



Study on the Development Path of Chinese Otome Games

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Abstract. With the improvement of Chinese female purchasing power and status, otome games, as a genre that presents contemporary female intimate relationships, are occupying an increasingly large share of the gaming market. This paper studies the development path of otome games by analyzing three aspects: the operational models of the games, the sales and development of IP derivatives, and official marketing strategies. Small gift packs and limited-time card draw events promote in-game purchases. In the sale of IP derivatives, the official utilizes players' emotional needs and vanity by categorizing players based on their spending levels, thereby boosting the sales of merchandise and creating a "guzi" economy. They expand brand awareness and increase user engagement by leveraging online community marketing and establishing specific emotional contexts offline. Chinese otome games have emerged as a new consumption form within subculture.

Keywords: Otome Games; Game Mechanics; Game Merchandise; Marketing Communication

1 Introduction

"Otome games", also known as "girl games", originated in Japan and generally refer to romance simulation games aimed at a female audience. In these games, female players take on the role of the protagonist and can choose from multiple male characters, creating a romantic relationship that relies on imagination and interactive gameplay^[1]. These female-centric romance development games are primarily concentrated in Asia, particularly in Japan and China.

In Japan, otome games are commonly referred to as "Japanese otome". The main game developers include Otomate, Rejet, Broccoli, and Koei Tecmo, with most titles available on the Steam platform. These games typically have certain entry barriers, requiring purchase to access, and lean towards short-term operational buyout models^[2]. Players need to interact with the protagonist to trigger storylines, with different choices leading to various endings.

In China, well-known otome games include "Light And Night," "Love And Deep-space," "Mr Love:Queen's Choice," and "Tears of Themis." Unlike Japanese otome games, the more popular Chinese titles often come from major companies such as Tencent, NetEase, and PaperGames^[3]. Chinese otome games do not have entry barriers,

they can be downloaded as apps from application stores, but they tend to favor long-term engagement. Players are required to continuously spend money to obtain in-game resources and character cards, further advancing and unlocking storylines^[4].

The widespread support and popularity of otome games among women can be attributed not only to their ability to meet women's emotional needs but also to their reflection of respect for women's agency through game narratives and mechanics^[5]. Female players' interest in otome games extends beyond emotional connections with male characters, they also pay attention to gameplay mechanics and content.

In the context of the increasing purchasing power of female today, studying otome games can suggest potential pathways for the future development of China's gaming industry, promoting the evolution of game content, models, and corresponding merchandise^[6]. It also offers deeper insights into contemporary women's views on love and emotional landscapes, providing more opportunities for emotional experiences and personal growth for female players. This can help them reflect on themselves, pursue autonomy and independence in relationships, and establish new value systems.

2 External Environment for the Development of Chinese Otome Games

China's productivity has rapidly increased, and per capita disposable income has risen, reaching an average annual income of 39,218 yuan in 2023. This increase in purchasing power has influenced people's consumption behavior, habits, structure, and levels. The Engel coefficient has declined, while the proportion of enjoyment-oriented and developmental consumption has continued to rise, leading to rapid growth in entertainment, culture, and other areas of consumption^[7].

With the further development of the internet, new consumption channels and industries driven by digitalization have also expanded rapidly, making gaming one of the primary forms of leisure and entertainment for the public. Currently, the number of internet users in China has reached 1.108 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 78.6%^[8]. According to the "2023-2028 Research Report on the Development Status and Market Operations of China's Mobile Gaming Industry" published by the China Research Institute, female players accounted for an impressive 48.6% of the user base in China's mobile gaming market, nearly equal to that of male players, and the industry size has reached 85 billion yuan in 2022.

Female consumer groups have begun to emerge as a significant force in today's consumer society with the improvement of women's social status. Young women focus on self-indulgent consumption, placing a high value on the emotional and social significance of the products they purchase, and are willing to pay for what they like. Female consumers spend significantly more time and money on games compared to their male counterparts.

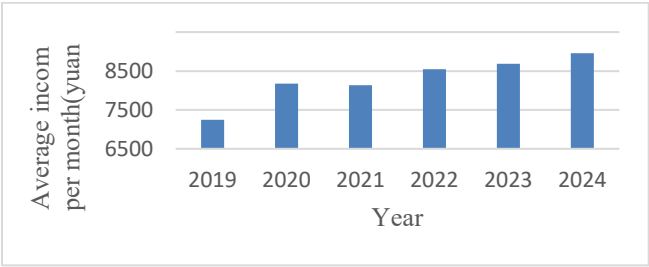


Fig. 1. Average income per month of the female

Figure 1 shows the average monthly income of women in China from 2019 to 2024, which has increased by 23.6% during this period^[9]. The continuous rise in women's average monthly income means they have more time and money to focus on self-indulgent consumption driven by emotional needs, indicating a high potential in the female-oriented gaming market.

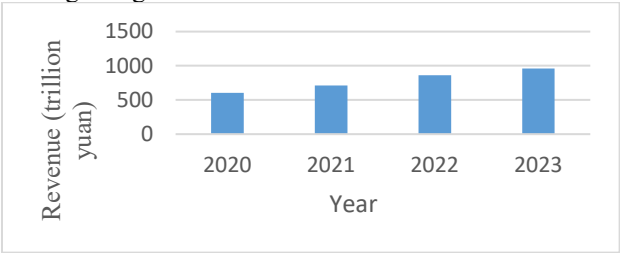


Fig. 2. Market size of Chinese female-oriented games

Figure 2 illustrates the market share scale of female-oriented games in China. From 2020 to 2024, the market size for female-oriented games has grown from 60.5 billion yuan to 95.8 billion yuan, an increase of 58.3%^[10]. The expanding market share of female-oriented games aligns with the rising income trends among women. As an important subset of the female-oriented gaming market that emphasizes the emotional connection between players and male characters, otome games possess significant crossover appeal and commercialization potential. Consequently, more and more gaming companies are recognizing this characteristic and entering the market to expand their scale.

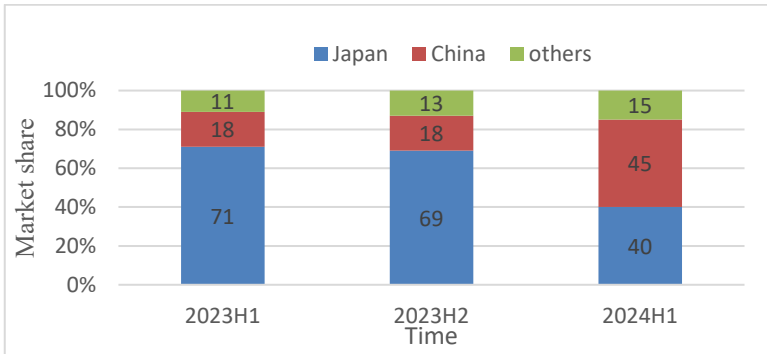


Fig. 3. Global female mobile game revenue share market distribution in 2023H1-2024H1

China's otome games are continually developing with new games being launched and showing a significant trend of capturing the market. Figure 3 illustrates the market share distribution of the global female-oriented gaming market from 2023 to the first half of 2024. The market for otome games is still primarily dominated by the Asian region as shown in the figure. Japanese otome games have been developing for a longer time and occupy a larger market share. However, the market share in China has surged to 45% in the first half of 2024 with the ongoing growth of Chinese otome games, surpassing that of Japan and demonstrating rapid development momentum.

3 Internal Pathways for the Development of Chinese Otome Games

3.1 Gacha System

The official release of new character illustrations for the main protagonist, along with the planning of limited-time events and the introduction of a card pool, are key features of otome games. Specific characters or card designs have a higher drop rate within the card pool, and players can acquire in-game resources through spending money to participate in draws. This is the primary gameplay mode of Chinese otome games. New cards often possess characteristics such as high rarity, special storylines, and the fact that they are not frequently re-released, which attracts players to view the card pool as a major way to spend money.

Taking "Light and Night" as an example, after the official release of card information and event announcements, players typically organize their accumulated resources or choose to spend money to draw from the new card pool. At the same time, the official team offers discount packages and resource bundles starting as low as one yuan, allowing players to choose the most cost-effective way to acquire cards. The game's content is segmented, with different game features requiring charges. Players can draw new cards based on their economic capacity, their affection for the cards and the stories behind them, and how they allocate their in-game "resources." Although, the card draws and the progression of the storyline seem unrelated on the surface, the main

storyline is structured in a way that integrates story-driven battles. This means the card drawing mechanic subtly encourages users to draw cards to enhance their card strength and unlock subsequent storylines.

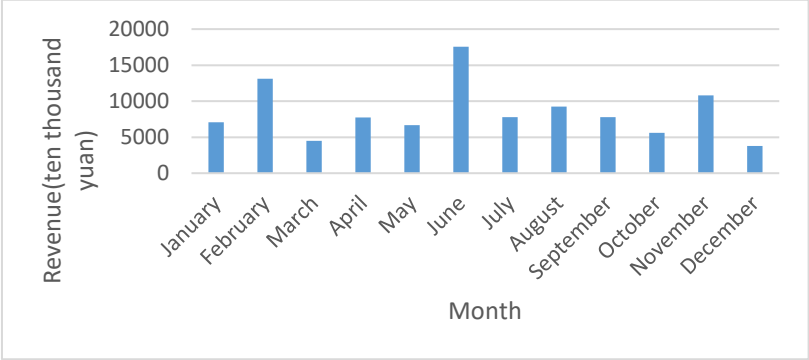


Fig. 4. Light and Night monthly revenue in 2024

Figure 4 shows the monthly revenue for "Light and Night" in 2024, with June's revenue reaching 175.58 million yuan, the highest for the year. The game held its third-anniversary celebration event in June, which included specially designed game plots and storylines. Players are also tempted to recharge and draw cards during special holiday events like anniversaries. Some otome games may even subtly adjust the drop rates of the card pool to further entice players to spend money. A single card typically represents a chapter of side story content, and these scenarios often rely on specific real-world settings and special holidays., Players usually opt to draw cards to experience the story with the male protagonist.

3.2 IP Derivatives

Chinese otome games have developed a relatively complete and comprehensive industry for IP derivatives in addition to in-game purchases. Common forms include badges, postcards, posters, and standees. These merchandise items are typically not used in daily life but are displayed in fixed settings. Officials focus on how to bring "2D" characters into the "3D" world to attract players, fostering a deeper and more tangible bond between the male protagonist and the players. For example, in the birthday gift box for the male protagonist launched by "Light and Night," there are postcards featuring travel destinations the protagonist and players "visit" together during the birthday event, along with handwritten letters addressed to players in the protagonist's voice. Although the monetary value of the letters is far less than the production costs of other merchandise, the sale price of the letters is often comparable to or even higher than that of other items during actual sales. Players place greater importance on the emotional value of IP derivatives; products that create emotional connections and a sense of companionship are often more sought after and achieve higher sales.

The official team rewards players with derivative merchandise in the form of gift boxes when they accumulate a certain amount of spending, increasing the engagement of heavy spenders. As game developers, the officials primarily aim for economic profit, categorizing players into different tiers and offering special privileges to those who spend more. For example, in "Light and Night," players who accumulate a total recharge of 20,000 yuan receive a special gift box each year and are provided with one-on-one customer service. The rarity of the special gift box increases the perceived value of the merchandise inside, which has a low production cost. As a result, players are compelled to continuously recharge in order to obtain the items featuring unique character illustrations.

As physical products, the merchandise carries significant emotional attachments for players. Influenced by varying personality traits, some players prefer to collect a larger quantity of duplicate merchandise, using money as a tangible means to express their love for the characters. The more merchandise they collect, the more they receive admiration and attention from other players when they share their collections on social media, adding a social dimension to the experience. Players with collecting tendencies and vanity are more easily influenced by psychological factors, leading them to purchase even more merchandise.

Due to the impulsive and self-indulgent characteristics often associated with female consumers, players are more willing to pay above the original price for products. As a result, some non-players and players in the market are inclined to purchase more merchandise than they actually need, planning to resell it for profit after its value increases, thus treating the otome game merchandise as a form of investment. The officials also intentionally guide the hype around the "goods" economy to enhance the value of the merchandise.

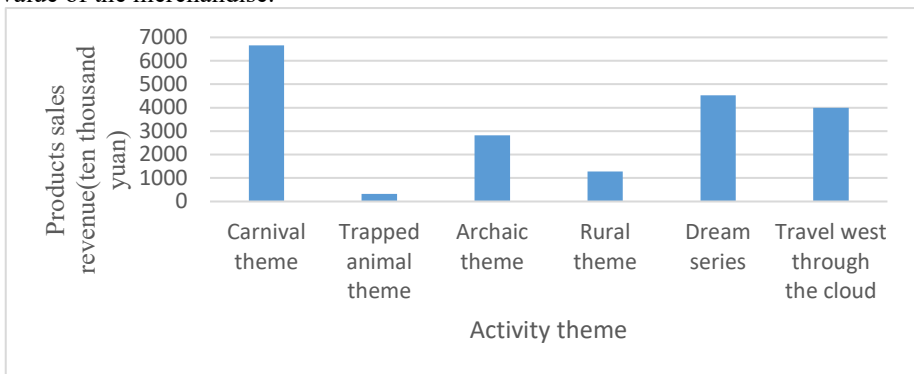


Fig. 5. Sales of products in the online store

Figure 5 shows the sales figures for the pre-ordered merchandise from the latest six events of "Light and Night." The sales of the official online flagship store for "Light and Night" have reached 300 million yuan from February 2023 to July 2024. The "goods economy", which encompasses the sale of physical merchandise carrying specific IPs, is developing rapidly. It conveys players' personalized expressions and

social needs, emphasizing the emotional value gained from purchasing merchandise. The market scale for this phenomenon is expected to continue expanding in the future.

3.3 Marketing Strategies

Otome games have their own specialized organizations and "communities", where players engage in communication and fan creations, enhancing their attachment to the IP. Players can browse various game information on platforms like "Weibo", "Rednote" and "Lofter", such as choosing which type of card art to upgrade for game levels, discussing game plots, and viewing fan creations. The dissemination of this information is characterized by openness, timeliness, and emotional engagement, allowing players to interact with like-minded individuals and often enabling real-time communication when new official events are announced. These topics can spread effectively through likes, comments, and shares among players. According to the "weak ties theory", this type of communication has faster, potentially lower-cost, and more efficient transmission characteristics. Through the "weak ties" created by simply playing one game, a large amount of information can be conveyed, increasing user engagement and attracting new players.

Offline events typically requires a significant amount of human resources, materials and financial investment, and the effects are often very limited. Online marketing undoubtedly saves a considerable amount of costs in contrast to traditional offline marketing methods. With just a few eye-catching posters, creative advertising slogans, and engaging videos, brands can achieve continuous dissemination, increasing exposure and awareness across multiple platforms. Taking "Light and Night" as an example, the game has been advertising across various platforms such as "WeChat", "Weibo" and "Tiktok" since its launch. By creating "earthy" and "CEO-style" video content that sharply contrasts with the male protagonist's personality and character design, discussions have been sparked both internally among players and externally. Additionally, the officials have incorporated conditional lottery draws during holiday events to further spread marketing messages.

Otome games are also adept at creating specific marketing scenarios. As a genre primarily aimed at satisfying female emotions, otome games often capture the emotional states of their audience, emphasizing the interaction between the male protagonists and players, as well as the overall player experience. They aim to evoke emotions such as sentimentality in players within specific offline settings, providing a tangible connection to the virtual world and reducing players' anxieties about the unreal and distant nature of the game. For instance, each game regularly hosts offline events that reflect its unique characteristics. Taking "Light and Night" as an example, during the offline concert held on June 28-29, 2024, familiar music amidst outdoor quote staircases and floral arrangements can enhance players' emotional resonance and deepen their emotional bond with the game. In offline events for games like "Light and Night" and "Tears of Themis", the officials tend to invite real-life models who resemble the male protagonists to wear cartoon masks and interact with players. Players are more inclined to seek a "perfect" partner in the two-dimensional virtual game that differs from the three-dimensional world, reflecting the officials' close attention to the emo-

tional needs and gaming desires of female players. These events allow players to share emotions with the male characters and experience something akin to "breaking the dimensional barrier", thereby activating emotional identification and increasing player engagement with the game.

The dissemination of high-quality content within the community is also one of the means to maintain user stability and enhance the return on investment in marketing. The official team creates a "mimetic environment" conducive to the game's development by distributing high-quality user-generated content or hosting events within the community. Outstanding works can even feed back into the game's content, enriching it and improving its reputation. For example, the official team of "Love And Deepspace" seeks out high-quality artists whose styles differ from the official art to create works that blend emotion and atmosphere. High-quality pieces can directly evoke emotional resonance among players, with some even achieving "breaking the circle" effects, attracting more attention.

In a certain sense, domestic otome games separate the "official" from the "male protagonist". Taking "Light and Night" as an example, during offline events, the official team playfully portrays their character "Ma Lanxing" as one that urges players to spend money in the game, while the male protagonist is depicted as the "perfect" character who forms romantic feelings with the players, distinct from the official image. This separation phenomenon results in players developing a strong attachment to the male protagonist, to the extent that when the official team makes mistakes, players may choose to forgive them or continue spending in the game due to their emotional connection to the male character.

4 Conclusions

This article examines the path to the flourishing development of Chinese otome games through the analysis of their external environment and internal operational mechanisms. The gradual increase in women's overall income has boosted their demand for emotional consumption. The official teams of otome games achieve greater economic benefits by utilizing card-drawing battle modes, regularly holding holiday events, developing IP-derived merchandise, and combining online and offline marketing strategies. This approach maximizes players' experience and romantic engagement, thereby increasing player retention. Striking a balance between economic benefits and game quality, adapting to the external environment of the gaming industry, and focusing on the internal operational pathways will help promote the sustained prosperity and development of Chinese otome games.

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