, 2023; Li et al., 2023), teenagers may be particularly vulnerable to the potential risks posed by these games. We recommend that game designers collaborate with other stakeholders, including parents and schools, to develop and implement effective measures that restrict teenage players' access to unsuitable content. Existing work in the field has begun to examine the challenges faced by teenage cosplayers with extensive chat-based Cosplay experiences, highlighting negative aspects such as bullying and excessive phone usage, which can lead to distress among teenagers (Li et al., 2023). Hence, collective efforts are essential to ensure a safer gaming environment and mitigate potential negative impacts on this age group.

5.3 Conclusion

In this late-breaking work, we present a small-scale, exploratory study engaging both male and female global Otome game players. Through examining their gaming experiences, we provide an initial understanding how Otome games influence players' emotional and mental wellbeing, parasocial and interpersonal interactions, self-perceptions, and perspectives on this unique gaming genre. As an exploratory study, this work has several limitations, including a small sample size. We are looking forward to the next phase of our work, which will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to engage with more global players and assess how players' emotional dimensions can be affected whilst playing Otome games, focusing on aspects such as engagement and fatigue (Bradley & Lang, 1994).

An important limitation of this study is that it doesn't explore the impact of culture contexts in depth. In the future, we call for researchers to use established approaches, such as Self-Determination Theory, to explore how factors like gender, relationship status, and age influence players' motivations, including how these characteristics affect their interactions with different male characters (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Additionally, future work should also adopt a cultural lens by comparing Eastern and Western culture differences and examining how these influence players' experiences and perceptions of Otome games, with the goal of offering explicit insights for HCI.

Acknowledgments

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