



From "Her Gaze" Performance to "Systemic Control" Cognition: A Theoretical Refutation and Player Study of the "Female-Centered" Narrative in Love and Deepspace

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore the essence of the "female-centered" narrative in the Chinese 3D otome game Love and Deepspace, analyzing how female agency is reconstructed under commercial logic. Using textual analysis and in-depth interviews, combined with theories of the "male gaze," symbolic consumption, and parasocial interaction, the study systematically examines game mechanisms and the perceptions of 16 dedicated players. The study finds that the "female-centered" aspect is not a structural subversion but a performative packaging serving consumer structures; although technology grants players first-person viewing privileges, the viewing path remains constrained by systemic presets. While enjoying emotional companionship, most players have gradually developed a conscious awareness of systemic manipulation. Chinese otome games face a deep dilemma between responding to female desires and maintaining their commercial nature. True feminist expression requires breaking through systemic induction to reclaim subjective construction of narrative and gaze.

Keywords: otome games, Female-centered narrative, Symbolic consumption, Gaze, Parasocial relationship

1 Introduction

In recent years, domestically developed Chinese otome games have rapidly expanded under the banner of "female-centered" narratives and immersive interactive experiences, becoming one of the fastest-growing sectors in the digital entertainment industry. These games typically adopt a female perspective, positioning the player as the narrative "protagonist" who engages in romantic interactions with multiple male characters. By the end of 2024, the Chinese otome game market reached new revenue peaks. Among them, the 3D title Love and Deepspace reportedly achieved a monthly revenue of 870 million RMB, highlighting its growing cultural and commercial influence [1].

Chinese otome games emphasize interactivity and emotional engagement through first-person perspectives, branching storylines, voice systems, and cinematic visuals. These mechanisms create a sense of intimacy and narrative centrality, offering players an experience framed as emotionally dominant and female-oriented. Marketed as "for

women” and as challenging the traditional male gaze, such games have attracted a large and loyal female audience.

Nevertheless, critical discussions have emerged within player communities. In titles such as *Code: Ruyuan*, although the narrative promotes slogans like “destiny belongs to women,” later plot developments have been criticized for weakening female subjectivity. Similarly, *Love and Deepspace* faced backlash over a Valentine’s Day limited gacha event that tied key narrative content to time-restricted spending. The homogenized and highly sexualized design of its male characters further triggered player dissatisfaction. Increasingly, some players question whether their apparent narrative agency merely masks a system in which choices are confined to pre-designed “ideal” romantic options [2].

Existing studies mainly interpret otome games as sources of psychological comfort, emotional companionship, or new channels for female expression and identity construction. While these perspectives highlight their affective and therapeutic value, they may not fully account for emerging critical awareness among players [3, 4].

This study therefore asks: under the dominance of commodity logic, to what extent is the “female-centered” experience in otome games structured and guided by commercial strategies? Using *Love and Deepspace* as a case study, this paper integrates feminist theory, gaze theory, parasocial relationship theory, and critiques of consumerism to examine how female expression is organized within visual-emotional narratives shaped by market logic, and whether such expression can be genuinely reclaimed by players.

2 Literature Review

This study constructs its analytical framework from feminist media criticism and critiques of consumer culture. It integrates three interrelated theories—gaze, symbolic consumption, and parasocial relationships—to explain how otome games produce the illusion of “female-centered” empowerment within a commercial system. These theories do not operate in parallel; rather, they form a causal loop that draws players into emotional immersion and repeated consumption.

2.1 Gaze Mechanism: The Illusion of Subjective Agency

Laura Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the “male gaze” argues that mainstream visual media are structured around a gendered logic of “men as viewers” and “women as objects of display.” Women are positioned as visual spectacles that satisfy male desire and voyeuristic pleasure.

In Chinese otome games, this structure appears to be reversed. Female players are granted a first-person perspective through which they “gaze” at male characters, seemingly occupying the position of the subject rather than the object. This shift has been interpreted as a form of empowerment, allowing women to experience emotional centrality and narrative control. However, the emergence of a “female gaze” does not automatically dismantle structural gender hierarchies. Cultural conditioning and internalized norms persist within new media forms. As Dai Jinhua notes, the gaze is reflexive:

to gaze at the other is also to confront the self. Thus, the act of looking in otome games is not purely liberating but shaped by subjective consciousness and existing power structures. The sense of agency generated through first-person interaction remains unstable and context-dependent, producing an illusion of control rather than guaranteed emancipation [5].

2.2 Symbolic Consumption: The Stabilization of Consumer Order

Jean Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption argues that modern society is organized not around use value but around sign value. Consumers purchase meanings, identities, and social distinctions rather than material functions. Commodities become carriers of lifestyle and emotional symbolism.

In otome games, character cards, storylines, and voice interactions function as emotional signifiers rather than mere gameplay tools. Players do not simply progress through narratives; they consume experiences of "being loved," "being seen," and "being responded to." Rare cards and limited events are marketed as exclusive intimacy, transforming emotional expression into a purchasable sign system.

2.3 Parasocial Relationship Mechanism: Sustaining Emotional Attachment

The concept of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl) describes one-sided emotional bonds between audiences and media figures. Although lacking real reciprocity, such relationships generate feelings of intimacy, stability, and emotional investment.

In digital interactive contexts, especially otome games, parasocial mechanisms are systematically amplified. Game design incorporates instant reward systems—such as birthday-exclusive storylines, festival-limited voice lines, and interactive features—that produce immediate feedback and emotional gratification. These mechanisms follow a behavioral loop of action–reward–reinforcement, encouraging sustained engagement and spending. As a result, emotional investment becomes embedded in a fragmented, pay-based structure of virtual intimacy [6].

Taken together, these three mechanisms form a structural chain: First, the gaze mechanism creates the illusion of narrative agency through first-person interaction. Second, symbolic consumption transforms intimacy into scarce and purchasable meaning, stabilizing the consumption order. Third, parasocial mechanisms maintain immersion and emotional dependence, reinforcing both gazing practices and purchasing motivation. This "gaze–consumption–immersion" loop allows players to appear expressive and autonomous while remaining guided by pre-designed systems of emotional regulation and economic discipline [7]. While this theoretical framework clarifies the structural logic of otome games, an important empirical question remains: Do players recognize these mechanisms? How do they interpret and negotiate their participation within them?

3 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining in-depth interviews and textual analysis to examine how Love and Deep space constructs a performance of “female-centeredness” within commercial logic. Sixteen long-term or moderately active female players were recruited for semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes (Table 1). By cross-analyzing players’ subjective accounts with game mechanics and narrative design, the study explores how female subjectivity is constructed under market-driven structures, and whether players recognize and negotiate the structural constraints embedded in the system.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Interview Participants

No.	Age	Occupation	Spending Time	Cost(¥)
1	21	Undergraduate Student	2 years	<2000
2	34	Media Editor	4 years	>8000
3	26	Software Engineer	3 years	About 3000
4	19	Undergraduate Student	1.5 years	<500
5	30	Freelance Illustrator	5 years	>10000
6	22	Master’s Student	2.5 years	About 1500
7	28	Secondary School Teacher	4 years	3000–5000
8	27	Primary School Teacher	3 years	About 500
9	25	Game Designer	6 years	>15000
10	22	Undergraduate Student	1 years	<300
11	27	New Media Operation	4 years	>6000
12	36	HR	7 years	>15000
13	21	Undergraduate Student	2 years	<2000
14	20	Undergraduate Student	1 years	500-800
15	23	Master’s Student	1 years	About 3000
16	32	Reporter	3 years	>10000

4 Analysis

4.1 Viewing Subjectivity and Shame Regulation

As discussed earlier, the so-called “female gaze” in otome games functions more as a performance of female-centeredness. Although first-person perspectives and branching choices create the appearance that women possess visual agency, the pathways of looking and emotional pacing remain embedded within a pre-structured system. A reversal of viewing positions does not necessarily constitute a reversal of power.

In practice, players’ experiences of “gazing” and “being gazed at” reveal complex and sometimes contradictory feelings. When recalling the promotional video of Shen Xinghui’s limited banner, described feeling, one said, “an inexplicable sense of embarrassment and discomfort due to the revealing clothing and cage-collar elements filled with niche erotic symbols, as if I had placed myself in the position of being watched and evaluated.” She even imagined herself as: “a player of this evil, vulgar, sensory-stimulating game.”

This sense of shame does not arise solely from visual explicitness but reflects the cultural discipline that continues to regulate women even when they appear to exercise the right to gaze. As Dai Jinhua argues, the gaze is reflexive: in looking at the other, desire also turns back upon the self, becoming moral scrutiny and self-evaluation. Thus, even when female players are granted the mechanism to “choose” male characters, deeper cultural scripts may still translate desire into an object of regulation.

Most interviewees emphasized that the “female gaze” cannot be understood as a simple gender inversion of the male gaze. “Whether in the game text or interactive content, players’ gaze at male protagonists cannot be simply regarded as a ‘female gaze’ through gender reversal. That would not only belittle women’s perspectives but also oversimplify the viewing experience.” (Respondent 7) They argued that certain limited-banner designs do not genuinely grant women dominance; rather, they invert existing objectification logic by turning male bodies into spectacles while still relying on sexualized appeal. Instead of producing liberation, this strategy may evoke discomfort and anxiety rooted in real-world experiences of female objectification. “In my view, ‘female fantasy’ might be a more accurate term than female gaze.” (Respondent 12)

4.2 The Payment Chain and the Psychological Mechanism of “Immersive Emotional Manipulation”

Based on the preceding theoretical analysis, the gaze mechanism in *Love and the Deep Space* merely serves as an “entry point for players into the narrative”; what truly sustains long-term engagement and spending is the dual algorithm of symbol–consumption–parasocial relationships. Players are not entirely unaware of this—they are often conscious that they are mere “cash cows” within the logic of commodification, yet they willingly allow their emotions to be guided along the consumption path, exhibiting a state of “being simultaneously aware and immersed.” (Respondent 6)

Within the virtual context, players develop emotional attachments to characters, while the system continuously regulates their emotions through probability mechanisms and delayed feedback, maintaining emotional stickiness through cycles of testing, hesitation, and anticipation. Respondent 4 admitted that when repeatedly failing at gacha draws, she would wonder, “Does he not love me? Does he not want to see me?” Although she rationally understood that “everything is just code and probability,” she found it difficult to separate game actions from real emotions: “Impulsively, I would spend a lot of money just to get the card and prove that we are connected.” This structural inducement easily leads to an “internalized intimacy dilemma.” Some players, when accessing limited-time storylines, enter an emotional loop of “possessing brings comfort—regret brings guilt.” On one hand, they seek to maintain the “emotional continuity” with the character through complete interactions; on the other hand, after spending money, they confront the psychological dissonance of “emotion being priced”: “Are these feelings just commodities I bought with a lot of money?” (Respondent 4) In this scenario, female players’ emotional expression has been subtly regulated by the system to be “realized through consumption,” and even when most players recognize this, they remain difficult to disengage.

4.3 Expectations Beneath the Illusion

In popular discourse, the term “female-centered” is often simplified as merely a “female perspective” or “female choice,” rather than a structural shift grounded in feminist principles. This semantic simplification obscures the patriarchal logics embedded in otome games’ mechanics, narratives, and bodily representations, while diluting the critical potential of “female-centeredness” as a tool for cultural critique. True female-centeredness entails not only a shift in narrative position but also respect for the diversity and complexity of female subjectivity, encompassing bodily experience, trauma, sexual desire, and psychological contradictions.

Although previous sections have revealed the structural limitations of *Love and the Deep Space* in terms of “gaze,” “emotional manipulation,” and “consumption guidance,” most players still regard it as one of the current exemplars of female-centered spirit in contemporary games. This does not imply ignorance of its commodified nature or consumerist orientation; on the contrary, players often articulate clear critiques regarding “lack of control” or “emotion-driven spending,” while simultaneously exhibiting a complex stance of “awareness and identification.”

This feedback indicates that even a “not fully realized female-centered” design is considered progress in a gaming environment where self-expression is scarce. Although such progress is intertwined with symbolic consumption and emotional regulation, it provides female players with greater emotional space and psychological resonance. In today’s mainstream cultural context, romance narratives centered on “female choice” remain rare. Some players also set higher standards, questioning “Why must being understood cost money?” and “Why does ‘control’ often feel performative?” These reflections signal a shift from being “represented” to “self-narrating,” and from “participating in the plot” to “actively shaping it.”

5 Conclusion

From the illusion of “she gazes” to the reality of “it controls,” domestic otome games both respond to female desire and shape how women look, consume, and emotionally invest—building a system where capital and emotion reinforce each other. Still, most players see *Love and the Deep Space* as “the closest thing to a female-centered spirit in domestic games,” appreciating its subtle visuals and emotional storytelling while feeling deeply attached yet “somewhat controlled.” These mixed responses reveal the structural tension in otome games as emotional commodities—caught between pleasing players and managing them.

These observations further suggest that domestic otome games being “non-male-centered” does not automatically make them “female-centered.” The presence of female-oriented content or the option to exert control should not be mistaken for genuine feminist expression. *Love and the Deep Space*, and the otome genre it represents, remain in a transitional state—“commodification first, structural change pending.” Though born from a female market and offering temporary emotional refuge, the game has yet to structurally reshape female narrative or spectatorship.

Feminist critique should go beyond recognizing these efforts; it must interrogate the underlying structural logic: Do expressions possess deconstructive potential? Can women truly become the subjects of narrative? If “she gazes” remains performative, it cannot escape the confines of “it controls.” Truly female-centered creation should constitute a process in which female subjects redefine modes of spectatorship, narrative authority, and emotional structures—claiming a position of storytelling that is neither regulated nor performative. Even if “unloved,” such narratives can assert themselves with conviction.

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