

A confrontation between female gaze and male gaze

Exploring Chinese female players' play experience in *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*

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Master's Thesis

June 2021

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Abstract

The otome game originated in Japan and has developed into a mature game industry in Japan. In Chinese game market, it is still niche. *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* opens the Chinese game market of otome games and attracts a lot of public attention, which makes female players become important consumers of Chinese game market. Since otome games are designed specifically for women, and women are the main targeting audiences, the feminist perspective is very important for studying otome games. As the reverse definition of male gaze, female gaze is the theoretical framework of this research. In addition, the gender stereotype is also an important theory discussed in this study. This research takes *Mr. Love* as a case and explores the gaming experience of female players from a feminist perspective. The main purpose of the research is to understand how female players participate in the game and perceive their gaming experience, as well as what role socio-cultural conditions play in their gaming experience. In order to answer these questions, the researcher recruited 12 female gamers of *Mr. Love*, and conducted in-depth interviews on their gaming experience. Since the otome game is a research topic that has not been fully discussed, in the data analysis process, the researcher used the constructivist grounded theory to analyze the interview transcripts. The main findings of this research are the diverse ways for female players to participate in the game, the perceptions of game experience obtained by constantly comparing the game world and the real world, as well as the significance and limitations of otome games. In the discussion, the research discussed the influence of patriarchal culture on female players' gaming experience, and how female players resist the products of patriarchal culture and form female gaze. Finally, it is concluded that the gaming experience in *Mr. Love* reflects the existence of female gaze and the confrontation between male gaze and female gaze.

KEYWORDS: Otome games, Female-oriented games, Female gaze, Feminist game study, Feminism

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1. Introduction

Female-oriented games (女性向けゲーム), also known as women's games in some previous literature, originate from Japanese game industry, which refer to a category of games that are exclusively designed and marketed for women (Kim, 2009). "Jyoseimuk g mu" is the female-oriented game in Japanese, which combines "jyose" (woman) and "mu" (for), therefore, it literally means "games for women" (Kim, 2009, p.169). As female-oriented games are gender-specific games, the development and marketing are based on female's needs. Therefore, the definition of female-oriented games involves two requirements – "developed for women and marketed towards women" (Kim, 2009, p.169), which are widely used in the game industry and media content.

The female-oriented game is not a certain genre of game, but a category, which could constitute diverse genres of games, such as role-playing, adventure, and simulation games (Kim, 2009). Among these genres, the most popular one is the dating simulation game (36kr, 2019), which could be divided into three subtypes: otome games, boys' love (BL) games and girls' love (GL) games (Mei, 2020). Otome games are usually derived from shojo manga, which are love stories with women as the protagonist, aiming at developing romantic relations with men. Boys' love games are targeting the "fujoshi" (rotten girls), who are interested in enjoying fictions about the romantic stories between men. Therefore, players play as a male avatar and date with different virtual male characters in BL games. Similarly, the girls' love game aims at people who enjoy media content about "yuri", which literally means lily in English, but refers to the intimate relationships between girls. In GL games, both the protagonist and the characters who are available to date are female (Mei, 2020). In Chinese game market, only the first type – the otome game – is allowed to be developed and published because Chinese acceptance of intimate relationships other than heterosexuality is still a bit low compared to most Western countries (Mei, 2020).

As explained above, the otome game is a specific type of female-oriented games,

which is mostly presented as dating simulation games and aims at developing romantic relationships with virtual male characters (Wu, Sun, Zhu & Shi, 2020). “Otome” means girl in Japanese. It refers to young girls between the ages of 14 and 18, who are usually full of romantic yearning and beautiful longing for love (Liu & Cheng, 2019). In this type of game, players play as a female avatar and date with different virtual male characters (Kim, 2009).

The purpose of otome games is to let players experience the feeling of love in the virtual world, which distinguishes otome games from other types of female-oriented games. Therefore, in addition to the features shared by all types of female-oriented games, otome games pay more attention to romantic elements in terms of the design of male characters and the game plot. For example, except the main game plot, otome games usually contain dating stories, which is excluded in other types of female-oriented games. In addition, the number of male protagonists in otome games is much lower than in other female-oriented games, but the persona of male protagonists is more complete.

At the end of 2017, a mobile otome game called *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice* was enthusiastically sought after by Chinese women and changed the Chinese game market. Fourteen days after it went online, it entered the top ten of the App Store and ranked second in the free download list. Until now, *Mr. Love* is still the most popular otome game in Chinese game market (Chen, 2020). In the game, players develop their career as a female media producer who runs a film and television company. They can interact with four virtual male characters (Xu Mo, Li Zeyan, Bai Qi and Zhou Qiluo) by sending messages on WeChat, making phone calls, commenting on each other’s tweets, etc. After the success of *Mr. Love*, female players were brought into public’s visions. The game market paid more attention to female players and developed many games that regarded women as the target audience (Chen, 2020).

Since the targeting audiences of otome games are female players, it is relevant to analyze female players’ experience in games designed for women from a feminist perspective. This study took *Mr. Love* as a case to analyze the experience and perceptions of Chinese female players in the game.

1.1 Mr. Love: Queen's Choice

As introduced in the previous section, *Mr. Love* is the most popular otome game in Chinese game market, which occupies the top three in the list of female game downloads for a long time, and often appears in the top ten of Weibo's Chaohua¹ (super topics) and Weibo's trends (Chen, 2020). In this sub-section, the game *Mr. Love* was introduced in detail, involving the game worldview, the main storyline, the characters, the core gameplay and supplementary gameplay.

The game studio: Paper Games

Mr. Love was developed and launched by Paper Games, a company founded in 2013 and focuses on making female-oriented mobile games. The first work of Paper Games is *Nikki Up2U: A Dressing Up Story* (Chinese: 暖暖换装物语), which creates a precedent for dress-up mobile games. Its sequel, *Nikki UP2U: World Traveller* (Chinese: 暖暖环游世界), is Chinese first dress-up mobile game that catches public attention and attracts a large number of female players (Paper Games, 2021). The third work of the Nikki UP2U series is *Miracle Nikki* (Chinese: 奇迹暖暖), which was launched in 2015, with more than 100 million registered users.

In addition to the Nikki series, another product line of Paper Games is the Love series. So far, there is only one product on this product line: *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, and this product has obtained huge success. At the end of 2017, *Mr. Love* quickly detonated the market after it was launched in mainland China. It became the most successful and topical female-oriented game product in 2017 (Paper Games, 2021). Since the game was launched, it has nearly 100 million registered users and has won many important awards in the game industry.

The game worldview and the main storyline

Mr. Love has a very grand worldview. The story takes place in a fictitious world, where some people have superpowers (called *Evol* in the game) due to genetic

¹ Chaohua is an online community embedded in Weibo. People who are interested in a certain celebrity, a certain group, or a certain topic can gather here to share and discuss related content.

mutations caused by the Perfect Human Genetic Transform Program. This program was initiated by Black Swan, an organization consisting of the heroine's father and some scientists. The Red Queen Hypothesis is their belief, which claims "in this world, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place..." (Paper Games, 2021). The scientists of Black Swan believe that human beings should actively seek changes to rule nature. Therefore, these scientists conducted genetic modification experiments for the evolution of humans. The heroine and the four male characters - Xu Mo, Li Zeyan, Bai Qi, and Zhou Qiluo - are all successful experiments, which means they all have Evols. The heroine's Evol is precognition, which means she can predict the future through dreams, but the people involved in the prediction and the specific time of the event are out of control. The Evol of Xu Mo is replication. Under certain conditions, he can copy the Evol of others. Li Zeyan's Evol is time control, which allows him to pause time but it takes a lot of energy. The Evol of Bai Qi is wind control, which allows him to feel whatever happens in the wind. Zhou Qiluo's Evol is absolute charm. People will be unconsciously attracted to him and like him.

The background of the main storyline began in 1908, when a comet hit the earth. The strong hit brought huge energy to this world and broke the original order of this world. The huge energy cannot be eliminated, and the excess energy will cause the world to collapse due to overload. In order to survive, a world with Evols has evolved. The energy exists in this world in the form of Evols, and gradually evolving into a special Evol: Queen. The female avatar in the game is Queen. On the one hand, as long as Queen awakes, the huge energy will exceed the limit that this world can withstand, and the world will perish; on the other hand, Queen's power can also create a new world for human beings to live.

The Black Swan organization is from the future. The members know that the world is going to collapse, so they are committed to making this world continue by creating a large number of evolvers. The more evolver, the greater the energy. Although huge energy will accelerate the collapse of the world, it can also create a new world. They keep trying and experimenting, and in the process discovered the existence of Queen. However, the internal opinions of Black Swan members do not

reach an agreement. The Queen disappears.

The player's game plot starts from here. The heroine is the unawakened Queen and has lost all memories of the experiment which happened in her childhood. She forgets the existence of Evol and the Black Swan. As a female producer, she established her own film company and ran her own business in Love City. However, the Black Swan finds her. Therefore, some members of Black Swan, such as Xu Mo (one of the male protagonists, codenamed Ares in the Black Swan), who support creating a new world by making use of the power of Queen, begin the Queen's awakening plan. They create many incidents, such as accidental attacks, hacking conferences, kidnappings, etc., aiming to awaken Queen through multiple stimulations of memory, emotion, and physiology. Under the pressure and stimulation of these plans, Queen is gradually awakened.

All in all, this is a story of a heroine who saves the world as Queen. With Queen's full awakening, the world began to collapse. Back in time, the heroine returned to 17 years ago, but started a whole new world different from before.

The characters

In the game, players play as a female media producer who has just started running a film and television company. Players need to name the avatar and her company. The heroine's persona in the game is Queen (a special result of the Perfect Human Genetic Transform Program) with the predictive superpower. At the beginning of the game, her superpower has not yet been awakened. As the plot advances step by step, the heroine's superpower begins to be awakened, and players gradually know the complete story and discover the truth.

Four male characters are available for players to date in *Mr. Love*: Xu Mo, Li Zeyan, Bai Qi, and Zhou Qiluo. Each male protagonist has a different personality and occupation to attract female players with different preferences.



Figure 1 From left to right: Li Zeyan, Bai Qi, Xu Mo, Zhou Qiluo (Videotapenews, 2020)

Name	Personality	Occupation	Age	Birthday	Height	Evol
Female avatar	Brave, responsible	Media producer	22		152 cm	Precognition
Xu Mo	Mysterious, indifferent, gentle, intelligent	Neuroscientist	26	November 15	180 cm	Replication
Li Zeyan	Cold, arrogant, capable, decisive	CEO	28	January 13	183 cm	Time control
Bai Qi	Responsible, honest, shy, reliable	Police officer	24	July 29	181 cm	Wind control
Zhou Qiluo	Optimistic, outgoing, happy, warm	Superstar	22	April 9	176 cm	Absolute charm

Table 1 An overview of characters in *Mr. Love*

The diverse gameplay in Mr. Love

The core gameplay of *Mr. Love* is to level up Karmas and then pass missions by increasing the value of the Karma to unlock more main storylines. Karmas are special cards with two card illustrations and four attributes. Only the male protagonists appear in the initial illustration, and the evolved illustration contains both the male

protagonist and the female protagonist. The main source of obtaining Karmas is Wish Tree, where players can spend money to buy Wish Coupons to get Karmas. Karmas have one of six rarities, ranking from low to high: N, NH, R, SR, SSR, SP. The higher the rarity, the lower the probability of obtaining it with Wish Coupons. Each Karma has four attributes, and each attribute has a corresponding color: decision (blue), creativity (orange), affinity (pink), and execution (green). To pass the missions, players need to select three Karmas and add all the values proportionally. Only when the sum exceeds the requirements of the mission, players can pass and unlock the following main stories. In order to increase the value of attributes, there are four ways to cultivate Karmas: upgrade, star up, evolve, and ascend. Each way requires materials from other events of the game, so players have to experience many events to strengthen the Karmas and pass the missions.



Figure 2 Bai Qi's Karma: initial illustration (left) & evolved illustration (right) (Huaban, 2018)

In addition to the core gameplay, *Mr. Love* contains diverse supplementary gameplays, which aim to increase a sense of companionship so that players tend to immerse deeply in the game. Following are the main supplementary gameplays:

1. The calls and messages system. The game simulates the mobile phone interface and WeChat interface, creating the simulated chatting status of text messages and phone calls. Players can choose the appropriate options to reply

to the message. Every phone call has a voice actor to perform the lines.

Players can easily feel that the male protagonists are chatting with them.

2. Dating system. When players obtain the SR, SSR and SP Karmas, they will unlock a piece of dating story. These dating plots usually have nothing to do with the main storyline. The main content is some daily dating activities in life, such as watching a movie, riding a Ferris wheel, and so on. Most of the lines in the dating story are very romantic. Coupled with the performance of the voice actors, female players can feel the joy of dating their boyfriends.
3. Right Beside You. This system consists of voice fragments of four male protagonists. The duration of the voice segment is approximately 15 minutes. Each voice clip is recorded with professional Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) equipment. ASMR is a sensory phenomenon, which refers to the slight tingling sensation mainly produced by visual and auditory stimuli. The slight tingling usually occurs in the brain, scalp, nape and surrounding areas. This phenomenon is usually accompanied by a sense of pleasure and relaxation (Barratt & Davis, 2015). In addition to the male protagonist's voice, Right Beside You is accompanied by environmental sound effects, allowing players to feel immersed when listening to the segment with headphones on. The content of the voice fragments is about the scenes of daily activities for couples, such as pulling out ears, reading poems, taking care of the sick male protagonist, and so on.
4. Home. The home system allows players to understand the male protagonists in depth by arranging and decorating the cabin. The decoration styles and furnishings of the four male characters are in line with their persona, reflecting their personalities and hobbies.

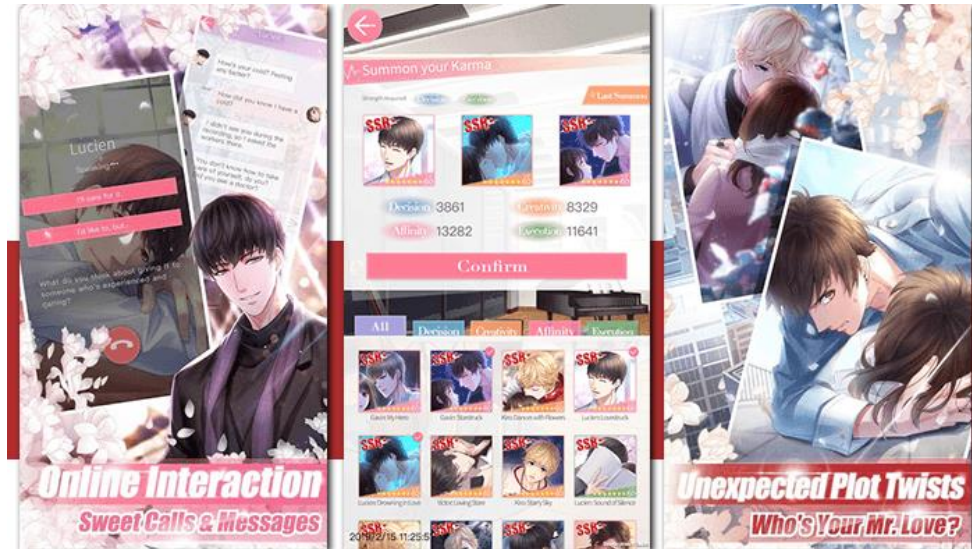


Figure 3 From left to right: the calls & messages system, the footage mission, the Karma (Apkpure, n.d.)

1.2 Aims and research questions

This research aims to take *Mr. Love* as a case, to study how female players participate and engage in various gameplays of the game, how they perceive their game experience, how the experience is influenced by contemporary Chinese socio-cultural conditions.

Rather than focus on the female characters in otome games, this research aims to focus on female players, understanding their experience, perception, and the nuances between individuals from a feminist perspective.

Based on the research purpose, the research aims to answer following research question: How do Chinese female players experience their gameplay in *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*? To better answer this research question, the following three sub-questions are developed:

Sub-question 1: How do female players engage in the play of *Mr. Love*?

Sub-question 2: How do female players perceive their experience in *Mr. Love*?

Sub-question 3: How do the Chinese socio-cultural conditions play a role in their gameplay?

The first sub-question aims to understand how players participate in various activities in the game, and to give a general overview of their different degrees and ways of participation. Based on the answer to the first sub-question, the second sub-question aims to analyze how players perceive their gaming experience. The third question aims to analyze the influence of Chinese socio-cultural conditions based on the answers to the first and second sub-questions.

Since the purpose of the research is to analyze the perceptions and attitudes of female players, this research adopted an in-depth interview approach to collect data. Because of the lack of adequate literature and theoretical frameworks, the study used the constructivist grounded theory method to analyze the data in an attempt to find potential patterns to supplement the existing theories about otome games.

1.3 Relevance

In current game studies, the otome game has not been fully discussed by scholars, but some literature on female-oriented games has great significance for studying otome games because they share many similarities. Since female-oriented games are mainly popular in East Asia, a little remaining literature is mostly contributed by East Asian scholars. One of the scholars is Kim (2009), who discusses the definition and features of Japanese female-oriented games. However, she does not engage in a feminist discussion. Since the main audience for female-oriented games is young women, the feminist perspective is very important when studying female-oriented games. Zhang's research supplements this missing perspective. The study of Zhang (2019) critically analyzes female-oriented games, claiming that female-oriented games challenge the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1989), but the patriarchy and gender stereotypes are still visible in the game. However, her study does not provide sufficient evidence to support her arguments. Some scholars aim at bridging game studies and feminist theories, but most feminist game studies focus on how female characters are portrayed and presented in video games rather than focus on female

players.

Academic relevance

This research aims to fill the research gaps mentioned above by studying female players from a feminist perspective. Therefore, the academic relevance of the research is to supplement the lack of a feminist perspective in the existing theories on otome games, and take female players as research objects rather than female characters in the games. In addition, most of the literature on feminist game studies is contributed by Western scholars. This research bases on Chinese game market and female players, and therefore, it contributes an East Asian perspective to feminist research.

Social relevance

Since there are relatively few games that take females as the main audience in the current game market, this research is dedicated to understanding and presenting the advance and limitations of such games, so as to promote public attention to female-oriented games and female players.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In this section, previous research on otome games and feminist game studies were explained and discussed in three subsections. The first subsection introduces academic discussions on the features, development, history of otome games. The second and third subsections focus on how feminism has been applied to game studies with only a brief summary of the development of feminism theories since it is not the goal of this thesis. The second section discussed gender stereotypes and the game industry. The gender stereotype is closely related to the second sex theory (De Beauvoir, 2010), and they are mainly used to analyze the shaping and design of female characters in the game industry. In addition to female characters in games, gender stereotypes also appear in the game industry's perception of female players. In the third subsection, the theories of male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) and female gaze were used as the theoretical framework of this research to analyze how the player's gaming experience in *Mr. Love* reflects female gaze.

2.1 The history, development, and features of otome games

This subsection involves the historical development of otome games, their subsequent development, the features of otome games, and finally involves some scholars' critical thinking about otome games.

The history and development of otome games

The first female-oriented game is *Angelique*, which is a combination of adventure games and otome games, designed and developed by a Japanese company Ruby Party and published by Super Nintendo Entertainment in 1994 (Andlauer, 2018). *Angelique* is the name of the female protagonist, who is a candidate for the Queen of the Universe. Accompanied by nine guardians, players grow up to achieve the goal of being a queen, or players can choose to give up being the queen and reach a romantic

ending with one of the guardians (Kim, 2009). After the success of *Angelique*, *Haruka: Beyond the Stream of Time* and *La Corda d'Oro*, the other two series of otome games, was published by the same company in 2000 and 2003 (Xue, 2018).

After the millennium, Japanese otome game market has grown from a single dominant company to multiple competitions. The critically acclaimed otome game *Girl's Side* was published in 2002 by Konami on the PS2 platform. The highlight of *Girl's Side* is that voice actors are used in all dialogues, which makes players feel more immersive (Xue, 2018). After that, *Girl's Side* has some sequels. The third sequel in 2010 was another breakthrough for the development of otome games. The *Girl's Side 3rd Story* uses the Live2D system, which gives the male protagonist dynamic images such as facial expressions, blinking, and changes in the mouth shape when speaking. This breakthrough makes the design of otome games shift from focusing on the development of the game plot to focusing on the authenticity of the male characters, which allows the players to have a true feeling of “he is there” (Xue, 2018).

After that, Japanese otome games enter a period of rapid development. *Hakuoki* released by the Otomate Studio of Idea Factory company in 2008 greatly increases the popularity of otome games. Due to the wonderful game plot, *Hakuoki* was adapted into an animation in 2010 and was broadcasted on TV. Later, it was adapted into a stage play, and in 2012 it became a musical. These popular adaptations have made *Hakuoki* a well-known otome game. Taking this opportunity, otome games are also known by male players and the game market of Japan and other Asian countries, such as China and South Korea (Xue, 2019).

With the development of smartphones and the application of VR technology, otome games have gradually developed towards the authenticity of the game and the sense of immersion of players. Players call for “only 2D is not enough” (Xue, 2019). *Imprisoned Palm* (Japanese: 囚われの palma) is a mobile otome game that claims to be “beyond screen”, published by Capcom in 2016 and debuted on both IOS and Android platforms (Xue, 2019). In the game, the player is taken to an isolated island and meets the young man Qingren, who is being held in prison but loses his memory.

The players can only be released if they restore Qingren's memory. Through the performance of the game artwork and the technology, the screen of the mobile phone has become the glass wall separating the place where the player and Qingren meet. Through a series of actions such as overturning the Qingren's forehead with players' hands, the players have deep a feeling of immersion.



Figure 3 The promotional poster for the VR meeting of the *Imprisoned Palm* (Xue, 2019)

Features of otome games

There are three features that distinguishing otome games from other video games: dating feature, simple game system and game control, and tightly related to multiple media products (Kim, 2009). First of all, the dating system is very important to otome games, because most of the dating experience of female players comes from the dating system. The dating system usually has its own dating stories which are independent of the main storyline, in which players can experience realistic dating, such as chatting with the male protagonists, exchanging festival gifts, going out to the movies or the amusement park, and so on. Secondly, the game system and game control are simple. The game designers avoid complex game systems because females are hard to handle and master complex game systems and difficult game control (Kim, 2009). Although this opinion shows gender stereotypes, it reflects how the practitioners of the game industry locate the female players and female-oriented

games. Finally, otome games are tightly related to other media products. As mentioned before, *Hakuoki* has been adapted into multiple different media products, including animation, the stage play, and the musical. Besides, most otome games are adapted from shoujo manga or novels. This combination helps otome games form their own industrial chain, increase user stickiness and retention, and benefit the long-term development of the otome game market (Xue, 2019).

Social concerns of otome games

As the most popular type of female-oriented games (36kr, 2019), otome games obtain much attention and receive much criticism after they entered the Chinese game market. With the popularity of *Mr. Love* and other otome games in China, several Chinese scholars hold a critical attitude and discuss some social concerns on them. Han and Wang (2020) argue that otome games may increase the single rate of women. Female players are immersed in the virtual world to experience the feeling of love, and gradually lose the ability to maintain intimate relationships in the real world. Zhang (2019) argues that on one hand, feminism is embodied in otome games because the design of the game is centered on female needs, and the design of male characters is based on female aesthetics. However, on the other hand, the game plot reflects gender stereotypes. Besides, Li and Wang (2018) bring up a moral issue, questioning whether female players of otome games would feel guilty as they are establishing romantic relationships with several males at the same time. In this study, these concerns will be embedded in the interview questions to gain more insights from the participants.

2.2 Gender stereotypes in the game industry

This section is divided into two levels to discuss gender stereotypes in the game industry. The first level uses gender stereotypes and the second sex theories to analyze the design and presentation of female characters in video games, and the second level uses gender stereotypes theory to analyze the existing stereotypes of female players in

the game industry.

Gender stereotypes in the design and presentation of female characters

Gender stereotypes refer to preconceived views of men and women, focusing on the different characteristics and attributes brought by the gender differences between men and women (Norris, 2004). For example, power and assertiveness are considered as indicators of men while warmth and consideration are perceived as signs of women (Ellemers, 2018).

In most contexts, gender stereotypes are negative, because gender stereotypes are usually accompanied by gender inequality. When gender stereotypes restrict the development of individuals, they are harmful (OHCHR, 2020). For example, women are usually sensitive, patient, and friendly, so they are naturally suitable for taking care of children. As a result, women often act as housewives in the family, and taking care of their children has become a natural responsibility for women. Men are generally considered to be more decisive, brave, and capable of leadership than women, so men have more opportunities to become leaders in the workplace than women.

The background of the origin of the second sex theory is largely related to the worldwide feminist movements. There are two recognized women's liberation movements in the world. The first generation of women's liberation movement originated after the French bourgeois revolution and the Enlightenment, and synchronized with the European industrial revolution (Freeman, 1973). The original demand is that women should be equal in education and legislation. The first feminist movement is successful with the birth of Women's Day on March 8th and the right to vote by women in major countries (Freeman, 1973).

The Second Sex is a book about feminism that Beauvoir wrote in 1949 with the world's second women's liberation movement. At that time, people began to realize that the equality of political rights was not enough to reflect all the problems of women, and women's rights should be extended to a wider range of areas (Hou, 2020). Influenced by people's ideas, what Beauvoir tries to present through her book is all

the questions about women. Besides, in *The Second Sex*, she tries to answer a core question through such comprehensive explanations of women: what is a woman.

However, when Beauvoir wants to answer this question, she realizes that it is impossible to find a “natural woman”. She believes that the definition of women is influenced by history, culture and society, and is constructed by these factors, just as she mentioned in her book, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 2010). From a historical perspective, she exposes the historical roots of patriarchal culture through Western religious legends. In the Western theory of human origin, God created Adam, and created Eve with Adam’s ribs to accompany Adam and prevent him from feeling lonely. Through this example, she emphasizes that women exist as an accessory of men, and women are created for the benefit of men (Beauvoir, 2010). From a social and cultural perspective, Beauvoir proposes that women are the “other” in society. The concept of “other” corresponds to the concept of “subject”, that is, those alienated people who have no or lost self-awareness, are under the control of others or the environment, are completely in an object position, and have lost their subjective personality (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). This concept occupies an extremely important position in Beauvoir’s book and other feminist theories. For example, in language, man means not only male, but also human beings. However, woman only represents female. The language culture implies a fact, men have no particularity, and they are the main body of the society and absolute existence, while women are special existence that need to be distinguished from men.

There are many overlaps between gender stereotypes and the second sex, mainly in that they are the products of patriarchal society and culture. Most of the people whose interests are damaged due to gender stereotypes are women. It is not to say that men are not victims of gender stereotypes, but that women receive more unfair treatment in society. Gender stereotypes are reasonable reasons for men to consolidate a legitimate and reasonable dominance of the patriarchal society (Ellemers, 2018). Meanwhile, Beauvoir’s theory of the second sex also emphasizes the subordinate status of women and the oppression of women by patriarchal society and culture. Therefore, the presentation of two theories in the game industry is also intertwined

and inseparable.

In the game industry, the gender stereotypes and object status of women are existing in many video games, and are mostly presented in terms of the appearance design and the function of female characters. Many scholars have already done a large number of research to indicate the gender stereotypes in video games. Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant (2017) explain “Ms. Male” in their study, which refers to female characters that are designed by adding feminine elements and characteristics to existing male characters, such as long blond hair, blush, red lips, high heels, skirts, etc. Game designers do not create independent and complete female characters with their own characteristics, but transform the male role into a female by adding female attributes. This practice embodies women as “other”, solidifies the duality of gender, and strengthens the gender stereotypes of women. In addition to the design of female characters, the function of female characters in video games also reflects the subordinate status of women. In most video games, female characters often exist depending on the males, rather than having their own independent identities and life (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). In the game, the female character is usually the player’s wife, children’s mother, or the vicious BOSS (the boss-level guardian monster in games) who needs to be defeated. Besides, Luce Irigaray’s theory “Currency of Exchange” is widely used in video games. Irigaray argues that women have been treated as the currency of exchange for a long time (Whitford, 1986), which is reflected in video games. In the game, female characters, regardless of their social status, are often given as rewards to men (Huntemann, 2010). For example, the player saves the princess in danger, and finally, the princess becomes the player’s wife.

In general, both the subordinate status of women and the stereotypes of women have affected many aspects of the game, from the design of female characters to the role and function of female characters, and these are essentially the products of patriarchal society and culture.

Gender stereotypes in the marketing of the game industry

In addition to the design of female characters, gender stereotypes are presented in

the marketing of games. On the one hand, the game industry believes that female players are difficult to handle games with complex gameplay and high operational requirements, such as competitive games (Zhang, 2019). Even in the MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Games) game *Honor of Kings*, which is very popular in the Chinese game market, female players mostly play support heroes. The main heroes who can create high DPS (Damage Per Second), such as the assassin and the archer, are still played by male players. Besides, the influx of a large number of female players into MOBA games does not eliminate gender stereotypes, but deepens them. In online game forums, “female college student” has become synonymous with “noob” and is often used to laugh at players who perform poorly in the game. Many male players like to play with female players with poor skills to satisfy their vanity (Zhang, 2019). Under such hints, women are also used to accepting the notion that female players are not suitable for difficult gameplays, and are accustomed to looking for male players to lead them to victory.

On the other hand, games designed for women tend to be simple and casual. Even if it is the otome game, a very representative female-oriented game, the gameplay is very simple and does not require a lot of brainpower or hands-on ability. Most otome games only require simple clicks from players. Many of the gameplays actually borrow from casual games, which also deepens the stereotype that women are naturally suitable for casual games.

2.3 Male gaze and female gaze in otome games

Taking into consideration the features of otome games, Mulvey's (1989) “male gaze” theory is important to analyze the exchange of subject and object of gaze in otome games. Mulvey (1989) explains the male gaze as “taking other people as objects” and “subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (p.16). In Mulvey's article discussing movies, she mentioned that female characters in Hollywood movies have been reduced to pornographic carriers and objects to please male characters and

audiences. She argues that women are displayed for men's pleasure, and the male gaze is evidence of the oppression of females in the patriarchal society. This argument is reflected in the study of Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant (2017), who claims that the design of female characters in video games aims to attract male audiences. In many games, especially in promotional posters or videos, female characters give audiences a sexual impression to tease male players. Women's exposed breasts and buttocks can satisfy men's voyeuristic desire (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017).

Although the male gaze is introduced in film theory, it can also be applied in other media, such as advertisements, television, and oil paintings. Male gaze in advertising is a well-researched topic because women in advertisements are object not only to be stared at, but also to be bought and sold (Tekanji, 2007). The message of the advertisement is always the same: buy the product, get the girl (Tekanji, 2007). The male gaze works in this way, turning women into promotional items. There are no exceptions even in advertisements aim at female audiences because women are encouraged to look at themselves in the way and from the perspective of males, that is, allowing women to buy the product so that they look more like the models in the advertisement.

However, in otome games, the subject and object of gaze are shifted. According to Zhang (2019), female players autonomously choose their preferred virtual male characters, and game developers design male images from the perspective of women. In otome games, female players can change the dress of male characters according to their preferences. In addition, the existence of male characters is to satisfy the needs of female players and provide female players with a pleasant experience in love. Otome games provide a new perspective to challenge the male gaze, which is described as the "female gaze" by some scholars.

"Female gaze" has been discussed in some research fields, such as the construction of masculinity Goddard (2000), pornography of male gays (Schauer, 2005; Neville, 2015; Zhang, 2016), and the gendered violence (Taylor, 2014). Neville (2015) claims that Mulvey recognizes the existence of female gaze but believes that female gaze cannot dominate because the female audience is masculinized. It means

that the thoughts and aesthetics of female audiences have been affected by the patriarchal society and male gaze. This opinion is similar to Zhang (2019). Zhang (2019) argues that the female gaze still reflects the patriarchal ideology and solidifies gender stereotypes because the female aesthetics are constructed under the influence of patriarchy. Although this opinion ignores the subjective initiative and agency of women to a certain extent, it exposes the long-term influence of patriarchal society on women, and points out that many women have internalized the demands and standards of women, which are formed under the male gaze, into their own pursuits.

Regardless of the research on male gaze or female gaze, researchers have regarded voyeurism as important evidence to prove the existence of the male/female gaze. When it appears in their data that men take women as the objects of voyeuristic pleasure to satisfy their desire of voyeurism (or when the subject and object are reversed), the male (female) gaze appears. Oliver (2017) claims in her research that creepshots are the climax of male gaze. Taking pictures of women's bodies without the permission of women not only satisfies men's voyeuristic desire, but also treats women as prey that can be "shot" and "captured" at will. Some men upload their creepshots of female bodies anonymously on the website, and label them with "chest" and "buttock" to commercialize female body parts so that the public can consume female bodies at any time. In Oliver's view, creepshots are evidence of an absolute male gaze, because men have the absolute initiative when doing creepshots while women are in a completely passive position, and their body parts have become the objects of men's possessiveness and voyeurism (Oliver, 2017).

Voyeurism is also important evidence in the research on female gaze. In Zhang's (2016) research on women's addiction to BL fictions, it is pointed out that female gaze is embedded in the process of reading and enjoying BL fictions because BL fictions satisfy women's voyeuristic desire to men. Firstly, BL fictions attract women to become the subject of voyeurism, rather than the object. In the process of reading BL novels, women are in a dominant position to observe the relationship between men and satisfy their voyeuristic desire and curiosity. Secondly, women do not have a sense of identification with the male protagonists, which leads them to pull out and sit

in an objective position to criticize and comment on men, and even objectify men to cater to women's preferences. Finally, the lack of female characters in BL fictions and the lack of identification with female characters also reflect the female gaze. Female images in BL fictions are often described negatively, such as playing the role of a lover of the male protagonist, or a mother who opposes homosexuality. However, female readers will not feel uncomfortable because they understand that these women often play a role in promoting the development of the plot and are forced to be portrayed negatively. Zhang (2016) claims that the lack of female roles and insufficient representation help female readers justify their right to gaze at men.

However, in game studies, female gaze is rarely discussed in-depth, which may be related to the male-dominated game market. As mentioned above, the subsidiary status of women as "the second sex" in video games is obvious, both in terms of the design of female characters and the role of female characters in the game plot (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). The game market is full of male gaze. Due to the dominant position of male players in the game market, games developed for female players, such as otome games, have almost no right to speak. Otome games, designed with female gaze as the center, do not gain wide popularity yet, therefore, female gaze does not receive sufficient attention in game studies. Based on the above research status, this study aims to clarify how female gaze is presented in the otome game *Mr. Love*, and explore how female players experience and perceive female gaze in their playing process. Besides, it is worthy of critically discussing what changes female gaze may bring and how it challenges male gaze in practice.

3. Methodology

This section mainly elaborates the methodology of studying the gaming experience and perceptions of female players. The first subsection introduces the method and process of collecting data, explains the rationality of the research method of semi-structured interviews, and contains a table that gives an overview of the interviewees. The second part introduces the process of data analysis, and explains the generation process of category, in an attempt to make the coding process as transparent as possible.

3.1 Data collection method

Since the purpose of the research is to explore the experience and perceptions of female players in *Mr. Love* from a feminist perspective, qualitative research methods are appropriate for this study. According to Sofaer (1999), qualitative research is suitable for exploring and analyzing people's understanding, perception and experience on social phenomena. It offers insight into the topic and helps to generate ideas or theories for future studies. The interview is a commonly used qualitative method to collect data.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted to collect primary data for this study. Semi-structured interviews help to ensure the process of interviews developed as expected, and it also leaves some space for both researchers and participants to go wider and more in-depth (Louise Barriball & While, 1994). Semi-structured interviews are widely used in feminist research because they build a close relationship between participants and researchers (Jayaratne, 1993). Especially in feminist research, an equal and emotional connection is vital for continuing interviews (Westmarland, 2001). Besides, feminist researchers need to avoid putting participants in a place being observed as a "subject", and it is unacceptable for researchers to "oppress women in the name of academic research" (Westmarland, 2001, P9).

Since the samples of this study are female players of *Mr. Love*, purposive

sampling is adopted as the main sampling method. The planned sample size was 12 to 15, depending on the data saturation. More participants are possible if needed. In the actual interview process, each interview lasted more than one hour, and 12 interviewees had reached saturation. In order to collect valid and reliable data, this research has several sampling criteria: the targeting participants are female players who a) have played *Mr. Love* for more than three months; b) actively participate in game activities; c) preferably have spent a certain amount of money for the game; d) preferably also played other otome games. The criterium of gameplay duration ensures that the interviewees are familiar with the game and the core gameplay. Actively participating in game activities requires the participants to have a border understanding of *Mr. Love* and be familiar with diverse ways of the supplementary gameplays. Besides, if the player has consumption behavior in *Mr. Love*, it may imply that the player has a higher customer stickiness, and therefore, she tends to be more familiar with the game, and has a deeper affection for the game (Carroll et al., 2020). Moreover, if the player has played other otome games in addition to *Mr. Love*, it is likely that she has diverse understandings of game experience by comparing her experience in other otome games.

According to Li and Wang (2018), a large number of players of otome games are active in the online community. Therefore, the researcher posted recruitments on several popular online forums and social media platforms, such as Weibo and Baidu Tieba, to attract the participants. Besides, the researcher joined some online fan communities to find some participants there. In case that the participants are not enough, snowball sampling was also applied as a supplement. Once there were some players who wanted to participate in this research, the researcher asked if their friends or acquaintances who played *Mr. Love* were also willing to accept the interviews. An overview of interviewees was presented below:

Number	Name (anonym)	Age	Education level	Favorite male protagonist(s)	Game duration	Average time spent in <i>Mr. Love</i> everyday	Single or not

1	Li Meng	19	Bachelor	Li Zeyan & Zhou Qiluo	7 months	1 hour	Yes
2	Ning Zhi	22	Bachelor	Xu Mo	6 months	30 minutes	Yes
3	Eza	26	Master	Bai Qi	2 years	30 minutes	Yes
4	Xiao Zhou	19	Bachelor	Xu Mo	11 months	1-2 hours	Yes
5	Nan Shan	20	Bachelor	Xu Mo	4 months	1 hour	Yes
6	Ye Zi	21	Bachelor	Bai Qi & Li Zeyan	4 months	3-4 hours	No
7	Bai Bai	18	High school	Zhou Qiluo	1 year	20 minutes	Yes
8	Xiao Tang	18	High school	Bai Qi	1 year	20 minutes	Yes
9	Ansley	20	Bachelor	Bai Qi & Zhou Qiluo	2 years	30 minutes	No
10	Xing Xing	18	Bachelor	Xu Mo	6 months	40 minutes	Yes
11	Xin Xin	18	Bachelor	Zhou Qiluo	3 months	2 hours	No
12	Dao Dao	20	Bachelor	Xu Mo	2 years	30 minutes	Yes

Table 2 An overview of interviewees

Because of the COVID-19, people are not encouraged to meet face-to-face, interviews were conducted online via some online communication applications such as Wechat and QQ. Conducting interviews online brings a lot of advantages, but also has its limitations. It will save a lot of time and money compared with face-to-face meetings. Besides, people may expose themselves more and talk more online because they feel safe without being watched (Nguyen, Bin & Campbell, 2012). However, it is a bit hard for the researcher to build rapport with the participants when interviewing online, as online communication distances the interviewer from the interviewee. Also, it is not possible for the interviewer to gain information from the interviewee's body language. Therefore, the researcher will preferentially choose video interviews according to the willingness of participants.

To avoid ethical issues, some rules were followed during the data collecting procedure. Firstly, the researcher needs to provide consent forms to each participant, informing the purpose of the research and main interview questions. Besides, to ensure confidentiality, participants appeared in the study anonymously. Moreover, participants were asked to give permission to record voices or videos. Finally,

participants should not under 18 years old.

3.2 Data analysis method

This study adopted the constructivist grounded theory to explore theories regarding otome games and feminism. As an inductive qualitative approach, the constructivist grounded theory is often used in psychology, education, and nursing to explore patterns and find theories (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Regarding the practical context, constructivist grounded theory is also very suitable for this research.

In epistemology, the constructivist grounded theory emphasizes the subjective connection between the researcher and participants, and the joint construction of the meaning-making process (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). They believe that the researcher is an inseparable part of the research, rather than an objective independent observer outside the research, so the subjective perception of the researcher is highly related to the research results.

The origin of the constructivist grounded theory can be traced back to the work of Strauss (1987) and Corbin (1998), and then their student Charmaz (2000) further developed the constructivist grounded theory and became the main supporter of it (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory is an inductive research method derived from data, and researchers have no preconceived ideas or theories to prove (or deny) the social phenomena they are interested in. Researchers analyze the data by constantly comprising. At first, it is a comparison between data and data, and then it is transformed into a comparison between codes and categories, and finally, the results can be theorized. In the process of developing the constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2000) emphasizes the researcher's position as a participant in the research. She is committed to finding meaning in the data, and she believes that meaning arises from the interaction between the researcher and participants and is constructed together.

The constructivist grounded theory is suitable for this study. The traditional

grounded theory argues that there is no need to learn any literature in the research field to maintain the researcher's sensitivity to the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2000) believe that the literature helps to analyze data from multiple perspectives. Both arguments indicate that the importance of literature in research is much lower than the data itself. In the feminist game study, there is very little research on otome games, which is in line with the theoretical requirements of the constructivist grounded theory and helps researchers to devote more energy to analyzing data rather than literature. The constructivist grounded theory also helps this study supplement the lack of research on otome games in the feminist game study.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) simplify the coding process of traditional grounded theory, and other researchers supplement and modify the coding process and later form three analysis steps of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Open coding is usually the first step in data analysis, which refers to fragmenting the data and marking these fragments with appropriate codes (Khandkar, 2009). The process of collecting and analyzing data is intertwined in the constructivist grounded theory approach (Chun, Birks & Francis, 2019), which means the interviews and open coding can be done at the same time. After doing several interviews, some important codes were brought up and prepared for further discussions in the following interviews. This study used a coding software Atlas.ti as a tool for systematically coding, which allowed researchers to cut the data into several pieces and code word by word. The following table contains some examples of open coding.

Number	Codes	Samples of Coded Text
13	Money spent	"I spend about 100 yuan in the game every month."
58	Brainless dating	"I hate the brainless dating very much."
168	Sense of companionship	"Buying game derivatives makes me feel that Zhou Qiluo is by my side to accompany me."
223	Preference	"I really enjoy the feeling of being favored."
349	High IQ	"Xu Mo's IQ is very high, which attracts me a lot."

Table 3 Examples of open coding

The axial coding is the second step of analyzing process, which aims to find

connections between existing codes and put them into different categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By constantly conducting opening coding and comparing the codes, categories emerged from the initial codes. The inductive approach requires researchers to repeat this process overtimes (Allen, 2011). Bowen (2006) describes this process as an iterative process, which is helpful to find potential patterns among several participants. In this iterative process, axial coding is helpful to convergent unstructured codes to formulate overarching categories. This iterative process ended when reaching data saturation, which refers to the point when no more new information is discovered (Bowen, 2006). Finally, each category was refined and given a clear definition to make sure there was no overlap between categories. It is also important to keep the research question in mind to remind what is relevant and what should not be missed. In this study, the researcher defined 38 categories in the process of axial coding, and each category contained many codes. For example, the category of “the function of game derivatives” involved the following codes: “sense of companionship”, “feel pleasant”, “release stress”, and “feel empathy”. The category of “trendy words” contains the hot words in Chinese popular culture that participants mentioned, such as “brainless dating”, “greasy”, “ordinary but confident”, and “stupid and sweet”.

Selective coding is the last step, aiming to connect all categories with a core category (Holton, 2007). The core category helps the researcher develop a unified theory, which represents the central argument of the research. The core category of this research is “female gaze”, which is an existing theory but has not been fully studied. This study links female gaze and otome games, which expands the application field of female gaze. Many categories are significant to explain female gaze, such as “the empathy of the female avatar”, “the perception of men in the real world”, “the perception of intimate relationships”, and “trendy words”. The examples of axial coding and selective coding process can be found in Appendix B.

In constructivist grounded theory, the researcher exists as a participant in constructing meaning rather than an observer, so it is necessary to acknowledge the researcher’s influence on the research process and results. Since the data is

constructed and interpreted by the researcher, it is significant to realize and admit the potential bias on this meaning-making process to ensure reflexivity. In this study, the researcher is female, so the process of interpreting data may be from a female perspective. In addition, the researcher has been playing *Mr. Love* for a month, which may cause some taken-for-granted thoughts and ignore some details that need to be introduced and explained.

4. Findings

This section consists of three subsections. The first subsection introduces the interviewees' different ways of participating in the game. The second subsection uses the comparison between the game world and the real world as a clue to analyze the interviewees' perception of emotional immersion, men, and intimate relationships. The third subsection discusses the significance and limitations of otome games.

4.1 Diverse approaches to the gameplay

This subsection mainly explains how female players participate and engage in the game, including the players' participation in the narrative, the core gameplay, the supplementary gameplay, and offline activities. The researcher finds that although many female players share similarities in their way and degree of participation, individual differences are still existing. In general, the participants show diverse approaches and degrees of engaging in the game.

The narrative

The plot of the game is significant to the gaming experience of players, especially in role-playing games that focus on plots. The player's experience of the plot largely affects the player's engagement and immersion in the game. This argument is confirmed in the research of Johnson and Wiles (2003). They claim that the game narrative can attract players into the game and keep them immersed in the game. The game narrative introduces the role of players, the story background, and the relationship between game characters, allowing players to actively participate in the game construction while experiencing the game (Sweetser & Johnson, 2004).

In this study, all participants experience the game plot, even if they engage in the game plot to different levels. Most of the participants are very interested in the main storyline of *Mr. Love*. They read the plot and the lines carefully, and even discuss the plot with other players on online game forums and social media platforms. For

example, they will analyze the lines of the characters to guess whether it is the foreshadowing of the subsequent plot, and predict the future development of the story according to their assumptions. Their analysis of the plot is very meticulous. In addition to the lines, the CV and the artwork are also the objects of their observation and analysis. Following is how some female players share and discuss their assumptions on social media platforms with other players:

“There are many celebrities on Bilibili [a Chinese online forum that focuses on ACG audiences], who have written articles and posted some videos to analyze the main storyline. I often go to see them and discuss the game plot with my friends in the QQ [a widely used Chinese social media] chatting group. I found it very interesting. The plot of Mr. Love is really well written, and the scope is too big”
(Zhou, 19 years old).

Some interviewees are not interested in the game plot, but they tend to quickly browse the plot instead of not watching it at all. One participant Li, a 19-year-old female college student, explain the reason, “if you don’t know what the plot is about, then this game is nothing fun”. In addition, these interviewees specifically mention that when their favorite male character appears in the plot, they would read the lines carefully and engage in the story.

It can be seen that reading the lines and the game plot is an important way for female players to engage in otome games. This point is also related to the origin of the otome game. Most otome games are adapted from romance novels, and previous research (Kim, 2009) claims that many Japanese otome games are adapted from shoujo manga. This media content highly relies on text and pictures which take narrative as the core. Therefore, the plot and narrative style are very important to otome games, and to a large extent affect the female player’s gaming experience.

The core gameplay

All interviewees are keen to collect Karmas, not only because collecting and cultivating Karma is the core gameplay of the game, but also because the artworks of

Karmas are very exquisite and beautiful. Most of the interviewees express, “even if it’s not my favorite male protagonist, if his Karma is good-looking, I will collect it” (Li Meng, 19). For the interviewees, all the Karmas of their favorite male protagonist they want to collect. In order to achieve this goal, almost most interviewees consume virtual items in the game. Those players who have collected the Karmas of all the male protagonists are called “mogul” in players’ game community.

The purpose of obtaining and cultivating Karmas is to unlock the game plot, which is an important element for players to participate in the game and influence their game experience. Almost all interviewees would carefully read and engage in the main storyline, and the game plot is an important factor in attracting them to play *Mr. Love*. Some interviewees are not interested in the main storyline, and in most cases, they skip it quickly, but when the plot involves their favorite male protagonist, they will read it carefully. Interviewees often use “grand” to describe the main storyline of the game, “it is far more than a love game” (Eza, 26). Generally speaking, the players are relatively satisfied with the main storyline of *Mr. Love*, but they also pointed out many problems with the game plot. The confusion and lack of cohesion in the plot are the most mentioned.

“The plot is very similar to that of Marvel, with the feeling of a grand universe. Although it is a love game, the main storyline is actually about saving the world. But the plot is very confusing to me. Many plots are not connected. I often read the following chapters and forget what was said in the previous chapter.” (Ye Zi, 21 years old)

Some interviewees believe that the logical confusion and incoherence of the plot are caused by deliberately balancing the proportion of the male protagonists in the game plot. Most Japanese otome games contain different branch narratives for different male protagonists. There is only one male protagonist in each branch narrative, and other male protagonists appear as supporting actors. However, there is no branching storyline in *Mr. Love*, and four male protagonists appear in the main storyline at the same time. In order to avoid quarrels among players, the game plot

needs to balance the roles of the four male protagonists. However, some players point out that the game plot added deliberately for some male protagonists is illogical and embarrassing.

“Especially when the male protagonist is switched, I feel so sudden. Why suddenly I switched to another male protagonist. I feel the game plot is deliberately added to balance the roles of the four male protagonists, and the plot arrangement is a bit confusing.” (Xiao Zhou, 19 years old)

The complementary gameplay

All players have experienced the calls and messages system. The interface of this system simulates the real social software WeChat. In addition to making calls and texting, you can also interact with the male protagonist in the circle of friends. Most players prefer to experience this system, which can increase their interaction with the male protagonist. And there are multiple options in text messages and phone calls, which makes players feel that they are chatting with the hero, not the heroine.

“It can also change the profile picture of the male and female protagonists, which is almost the same as the WeChat page. And every time there is a new current event in the game world, it will push the news to you like a WeChat official account. The comments under the news are actually the same as what real netizens would say. It makes me feel that this world is real, and there are many people besides me.” (Li Meng, 19 years old)

Right Beside You is recognized by female players as the most immersive gameplay because players can feel the male protagonists talking in their ears. The combination with ASMR and the emotional dubbing of voice actors are the main attractions of this system. Besides, some interviewees indicate that Right Beside You helps them sleep. “I suffered from insomnia during summer vacation, and I listened to Bai Qi’s Right Beside You. It was really useful. After listening to a piece of audio, I feel very relaxed”, said Ansley (20).

The offline activities

There are three main offline activities that female players participate in: offline phone calls, game derivatives, and offline theme restaurants. Most of the players engage in the first two activities. Players' participation in offline theme restaurants is limited by the development level of the player's city because *Mr. Love* only opens offline theme restaurants in a few developed cities in China, such as Shanghai and Shenzhen.

Offline phone calls are gifts for players from the game studio. The Paper Games will ask the voice actors who are dubbing the male protagonists to record a festival blessing audio. On the day of the festival in the real world, players who leave their phone number beforehand will receive a call, which is the pre-recorded festival wishes. Most of the interviewees receive blessing calls from the male protagonists during the Spring Festival, Valentine's Day, Mid-Autumn Festival and other festivals, which surprises them a lot. Ye Zi (21) once uninstalled the game, but during the Chinese New Year, she received a blessing call from Bai Qi, which made her re-download *Mr. Love* and kept playing until now.

"I was still sleeping at that time, and suddenly I received an unfamiliar number. I answered the phone and a male voice said, 'Hey, it's me, I'm Bai Qi'. I was shocked at the time, and I felt like, oh my god, I am in love again. After hanging up the phone, I quickly downloaded the game back." (Ye Zi, 21 years old)

The game derivatives refer to the physical products derived from the image of the characters in the game, or the materialization of virtual items that appear in the game, such as the water cup with the photo of the male protagonists, and the headwear of the female protagonist in the game. Most interviewees have bought game derivatives, but a small part of the interviewees believe that it is unnecessary, or insufficient funds make them impossible to purchase. "I spent more money on derivatives than in *Mr. Love*," Ning Zhi (22) said.

Offline theme restaurants are another industrial linkage, which enhances player's immersion by decorating the restaurant in a style that matches the style of the game

and is full of game elements. As one of the few interviewees who have been to offline theme restaurants, Li Meng (19) shares her experience and feelings.

“It was really great! Each male protagonist has a separate hall, and every dish in it has meaning, related to the game plot or characters. Posters of male protagonists are posted on the wall, and the music played is also the background music in the game.” (Li Meng, 19 years old)

4.2 Female player’s perception of gaming experience: Constantly comparing the game world with the real world

The researcher found that when it came to how female players perceive their gaming experience, interviewees would unconsciously compare the game world with the real world. This comparison became a clue of this subsection to discuss the differences between the game world and the real world in terms of emotional immersion, the perception of men, and the perception of intimate relationships.

“The emotional immersion in the game world and real world are complementary.”

According to the interviews, all participants are more or less emotionally involved in *Mr. Love*, and the emotional immersion in the virtual world and real world are complementary. In the process of reading the plot and interacting with the male protagonists, the female players gradually develop an emotional connection with the male protagonists. This connection is not one-way, but a two-way relationship. Players have a sense of immersion and empathy and feel emotionally engaged in the game. In turn, the male protagonists provide the players with a sense of security and companionship. In addition, players who lack a sense of security and companionship in real life tend to invest more emotions in the game.

It can be concluded from the data that the emotional immersion of female players in *Mr. Love* can be roughly divided into three categories: a sense of empathy, a sense of security, and a sense of companionship.

A sense of empathy

In this research, empathy refers to whether the player can substitute for the avatar from the level of emotion in the game, which means whether the player can feel the heroine's emotions, and understand her thoughts and behaviors. In *Mr. Love*, the main empathy object for players is their avatar in the game: the heroine of the story.

Through the interviews with the participants, the researcher finds that whether the player can empathize with the heroine and the degree of empathy are related to two factors: the similarities that players share with the heroine, and the player's affection for the heroine. There is a connection between these two factors. In general, the more similar the player and the heroine are, the more they will like the heroine. Therefore, when the personalities of the player and the heroine are similar, the player is more likely to appreciate the heroine, empathize with the heroine, and generate the feeling of "I am the heroine". About 7 participants appreciate the heroine, and the rest 5 participants criticize the heroine a lot. Bai Bai, an 18-year-old high school student, is completely able to empathize with the heroine, "I am the heroine, the male character is in love with me". She is very similar to the heroine, "like the heroine, I'm a little impulsive and reckless. I don't think so much before doing things". Bai Bai (18) expresses her appreciation for the heroine and explains the reason why some players may dislike the heroine:

"Since the male characters are too good, it seems that she [the heroine] is not so good. In fact, I think she is really a very good person. In many aspects, for example, some of her characteristics, and because of her father's death, she can persist for so long to find the truth about her father's death, and then bring her father's company back to life. These aspects show that she is actually quite good. Yes, but maybe because of the [features of] otome game, and everyone may pay more attention to male characters, so they may ignore her shining points, but in fact, I think Papergame is quite successful in shaping the image of the heroine."
(Bai Bai, 18 years old)

From Bai's words, her appreciation for the heroine is quite obvious, and she believes that otome games deliberately weaken the heroine in order to beautify the

male characters, which causes some players to be unable to appreciate the heroine, let alone empathize with her. Bai's opinion is confirmed by other interviewees. Ning Zhi (22 years old) said that when the heroine makes a very stupid and incomprehensible behavior in the plot, it is difficult for her to have a sense of empathy. However, she realizes that for the development of the plot, the heroine has to be portrayed stupidly, "it is understandable, I know that she has to do that to promote the development of the game plot" (Ning Zhi, 22).

Apart from the weakened description of the heroine by the otome game itself, the personality of the heroine is another reason why players cannot have the sense of empathy in *Mr. Love*. Ye Zi (21 years old) hates the heroine very much because "she [the heroine] is too incompetent, she has to rely on the male characters for everything, not only can't offer any help but bring extra troubles". Most of the reasons cited by participants who dislike the heroine are due to her personality. In their opinion, the heroine is too weak, incompetent, very silly, too reckless, and "stupid and sweet²" (Ye Zi, 21; Xin Xin, 18; Ansley, 20).

The similarity with the heroine and the appreciation for the heroine can make the player empathize, but the way the player generates empathy is different. The researcher summarizes the following different ways of feeling empathy:

- 1) Fully empathetic, thinking that they are the heroine;
- 2) Cannot feel empathy at all, watching the development of the plot and the interaction between the heroes and the heroine in the position of a bystander;
- 3) Sometimes they can feel empathy, sometimes cannot.
- 4) Ignore the existence of the heroine and the players interact with the male protagonists by themselves.

Bai (18) belongs to the first type. She is similar to the heroine and likes the heroine very much, so that she can empathize with her, and feel "I am the heroine". Another interviewee, Eza, a 26-year-old master student, belongs to the second type. She does not hate the heroine, "she is still a kind girl after all", but she cannot

² "Stupid and sweet" is a hot word in Chinese culture, which is widely used to describe a girl who is naïve, innocent, kind, and often confused.

empathize at all, and she plays games as a bystander.

“I can’t empathize at all, because I feel she is too stupid emotionally. If she is in real life, she would be defeated in society, and if you look at her approach to do some things, you will feel that...although the girl is very courageous, I admit that she is very courageous, but she is really stupid, as if she has not been educated in school. I can’t empathize with her. When I’m watching her, when I’m watching the game plot, I feel like I am watching a little girl, watching a little girl and a man fall in love.” (Eza, 26 years old)

The third type of player will generate empathy in certain situations. For example, when the content of the game plot is very close to daily life, players are prone to empathy. Therefore, interviewees (Ning Zhi, 22; Xiao Tang, 18) mention that compared with the main storyline, they are more empathetic in dating stories. In addition, *Right Beside You* is recognized by players as the most empathetic gameplay. The system uses ASMR to make the player feel pleasant, and the stereo and surround sounds make the player feel like the male protagonist is speaking in the ear.

“I think Right Beside You is really good. I listen to it every day before going to bed and I feel really hypnotic. Especially the series of bedtime stories, I feel very immersive, as if he is really by my side to coax me to sleep.” (Xiao Tang, 18 years old)

The last type of player is special. They do not care what personality the heroine is, because they choose to ignore the heroine while playing the game, which means they believe that all the actions and choices of the heroine in the game are done by themselves. They do not recognize the existence of the heroine, so they cannot empathize with her. “I will not pay attention to what she is like, and there is no heroine in this game”, Xin Xin (18) said.

A sense of security

According to the interviewees, Xu Mo is the best male protagonist who can give

players a sense of security, and his preference for the heroine is an important source of security. In *Mr. Love*, Xu Mo is a high IQ neuroscientist, very calm and rational. He is gentle, but in fact, very indifferent at heart. In his world, everything he sees is black and white, only the heroine is in color. Besides, in the main storyline, Xu Mo and the heroine stand in opposition. On the one hand, Xu Mo needs to complete the tasks assigned to him by Black Swan, on the other hand, he cannot control his love for the heroine. This contradiction in Xu Mo is also what attracts female players. In the plot, Xu Mo loses his calm several times because of the heroine, which makes female players feel “I am special to Xu Mo and I am favored” (Xiao Zhou, 19). The heroine can see the side that Xu Mo does not show to others, which convinces the players that Xu Mo loves the heroine deeply, so they gain a sense of security in love.

However, the sense of security which relies on preference is a manifestation of a lack of confidence in love. Female players are eager to know that they are special for their boyfriends, constantly confirm whether men still love them, and rely on these to prove their importance. This psychology reflects that females are very afraid that men no longer love them. Enjoying the feeling of being favored is actually an expression of insecurity.

In addition to Xu Mo, Bai Qi is also labeled with a sense of security by the interviewees, but unlike Xu Mo’s preference for heroines, Bai Qi’s sense of security for players comes from Bai Qi’s occupation and personality. In *Mr. Love*, Bai Qi is a policeman, and his belief is to uphold justice. Bai Qi is very kind, reliable, and candid, “he is like the big brother next door, very close to me” (Eza, 26).

A sense of companionship

Creating a sense of companionship is the purpose of otome games, and *Mr. Love* has done it very well. “No matter in the game or in my life, I can feel Zhou Qiluo with me,” said Bai Bai (18).

The game derivative is one of the approaches to create a sense of companionship. Most of the interviewees buy game derivatives, such as pillows, water cups, blankets, and calendars, with the pattern of male protagonists printed on them. Ning Zhi (22)

has spent more money on derivatives than in the game. The derivatives related to Xu Mo are of great significance to her, which accompany her through the difficult time when preparing for the exam. Whenever seeing the calendar with a photo of Xu Mo, she would feel better.

“I will put it [the calendar] on the table and look at him when I am tired of studying or when I am not in a good mood, that’s it. It was during the period when I was preparing for the exam, I spent the most time playing Mr. Love, because of the great pressure. There is a function in the game that accompanies me to study together. I really think that for the students, I think it is very friendly.”
(Ning Zhi, 22 years old)



Figure 4 Pillow with the image of Bai Qi (Baidu, n.d.)

In addition to the derivatives, when female players find that the game world overlaps with the real world, they can also feel that the male protagonist is by their side to accompany them. Ansley (20) recounts one of her experiences about her

receiving a blessing call from the virtual world during a Chinese festival in the real world. This kind of experience made her feel that the male protagonist really exists in the real world and is always by her side.

“I am very impressed, and this game gives me many surprises. I didn’t remember it was a festival that day, I just opened the game as usual. I was with a friend at that time, and suddenly I heard a call, I was still thinking about whose call it was, and then I found it’s a call from Mr. Love. Then I answered the phone. The male character I like wished me a happy festival, and then I realized that day was a festival.” (Ansley, 20 years old)

Ning Zhi (22) also has a similar experience, which makes her excited and impressed.

“All male protagonists have their own Weibo accounts. In my memory, when I feel Xu Mo is really by my side is the picture of plum blossoms posted by him on his Weibo this year. When I saw this Weibo, I happened to be in a mountain with many plum blossoms, and appreciated the plum blossoms. I felt for a moment that he was with me and also in this plum blossom forest.” (Ning Zhi, 22 years old)

Mr. Love put a lot of effort into making female players feel a sense of companionship. In the game, there are the calls and messages systems, players will receive calls from their preferred male protagonist on festivals and anniversaries, and the male protagonist can accompany the players to study and work together. Outside the game, each male protagonist has his own social media account, which will be irregularly updated. Besides, many game derivatives and offline theme restaurants have been designed to provide a sense of companionship.

When discussing the sense of companionship felt in the game, respondents show great differences based on whether they are single or not. The vast majority of interviewees are single in reality, most of whom do not have any love experience. Only three interviewees (Ye Zi, 21; Ansley, 20; Xin Xin, 18) have established intimate

relationships in reality. According to interviews, the researcher can clearly feel that female players who have partners in real life spend much less emotion and time in the game than female players who are single in real life. Therefore, the emotions that players invest in the game world and the real world are likely to be complementary. In other words, to a large extent, *Mr. Love* satisfies the players' love needs in real life, causing players to reduce their willingness to establish intimate relationships in real life. Unlike single female players who need the accompaniment of the male protagonist, female players who are accompanied by their boyfriend in real life only regard Mr. Love and the male protagonist as a tool to entertain themselves.

"I don't really need his [Bai Qi] company very much, I just need him to make me feel happy. He makes my heart beat violently, I am very happy today, because of his words, because of his romantic love words. He is just a virtual character, I don't understand how he can accompany me. Whether chatting with me or hanging out with me, he can't do it. I think he only needs to achieve the emotional value to make me happy." (Ye Zi, 21 years old)

"Compared with them [Bai Qi & Zhou Qiluo], I definitely love my boyfriend more. ... In fact, I still feel very excited when I listen to those phone calls in the game, but the reaction is not as strong as before [when I was still single]. I will no longer hold my phone and scream as I did before, and I spend less time in the game than before." (Ansley, 20 years old)

"I am unwilling to fall in love with the male protagonist in the real world."

There is an interesting phenomenon during the interviews: when they were asked "can you distinguish the game world from the real world", most of the interviewees answered, "of course I can". However, from their words, the desire to bridge the two worlds is revealed. The game derivatives mentioned before are the proof that players are looking for the virtual male protagonist in the real world, "the derivatives make me feel that he does exist in my life" (Xiao Zhou, 19). A small number of interviewees believe that the game world and the real world are not completely

separate. Bai Bai (18) believes that there is a parallel world, in which she and Zhou Qiluo meet each other and fall in love. Nan Shan (20) believes that Xu Mo really exists in the world, but she will never meet him.

“The world is too big, there are so many people I will never meet, I regard him [Xu Mo] as one of them. It is enough to have him in my heart, it is not necessary to be with him in the real world.” (Nan Shan, 20 years old)

Not only Nan Shan, but most of the interviewees are also unwilling to fall in love with the male protagonist in the real world, although they love them in the game very much. According to the interviews, three reasons can explain this phenomenon.

First of all, interviewees believe that if the male protagonists of *Mr. Love* appear in the real world, their perfect image will be destroyed, which makes female players have a huge psychological gap and feel disillusioned. Xiao Zhou (19) said that she would fantasize about Xu Mo’s existence in the real world, but she should choose to pay attention to him, and would not want to fall in love with him.

“Real life is definitely different from the game world, Xu Mo should be a very perfect person, but if I am really dating with him in the real world, I will definitely find a lot of problems and frictions, which may destroy the image of Xu Mo in my favorite game world...In the game, we will never fight, and there will be no trivial things, but in real life, real life is very cruel, and full of trivial things, which will cause constant disputes between Xu Mo and her, then I will see his shortcomings and feel that he is no longer perfect.” (Xiao Zhou, 19 years old)

“Xu Mo is too perfect, I don’t deserve him” (Dao Dao, 20), this is another reason why female players are unwilling to date the male protagonist in reality.

“Because the ideal and reality are definitely different. He [Xu Mo] is my ideal boyfriend, but I feel he is too far from me, maybe my knowledge level and life experience cannot be compared with him at all, or I may not be able to think about and look at things at the same level as him. In my opinion, it is good to

have a boyfriend who is particularly good, but for a relatively ordinary person like me, I still don't dare to approach such a good person.” (Dao Dao, 20 years old)

Dao Dao's thoughts actually reflect her self-esteem and the equal intimate relationship she desires. As Xu Mo is too perfect, and she is an ordinary girl, the intimate relationship between them is not equal. If the social status, family background, educational level, and financial conditions of two people in an intimate relationship are too far apart, the person in the weak position may develop an inferiority complex. Many participants agree with Dao Dao's idea.

“Even if my boyfriend doesn't think I'm inferior to him, I will feel inferior and will be very stressed...I don't want him to look down upon me, feel that I am attached to him, I want to be respected.” (Xiao Tang, 18 years old)

The third reason is that players have different feelings and perceptions about the language used in the game and in reality. Some plots and lines make players feel sweet and impressive when seen and heard in the game, but may feel uncomfortable when heard in the real world. Therefore, players may refuse to date male protagonists in real life. “I can't accept my boyfriend talking like the male protagonist in the game, it is too uncomfortable and too greasy” (Ansley, 20). “Greasy” is often used in Chinese popular culture to describe men who think they are cool, but women feel very uncomfortable with their words and deeds. “If someone like Li Zeyan really appears in reality, I might think he is very greasy”, said Li Meng (19), a female player who loves Li Zeyan very much in *Mr. Love*.

“I think I might not be able to have what happens in dating stories. For example, Li Zeyan made a cake, and I might just eat it directly. Before he could devise any surprises, I had eaten it. Do you know what I mean? ... I can't say the cheesy lines in the game at all, and I can't accept others say them to me. I feel very sick. Mr. Love is like the spice of my life. It is good to say some romantic words

occasionally and do some romantic things, but it is very greasy and disgusting to live like the way in the game every day.” (Li Meng, 19 years old)

“Men in real life are greasy, ordinary but confident.”

The acceptance and perception of male protagonists in the game and males in real life are completely different. When describing their favorite male protagonists in *Mr. Love*, the keywords used by female players are very positive and beautiful. For example, Li Zeyan is mature and successful in his career; Xu Mo is gentle and sexy; Bai Qi is trustworthy; Zhou Qiluo is optimistic and as warm as the sun. However, when participants mention males they meet in real life, they often use negative words such as “greasy”, “ordinary but confident³”, “untrustworthy”, and “dangerous” to describe men in the real world. The female players are very dissatisfied with the inherent superiority of men. Many interviewees indicate that “ordinary but confident” men are what they hate most, and such men are very common in their lives.

“There are really too many uncomfortable behaviors by men. In real life, some men criticize and make comments on women. They are ordinary people themselves, but they are very confident, and they put forward various demands and set up standards on women. They think this girl is too fat, that girl is too thin. They seem to think that girls should exist to please them. This is the most unacceptable point for me.” (Bai Bai, 18 years old)

During the interviews, the researcher found some participants were afraid of men in their life. They cannot fully trust men in real life and have a feeling that men represent danger. Xin Xin’s father is very irritable. When she was very young, her father often lost his temper to her mother. Besides, Xin Xin’s uncle is prone to domestic violence. The men in Xin Xin’s family cause her to fear men from her childhood.

³ “Ordinary but confident” is a hot word that has recently become popular in China, which comes from the famous saying of talk show actress Yang Li, “men are so mysterious, why do they seem so ordinary, but they can be so confident”.

“When I was 14 years old, my mother gave birth to a younger brother. When my brother was only three months old, the child was very noisy, and my mother who had just given birth did not recover. At that time my father went out to play poker cards, and then my mother was woken up by my brother in the middle of the night. She didn’t have a good temper, so when my father came back, she asked my dad, ‘I was so uncomfortable, why did you go out to play cards, didn’t answer the phone’. The next day, I heard my father say that he didn’t want to take care of this child anyway. He told my mother, ‘I want to smash your damn son to death’.”
(Xin Xin, 18 years old)

Xin Xin’s experience makes her be wary of the world, especially when facing males. She cannot trust men in real life, and it is impossible for her to establish intimate relationships with men. She said, “I never think about falling in love or dating any man”. Because of all these unpleasant experiences, Xin Xin can only satisfy her love needs in otome games, “because the male protagonists in the game will never hurt me, I can completely trust Xu Mo”.

There is another characteristic that men in real life that makes female players unbearable: male chauvinism. It is mainly reflected in their stubborn opinions, a sense of superiority, and always love to make decisions for others. The male chauvinism felt by female players mainly comes from their fathers. Xiao Tang (18) said that her father shows strong male chauvinism and a desire to control her and her mother. In family relations, her father and her mother are not equal.

“Compared with my mother, my father would like to make decisions for me, and he would say some unthinkable words, such as, ‘as a child, you must listen to me’. I don’t think he respects me. I think if he wants to control me, then he is depriving me of my freedom as his daughter and more important, as an ordinary person. This is unfair. And my father keeps a lot of things from my mother, and many things related to the whole family are decided by him alone, which is also very unequal.” (Xiao Tang, 18 years old)

However, while some interviewees are opposed to male chauvinism, some interviewees are deeply influenced by male chauvinism without being aware of it. The standards of ideal boyfriends of some interviewees actually reflect the influence of male chauvinism, which some female players already internalized into their own pursuits. For example, the fathers of many female players often make decisions for them, which makes these females unable to formulate independent opinions. Therefore, they hope that their boyfriends are very decisive and can make decisions for them. This phenomenon is very obvious in female players who like Li Zeyan and Xu Mo in *Mr. Love*, because these two male protagonists are labeled as mature, reliable, and decisive.

“I am a person with no opinion, because when I was a child, I don’t have many opportunities to make my own choices. I feel that a mature man, a person who is very decisive and has opinions towards most things, would make me like him very much.” (Xin Xin, 18)

In addition to the influence of male chauvinism, the patriarchal society also subtly influences women’s standards of the ideal boyfriend. Eza (26) believes a “daddy-like boyfriend” is popular among Chinese girls. “Daddy-like boyfriend” is a hot word of Chinese pop culture, which refers to boyfriends who give women a feeling of a father. They are usually mature and considerate, and like fathers, they love to take charge of women’s life. In *Mr. Love*, Li Zeyan is a typical daddy-like boyfriend. He will supervise the work of the heroine, scold her when she makes mistakes, and take care of her in a father’s tone in daily life, such as putting on a coat in the hard wind, and remembering to take medicine when the heroine catches a cold. Female players who like Li Zeyan enjoy the feeling that their daily lives are arranged by their boyfriends, “I really enjoy traveling with Li Zeyan, or going out to eat and for fun. He will arrange everything for me. I just need to go out. It is very worry-free” (Li Meng, 19).

“How I look forward to the love in the game world, how I am unwilling to have a relationship in the real world.”

Female players gradually form their own expectations of love and intimate relationships as they interact with the virtual male protagonists. They use words such as “equal”, “respect for each other”, and “mutual trust” to describe their ideal intimate relationship. “Respect each other, and both of us have a job that suits us, and we can shine in our own career. We are equal, and we are all excellent people,” Ye Zi (21) described to the researcher the ideal intimate relationship she expected. Based on her words, owning a career is very important for Ye Zi.

However, even though all the interviewees have their ideal intimate relationships, most of them do not plan to develop an intimate relationship in real life. In this research, 9 of the 12 interviewees are single and only 3 have a partner. In Li Meng’s future, love is only a small part. She cares more about her parents than her partner.

“I don’t have any idea of dating someone...I don’t know...I have carefully considered my future. I hope to be able to finish a master’s degree or PhD in the future, and then become a teacher, find a person with a stable job and live a normal life, preferably in my hometown, in the same neighborhood as my parents.”
(Li Meng, 19 years old)

Li Meng’s attitude towards love represents most of the interviewees: love is not a necessity, but a spice. They don’t have too much longing for love, “whatever will be, will be” (Xiao Zhou, 19).

However, some interviewees are very resistant to love, such as Xin Xin, a girl who experienced domestic violence. She has seen too many failed marriages since she was a child, which makes her very pessimistic about love and marriage. She is very resistant to communicating with men in the real life, “I have barely spoken to men” (Xin Xin, 18). For her, *Mr. Love* is the only place where she can feel love.

“I didn’t think about this kind of thing [build an intimate relationship] before, but when I grew up, I saw the side of human. I have experienced many dark and dirty things about couples, marriage and love. I think it’s better to be single in real life.”
(Xin Xin, 18 years old)

In addition to talking about their own views on love, many interviewees criticize some people's attitude towards love: brainless dating. "Brainless dating" is also a hot word in Chinese pop culture, with two meanings: 1) Refers to young people who casually fall in love with people they do not really know; 2) Refers to young people who lose their minds in love and take love and their partners too seriously. Both phenomena are criticized by most interviewees.

"I strongly disagree with some people who find a partner just because the notion of 'others have a boyfriend or girlfriends, so I need to have one', and they quickly find someone who they don't know very well, who they just met each other for a short time. I don't think there is any need to worry, just fall in love when you meet the right person, and never mind it if you don't meet." (Xiao Zhou, 19 years old)

"I hate brainless dating very much. I think you need to be sensible, you can't feel that love is bigger than anything as soon as you are in love. Many girls are like this. When a man treats her well, she thinks this man is too good, and wants to be with him forever. After breaking up, she will die, as if there are only men and love in her life." (Ye Zi, 21 years old)

Most interviewees disagree that women care too much about love and their partners. They believe that the meaning and value of life do not lie in love and men. This opinion is also visible when Ning Zhi (22) talks about her views on the heroine, "it seems the four men is the whole life of her, she seems to have no friend, and her own entertainment time". Players' attitude towards love actually reflects their resistance to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. In ancient China, women are only allowed to stay at home most of the time, and their attention is on how to attract and please their husbands. But now, the importance of love for women is gradually decreasing, which shows women are no longer satisfied with being imprisoned in the family, and their desire to achieve success in career and social status just like men.

4.3 The significance and limitations of otome games

During the interview, the researcher found that in addition to please women, the otome game has great significance for some marginalized groups, especially those who cannot develop intimate relationships in real life. At the same time, the interviews also revealed many problems with otome games. This subsection is developed around the significance and limitations of otome games.

The significance

For the interviewees, the significance of otome games is mainly reflected in three aspects: shaping the player's value of love, raising women's requirements and aesthetics for men, and satisfying the emotional needs of marginalized groups.

Firstly, otome games shape the value of love of female players. By playing *Mr. Love*, female players understand what type of men they like, and construct their own standards for ideal partners and requirements for ideal intimate relationships. "I didn't know what kind of guy I like before, but after playing *Mr. Love*, I know," Xing Xing (18) said. In addition, many female players mention that playing *Mr. Love* makes them realize their shortcomings and stimulate them to promote themselves. "Only when I am good enough to meet a good person can I dare to contact him," Xiao Tang (18) said.

"The more I play, the more I realize that if I want to have an ideal intimate relationship, first I have to match them. The more I play, the more I find that I have many shortcomings, and the more I play, the more I find that there are still many rooms for growth." (Xiao Tang, 18 years old)

Secondly, otome games improve women's requirements and aesthetics for men. All of the male protagonists created in *Mr. Love* are perfect. They have a decent career, outstanding ability, good education and personality. All these allow women to have a notion that "men should be so good", so as to improve their aesthetics and requirements for men in real life, and help them to find better partners. "Don't pick up

boyfriends from the trash bin,” Eza (26) said.

“A good game should improve the player’s values from a deep level. Girls, the man you choose must be someone who respects women from the bottom of his heart, loves women, and insists on gender equality. He must be loyal, love you, and will never hurt you. Don’t choose some trash, I am serious, some men really come out of the trash bin.” (Eza, 26 years old)

Thirdly, otome games can meet the romantic needs of marginalized groups and is of great significance to them. Among the interviewees, two women are quite special: Nan Shan (20) has an avoidant personality disorder. She cannot accept men’s love, even if she loves him as well. Facing the love expressed by men, she instinctively chooses to escape; Xing Xing (18) suffered domestic violence, which makes her unable to trust men in real life, and it is impossible for her to establish intimate relationships. However, in *Mr. Love*, they can break through the shackles of the real world and experience the feeling of love and being loved in the virtual world. “I can trust Xu Mo completely, because I know he will never hurt me...In reality, I hardly communicate with men because I think they are all dangerous”, said Xing Xing.

“I will be afraid if someone likes me, because I can’t respond to other people’s emotions. When I find that someone likes me, I will become very anxious. It’s wonderful that I can approach someone so proactively in the game.” (Nan Shan, 20 years old)

The limitations

In addition to the advantages, otome games have many limitations, mainly owing to the mechanism of the otome game itself. The purpose of otome games is that female players can date the virtual male protagonists in the game and develop a romantic relationship. Therefore, the center of the game is male protagonists rather than the heroine. In order to highlight the attractiveness of the male protagonists, the heroine is often weakened. “Only when the heroine is weak, can we feel the power of

the male protagonist,” said Dao Dao (20). As a result, the heroine’s personality is very close to the stereotypes of women constructed by the patriarchal culture: weak, helpless, dependent on men. While some players dislike the heroine’s personality, some players internalize the heroine’s personality, which deepens the stereotypes of women.

Another limitation is that otome games simplify the complicated relationship between men and women. In real life, the relationship between men and women is very diverse, such as friends, teachers, elders, etc., but in otome games, there is only a romance relationship between the male protagonists and the heroine because the purpose is to develop a romantic relationship. It leads to the moral issue of loyalty to love in otome games, which has been criticized for a long time.

“For example, a certain person, his certain behavior, you may think that his behavior is quite good. You will have a good impression of him, not necessarily that of love, but of ordinary friends. This person may become your good friend. I like many qualities in him, but I am not the lover of him, I am just a friend. However, in the game, it is an otome game after all...your goal is to fall in love. You can’t be friends. There is no such ordinary friend setting in the game. The game environment is for love.” (Ansley, 20 years old)

5. Discussion and conclusion

This section discusses how patriarchal culture affects players' gaming experience, and how female players resist the products of patriarchal culture and formulate female gaze. Moreover, this section also attempts to answer the research question from a feminist perspective. Finally, the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research are discussed.

5.1 The impact of patriarchal culture

From the interviews with female players, it is obvious that the patriarchal culture still has a potential impact on their experience and perceptions in otome games. These influences are mainly reflected in their perceptions of the heroine in *Mr. Love*, the expectations of their ideal partners, and the stereotypes of female players.

Although many interviewees indicate that they do not like the heroine in *Mr. Love* because she is too weak and is always protected by the male protagonists, some interviewees express their favor of the feeling of being protected and loved. Xin Xin (18) is one of them. Compared to the strong heroine, she prefers the male protagonists being stronger, "I really enjoy the feeling of being taken care of and protected". Xin Xin's thoughts reflect the weakening of women and the stereotypes of women under the patriarchal culture and society. Her expectation of the heroine is completely in line with the image of a woman who is weak, helpless, incapable, and needs to rely on a man, which ignores the initiative and agency of women and does not treat men and women equally. Girls like Xin Xin have internalized the patriarchal stereotypes of women into their expectations of women. They take it for granted that women should be weak and need the help of men to achieve success.

In addition, the "daddy-like boyfriend" also reflects that the patriarchal society has influenced the standard of an ideal boyfriend of female players. This hot word is probably related to the role of fathers in Chinese families. In Chinese context, fathers are often not good at expressing their love and feelings, and therefore, children's

impressions of their fathers are mostly silent and cold. Besides, it is mainly the mother who takes care of the family and children. The lack of paternal love in children's childhood may lead to their desire and dependence on daddy-like boyfriends. One participant Eza (26) believes that some players have received insufficient paternal love since childhood, so when Li Zeyan appears in the game, they will be very obsessed with him. Moreover, fathers with machismo usually make decisions for their children instead of giving them the right to make their own choices, so that children are used to obey and rely on men. It causes female players to mistakenly believe that they like men who can make decisions for them. In other words, they like men with machismo, thus forming a vicious circle. Xing Xing (18), the girl who experience domestic violence, said, "I barely had the opportunity to make choices since I was a child. That kind of assertive mature man will attract me most". The oppression of women under the patriarchal culture is internalized by these female players as their own expectations of their partners.

In the interview, none of the participants expresses discomfort with *Mr. Love*'s simple gameplay. On the contrary, a small part of the participants opposes difficult gameplay in *Mr. Love*. Li Meng (19) opposes the complicated combat system in otome games. She believes that she can only master simple gameplay, and the gameplay of otome games does not need to be too complicated. It is consistent with the gender stereotypes in the game industry mentioned in the literature review. Female players are considered low-ability in the male-dominated game industry, and they are hard to master complex gameplay (Zhang, 2019). Female players gradually accept such stereotypes and internalize them as their own characteristics, which in turn deepens gender stereotypes.

5.2 Resistance to the products of patriarchal culture

Although some female players reflect the influence of patriarchal culture, most female players realize and begin to resist the products of patriarchal culture. The

resistance can be seen from the persona of the heroine, Li Zeyan's attitude towards the heroine, and the critique of brainless dating.

First of all, most female players dislike the image of the heroine in *Mr. Love*, which shows that they resist the female stereotypes formed under the influence of patriarchal culture. Most of the interviewees indicate they do not like a "stupid and sweet" heroine. A girl who is naïve, kind, and often confused will be described as "stupid and sweet". These characteristics are all female images that are constructed according to men's preferences. Men like stupid women, which can give them a sense of superiority. At the same time, they expect women to be very sweet, weak, and ignorant, so that they can provide protection for women and have a sense of satisfaction. "Stupid and sweet" fully reflects the male gaze, which is also the cultural product of the patriarchal society. It is the awakening of female consciousness for female players who feel uncomfortable with the "stupid and sweet" heroine. They realize that these characteristics are the female images expected by men, and begin to criticize such female images in otome games.

Secondly, many interviewees cannot accept the way of getting along between the heroine and Li Zeyan. Li Zeyan will taunt the heroine in daily communication, especially when the heroine reacts stupidly or did something wrong. Many female players refuse to accept this way of getting along between Li Zeyan and the heroine, which makes them very uncomfortable. Ye Zi (21) and Ansley (20) feel uncomfortable when interacting with Li Zeyan in the game. They believe that Li Zeyan communicates in a condescending attitude, and has been oppressing and denying the heroine. Ye Zi admits that maybe the identity of the CEO makes Li Zeyan used to educate others, but she still cannot accept it. The low acceptance of the way of getting along with Li Zeyan reflects female players' yearning for equality and respect in intimate relationships. They believe that Li Zeyan does not put the heroine in an equal position with him, and often taunts her and hurts her feelings. Besides, Li Zeyan often educates the heroine with a superior attitude, which is inconsistent with the equal intimate relationship they expect.

However, some players gradually feel the charm of the way of getting along. Li

Zeyan is not good at expressing his feelings and emotions, and he cannot say any sweet words. Therefore, he chooses to taunt the heroine to express his concern. His pet phrase “idiot” is also regarded as synonymous with sweet words by female players, “every time I say ‘idiot’, I’m not scolding you”.

Finally, the “brainless dating” mentioned in the previous subsection is also evidence of women’s resistance to patriarchal culture. Many participants mention that they hate “brainless dating”, which shows that love is not so important to most women. They find other ways to realize their self-worth, such as a successful career, so they have less energy to invest in love. In the interview, Ye Zi (21) points out that the career is very important in her future plan. In addition to Ye Zi, many interviewees mention the importance of the career, especially when they talk about the advantages of the heroine in *Mr. Love*. When faced with the question of “what do you most envy of the heroine”, most of the interviewees said, “I envy her for having a successful career and her own company” (Dao Dao, 20). Affected by the patriarchal society, women used to have low social status and low level of education, so that they have less opportunity to get a job. Most of their time and energy was spent on their husbands and children. The resistance of “brainless dating” reflects women’s refusal to devote too much emotion, energy and time to their partners, and they oppose the former patriarchal notion of imprisoning women in the family. It shows that women nowadays attach great importance to their careers. They have shifted the way to realize the value of life from family to work.

Women’s desire for a career reflects the willingness of women to realize their self-worth and ask for equality and respect. Moreover, the desire for a career emphasizes the requirements for self-improvement, indicating that women refuse to be accessories of men, and they hope that they can be independent and are as good as men. Only after achieving economic independence, can they have the confidence to claim equality and respect.

5.3 Formulate the female gaze

Although the otome game still has traces of patriarchal cultural influence, the otome game itself is the product of female gaze. From the design point of view, since the target group of otome games is female players, whether the plot, the gameplay or the personas of male protagonists are all designed according to female preferences. Female players have high demands on the game. They not only require interesting gameplay, but also have very high requirements for game aesthetics and sensory experience. For example, most women are face judges and voice-fetishes, therefore, the game designers need to design an attractive appearance and find a voice actor for each male protagonist. All of these game elements are designed to gaze at men from the perspective of women. What a man in the game looks like depends entirely on what kind of men that women like.

The perception of female players on men in real life also shows that female gaze has influenced Chinese popular culture. As explained before, “greasy” and “ordinary but confident” are two trendy words commonly used by females to describe males who make them feel uncomfortable and offended. “Greasy” means that women have formed their own aesthetics of men and begin to look at men with this aesthetic. Many behaviors that are very handsome in the eyes of men are greasy under the female gaze. “Ordinary but confident” reflects that women are tired of the inherent superiority of men, and they believe that men and women are all ordinary people, so men have no rights to be born superior to women. The popularity of these words shows that the public begins to accept the products of female gaze, and recognize the objective existence of observing, commenting and criticizing men from the perspective of women.

Some interviewees reveal that in addition to playing *Mr. Love* in their free time, they like to watch male talent shows, and these shows are full of female gaze. In recent years, many male talent shows have appeared in the Chinese market. The audience of these shows is also female, especially fangirls. Most of the shows convene about 100 good-looking young men who are talented in singing and dancing,

and finally select the Top 10 most loved by women to form a male idol group. The male talent show is full of female gaze. Whether the appearance, personality, or talents of male participants, will be discussed by women on the Internet. In order to cater to women, some male participants and the post-production of the show will consciously “sell homosexuality”, that is, intentionally create male couples in the program to attract female fans. Both the program production and the male participants are working hard to please the female audience in a male talent show.

Both as gender gaze, the biggest difference between female gaze and male gaze is that female gaze is not aggressive. Women’s criticism of men is usually more euphemistic and can easily be changed. Men are often stubborn and hard to change their stereotypes about women because their inherent superiority and pride make them hard to admit their mistakes and accept other’s opinions. Respondent Bai Bai (18)’s favorite male talent show includes a group of five obese boys. At first, the female audiences are very surprised, because they do not match the image of the traditional boy idol groups. After watching the great performance of the group, most people give them encouragement. However, in a popular female talent show a few years ago, a female participant whose appearance does not conform to the traditional male aesthetics, received a lot of appearance attacks and slanders from male audiences.

These phenomena reflect that the female gaze has formed and is of great significance in challenging the patriarchal culture and society. The otome game itself is a concentrated expression of women’s aesthetics towards men. The emergence of trendy words, such as “greasy” and “ordinary but confident”, has returned the previous criticisms of men against women to men. The popular male talent shows in recent years are evidence that men are pleasing women. The female gaze and its products challenge the traditional patriarchal culture and have attracted attention and discussion in society.

5.4 Limitations

In general, this research presents the various ways in which female players participate in the otome game *Mr. Love*, analyzes the perceptions of female players' gaming experience by comprising the game world and real world, and finally discovers the influence of patriarchal culture and female gaze on player's gaming experience. It is obvious that female gaze has gradually affected Chinese popular cultures, such as trendy words and male talent shows. This research makes some contributions to existing theories. First of all, it takes otome games, a game category that has not been fully studied, as the research object, and supplements the feminist perspective to the research on otome games. Secondly, the research focuses on female players, rather than female game characters, which are selected as research objects by most feminist game studies. Therefore, this research not only includes the researcher's perspective, but also provides the perspective of female players.

Although this research supplements theory about female gaze and otome game, it contains many limitations. Firstly, in the process of recruiting participants, the interviewees have the initiative, which means that the researcher cannot control the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the final interviewee group. The researcher has been in a passive position after posting recruitment information on social media platforms, waiting for respondents to voluntarily participate and leave contact information. It means that the personality and personal experience of the participants are random, so the researcher cannot control the commonality and differences of the research subjects.

Besides, the application of this research is limited. The background of this research is based on the Chinese otome game *Mr. Love*, so the results may not be applicable to otome games in other Eastern countries, especially Japanese otome games. Because *Mr. Love* is a native Chinese otome game, not a translation of Japanese otome game, it is quite different from Japanese otome game in the game plot and the gameplay. Additionally, due to large cultural differences, the theory of this study may not be applicable to otome games in Western countries.

5.5 Future research

The main direction of this research is to analyze the influence of female gaze and patriarchal culture on the female player's gaming experience from a feminist perspective. The theory of female gaze is often applied in studies on BL fictions and gay pornographic. It needs to be discussed in depth in the field of games. As this study applied female gaze to otome games, future research can apply female gaze to games that consider males as the targeting audiences, discussing the existence of female gaze, how it affects the player's gaming experience, and how it confronts male gaze.

Moreover, in addition to the main direction of this study, this research involves other topics worthy of studying. The research findings mention that playing *Mr. Love* reduces the willingness of female players to develop intimate relationships in reality. However, because the research sample is not representative, this topic deserves more in-depth discussion in the future. For example, as a love simulation game, whether the otome game can stimulate players to develop intimate relationships in real life. In addition, the significance of the otome game for some marginalized groups is beyond the researcher's expectation, which also arouses the researcher's curiosity. It is mentioned in the findings that *Mr. Love* helps people who are unable to develop intimate relationships in the real world experience the feeling of love in the game. Not only otome games, but all games of different genres and themes may be significant for certain marginalized groups. These topics are to be developed by future research.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Ice-breaking:

1. Introduce myself (name, major, university)
2. Introduce the purpose of this research and main topics of the interview

Background information:

Social demographic

1. Name
2. Gender
3. Age
4. Education level
5. Occupation

About game:

1. time spent (also frequency)
2. money spent
3. whether play other otome games

Topic 1 The game plot/narrative

1. How do you feel about the main storyline?
2. Where do you feel touched/satisfied/excellent? And why?
3. Where do you feel embarrassed/dissatisfied/uncomfortable? And why?
4. Are you interested in the dating plots in the game?
5. The linear narrative structure and the branching narrative structure, which one do you prefer?

Topic 2 The male characters

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1. Which one do you prefer? And why?
 2. What attracts you (appearance, personality, occupation)?
 3. Does he satisfy all your expectations of ideal boyfriend?
 4. What do you think make you have this aesthetic?
 5. Do you see similar male characters in other otome games? (How do you feel about them? Do you also like them? If not, why? What makes the male characters in Mr. Love distinguished from other similar characters in other otome games?)
 6. How much do you like the male characters?
 7. How do you feel the connection between you and them?
 8. Can you describe the male character you preferred?
 9. How do you think about the new male character Ling Xiao?
 10. Do you accept Ling Xiao? If yes, will you accept more new male characters in the future? And why?
 11. Do you like only one male characters in the game or more than one? (If you like more than one character, do you feel you are not loyal? How do you think about this situation? If this happens in the real life, how would you do?)

Topic 3 The female avatar

1. How do you feel the female avatar in Mr. Love?
2. Can you describe what kind of person she is?
3. Compared with other otome games, do you like the female avatar in Mr. Love? (Why?)
4. Do you think there is some similarities between you and the female avatar? (explain more)
5. Have you ever admired the female avatar? (in what circumstance)

-
6. Do you want to become a female like the avatar in Mr. Love? (Or other otome games)

Topic 4 The sense of companionship

1. Did you experience the companionship system? (How do you feel about it? Does it offer a sense of companionship?)
2. Where do you think makes you closer with male characters in the game?
3. Do you feel you are accompanied by the male characters in the game and out of the game?
4. Do you have built a connection between you and the male characters? If yes, how do you perceive this connection?

Topic 5 Recognition

1. Do you share your perception/experience in the game with others (who also play the game or someone does play it)?
2. Are you afraid of letting others know that you are playing otome games? Why?
3. Did you engage in consuming related fan fiction (including videos, photos, songs, novels)?
4. Did you create fan fiction?
5. Did you buy customizing accessories?
6. Did you join some related Wechat/QQ groups?

Topic 6 Concerns

1. Morality (Do you have the feeling of dating with many people at the same time when playing Mr. Love/other otome games? How would you perceive this, is it moral?)

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2. single rate (Does Mr. Love/other otome games stimulate you to begin a romantic relationship? Do you think otome game will increase/decrease single rate?)
 3. the pornographic content (Do you think the game graphics and some plots involve pornography? If yes, can you give some examples and how do you perceive them? If not, why some media outlets reported this concern?)

Appendix B: Examples of axial coding and selective coding

Core category	Category	subcategorie	Codes
Female gaze	The perception of men	The perception of male characters in the game	Intelligent, gentle, reliable
		The perception of men in reality	Dangerous, greasy, ordinary but confident
	Emotional immersion	Empathy	Ways of feeling empathy, degree of empathy
		Safety	Preference, occupation
		Companionship	Game derivatives, Weibo accounts of male characters
	Trendy words	Trendy words from male gaze	Stupid and sweet
		Trendy words from female gaze	Greasy, ordinary but confident
	The perception of the game plot	The main storyline	Grand, sad, not well connected
		The dating story	Sweet, daily, immersive
	The perception of the heroine	Positive	Kind, warm, brave, determined
		Negative	Weak, inability, stupid, impulsive
	The experience of supplementary gameplays	The calls and message system	Necessary, wonderful
		Right Beside You	Most immersive, companionship
		Home	Cumbersome, boring
	The perception of	Passive attitude	Unwilling, reluctant
		Brainless dating	Oppose, criticize

	love	Ideal intimate relationship	Equal, understand, respect, freedom
	Products of patriarchal culture	Standards of ideal partner	Daddy-like boyfriend, mature, decisive
		Gender stereotypes	Simple gameplay, low capacity
		The persona of heroine	Need to be protected
	Significance of otome games	Important for marginalized groups	Help them feel love
		Construct players' value and norms	
	Limitations of otome games	Simple relationships	Only the romance relationship is allowed
		Weakening the heroine	Deepen the gender stereotypes