Master Degree Project

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Female Characters' Images in Chinese Otome Game and Woman Stereotype

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Dongna Chen

Supervisor: Rebecca Rouse
Examiner: Per Backlund

Abstract

Otome game is a role-playing game targeted to female players, with immersive romance as the main game experience. Female players assume the role of a female character and engage in the romantic relationships with different outstanding male characters. However, these characters from different games share too many similarities, and they possess numerous "perfect" design details, such as slim bodies, beautiful appearance, wealthy family, low combat abilities, etc. These unrealistic character representations impact the player's experience, and most importantly, they create a stark contrast with the male character images, especially in terms of physique and social status. The purpose of this study is to analyse the similarities among female characters from 12 games in terms of appearance, profession, and characteristics. By combining player comments, the study aims to examine the influence of female stereotypes on these character images and their relationship with traditional gender norms.

Keywords: otome games, gender, women stereotypes, character design, user experience

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1 Introduction

In recent years, the significant growth in the number of female game players in China has brought about a noticeable shift in the gaming landscape. The China Gaming Industry Report (CGIGC, 2019) predicts that there are over 400 million active female players in China (The WeChat Agency, 2022). With an increasing recognition of the significant market potential of female gamers, game companies have begun redirecting their attention toward catering to the specific needs and preferences of this demographic. This shift in focus has led to the emergence of games specifically designed for female players, especially with otome games occupying a prominent position within this genre (Huan, 2022).

Otome games, originating in Japan, have gained immense popularity worldwide, including in China. These narrative-driven video games are targeted primarily at women and offer players the opportunity to engage in virtual romantic relationships with various characters within the game. Players assume the role of a female protagonist who navigates a complex web of romantic interactions, choices, and storylines. Otome games strive to create an immersive love experience, drawing players into captivating narratives and evoking a range of emotions throughout their gameplay (Kim, 2009). Otome games strive to create an immersive love experience for players and evoke emotional value in their gameplay (Zhang, 2022). With the growing popularity of otome games among young women, game companies have started incorporating more detailed design elements for female characters to enhance the gaming experience. For instance, the characters often have similar attractive appearances and high-paying jobs, with their primary struggle being the choice of an excellent male partner to date. These female characters are portrayed as well-educated office workers and "perfect" individuals, sharing nearly identical physical appearances, personalities, personal experiences, and professions. Similarly, some female characters are depicted as weak and powerless, relying on male characters to provide protection when faced with danger. All the disadvantages of female characters may highlight the important ability of male characters. These character portrayals may reflect and even reinforce existing societal stereotypes related to women, particularly influencing young female players.

To shed light on the connection between the portrayal of female characters in Chinese otome games and societal gender stereotypes, this study chooses 12 popular Chinese otome game as game samples, and aims to analyse the similarities among these characters in these games in terms of appearance, profession, and characteristics. Following by the collections of players' comments from the game platform of 6 game samples (modern setting background), the study will discuss the potential impact of character design from gender stereotypes and its connection with traditional gender paradigms. The research outcomes are supposed to provide design suggestions for female characters in otome games and address the underlying gender-related design issues in game development processes.

2 Background

2.1 Gender stereotypes

Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviours, and roles that varies between societies and over time. Gender is often categorized as male, female, or nonbinary (Oxford Reference, 2023). The term gender role refers to society's concept of how people are expected to look and behave based on societally created norms for masculinity and femininity (Lumen learning, 2023). Gender roles are a set of behaviour patterns, attitudes, and personality characteristics stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine within a culture (Oxford Reference, 2023), which carry out gender stereotyping.

Gender stereotyping refers to the prevailing beliefs regarding the distinct attributes or characteristics ascribed to men and women, as well as the prescribed societal roles they should fulfil. For instance, it is commonly held that women should exhibit warmth and nurturing qualities, while men are expected to possess strength and assertiveness (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). These stereotypes are closely tied to traditional social roles and the pervasive power imbalances between genders (Wu, 2021; Zhang, 2020). Gender stereotypes may encompass both positive and negative traits, but they can curtail the ability of individuals, irrespective of their gender, to explore their personal aptitudes and pursue their aspirations (OHCHR, 2014).

2.1.1 Female appearance and social trends

Social specifications of female external beauty arise from the combined social and cultural, male aesthetic, and media shaping of the image of the perfect woman. Aesthetic standards of femininity changed according to different historical periods in China: the female pregnant body image in the tribal period, the Tang dynasty with its preference for plump women as beautiful, the Song dynasty with its preference for petite and soft women, etc. (Sun, 2010).

In traditional Chinese societies, women were often celebrated for their feminine and delicate beauty, which was commonly manifested through features like small faces, slender eyes, dainty mouths, and tiny feet. To accentuate their gentle and fragile beauty, women would employ various practices, such as breast binding and foot binding, to alter their physical appearance (Sun, 2010; Sun, 2021). With the rise of modern women's consciousness, there has been a shift towards embracing individuality and diversity in fashion choices. Women now prioritize the well-being of their natural bodies and exhibit the courage to proudly showcase them. Aesthetic sensibilities in society have become more varied, placing greater emphasis on health and self-awareness in terms of clothing and body shape. As a result, women have grown more independent and confident in their personal style and appearance (Sun, 2021).

In a modern society that promotes equality between men and women, men cannot force women to accept their own aesthetic preferences, but this power is still hidden in the consumer system and mass media, allowing women to control their own image according to this standard of 'perfection'. In the study of "slim body" popular culture by Xu and Qian (2002), it mentioned that the pursuit of a slim, thin appearance is the dominant norm in modern society that shapes women's external beauty, and this has led to many social topics related to body slenderness testing standards, such as the 'A4 waist' (i.e., the width of the waist is equal to A4 paper) and the "backhanded touching belly button". This social form of

manipulation of the female body is the most demanding, has been popular for a long time, covers a wide range of people and has become fashionable for most people. In the research of TV programs and popular culture by Tao (2012), the promotion of the image of women recent decade with small faces, long legs and slim waists has led to the fact that only slim women are considered beautiful and that voluptuous women are even discriminated against by society. This social behaviour and mindset are imposed on every woman as an individual through an invisible coercive force. This is why weight loss and sobriety has become a constant topic for modern Chinese women (Tao, 2012).

In Sun's (2021) examination of women's fashion and body shame, she outlines the distinctions between traditional and modern Chinese female aesthetics. In traditional societies, female appearance was expected to align with male aesthetics, emphasizing traits such as softness and slimness as primary aesthetic representations. In contemporary society, women's increased awareness has granted them greater agency in defining their own aesthetic standards, reducing their reliance on male-imposed ideals. However, women are not entirely liberated from the influence of traditional moral and aesthetic norms, and they continue to experience body shame when it comes to donning revealing and provocative fashionable attire (Sun, 2021).

2.1.2 Benevolent sexism

Benevolent sexism refers to subjectively attitudes about women that seem positive in tone, but restrict them to traditional gender roles and nonetheless connote inferiority to men based on fragility, lack of competence, or need of help and protection (Fiske and North, 2015). Benevolent sexism is often expressed through the goal of supporting women at work, often under the pretence of providing them with help, protection, compliments, and affection, such as Wives, mothers, lovers, daughters, etc., who need to be protected, who have good moral character and who are entrusted with romantic feelings (Sattari et al., 2022). Benevolent sexism can be harmful for both women and social activism. It reinforces gender stereotypes and inequality, and can lead to women relying on men physically, mentally, and emotionally, which can also discourage women from challenging gender norms and stereotypes (Barreto and Doyle, 2023).

2.2 Chinese Otome games

Female-oriented games are games developed, designed, and operated with female players as the main target group, and also called the cultural consumption that uses women as target group (Han and Wang, 2020). Female-oriented games have 3 main categories: BL (boys love) game, otome game, and simulation games. BL games are the games with boys' love narration, in which players can play as one of the main characters or as a third-person to enjoy the story. Otome game are the games with girl's dating system, in which player will act as the female character to achieve the goal of dating with one of the male characters. Simulation games are including growing with the characters to get the achievement, dressing up, designing something, simulating the career of the characters, or keeping a pet. Compare with the other two genres, otome games place more attention on romance and character interaction between men and women, such as dating, gift-giving, etc. (Han and Wang, 2020).

In the very early otome game designs, the female characters mainly aimed to develop a romantic experience with male characters or get supports from them in order to achieve the game's ending (Ruby Party, 1994). The design of female characters tended the traditional

image of the dependent, kind, gentle and beautiful girl. The female characters always needed help from the males in the game to achieve their goals. Since more and more local independent otome games came out in China, game designers tried to add more mechanics in the gameplay. The goals for players start to be both "career" and "love" but not only on romantic relationships (Alfa games, 2015; Orange light game, 2016). Some games added female characters into the dating choices of love relationships (Funtoy Games, 2015). The character design became blurred and even can be changed depending on the player's choices (Alfa games, 2015; Orange light game, 2016).

As the decision of female consciousness increased the sense of independence and self-drive for women characters in games, it has brought out many assertive, financially independent, and confident female characters in games (Paper Games, 2017; Mihoyo, 2020; NetEase, 2020). This kind of otome games started to emerge in the Chinese gaming market mainly from 2017 (Paper Games, 2017). The popular otome games are no longer indie games; they have much longer narrative chains and interaction system for multi-players with long-term maintaining. Detailed character designs have replaced the character with vague background for the long run and a more realistic gameplay experience for players (Paper Games, 2017; Funtoy Games, 2015; NetEase, 2020).

There are some Chinese otome games related researches focusing on the analysis with the analysis of Chinese feminism. Zhang (2022) chose the game YunShangYuYi, which is a dress-up 3D otome game in China, as a case to analyse the perspective of feminism in China. She concluded that otome games in China build a platform that shows the unique values and ideas of women but the content and design of the game were limited on the gender stereotypes (Zhang, 2022).

Similarly, Huan (2022) analysed 3 female characters from 3 Chinese otome games, which are *Evol x Love* (2017), *Tears of Themis* (2020), and *Light and Night* (2021). The research found that female representation in Chinese otome games has improved a lot, including work fields, academic, and independence. However, the overall styles of girls are still tending to be sweet and innocent, which are the labels of woman from the traditional society. Also, the characters are created by labels (Huan, 2022).

To investigate the Chinese woman gaming experience in the Chinese digital market, Liu and Lai (2022) invited 31 Chinese women aged 18-36 to participate a qualitative interview of two games - *King of Glory* and *Evol x Love*. The results showed that Chinese women gamers found themselves being integrated in to the gamified ideals of patriarchal order and standard. Liu and Lai (2022) analysed that this trend is related to the feminist movement in the country, and the game design skills and experiences from Japan and Korean by the Chinese game companies.

2.3 Female images in Chinese games

In the research of Jansz and Martis (2007), they found that more and more female characters in a dominant position in video games and ascertained the existence of “Lara phenomenon”, which is the appearance of a tough, and competent female character named from a video game *Tomb Raider*. Since 44.2% of gamers in China are women (MobData, 2018), some researchers have carried out related studies about female gamers, game gernes, and gaming experience. “Lara phenomenon” also appeared in China with the arise of feminism, but in a different way. It could be argued that the extensive use of female

characters in video games is not equal to the improvement of women's social status, but the reflection of the gender discrimination against women formed under the patriarchal society, commercial environment, and the male desire world by the commodities designed and marketed by men (Wu and Fan, 2006). Sun (2018) analysed the female characters in Chinese video games since 1990s and concluded that 3 types of female stereotypes have been formed by game industry, which are:

1. Before 2010s: Silent NPC following Chinese traditional expectation on girls in male-dominated (or male heroes world) video game culture.
2. Mainly 2012-2016: the prosumer of boy's love culture, influenced by Japanese comics and Korean dramas.
3. Since 2018: The technological consumers in otome games.

Sun (2018) also mentioned that the great success of otome game tailored for girls has short lifespan but are costing female players themselves economically and emotionally, which can be a kind of trap of male-dominated gender discourse in game industry. In the analysis of Chinese popular otome games by Huan (2022), she found that the female image in the games started to be independent and confident compared with the games before.

According to Li (2021), the increasing presence of female players and game developers has spurred a shift in the portrayal of female characters, moving away from sexualized depictions within games. In the previous decade, female characters were frequently relegated to subordinate roles, serving as mere sidekicks, bonus items, or antagonistic figures embodying evil. As the community of female gamers grew more vocal in their rejection of these monstrous portrayals, the gaming industry began to witness the emergence of independent and powerful female characters. Consequently, a substantial influx of female-oriented games and protagonists with a female perspective entered the gaming realm. However, despite these superficial acknowledgements of women's place within the gaming world, the core values at the heart of these games remain entrenched in traditional masculinity. It is important to note that even female-oriented games are not exempt from perpetuating gender stereotypes (Li, 2021).

2.4 Young ladies' image in Chinese digital media

The image of women refers to the spiritual or visual representation of women, presented or reproduced by mass media, which is a symbolic image of women constructed by digital media (Wang, 2018). With the changing status of women and the shifting topics of feminism, the image of women in digital media is constantly changing, which reflects the development and needs of the society (Wu, 2021). The media content of women reflects the views, positions, and ideologies of the creators and represents the dominant image of women promoted by the medium at a particular time, but is not a true representation of women in reality (Wang, 2018).

In Chinese digital media, female images are mainly divided to four categories: married women, mothers, young ladies (in chick flick shows), and leaders (in female-dominated shows) (Zhu, 2022). Since the female characters in otome games are belongs to "chick flick" with some elements of women leaders, the following reference will focus on their images in Chinese digital media.

2.4.1 Television drama and Movies

With economic development and urban modernisation, “chick flick” have raised in the urban drama genre. These films are fashionable, with the theme of urban romance and usually start with a story of an unlucky lady, through her self-confidence and reliance, wins the appreciation and heart of a man and leads to a happy ending (Zhu, 2022). In Chinese “chick flick” films and drama, female characters are designed as “silly” or “strong”, which can be interpreted as a rebellious image of traditional “perfect girl” (Zhang, 2020).

Li (2021) researched the female images in Chinese TV drama from 2009-2018, identifying three key issues: body images, repetitions, and professions. Young women in the dramas were typically portrayed as beautiful and energetic, with a strong focus on their appearance. Conversely, older women received limited attention, primarily in relation to their familial roles. The research found that female characters in the dramas exhibited repetitive and idealized traits, lacking individuality and realism. Their positive traits and behaviours followed predictable patterns, failing to reflect the complexity of human personalities. Li (2021) recommended the inclusion of more distinct and varied characteristics for female characters to avoid this homogeneity. Regarding professions, female characters were predominantly depicted in traditionally feminine roles such as housewives, teachers, and nurses. On the other hand, professions like designers, technicians, and government officers were underrepresented. The study emphasized the need for a broader range of occupational roles, acknowledging the diverse roles women hold in society. Additionally, Li (2021) suggested featuring women of different age groups in TV dramas instead of solely focusing on young characters. This would promote greater diversity and representation, capturing the various stages of women's lives.

In the female image analysis of Zhu (2022), he mentioned that as “independent women” became a tag and the social requirement which internalised by women as a self-imposed demand in China, many similar female-dominated film and TV would push women into demanding rules about how to get ahead in society, how to improve themselves, and how to live. Although this unreasonably high requirements do not seem to be imposed on women by men, however, it is still an “oppression” essentially, which is deeper, more insidious, and harder to resist (Zhu, 2022).

2.4.2 Romance novels

Jinjiang Original Literature Website (Jinjiang) is one of the most influential female-oriented original literature platforms in China, holding the rights to over 70% of the simplified romance novels publishing market and 91% of the online female reading user market (Song and Zhang, 2020). Among the readers of Jinjiang's website, 84% of the readers are women aged 18-35 (Song and Zhang, 2020). Many researches would select works from Jinjiang for analysis when they are studying 'female-oriented' online novels (Wu, 2021;).

Wu (2021) argues that the popularity of female-oriented online novels is a symbol of the rise of contemporary female consciousness, with works written in a female discourse. Selecting the characterisation and content analysis of popular romance novels in Jinjiang, she pointed out that the female characters in the novels are trapped in a monolithic image for reasons including the influence of traditional gender concepts and the guidance of the commercial market. The over-protection of female characters by men, the degradation of women (e.g., vicious supporting actresses), and the "Cinderella" who changes her social status through

marriage are all examples of the self-objectification of female characters and their subordination to men (Wu, 2021).

Wei (2021) analysed the value of female-oriented online novels from a textual perspective. She mentioned that most romance novels started to focus on reality after the orgy of deviance styles, and their authors started to use a more prosaic and detailed narrative to depict women's love experience and pay more attention to women's spiritual values and social life. In romance novels set in the modern urban background, the female characters are essentially growing up from a difficult existence, eventually breaking the male monopoly on power and overtaking them. Wei (2021) agreed that this narrative style matched the social plight of women in reality.

2.4.3 Conclusion

From the previous research in Chinese digital media, women's image has gradually moved from traditional women to urban ladies. The traditional women image can be summarized as a weak and gentle woman highly dependent on male power (Wu, 2021). For example, a woman character who is dependent on marriage to change her status, is trapped in trouble that can only solved by male help, is subservient to male power, has family or love as all the focus of their lives, or has a beautiful and pitiful appearance, which can be concluded as a type of representation of women and woman stereotype in traditional society (Wu and Fan, 2006; Wu, 2021). The image of urban woman can be concluded as a woman who has grown up in a tough, male-dominated environment through self-confidence and demanding self-reliance (Huan, 2022; Zhang, 2020). Different from the pale image of the traditional one, urban women image is more diverse and contradictory. On the one hand, they are confident and strong, financially independent, have their own hobbies and careers, and have demanding rules for their lives (Zhang, 2022). On the other hand, their excellence and dependence are both conditions to win the appreciation of men, leading to the traditional happy ending (Zhu, 2022). The discussion of female images and stereotypes in games in this research focuses on these two directions.

2.5 Content analysis in video games

Content analysis is a methodical approach used to analyse the substance and significance of communicative messages, encompassing various forms such as text, images, audio, or video. It can be executed through quantitative or qualitative means, entailing a systematic examination or observation of texts or artifacts that are assigned labels or codes to identify noteworthy and meaningful content elements. Within the research domain of video games, content analysis has been employed to investigate established and emerging constructs frequently associated with this medium (Wulf et al., 2022).

In the general research of content analysis in video games of Wulf et.al (2022), they concluded that content analysis of games has mostly focused on content that might have a negative influence on players, including violence, stereotypical depictions of female characters, and ethnic minorities. Content analysis of gender stereotypes has consistently revealed inadequate depictions and stereotypes of female characters, such as sexual level (Downs and Smith, 2010), stereotypes (Jansz and Martis, 2007), and position (Ivory, 2006).

To discuss the representation of gender characters in video games, Ivory (2006) chose a sample of 100 quality game reviews (1-3 pages) from games on 6 different platforms were

extracted and analysed the keywords related to the gender differences of the character (e.g., sexy, beautiful). He got the result that the players' discussion about male characters (75%) were way more than female characters (42%) and female characters were more likely to be sexualised in games.

Downs and Smith (2010) chose 60 top-rated games for Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft Xbox to analyse the overt sexuality variables and gender stereotype in games by study the game segment and the game character design. They designed the scale to code a number of variables including sexually revealing clothing, species, apparent race, body proportion, sexual behaviour, etc, and got their results by Chi-square analyses (Downs and Smith, 2010).

In the study of powerful female characters in video games, Jansz and Martis (2007) selected 12 video games as research sample and analyse the character content of gender and race. The characteristics of the game characters were coded into the codebook, which consisted of gender, race, role or position, and appearance (e.g., attire, body, build). Following the statical analysis, the results show that female characters are competent and occupy a powerful position in the video game, which is also called "Lara Phenomenon".

2.6 Related platform and application

In the following research content, some of the analytical data and user information will be obtained from a number of Chinese software and player platforms. This section provides a brief introduction to these platforms and applications.

Taptap

Taptap (2017) is a prominent mobile game platform based in China. It serves as a hub for gamers to discover, download, and interact with a wide variety of mobile games. The platform offers a diverse range of games, including both domestic and international titles. Taptap distinguishes itself by allowing users to access games that might not be available on mainstream app stores due to regional restrictions or content regulations. In addition to game downloads, Taptap features a social networking aspect where users can connect with fellow gamers, share game-related content, participate in discussions, and even form communities around specific games or interests. This social interaction enhances the overall gaming experience and cultivates a sense of community among players. Moreover, Taptap provides a platform for user-generated content, enabling players to publish and distribute their own game mods, patches, and other modifications. This fosters creativity and innovation within the gaming community, allowing players to customize their gaming experiences and share their creations with others.

Bilibili

Bilibili (2009) is a Chinese online entertainment platform that is particularly popular among the younger generation. It is known for its focus on animated show, comics, and gaming content. In terms of gaming, Bilibili has a dedicated gaming section that provides a platform for gamers to discover and engage with a wide range of gaming-related content. This includes gameplay videos, live streaming of gaming sessions, game reviews and analysis, as well as discussions and community interactions. Bilibili has also ventured into the gaming industry by publishing and distributing its own games. Moreover, it also hosts gaming tournaments and events, both online and offline, attracting competitive gamers and

fostering a sense of community among gaming enthusiasts. They have also expanded their presence internationally by partnering with international game developers (e.g., Riot Games) and hosting global esports events (e.g., League of Legends).

3 Problem

The game genre of otome game is role playing, in which the player takes on the role of a female character and interacts with different NPCs (i.e., non-player character) to push the plot of the game. Though the identity of NPCs is the driving force behind the choices players make in the game, the mechanics of this type of game is limited by specific narration. How the female characters behave and react in the plot would affects the player's experience in the game strongly. During the game narrative of the currently popular otome games, the female characters are always "perfect" girls: they are gentle and patient, warm and sweet, capable, social popular, and never complain or get upset about their work or life (Aurora Studios, 2021). In contrast, the male characters may have many flaws, such as being grumpy or rude, bad at school, cold, impatient, etc. (Aurora Studios, 2021; Alfa games, 2015).

As Otome games are supposed to bring immersive love experience to players, players would like to invest their real emotions in the game and take pleasure from interacting with other characters. Game companies are supposed to design a female character close to the reality life. However, many players complain about the "perfect image" of the female character or have self-doubt from their gaming experiences, which can be found in some Chinese game forums and comments. These two comments were collected and translated in game video comment areas in Bilibili (2009):

> For me, the female character is actually a very crucial point, to make the player feel a sense of immersion and not feel disgusted. The first thing is that she has to be a normal person and have a normal reaction to things that a normal person should have.
>
> Jiazhengfuwuxiaolin (2022)

> The reason I don't like it is that all the character designs feel so far away from me, they're just too good and perfect ... I just feel fake and not immersive, and it's not a matter of low self-esteem. It made me feel like the players weren't playing a game, but making gods.
>
> Xinshijijiaolvzhanshi (2022)

It seems that the game development teams put different positive tags in the female image in order to create a perfect character that is acceptable to most female players. However, these characters from different games all share the similar characteristics, which leads to the confusion of "the only one way of perfect girl". When character design tends towards perfectionism and similarity, the labels of these characters can easily become a socially oriented aesthetic for women in terms of appearance, origin, educational background, personality, etc.

These arguments from the labels of otome game character design bring the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the similar settings in female character design in the otome game?

RQ2. What is the effect of character design from gender stereotype?

RQ3. What is the relation between female character and traditional gender paradigms?

4 Method

Video games are multi-layered products that offer a huge range of content and they take a trained gamer more than 20 hours to go through a contemporary video game (Jansz and Martis, 2007). In order to provide a deep immersive romance experience, otome games require a long gaming time or a lot money in a short time to unlock the appropriate storyline. To analyse the content of several games, researchers have to be selective on the number of games, and taking a sample from existing video games on the market is a convenient way to reduce the complexity of analysis (Ivory, 2006; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010; Huan, 2022). Most previous researchers have used the popularity of the game as a standard for selection, drawing their research game samples from the top-ranked games on the sales charts (Jansz and Martis, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010), and this method will also be used in the game samples selection in this research. This research will use the official initial setting and player videos as sources to support the characters analysis procedure.

4.1 Game samples

Given the diverse array of themes found within the background settings of otome games, such as ancient China, magical realm, urban cities, ancient Europe, and fantastical realms, this study will focus solely on the portrayal of characters in otome games set in ancient and modern China. This approach will enable a comparative analysis of game characters against realistic depictions.

The Chinese gaming market is predominantly dominated by mobile games, accounting for over 70% of the market share (CGIGC, 2019). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that a significant portion of otome games is released on mobile platforms. Taptap (2017) stands as one of China's most renowned mobile gaming communities, where each game garners reviews, guides, votes from players, as well as reviews and recommendations from professional gamers.

The processing of selecting otome games sample was informed by the top female-oriented games on Taptap and there are **12 most popular Chinese multiple-player otome games** (2017-2022) as an example (Table 1). The game with “translation name” tag is the one without official English name.

Title	World setting	Publisher	Release Year	Download times
Evol x Love	Modern	Paper Games	2017	2.3 million
Light and night	Modern	Tencent	2021	1.8 million
Tears of Themis	Modern	Mihoyo	2020	2.2 million
For all time	Modern, Time travel	NetEase	2020	1.8 million
The fairy Chronicles (translation name)	Modern, Magic	Icesimba	2021	0.5 million
Dreamscape Albireo	Modern	Perfect World	2020	/
Busy Master	Ancient	Sincetimes	2020	0.6 million
Dream of Floating Light	Ancient	ReveAVG	2020	/

The legend of the Spirit Cat (translation name)	Ancient	Dreamart	2021	0.5 million
Encountering Justice (translation name)	Ancient	NetEase	2019	0.7 million
The throne of girl	Ancient	Rastar	2021	0.5 million
A tour of the half world	Ancient, Magic	Joymore	2018	0.2 million

Table 1 Chinese multiple-player otome game sample (2017-2022)

As previously mentioned, the analysis of female characters in otome games requires a substantial investment of time and resources. To gather the necessary material for this analysis, walk-through videos of the games will be observed and recorded. These videos are publicly available on the Bilibili (2009) website, and they provide valuable insights into the gameplay and character interactions (refer to Appendix A). It is important to note that due to the inherent constraints on women's behavior and social status in the context of historical and social attitudes within ancient world settings, this research will focus exclusively on six game samples set in modern world for the content analysis in the following sections.

Generally, the sample of games selected for the ensuing analysis is listed in the table below:

World background/ Analysis variables	Appearance	Profession	Characteristics
Ancient world (6 games)	Yes	No	No
Modern world (6 games)	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2 Game samples selection in variable analysis

4.2 Analysis variables

In previous game content analysis studies, game characters had been quantified into different variables for analysis: Jansz and Martis (2007) quantified the game characters into gender, race, role, and appearance; Downs and Smith (2010) used clothing, species, apparent race, body proportion, sexual behaviour, etc, to analyse the game characters. The variables for quantifying characters in this study will be set according to the needs of research questions.

Alongside it, to try to answer the research questions, five questions were posed as an analysis basis which are following:

1. What are physical characteristics of female characters?
2. Are there any similarities in the specific individual features? (e.g., hair and eyes)
3. Do the female characters cover a wide range of professions?
4. Are there any similarities of setting or background of the characters?
5. Do the character's personalities and appearances fit the stereotypical expectations?

In order to answer these questions, this section will analysis the characters on 12 Chinese otome games and fulfil the following two objectives:

1. Compare the appearance and profession and figure the similarity or difference between different characters.
2. Analysis the content of specific games and the characteristics of female characters.

Therefore, the variables of the character analysis are mainly appearance, profession, and characteristics, following the walk-through videos of the game content.

4.2.1 Appearance

The preceding content analysis of game characters examined various aspects, including their race, combat abilities (muscular or not, strong or weak), and overall appearance. Considering that the game samples are set in China, both in ancient and modern contexts, it becomes apparent that all female characters depicted are young Chinese girls, primarily characterized by their limited combat abilities, as otome games typically lack battle or violent gameplay. Regarding appearance variables, the analysis primarily concentrated on individual design details that set each character apart from others. The variables for appearance analysis were: Attire (sexy, ordinary), Body (heavy, normal, thin), Breasts (large, normal), Hair length (long, short), Hair colour, Eye colour.

As many female-oriented games have in-game dressing gameplay, to keep the variables stable, only the official character poster and design values were used for the analysis (figure 1).

Figure 1 The sample of the female character setting poster from *For all time* (2020).

4.2.2 Profession

The traditional stereotype is that women are more emotional than men and they are better suited to careers in arts, education, media, or humanities, while the fields requiring more

rational and logical thinking such as engineering, science, or medicine, have more expectation on men than women (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). The most typical example of this is the saying that “girls are not good at math”, which has been proven wrong in past studies (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). To meet the needs of female players for different dating professions, the male characters in otome games cover a wide range of professions, such as entrepreneur, singer, designer, policeman, racing driver, science professor, prince, etc., and even non-humans (cats who can transform). Apart from the needs of the plot, the professional identity of female characters is an important label for their characterisation.

The following analysis aims to classify the occupations of female characters within the urban-themed game samples into four distinct categories: arts, humanities, science and engineering, and business. For instance, legal professionals are classified under the humanities category, while medical practitioners fall under the science category. In cases where certain occupations do not align with any of these four predefined categories, their classification will be determined by the educational background requirements typically associated with students pursuing a major in that specific profession. For instance, if the character serves as a police officer, it will be categorized under the science and engineering domain, as most police academies prefer applicants with a science background.

Apart from examining the characters' professional roles, games that highlight or significantly lack the characters' performance in the workplace will be chosen for analysis of their professional conduct. The narrative content of these games will be utilized to explore various aspects, such as how the characters navigate challenges in the workplace and how they interact with colleagues and superiors. This analysis aims to shed light on the characters' professional behaviour and their portrayal within the game's storyline.

4.2.3 Characteristics

Due to time limitations, the character analysis in this study primarily focused on the game samples set in modern backgrounds from a total of twelve otome games. The primary source for analysis was the official setting information, as shown in Figure 1. Additionally, the study examined the construction of the game characters' personalities based on factors such as game content, story context, and their interactions with other characters within the game.

The analysis of the character's personality encompasses three main perspectives. Firstly, thorough consideration is given to the fundamental aspects of the game, including the assigned tasks and contextual background of the female character, while also evaluating whether she is depicted as passive or active within the game's narrative. Secondly, a meticulous analysis is conducted on the character's dialogue and expressions, with particular emphasis on the tone, diction, and attitude exhibited by the female character during interactions with others or acquaintances. Lastly, a comprehensive exploration of the romantic relationship between the female character and male counterparts is undertaken, encompassing their compatibility, attitudes, and emotional interactions. Notably, certain games feature female characters with distinct personality traits that are contingent upon the chosen romantic partner, and this discussion illuminates the primary manifestations of personality within these relationships.

4.3 Players' comments

According to Li's (2021) study, involving female gamers can help decrease gender stereotypes within the gaming industry. Player feedback on characters serves as a valuable resource for game development. In addition to an analysis of the game's content, this article supplemented players' opinions on the character setting with a selection of the most popular comments of female characters from Taptap (2017), from which it shares the expectation of players from female characters and the game design (figure 2).

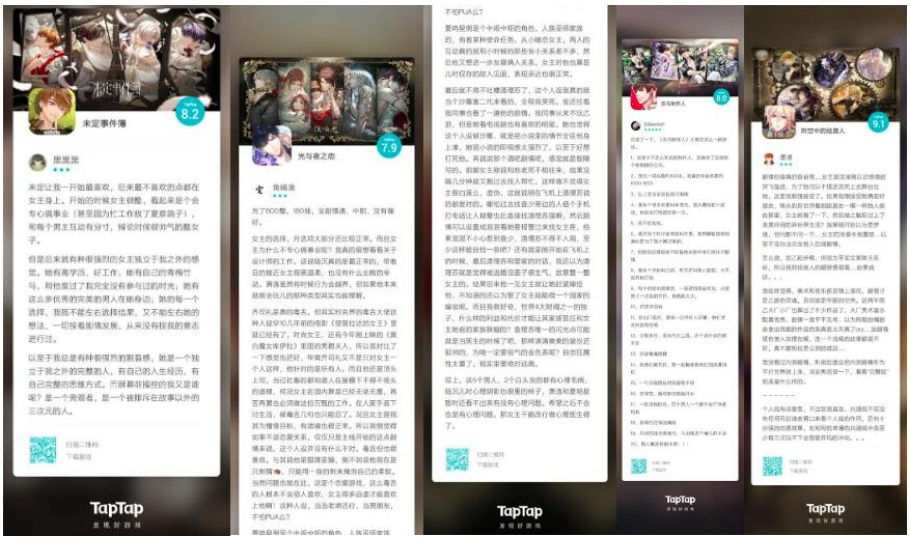

Figure 2 4 examples of player's comment in Taptap (2017).

4.4 Ethical considerations

This research project aimed to analyse female character design in video games and examine the relation of women stereotypes and character images. The following ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process:

Informed Consent

This study did not involve direct participation of human subjects. The analysis was based solely on publicly available content in the form of published video games and open sources in public players' platform. As such, there was no requirement for obtaining informed consent from human participants. The analysis focused on the artistic and narrative elements of the otome game samples rather than personal experiences or sensitive information of individuals.

Representation and Stereotyping

Acknowledging the potential impact of perpetuating harmful stereotypes or misrepresenting women in video games, a balanced and critical approach was adopted in the analysis, and also implemented in the discussion. The evaluation of female character design was guided by a set of criteria developed through a comprehensive literature review on gender representation in games. To figure out the image design of female characters in otome games, emphasis was placed on identifying both positive and negative portrayals, and efforts were made to avoid reinforcing stereotypes though female character design in video game industry.

Research Bias

As this research project is of a personal nature, it is susceptible to personal biases in the analysis. To mitigate such biases and ensure an objective analysis, the researcher has taken into consideration the comments and opinions of a wide range of players on forums, video sites, and player communities pertaining to the subject of the study—the portrayal of female characters in otome games. The direction of the character design assessment and analysis in the research process was established based on established methodologies and common characteristics found in studies related to the analysis of video game character content.

Given that this study solely focused on Chinese otome games to examine the relationship between female characters and stereotypes within this specific genre, a predominantly Chinese social context was adopted when reviewing the research subjects. In defining gender and addressing objectively existing gender stereotypes, the researcher draws upon the results and perspectives of studies and scholars from various media fields to substantiate this study. Throughout the analysis and discussion of the findings, the researcher relies on objective facts pertaining to game design and industry phenomena, while referencing studies and evaluations of female media images across diverse fields to circumvent any potential biases that may have arisen during the research process.

Potential Impact and Implications

The findings of this study hold the potential to make valuable contributions to the female-oriented games industry by enhancing the design of female character portrayals in video games and mitigating the impact of female stereotypes on character representation. Through an examination of the depiction of female characters, this study offers insights into both negative and positive instances of game character design, suggesting areas for improvement and providing recommendations for game development that foster a more diverse portrayal of women in the gaming industry while catering to the needs of female players. Enhancements in character design within this domain can also positively influence young individuals' perceptions of gender. However, it is important to acknowledge that altering character design alone may not adequately address the multifaceted nature of female stereotypes in games, necessitating broader discussions and concerted action within the industry.

5 Result and Analysis

5.1 Character appearance

To analyse the appearance of female characters, This section explores the intricacies of head features, body features, and dressing, analysing their portrayal to uncover commonalities, potential biases, and the underlying gender dynamics prevalent in otome game character design, aiming to address the research questions surrounding the similarities in their designs, the influence of character design on gender stereotypes, and the relationship between female characters and traditional gender paradigms.

5.1.1 Head feature

As not all games provide clear images of the characters' settings, no official information on the appearance of female characters will be taken from their first appearance in the game scenes (figure 3).

Figure 3 Appearance (Facial features) of female characters in 12 game samples: screen shots or official posters.

Regarding the head features of the characters (as depicted in figure 3), it is evident that all female characters possess small faces, small mouths, fair skin, and thick hair. These characteristics align with traditional ideals of female attractiveness, which emphasize softness and conform to male expectations (Sun, 2021). Additionally, the presence of bangs, large eyes, and a pointed chin, commonly found among the female characters, would be the influence of Japanese anime culture or the appearance from the west (Liu and Lai, 2022). These features are associated with a youthful and cute aesthetic, evoking a sense of innocence and non-aggression, in line with the popular expectation of a sweet and charming girl (Sun, 2021).

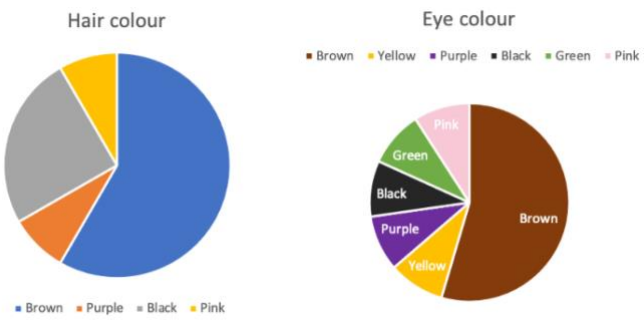

Figure 4 The pie charts of hair colour and eye colour for 12 characters.

In addition, the female characters in terms of their pupil and hair colours primarily exhibit shades of brown and black (figure 4). These colours are natural and conservative, aligning with societal norms for women. However, it is worth noting that this differs from the general character design in games, where male characters often feature a wider range of hair colours to show their personality, including unconventional ones, even in settings depicting ancient times (figure 5).

Figure 5 Head feature comparation: male characters' design in 8 game samples

5.1.2 Body feature

Female characters are usually visually more revealing than men in previous researches of popular video games, as well as dressing in a more sexually suggestive manner (Ivory, 2006; Downs and Smith, 2010). On the contrary, the otome games have few particularly sexy or revealing clothes or body parts in their designs regarding the appearance of female characters (Figure 6). These are very different from the portrayal of women in other games with more male players.

Figure 6 Female characters' image of 6 modern otome game sample. From left to right: Evol x Love (2017), Dreamscape Albireo (2018), Tears of Themis (2020), Light and Night (2021), For all time (2020), and The fairy Chronicles (2021).

The majority of female characters in the game exhibit specific physical attributes such as small faces, long legs, and slender waists, conforming to societal ideals of an idealized body image (Tao, 2012). However, some of them still mentioned that they want to lose weight in the games (e.g., the female character in Tears of Themis (2020) mentioned about weight losing plan when visiting a restaurant in chapter 1). Additionally, within the game's visual presentation, these characters are often depicted wearing revealing or form-fitting attire, accentuating their slim figures and intended to elicit praise and admiration from players.

5.1.3 Dressing

Due to the primary allocation of art resources in the game, female characters are depicted wearing relatively fixed costumes, which may occasionally vary in special scenes or on the card screen. In the context of the ancient world, these female characters are bound by the constraints of the setting, typically portrayed in light-coloured dresses adorned with different styles of decoration. Such attire reflects the customary dress code for young women during ancient times (Sun, 2010). However, in contemporary settings characterized by more relaxed dress codes, female characters exhibit a lack of clothing variety. In the sample of the 6 modern background otome games examined, female characters are initially depicted wearing a combination of a shirt, skirt, and high heels (Figure 6). Throughout the games, with few exceptions, the majority of female characters continue to be portrayed in this attire, consisting of skirts and high heels (Figure 7), even in potentially hazardous scenarios. Furthermore, the described dress code for female characters also influences the development of romantic relationships in certain subsequent episodes, where they often find themselves in need of rescue by male characters due to circumstances such as unsteadiness or inability to avoid danger.

Figure 7 Dressing design example: main female character's dressing setting in Light and Night (2021)

In the plot of Evol x Love (2017), the instances in which a female character wears pants are limited, and they primarily occur when she requires covert access to certain institutions or organizations, necessitating the adoption of a uniform or disguise. The prevalent depiction of skirts and high heels underscores notions of femininity while reinforcing gender stereotypes and societal expectations regarding female attire. This imagery further perpetuates the perception of women as gentle, non-aggressive, and reliant on protection (Sun, 2021).

5.1.4 Conclusion

Overall, there are notable similarities in the portrayal of female characters across the various games in terms of their facial features, body types, and attire, indicating a high degree of resemblance. These characters exhibit a delicate and slender appearance that aligns with the contemporary media's promotion of beauty ideals for young women. Additionally, their

depiction is influenced by anime popular culture and the expectations of traditional female aesthetics, which is a kind of beauty imposed on women by men.

5.2 Profession analysis

As previously mentioned, the career analysis section focuses on six games set in modern background. It should be noted that some characters in these games may possess special positions and superpowers due to time travel or specific world settings. Therefore, the discussion here of female characters' occupations is limited to those in a normal, everyday world context.

	Arts	Humanity	Science and engineering	Business
Number of games	2	1	0	3
Job details	Artist (student), fashion designer	Lawyer	/	Producer, Café owner, bookstore employee

Table 3 Profession of 6 female characters in game samples (6 games with modern urban background)

It is evident that the job tags of female characters in the game predominantly revolve around the arts and business domains. Notably, even within the business category, the female characters assume the role of family business or shop owner rather than being positioned in financial industry, and also one of them has an arts-related career (movie/TV show producer). Conversely, none of them have science and engineering-related professions. The pattern of career choices for female characters in earlier otome games or non-romance games targeting a female audience closely aligns with the findings of this analysis. These female characters could be portrayed as actresses but not engineers. These occupational choices in games perpetuate the traditional female stereotypes in the society.

In the workplace representation of the characters, with the exception of the artist who is still studying in school, and the bookstore employee who is not very professionally expressive, other characters' working are depicted often in the games. In Tears of Themis (2020), the female character's working as a lawyer forms the basis of the entire narrative and the working processing are well represented, with players actively participating in case investigations and courtroom arguments. However, in the other three games, the female characters' professional abilities are portrayed as relatively weak. For instance, the fashion designer in Light and Night (2021) is limited to descriptions such as seeking inspiration at a craftsman's shop or creating a hat out of spun yarn, which primarily serve as reasons for interacting with male characters. The player's assessment of the fashion designer's abilities is based solely on textual descriptions of her hard working and winning an award. Similarly, the café owner in Dreamscape Albireo (2018) is certified as a dessert chef, and the player's understanding of her workplace performance is conveyed through descriptions of her popular desserts and signing contracts with big company (in chapter 4 of the game).

Besides, these female characters receive varying degrees of assistance from the male characters they can date with in their respective workplaces. For example, lawyers are supported by senior lawyers and detectives when taking on cases (in chapter 1 of the game), fashion designers receive mentorship from renowned designer and the encouragement from the CEO (in chapter 4 of the game), and café owners rely on their staff for help (in chapter 2

of the game). The most notably example would be Evol x Love (2017), in which the producer's determination to protect her father's company and her unwillingness to give up in the face of crises are key elements driving the game's plot. However, the game does not grant her independent agency to overcome these challenges. Regardless of the dialogue choices made by the player, the resolution of workplace difficulties ultimately hinges on the presence of a dateable male character. Consequently, the narrative structure in the game follows a predictable chain of events: encountering a problem, either seeking assistance or waiting for a male character to intervene, and ultimately resolving the issue.

Overall, all female characters' profession fit the expectation of traditional stereotypes and the portrayal of female characters in these games reflects a pattern where their professional performance is intertwined with their relationships with male characters, ultimately relying on them for support and resolution of challenges.

5.3 Characteristics and content analysis

5.3.1 General information of games samples

Generally, the six games samples all feature storylines that begin with a new journey of a female character who meets some troubles or starts a new page of her life, following with meeting and dating male characters as the story progresses. The following table shows the summary of each game (table 4).

Game samples	**Female characters' image**	**Summary**
Evol x Love (2017)	 Producer /Company owner Age: 22	Your father passed away two years ago, and at the age of 22, you successfully completed your studies in France. Following your father's footsteps, you inherited his film company as a producer. However, the company now faces a critical financial situation on the brink of bankruptcy. Determined to save the company and preserve your father's legacy, you decide to pursue investment from a prominent corporation. It is during this process that you cross paths with Li, the CEO of the said company, who becomes one of the male protagonists in your journey. With Li's assistance, your company is able to sustain its operations. As the challenges continue to mount, you encounter three other exceptionally talented individuals. Amidst these trials, a startling revelation unfolds—the existence of superpowers in the world. Eventually, you find yourself relying on the collective strength of these four men to avert impending global catastrophe and safeguard humanity's future.

Dreamscape Albireo (2018)	 Café owner Age: 24-25	After being compelled to part ways with your previous company, you become the new owner of the Albireo Café accidently, a famous shop from your childhood that holds treasured memories of your family. Determined to revive the café's fortunes, you embark on a journey of both culinary delights and love. Within the warm confines of the café, you encounter six distinct males whose lives intersect with yours. Through the power of love and the artistry of food, you gradually unlock their guarded hearts, fostering deep connections and meaningful relationships. As these bonds grow stronger, you also work tirelessly to rescue the café from the perils of finance.
Tears of Themis (2020)	 Lawyer Age: 24-25	In the city, a string of perplexing incidents unfolds, seemingly disjointed at first glance, but intricately intertwined upon closer examination. These peculiar occurrences have been meticulously documented and compiled into a comprehensive file. As an outstanding junior lawyer, you are invited to join the team investigating the dossier. Teaming up with a seasoned detective, an experienced senior lawyer, a perceptive psychiatrist, and the influential president of a prominent group, you delve into the depths of investigation, tirelessly seeking answers and aiming to uncover the truth that bind these seemingly disparate incidents.
Light and night (2021)	 Fashion designer Age: 22	Having been born into a privileged family, you found yourself unable to accept the predetermined path and arranged marriage that lay ahead and determined to forge your own destiny. Driven by your passion for fashion and the desire to be a fashion designer, you decided to compete in the prestigious Warson Prize fashion design competition. Through sheer talent and relentless hard work, you managed to make a name for yourself in the competition, earning recognition. However, despite your impressive skills, you missed the opportunity to claim the championship and establish your own personal brand. In such a crucial moment of disappointment, an unexpected offer arrives – Warson Group extends an invitation for you to join them as a junior fashion designer. On your journey towards realizing your dreams, you encounter five remarkable males, each leaving a distinct impression on your path. Along the way, you also stumble upon an extraordinary revelation – you possess an innate superpower known as "super sense". Together with these companions, you embark on a journey to uncover the hidden aspects of the world, unaware that it is all intricately woven by fate.

For all time (2021)	 Artist Age: about 18	Embark on your artistic journey at St. Cecil's College as a new student with a dream to be an artist. However, fate takes an unexpected turn during the school's talent competition, thrusting you into an accident that bestows upon you the extraordinary ability to traverse different worlds. Astonishingly, you realize that your peculiar dreams are actually memories from an alternate realm. Since then, you lead two contrasting lives: one in the familiar routine of your real-world school and the other in a perilous, otherworldly apocalypse. In these worlds, you encounter five men resembling people from your real life, yet their personalities diverge significantly. Is their resemblance mere coincidence or a deliberate design of destiny? Amidst this extraordinary backdrop, the story of "love and salvation" is urging you to shape your own path through the choices you make. The canvas of your journey awaits as you to draw your answers.
The fairy Chronicles (2021)	 Employee Age: 22+	Following your graduation from university, you started to work at a local bookstore and enjoyed a quiet and predictable life. However, everything changes before a Chinese New Year when you experience a supernatural encounter while returning home from work. In a moment of peril, you are rescued by 4 enigmatic gods who recognize the necklace passed down to you by your grandmother as a sacred artifact with deep connections to their world. Thrust into a secret of mysticism and intrigue, you are compelled to join forces with these celestial beings in order to unravel the enigmatic mysteries plaguing the city.

Table 4 Summary of 6 game samples with modern background.

In the six games narration summary, the storyline unfolds in a manner reminiscent of Zhu's (2022) examination of Chinese 'chick flick' films and television shows (narratives told from the perspective of young urban women). These narratives typically revolve around an "unlucky" young woman facing a significant challenge in her life. Through her self-confidence and diligent efforts, she garners the admiration and affection of a respectable man, ultimately resolving the predicament and attaining a happy ending, which could be symbolized by a successful date in the game. Apart from the shared theme of female characters joining forces with male characters to save the world, the narrative content of otome games aligns with the prevailing conventions observed in contemporary female storytelling within the electronic media sphere.

Furthermore, the game's setting unveils that at least four of the female characters possess impressive education backgrounds. They include the producer and fashion designer who came back from studying abroad, the lawyer and the café owner who graduated from one of the best institutions in China, and the talented painter who gained admission to a prestigious school. In terms of their family backgrounds, the majority of the characters do not have intact families. Many have experienced the loss of a parent, undergone divorce, or have been raised by their grandmothers, with little mention of their parents. Also, some of them shows the wealth and power of their family. It is noteworthy that, with the exception of Dreamscape

Albireo (2018), all female characters participate in the mission to save the world alongside their male counterparts. While these elements contribute to a heroic narrative, as highlighted in the problem section addressing player feedback, they appear somewhat distant from the everyday lives of ordinary young women in China.

5.3.2 Expression and ability

In the six game samples, the female characters can be classified into two main categories based on their characterization: those who are portrayed as sweet and cute, and those who exhibit a cool and calm demeanour. Additionally, due to the specific world settings within the games, some female characters possess special abilities that are associated with the heroic task of saving the world.

When analysing the personalities of the female characters, their expressions will be examined in two main sections: daily communication and responses to danger. Furthermore, the section dedicated to special abilities will provide an overview of these unique traits possessed by the female characters. And the plot of the game quoted next are translated from the Chinese version.

Daily communication

In everyday life situations, the factors of female character's conversations and the perception by others play crucial roles in revealing her personal character. Factors such as the tone of voice, words using, and mannerisms exhibited by the female character contribute to shaping how her characteristics is. The content of her conversations, including the topics she engages in, the language she uses, and the way she interacts with others, further provide insights into her character and personality. These daily elements collectively contribute to the overall portrayal and understanding of the female character images.

For sweet and cute female character, the one in Evol x Love (2017) could be a typical example, who is always lovely and kind in the game. When she was struggling with the business plan of the company, she was "looking at the computer in despair" and "falling my head on the desk"; when she was worried about the financial situation of the company, she was sobbing of "not being able to pay next month and going out of business..."; when Anna, the manager of the company, told her what she did before had cost the investment of the company, she "looks up at her with resignation" and said "Anna... I was wrong" (chapter 1). It is these cute behaviours that make the female characters always be looked after and pampered in the game. When she is kidnapped while searching for a missing girl, she is the first to ask about the girl's well-being when she is rescued (chapter 7), and when she makes a documentary about autistic orphans to get more people involved in charity work (chapter 6), it is clear that she has a sense of social responsibility and a kind heart.

However, when she is unable to solve a problem, she usually appears "depressed" and "unsure of what to do next". One of the examples is when the female character, as the TV show producer, was interviewing the lift attendant of the "lift malfunction" incident like a journalist, she felt that "there are so many questions about this person that I don't know how to start" and "I'm suddenly a bit overwhelmed". The male character Lucien helped her to find the breakthrough and asks for the reason behind the incident in the end. The female character felt Lucien hold one of her hands "with a gentle strength that warmed my heart" (chapter 13-6). It is also because of her inability and weakness that the most common word spoken to her by male characters is " to listen and obey".

The other typical sweet and gentle character could be the one in the game Light and Night (2021), who consistently demonstrates her gentle and kind nature. Her sprite figures in the game also shows her sweet personality (figure 8). For example, when she encountered a young boy who expresses concern about his grandmother's potential abandonment, she immediately reassured him that she would help convince his parents to continue with the treatment. She also consulted with Dr. Charlie to gather information about the patient's condition and chances of recovery, and utilized her superpowers to convey the patient's desire to survive (chapter 10-6). In another instance, when the female character met Jesse, who is being treated for burns, she expressed concern about his painful wounds. Jesse assured her that "It's ok. I cannot feel anything", leading her to believe that he is well (chapter 10-8). In Chapter 13-3, the female character shed tears of joy when Sariel, a dateable character, woke up from a coma. Sariel remarked that "you are always crying when we stayed together". Additionally, when the female character expressed her worries about Osborn's dangerous mission, Osborn responds in a manner that seems more fitting for a child than a young woman with superpowers, touching her head and saying that "It's hard to sleep when you think too much" (chapter 13-13). Even in the conversation of the female character and her best friend, Ann, about her father's controlling behaviour, Ann offered support by saying, "It's okay, I'll take care of you from now on" (chapter 2-8). It can be seen that the female characters are also among those who are taken care of in front of their female friends. Generally, these examples demonstrate that the portrayal of the female character in Light and Night (2021) reinforces traditional gender norms, presenting her as someone who is emotionally vulnerable and requires care and protection from others.

Figure 8 Screen shots from Light and Night (2021): facial figures with different emotions and dressing of the female character.

The female characters in For all time (2021) and Dreamscape Albireo (2018) also have a very positive image of kindness, gentleness, and bravery in other characters' reviews. For example, in For all time (2021), the female character, who is a student, is described by other students and teachers as a gentle, sweet, kind, and good student; in Dreamscape Albireo (2018), the female character, who is the owner of the Café, is considered to be a kind, compassionate, and responsible person.

To portray the goodness of the female characters there is also the possibility of creating more conflict in the plot, their characters sometimes revealing themselves to be gullible and naive. Here are some examples in the games.

- Evol x Love (2017), when the female character first met the professor Lucien, who is a dateable character in the following gameplay, she didn't reject the intimacy actions from him including coming up to her ear to talk and touching her head (chapter 1). On the contrary, she was shy and blushing at his handsomeness and gentleness.

- In Dreamscape Albireo (2018), the female character first met a dateable male character, Snake, while walking down a dimly lit path at night. Snake was in a situation where he was being chased. And recognized the badly wounded and bleeding Snake, instead of taking him to the hospital or calling the police, the female character took him back to the café and offered to hire Snake as her employee, since he could not leave temporarily (chapter 1).
- In Light and night (2021), the female character was trapped in a lift with a dateable male character. Fearful of the unknown, the female character accepted to be held in the arms of the male character, whom she had only met a few times, for comfort (chapter 2-13). When the head designer of a company she didn't know well (a dateable character) got sick, she chose to give up an event that would enhance her professional skills and delivered medicine to the head designer and took a nap at his house (chapter 4-12).
- In For all time (2021), a female character was rescued by a mage (dateable) when she is identified as a sacrifice in an enchanted world and took up residence in his deceased sister's room. Despite being told that the room is not entirely safe, the female character heard a knock at the door and assumes it must be the mage, opening the door without making sure, but outside the door is the knight (dateable). Although the knight did not apprehend the female character, her whereabouts were no longer hidden anymore (general chapter on the continent of Yesai).

In complete contrast of the examples above, the female character in Tears of Themis (2020) more often shows her passion for her work and professionalism, as well as not subconsciously believing that it is expected when the male character offers to protect herself. Her kindness and gentleness are mainly reflected in her compassion for and assistance to innocent and weak clients or victims. Here are some examples:

- When the investigation requires a trip to an underground market to collect evidence, Vyn suggests that "it's not safe for a girl to go there because it's a chaotic place and it's not easy to get information". The female character responds by saying "I want to refuse Vyn's offer, but I can't think of a reason to convince him" and then chooses to go to the police station to question the suspect and obtain important testimony (chapter 2).
- When the male character offers to join her for dinner (chapter 1) or a ride home after work, the female character often rejects them because she needs to sort out her work materials. In chapter 2, Vyn offers to take the female character back to the office and the female character refuses him by the reason of "you have helped me a lot, it's time to go back and rest".
- In chapter 4, the female character calmly describes her presumptions about her client, and Artem, the senior lawyer, says that "the initial fear that you were too nice and vulnerable seems completely unwarranted".
- The female character repeatedly explains to her colleagues and friends that her job is her lover.

The main story of the game is the role-playing of a female character who investigates different cases and defends her client in court by discovering clues and obtaining exhibits. The female character is portrayed as calm, independent and motivated to do her job. In chapter 2, Vyn, a psychiatrist, comments that the female character "has the courage to break through, is attentive, kind and has a calm and confident mind". Although Vyn's assessment as a date may not be objective, it is possible to guess from the examples that this is the official keyword for the female character's image.

The narration of game sample The Fairy Chronicles (2021) is full of metaphysics elements. She lives and behaves more like an ordinary person in her daily life than the previous female characters who have many excellent labels. Her kindness is mainly reflected in her compassion and help for people with tragic circumstances. The examples here are mainly chosen from episodes where she has not yet been able to discover her superpower stage, for the sake of the female character at this stage being an ordinary person with few abilities.

- Realising in Chapter 1 that her pendant would involve her in the world of metaphysics and the responsibility associated with saving the city, her reaction is "I'm afraid I'll get into trouble" or "I'm afraid I'll be in danger ".
- In chapter 1, while waiting for the ghosts coming out with the male character, she eased the tension when the male character invites her to spend New Year's Eve together and joked, "Including my meal or not? I won't come if the answer is no".
- In Chapter 2, Yu, the river god, asks the female character for help in asking the old men who fish by the river for clues, and the female character says, "I never thought I'd have to do this with my social anxiety".
- The female character deduces the relationship between the two enemies and the reason for their attack on the young woman, solving the most crucial puzzle of the incident (chapter 2).
- Also in chapter 6, when the female character and Yu (dateable character) were trapped in a strange space, she solved the puzzle to escape and protected the male character Yu.

Responses to danger

In the plot of a romantic novel, a female character in danger is usually the moment when the male character becomes the hero, or an opportunity to demonstrate positive character traits such as the goodness of the female character. This narrative logic is also realized in some of the game samples.

In Evol x Love (2017), the female character demonstrates her kindness and self-sacrifice to protect others at critical moments. An example being shown is the sense when the female character and another male character Victor meet an unexpected attack, her thinking and movement (figure 9):

> A sudden burst of white light and a thunderous roar echoed in my ears, as a bolt of lightning tore through the air towards Victor. Without hesitation, I instinctively rushed towards him. In those fleeting moments of fear and panic, a flurry of images flashed before my eyes like a vivid pantomime. I saw Victor's stern expression as he rescued me from a dangerous situation, his gentle visage illuminated by the night, and the slight hint of anger in his eyes when he presented me with a gift...
>
> Evol x Love (2017), Chapter 10-25

Apart from that, she displays unwavering loyalty towards her teammates in critical moments, refusing to abandon them. Despite being advised by male characters to prioritize her own safety due to her limited abilities, she always accompanies them, even when there seems to be little she can contribute. When Helios, who is uncertain whether she is a friend or foe, becomes weakened after using his superpowers to protect her. In response, the female character's actions unfold as follows (figure 9):

Helios, however, staggered to his knees as if he had suffered some kind of backlash. With one hand over his chest and the other holding his gun, he braced himself on the ground and gasped violently, and the blood on his face faded rapidly. ……

Helios: Don't stay here and cause trouble, get out.

He said this coldly and reluctantly stood up, but still subconsciously kept me behind him and raised his gun at his pursuers. ……

But the situation is so critical, no matter who he is, I can't just walk away alone with my own safety in mind!

Evol x Love (2017), Chapter 23-5

Figure 9 Screen shots from Evol x Love (2017) in chapter 10-25 and 23-5

Similarly, in Light and night (2021), the female character chooses not to leave early even she is weak when she first faces danger head-on:

After putting my manager in the car, I looked back at the half-green canopy and suddenly remembered the blue flame that had wrapped around me outside the training base. Is it really okay to just leave Osborn alone like that?

Wen (the driver who picked up the female character): Let's go!

Hesitating for a moment, I closed the car door.

Me (female character): Please send her back home first. I want to wait for Osborn here.

Wen: But he asked me to pick you up……

Me: I'm just waiting for him here. I'm not going to do anything dangerous.

After Wen left, I went back to the shop entrance and stood beside Osborn's motorbike. On the top floor of the abandoned building, a thrilling battle was taking place.

Light and night (2021), Chapter 3-19

In Tears of Themis (2020), when there is a potentially dangerous investigation scene, the male character will ask the female character to go elsewhere to avoid putting her in danger. If they are in danger together, the male character still takes on the role of protecting the female character.

Luke: Keep your voice down, we're being followed.

Me:!

In an instant, a rush of cold air crept up my spine and the skin on my back seemed to explode. I panicked and looked around nervously, but didn't dare move too much, so I subconsciously clutched the briefcase in my arms.

Luke: Don't be nervous, just move on normally, I'm here.

Tears of Themis (2020), Chapter 5

The female characters in the above cases are barely aggressive, which could be interpreted as an inevitable consequence of the male characters with higher force levels protecting the female characters. The female characters who have the ability to attack are shown to be kind in The Fairy Chronicles (2021) and For all Time (2021), or to use their powers to mitigate danger and then wait for the male characters to help them.

Alkald: I want to give you a chance to try it. This is a sacred crown made by Shireen (Alkald's already deceased sister). She had said that it was a spell she had made, which could be used to get rid of fate and bring hope.

I froze, the meaning of his words was clear enough ..... Shireen's spell possessed great power, and Alkald intended to support me and give it to me - to escape fate and bring hope.

Me: Alkald, are you sure?

I knew that I shouldn't say more at this moment, in case Alkald changed his decision and there would be no more escape for me. But looking into his eyes, I ask this anyway.

For all Time (2021), general chapter on the continent of Yesai

The phone fell to the shore in the struggle and I couldn't see exactly what it was that was wrapped around my ankle. Seeing that the water was already up to my calves, I pulled at the stone platform on the shore with one hand and held the pendant on my chest with the other. Cheng Huang had taught me how to channel the spiritual energy in my body before, so think about it calmly. My fingertips whipped out a burst of spiritual energy, hitting whatever was pulling me, and a miserable yelp sounded from under the water, followed by a sharp pain in my ankle.

Me: ouch! Release me!

I was at a standstill when a huge splash of water suddenly appeared not far away and Yu surfaced and immediately came towards me. ..... I felt free of my ankle and was lifted up onto the shore.

The Fairy Chronicles (2021), Chapter 2

The descriptions provided indicate that the female characters in various games are often depicted as needing protection when faced with challenges or dangers, even could be figured out by the body size gap between female characters and male characters (figure 10). Even those with offensive abilities may still seek assistance from male characters, and at least 2 of them showed panic or a lack of composure in such situations. However, it is interesting to note that only the female characters in The Fairy Chronicles (2021) grew her power and had the ability to protect herself and others male characters in the existing following storyline: In chapter 4, a male character prepared a spell with the protection from the female character by his side to avoid the outside interference and in the subsequent chapter 5, the female character started to be the main output of the attack in battle.

Figure 10 Some characters graphics from Evol x Love (2017)

Special abilities

Among the four games with unique worldview settings, except Dreamscape Albireo (2018) and Tears of Themis (2020), the female characters possess special abilities that can be classified into two main categories: offensive and non-offensive.

- The female character with offensive abilities are the painter from For all Time (2021) and the bookshop employee from The Fairy Chronicles (2021). Since the bookstore employee has no special professional abilities, but the pendant her grandmother left her possesses divine powers, enabling her to awaken the gift of Jubilee and engage in battles with male characters, who are portrayed as gods. The painter, on the other hand, uses the painting skills she already possesses to be able to participate in battles in the magical world through the power of the painting spirit, which is developed from the character's painting ability.
- The female characters without offensive skills are the producer from Evol x Love (2017) and the designer from Light and Night (2021). The talent of producer is clairvoyance, allowing her to have precognitive dreams and gain insights into the future, or touching individuals to predict their future experiences. For the designer, her power is “super sense”, which can help her feel the emotions and scenes associated with things touched by her hands.

Regarding the story setting, all female characters are described as part of the group that gets halfway rolled into trouble and discovers their gifts. Since that, when it comes to true combat strength, male characters are consistently depicted as being more powerful than their female

counterparts. This dynamic often reinforces the prevalent romantic trope of male heroes rescuing female characters. Additionally, the female characters who do not have offensive abilities, and can only support or be protected, are similar to those mentioned by Sun (2018) as female characters in early Chinese games, i.e., NPCs (non-player characters) who assist or stage inspiration for the male hero. This suggests that, in terms of special abilities, most of female characters continue to embrace to the conventional design approach that predominantly caters to male players' preferences.

5.3.3 Romance relation

The narrative structure of otome games consists of a main storyline and a side storyline. The main storyline is a compulsory narrative that all players experience, featuring significant events such as career achievements and the introduction of key characters. Within the main storyline, female characters interact with their potential romantic partners and gradually become acquainted with them.

In contrast, the side storyline centres on the dating aspect of the game, allowing the female character to choose her preferred male character from a selection of 4 to 6 individuals (depending on the game). Through the side story, the female character engages in a romantic relationship with her chosen partner, uncovering additional details about his character and collecting special cards and recordings related to their relationship. Consequently, the female characters devote a substantial amount of time to interacting with the male characters in both the main and side storylines.

In scenes where both male and female characters are present, most of the time the female character is the figure that has to wait to be protected, or even just a foil to the heroic qualities of the male character. Except the examples being mentioned in the “Responses to Danger” sections, here are some examples from the games:

- In Evol x Love (2017), the female character met “a billboard, torn raw by the wind, suddenly veered off its fall and slammed straight at me”. Since she still stood there, a male character Lucien (dateable character) used his super power to save her and told her “It is fine now”. The female character felt “a pair of strong hands pull me away” and “my nerves are back in place” (chapter 13-4).
- In Evol x Love (2017), when the female character, as the producer to interview the lift attendant of the "lift malfunction" incident, she feels that "there are so many questions about this person that I don't know how to start" and "I'm suddenly a bit overwhelmed". The male character Lucien helps her to find the breakthrough and asks for the reason behind the incident in the end. The female character felt Lucien hold one of her hands "with a gentle strength that warmed my heart" (chapter 13-6).
- In For all Time (2021) chapter 1, during the ship trip to the school, the female character got seasickness and she went for a walk on the deck. She was helped by Rorchach (dateable), the member of the university council, to avoid falling into the water since she felt dizzy (figure 11).

Figure 11 Screen shot from For all Time (2021) in chapter 1

When female characters with relatively strong combat skills face dangerous battles, they still make some mistakes and need the help of male characters. The example in For all time (2021) is the time when the female character travelled to the world and got a powerful identity as the lord of the forest. She planned to help Alkald in the battle:

> The successive battles had festered me somewhat, and I didn't even notice that I was being distracted from the battlefield. ..... It was only the moment the vine veered off course that I realised I was now out of my depth. Immediately afterwards, the back of my hand was gently covered by someone.
>
> Alkald: Give it to me!
>
> The moment I heard this voice, I had instinctively chosen to act on his words. I relinquished my grip on the vine and let it dangle freely. The next moment, the man behind me, driving my hand, slashed through the air - long green and blue vines, countless fine leaves, linked into a tough, unbreakable net in the air. .....
>
> Alkald: Close your eyes.
>
> I closed my eyes and felt Lucien turn the flames of light that had ignited ..... After all the sounds had subsided, Lu Chen gently let go of my hand and took a step back.
>
> For all time (2021), World 3 – Lucian line

In addition, the female characters seem to be able to pick and choose to date among the male characters, however, men still dominate the relationship and can control and suppress the female characters through words and actions.

In Dreamscape Albireo (2018), when the female character first met one of the male characters, Xiyue, she was passing by and overheard part of his conversation with someone else. Xiyue came to asks the female character "who are you". This somewhat rude mannerism is portrayed in the game's text in a quite romantic way:

> Xiyue crouched down and drew near to me. Despite the smile adorning his face, there was an overwhelming aura of intimidation emanating from him. His amber eyes fixated on mine, seemingly attempting to glean insights from my thoughts. The waft of

vetiver fragrance brushed against my cheeks, and I defiantly straightened my posture, inching closer to his alluring yet dubious countenance.

Dreamscape Albireo (2018), Chapter 1

In Light and Night (2021), when the female character felt uncomfortable of touching the pen on the ground which is belongs to the head designer, she was wondering if she needed to book an appointment of body check. The head designer Sariel, whom she met in the second time, joked to her:

Me (female character): Should I go to the hospital for a check-up? In case there is something wrong with my body…

Sariel: I see you alive and well, not like there's a health problem.

He said as his eyes moved smoothly from my face to the top of my head.

Sariel: Rather like there's something else.

Me: …!

I huffed but didn't dare to glare at him, and when I saw this look on my face, Sariel's mouth actually flickered with a smile.

Light and Night (2021), Chapter 2-5

Despite subsequent revelations that attribute the female character's discomfort to the emergence of her super power, Sariel's past behavior of openly mocking or belittling her abilities, including an instance where she ridicules the female character's perceived lack of intelligence, cannot be overlooked. However, it is undeniable that Sariel is still a romantic option among female players and maintain significant popularity.

A similar situation occurs in Evol x Love (2017), where the male character Victor, a successful businessman, often belittles the female character's intelligence and talent, especially in the management field, praising her with the words "Good, your IQ is not as low as I thought it was" (chapter 2), and the female character never took offence at this kind of compliment. He secretly ate the pudding made by the female character but commented that it was “awful” (chapter 4). Again, he is also very popular with the players in the game.

In the aforementioned cases, the female characters’ images are often portrayed in passive emotional roles and may even be depicted as consistently causing trouble, serving as a mean to highlight the exceptional qualities and capabilities of the male characters within the narration. However, in games like Tears of Themis (2020) and The Fairy Chronicles (2021), the female characters demonstrate a greater sense of independence in their thoughts and actions, and they are depicted as being protective of the male characters. Their relationship with male characters seems more equal and realistic (figure 12).

Here are some examples in games:

- The second chapter of Tears of Themis (2020) featured a female character as Marius' defense lawyer who helps him prove his innocence and rise to fame. Also in Chapter 2,

Luke ended with her saying that she has become a famous barrister because of the case, and she said "your praise is too perfunctory".

- In chapter 4 of Tears of Themis (2020), when Marius asked the female character to compliment him, she rebuffed him by saying, "Please be serious in the workplace". Also, in the third chapter of Marius' story, Marius hugged a female character after drinking, and her first reaction was to "push him away".
- In chapter 20 of The Fairy Chronicles (2021), the female character offered herself as bait to lure the enemy into a trap, which the male character found very difficult. But he still agreed and promised that he would protect her.
- In The Fairy Chronicles (2021), a male character prepares a spell with the protection from the female character by his side to avoid the outside interference (chapter 4). Even in the subsequent chapter 5, the female character becomes the main outlet of the attack in battle.

Figure 12 Posters of female characters and 4 male characters in Tears of Themis (2020)

The same comparison is made in the protection of the female character by the male character, who in many episodes thinks "I can't tell her the truth in order to protect her", and the female character reacts in different ways:

- In Evol x Love (2017), when Gawin, a police officer, who just saved the female character from a sudden bullet in chapter 7, he said "I'll tell you, but not now" and the female character acquiesced to this caring and protective approach.
- In Dreamscape Albireo (2018), Snake, a dateable character who was taken in by the female character and lived at the café, protected the female character by not telling her why he was being hunted, and instead of pursuing him, the female character hired him as her employee.
- The female character's investigative skills are put to good use in Tears of Themis (2020). In chapter 4, when describing the struggles of the suspect's family, Marius said "this is the kind of dirty play and I want her never knowing about". However, the female characters had already deduced the full story from the clues they have gathered.
- In Light and Night (2021), when the female character awakened to her super power, the male character only told her that "your gift is still unstable, so remember do not mention it to anyone". The woman responded "I'll remember" (chapter 3-14).

- When the female character of For all Time (2021) was summoned to the continent of Yesai, all the male characters who had good or bad intentions towards her believe that they couldn't tell her about the crisis facing the world. The female character was forced to accept the truth and tried to find clues in an unfamiliar environment by herself.
- In The Fairy Chronicles (2021) the female character was told many secrets that the male characters were reluctant to tell her by the goddess Lin Mo, since they did not want the female character to be hurt by knowing too much secrets. The female character expressed her gratitude and said in a subsequent conversation, "I never waste my energy and time on things that are already settled" (chapter 5).

5.3.4 Conclusion

Overall, all female characters in the six games have the quality of goodness. Four female characters appear to be overly naive, even out of reality, and the female characters in Evol x Love (2017) and Light and night (2021) have a long storyline of being 'protected' and weak, and their personalities are close to the traditional stereotypical image of women, especially the characteristic of being highly dependent on male power. In contrast, Dreamscape Albireo (2018) and For all Time (2021) are closer to the stereotypical modern female images who is independent and brave, but momentarily weak for the sake of a romantic relationship with a male character. The female characters in Tears of Themis (2020) show a more independent, work-loving side to their personalities, giving her more complexity in her lives rather than just dating with male characters. In The Fairy Chronicles (2021), the female characters are calmer in the face of hardship and danger, and their relationships with the male characters are more like friendships rather than romance. Therefore, the female characters in these two games do not fit the stereotypical image of women in society and video games.

5.4 Player's Comment analysis

In the mobile game platform Taptap, players can rate the game from 1-5 stars. In the player community, a 5-star rating is usually considered a high rating, 3-4 an intermediate rating and 1-2 a poor rating. The total game score is 10 out of 10. As the above analysis focuses on 6 games in modern settings, here are the player ratings for the 6 games on the platform (table 5). One of them, Dreamscape Albireo (2018), unsupported in June 2022 and has no game rating data.

Game samples	**Evol x Love (2017)**	**Dreamscape Albireo (2018)**	**Tears of Themis (2020)**	**For all Time (2021)**	**Light and night (2021)**	**Fairy Chronicles (2021)**
Scores	8.0	/	8.2	9.1	7.9	9.4
Number of comments	23k	/	21k	16k	27k	3395

Table 5 Players' rating of 6 game samples in Taptap

Evol x Love (2017)

The comments related to female characters are more extreme. The majority of players agree that female characters are gentle, beautiful and kind. Players with high ratings were convinced that female characters have a brave and strong heart underneath their soft exterior, and that they grow up over the plot in the game. More often than not, players

criticise the female characters for being too weak and always asking for help when she get into trouble without thinking any solution by herself. Due to the game's long release, the following reviews sentences are from players who have played this game for over 200h:

- The female character is introduced as a female boss from a wealthy family, and just by looking at this image, it is not designed for the fantasy of the average teenage girl. How many people can graduate from undergraduate school and become the boss of a well-known film company?
- All male character's hands are twice as big as the female character's face. The shoulders are all broad, the waists are all thin and the legs are all exceptionally long. To emphasise the petite of the female character, they all make her look big-headed and small-bodied. Totally out of shape to normal human proportions.
- The Mary Sue plot does make the female image boring, but it also makes it easier for players experiencing an immersive romance.
- The female character moves around between four guys, blushing at this one for this moment, and her heart racing at another in the next moment. Nothing else but falling in love in her daily life.
- I love how sweet and cute she is, but why doesn't she try to strengthen herself when she knows she's so bad at it, instead of thinking that she can save the world on her own?

Dreamscape Albireo (2018)

As this game has been taken down in 2022, the reviews of game ratings have been cleared and the following reviews of the female character have been taken from the otome games community:

- She's someone who has her eyes on work and not romance, and tries to figure things out when they come up.
- The heroine's IQ is basically passable (not always good, sometimes ridiculously stupid). The problems in the café are mostly solved by herself.
- She is patient and gentle and has a soft feminine attitude.

Tears of Themis (2020)

When it comes to female players, they cover all score bands. Most players thought the female characters were "good, hard working, super cool in courtroom arguments, and has a good sense of interactive way with men", while a number of players thought the female characters were good personalities. Here are some of the comments:

- “I” am the image of every wonderful thing integrated, excellent and therefore deserving of love from everyone.
- Her characteristics make me spellbound, and she is the person I want to be but cannot be.
- The game is an ideal world for me, but the reality always reminds me that not being born into such an elite family as female characters with such an outstanding profile, makes it all the more important to be a better person by myself.
- Who wouldn't love a girl who works so hard and so well?
- The most important thing is that she can support her own career and life instead of relying on men to live.

However, there are some players who find the female character too perfect or detailed to be immersive and may even develop self-doubt.

- I, as her role-playing player, had absolutely no influence over the outcome of her thoughts and choices, everything went according to the plot, never according to my will.
- She is a perfect, completely independent person, so who am I?
- The game often emphasizes that female character loves seafood, but I really hate it. As well as the fact that I can't just toss aside a toy that someone gave me as a gift (from the Marius episode).

For all Time (2021)

There was very little feedback from players who mentioned female character's image directly, more often expressing the instability of the characterisation due to the plot. Of course, some players appreciated the bravery and cuteness of the female characters. Generally, there was little commentary on the female characters and more on the plot of the game:

- The plot is strangely connected, as the female character's friendship grew rapidly within two or three days after meeting her classmate Shen Ling, and she was willing to go upstream in the crowd to save her on the performance stage for her. No sooner had I accepted their deep friendship than the next moment the female character saw a girl identical to Shen Ling on the ground in another space, the female character took one look at her and left her behind to live a life surrounded by beautiful men.
- The female character's personality is confusing. The male characters were so perfect in comparison that I felt the female characters did not deserve them.
- I thought the female character was still brave and kind, but the progression of the plot made me feel that her thoughts were abrupt, or at least not empathetic to the player.

Light and night (2021)

All of the feedback that gave the game a high score did not discuss female characteristics. In the popular reviews, those who mentioned female characters all gave the game a moderate score. Most players felt that the female characters were too trusting of male characters who were still strangers and that the romantic relationships of the characters were key of the game narration, which sounds like “love is everything”. One player mentioned that "the female characters are very invisible and it's easy to feel like you're in the story in the beginning. However, as the gaming time getting longer, I felt empty and felt that the female character was very impersonal, which made me hard to identify with her approach". Players who mentioned female characters agreed that she was "pretty, but not capable of anything".

Fairy Chronicles (2021)

As the highest rated game in the game samples, almost all of the long game reviews mentioned the female character. The vast majority of players found the female character to be brave and intelligent and left very positive comments.

- The female character is smart, not relying on men, and also has a high emotional intelligence, making her be a very independent and excellent image.
- Her characteristics and thoughts are very close to reality, especially when she is not capable in the dangerous moment, she will think about how to protect herself and survive, rather than supposedly sacrificing herself to protect everyone.

- She is the only mature lady I have ever played in a Chinese game. Great looks, intelligence, personality, and combat prowess. She is the complete opposite of most female characters who always seek help from male characters whenever things go wrong.
- She's so charming when she is fighting. The male characters don't hinder her growth either, but encourage her and guide her to become stronger. The story doesn't force romance storylines either. In the main story, the male and female characters are more like good friends.
- The female character is smart and brave, and doesn't drag or hesitate in their speech, making them the best game I could relate to.
- I like the female character more as a friend and don't mind experiencing the story from her point of view. There was nothing romantic about the interactions between the female character and her dateable characters in the main storyline, and I appreciated how they cared for and helped each other.
- The strong strength of the female character also means that she is equal to the male characters. The males don't revolve around the female protagonist forever and there is no situation where the female protagonist is protected to the point where she doesn't know anything.
- Finally, there is a female character in otome games without bangs.

Conclusion

Overall, players of all games affirmed the positive elements of female character's images, such as pretty appearance and kindness. Weaker and emotionally vulnerable female characters have a lower presence and enhance the player's immersive relationship experience, but in some game narration, female characters do not behave in a normal way which is far away from the reality. Independent, powerful female characters are more likely to be identified and appreciated by players, but the immersive romance experience is also reduced by the individuality of the female character. Moreover, it is worth noting that female characters who are portrayed in a way that more closely resembles the everyday behaviour and personality traits of ordinary people in the real world will be more popular with players.

6 Discussion

6.1 The limits of female character construction

Female-oriented games are designed to cater to the perspectives and needs of female players, serving as a medium of entertainment that reflects the female discourse. The emergence of the first female-oriented games marked a significant milestone in women's participation within the male-dominated gaming culture industry. Their success signified the establishment of a voice for female gamers and game developers within the gaming culture industry.

Given the substantial female-oriented market, game developers assert that their games are tailored specifically for women, claiming to have designed them with women in mind. For instance, Aurora Studios (2022) conducted early market research aimed at understanding the perceptions of modern Chinese women regarding their personal lives and career aspirations. This research sought to develop a user profile for these women. However, the publicly presented "user profile" formulated by game companies actually represents an accepted standard of perfection and excellence for women. These criteria and labels draw inspiration from other portrayals of women in electronic media, encompassing attributes such as a slender body, attractive appearance, favourable family background, and high-level education—all of which are possessed by the characters examined in this analysis. These exceptional qualities are imposed upon characters to create a similar image and character design, as claimed by the game's promotional material, aligning with the criteria of an independent woman. Nevertheless, as Zhu (2022) argues in their study on female characterisation in film and television, these demanding conditions and rules are not merely superficial impositions imposed by men upon women, but rather represent a deeper and more insidious form of "oppression." This societal demand on women has been perpetuated and reinforced repeatedly, ultimately shaping the standard of the "perfect urban woman."

Besides, otome games primarily focus on providing a romantic experience for women, with male characters serving as a key element of the game content. As a result, the design of male characters tends to be more refined and diverse (as shown in Figure 5), as they are seen as a competitive edge in attracting players. The game development process often diminishes the presence of female characters, directing the player's attention towards the male character and even positioning the female character as a tool to drive the plot or a character meant to complement the male character. For instance, in order to highlight the male character's painful past, the female character is typically portrayed as kind and gentle, serving as a source of healing for the male character. Similarly, to showcase the male character's exceptional professionalism, the female character is often depicted as relatively weak, emphasizing a heroic storyline. The design of female characters often incorporates "cute little flaws," such as being easily lost, afraid of the dark, or stumbling in high heels. These details provide opportunities for the male characters to care for and support the female characters during the dating process. While the numerous positive attributes assigned to female characters may not necessarily aim to create a perfectly flat characterization, they can be seen as a narrative necessity within the game. These portrayals contribute to the overall romantic experience and facilitate the dynamics between the male and female characters, enhancing the gameplay and storytelling. Conversely, if the game developers want to highlight the independence and power of female characters, the ability and performance of

male characters, and the experience of immersive romance in the game will be diminished. This was also mentioned in the player feedback.

Otome games primarily cater to a female audience rather than serving as feminist platforms, with their content primarily shaped by market demands rather than an intent to shape female consciousness. Many game companies remain entrenched in traditional gender paradigms or rely on outdated depictions of female characters seen in earlier Chinese games (Sun, 2018). Despite perceiving the game world as centred around women, the social dynamics of gender within games continue to adhere to patriarchal norms (Liu and Lai, 2022). As more educated and independent women engage with otome games, a significant disparity emerges between their expectations regarding the portrayal of female characters and the perspectives of game development teams. Consequently, there is often dissatisfaction with the representation and behaviour of female characters, and some players even develop a dislike towards them. Younger girls, including pre-adolescents, tend to embrace female characters in games and regard being "pampered" and "rescued" as a privilege (Li, 2021). This inclination is influenced by the cultural norms and social gender in which they have been raised, a topic that will be explored in the subsequent discussion.

6.2 Stereotypes and gender in Otome games

From a gender perspective, notable differences emerge due to gender traits. The social construction of femininity forms the basis for female-oriented games to cater to the preferences of female players. These games are often limited to romance and dress-up themes, and the female characters depicted within them may not consciously adhere to gender norms. The majority of popular female-oriented games in the market are romance simulations and dress-up games, while hardcore competitive strategy games with a 'female-oriented' label are relatively scarce. The gameplay and content of otome games align with the gender stereotypes prevalent in society. The internal gameplay typically revolves around visual novels, card mechanics, and simulations. The female characters in these games exhibit slender and feminine appearances, and even if some deviate from that norm, they still conform to traditional male preferences for female images.

Most of the characters are set up in a way that conforms to the basic setting of male strength and female weakness in otome games. On the one hand, this is reflected in the external appearance of both men and women, with the female characters being thin and cute, while the male characters are tall, strong and powerful, as the pictures of the characters in Figure 10 well confirm. This setting gives the female characters a sense of warmth and security from their dateable counterparts and always keeps them protected at any times. In Light and night (2021) the female character and the male character walk together in the snow, and the size of the footprints in the background image highlights the size difference between the male and female characters (figure 13).

Figure 13 Screen shot from the game Light and night (2021): female and male character walked on the snow together and left some foot prints.

Apart from the disparity in appearance, the professional identities of the male and female characters also fit the male strong and female weak setting. In Evol x Love (2017), profession of the female character is the owner of a film and television company on the verge of bankruptcy, while the male characters are the president who holds the economic lifeblood of the city, the special police officer, the genius scientist, and the superstar. The different male characters' professional identities cover politics, economics, science, culture and mass media, and enjoy a certain amount of power, wealth and prestige. In Light and Night (2021), the female character is a junior fashion designer, while the male character is the president of a fashion conglomerate, an award-winning racing driver, a famous designer, a talented doctor, and a popular idol. Dateable male characters are members of the school council, teachers, student council presidents, musical geniuses, and outstanding students. Even the strong, independent, protective female characters, such as the junior lawyer in Tears of Themis (2020), can date the senior lawyer, the special police officer from the National Security Centre, the psychologist, and the heir to prestigious conglomerates. Almost all male characters will have a much higher social status than their female counterparts, and even if the female character grows up quickly, there is no substitute for male characters guiding female characters in the beginning of the game.

In addition to otome games, various studies on film and television have explored the portrayal of gender roles, often depicting 'strong men and weak women' (Zhang, 2020; Li, 2021; Zhu, 2022) These representations found in digital media tend to reinforce societal stereotypes regarding the sexes. However, such stereotyping in games hinders the development of a healthy perception of gender among young players and, to some extent, contributes to the vulnerability of women to unequal treatment in social contexts.

Gender stereotypes pervade various aspects of the game, particularly in the available interaction of female characters. Despite the illusion of agency in choosing their dates within the game, these characters occupy a subordinate position in heterosexual relationships. The majority of female characters are constructed with appearances and personalities that align with notions of weakness and dependence, where themes of being rescued and pampered dominate the narrative. The core gameplay experience emphasizes the sensation of being in love, and player reviews suggest that the immersion in romantic relationships is enhanced through the depiction of weak and submissive female characters.

When a female character displays submissiveness to a male character and chooses to accept his protection, she is rewarded with positive responses such as physical affection, a smile, and comforting phrases like "wait for me." On the other hand, if a female character deviates from complying with a male character's desires, she is often subjected to peril or harm, necessitating rescue from the male characters or leading to the injure of other characters. These displays of thoughtfulness and tenderness from the male character serve as powerful romantic expressions that players can intuitively appreciate. This romantic narrative establishes a requisite foundation for the female character to embrace a fate of being protected and dominated, thereby accepting a subordinate role in the gender dynamic. The swift acceptance of the stereotypes surrounding the personalities and abilities of female characters by players can be attributed, in part, to the packaging of such stereotypes in benevolent sexism, which is reinforcing gender inequalities and stereotypes by encouraging women who fit men's needs, and making them more acceptable to women with positive and kind way in tone (Fiske and North, 2015; Sattari et al., 2022; Barreto and Doyle, 2023). Except for the characteristics of female characters' image, the appearance, profession fields, the social status gap compared with male characters, and background (education, family) of the female characters' images can also be covered by benevolent sexism and be accepted by players.

The design logic of otome games, generally, remains entrenched within traditional gender paradigms, aligning with both the gaming industry and conventional stereotypes of female players. While it is undeniable that powerful and independent female characters tend to receive higher ratings in games, they are also the least popular among players, as evidenced by Table 5 in Fairy Chronicles. However, famous and influential game companies usually choose to design vulnerable but "prefect" female characters while creating idealized male characters to attract players, such as Light and Night (2021) from Tencent Games, For All Time (2021) from NetEase, and Evol x Love (2017) from Paper Game. Tears of Themis (2020) by Mihoyo stands out as a game that challenges this established logic within the game samples of this research. However, players have raised concerns that it cannot provide the immersive romantic experience typically associated with otome games. These criticisms and discussions surrounding the portrayal of female characters are rooted in societal gender stereotypes and benevolent sexism, which aim to shape women's behaviour and facilitate the acceptance of various forms of unrealistic character content.

6.3 The development process of otome games

Li (2021) mentioned that the increase of female developers was one of the reasons to change female characters' image to positive and important in Chinese games. As the gaming industry report in China (CGIGC, 2019), nearly 70% practitioners are males. The production aspect of video games is influenced by gender, and games are inevitably imbued with a masculine mindset from development and design to operation. As a mass communication medium that spreads rapidly and reaches a global audience, video games further amplify this male-dominated gender bias. This is also the case with gender concepts in female-oriented games.

Since 2017, Evol x Love has demonstrated the enormous potential for the development of otome games and the purchasing power of female players in the Chinese gaming industry, with a first-month revenue of 300 million Chinese yuan, leading to a rapid increase in the number of game companies involved in otome game development and distribution (Li,

2021). During the period from 2018 to 2020, apart from Tears of Themis (2020) which generated monthly revenues in the tens of millions, other games such as Dreamscape Albireo (2018), Encountering Justice (2019), and A Tour of the Half World (2018) did not achieve significant commercial success (Li, 2021). Under Tencent's strong promotion, Light and Night (2021) surpassed 200 million Chinese yuan in revenue in its first month after release, but its subsequent commercial performance was not as remarkable as Evol x Love (2017), which had been in operation for four years (2017). It is undeniable that games targeted at women have transitioned from niche games to popular game genres in the industry. However, due to the underwhelming performance of subsequent games compared to Evol x Love (2017), most game companies are not willing to allocate significant resources to otome games with limited audiences (Li, 2022).

Meanwhile, rushed production and conservative approach of otome game development make the quality of character and narration design declined, as well as the similarity of game content. Not only do the female characters in game content have similar images, but the male character designs have also become similar and monotonous. For example, in the game samples, all male characters are concentrated within the age range of 20 to 28, and their professions mostly revolve around CEOs, experts in biology or medicine, popular public figures, and occupations that require sharp thinking. In terms of personality, they tend to fall into four categories: mature and steady, sunny and cute, handsome but a bit naughty, and cold and sarcastic. Even the connections between male and female characters are limited to narratives such as growing up together since childhood, being work partners, guiding the female characters' growth, and the male character acting as a hero to rescue the female character in distress.

In the game comments section of For All Time (2021), an otome game player who has played four out of the six modern-themed game samples pointed out that different otome games had male characters voiced by the same voice actor, making the characters lack distinctive voices. Just by listening to their voices, it was impossible to differentiate which game the character came from. Almost all reviews of Light and Night (2021) mentioned body issues of characters in the CG (computer graphics), and during the testing phase of For All Time (2021), some players found the narrative of the story to be confusing. Even after the official version was released with revised text, many players still felt that the plot did not make logical sense. For example, conversations with friends who reunited after a long separation lacked enthusiasm, and interactions between female characters and their caretakers showed no sense of familiarity.

These rushed production backgrounds and flaws in game details can explain why female character images are heavily influenced by stereotypes. Game companies are likely focused on releasing games as quickly as possible, attempting to replicate the success of Evol x Love (2017) without delving into in-depth analysis and research on character images.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Summary

The main goal of this research was to find out the similarity setting of female character images among 12 Chinese otome game samples by analysing their appearance, profession, and characteristics, referenced by players' comments. Meanwhile, analysis result showed that the female character images and their similarity setting were still being influenced from gender stereotype of the society and the game industry, especially the fragile, gentle, and non-offensive ability, which were supported and referenced from previous researches (Sun, 2018; Li, 2021; Huan, 2022). In the discussion section, the limitation of otome game design and the female-oriented game development was pointed out, which were the gameplay of immersive romance experience, rushed production, and the developing environment with male practitioners mainly.

RQ1. What are the similar settings in female character design in the otome game?

- Appearance: all of them had small faces, small mouths, fair skin, and thick hair, slim bodies, which were related to youthful, non-aggressive, sweet and charming images. They were also dressing in the same way with shirts, skirts, and high heels.
- Profession: none of them were in the field of science and engineering and most of them were working in art and business area. No matter how their abilities and professional skills were, they still had a gap of social status with male characters.
- Characteristics: all of them were kind, gentle, and friendly. There were 2 main kinds of characteristics among the female characters, one of them is being 'protected' and weak; the other group of them were independent and brave, but still needed to be protected by male characters when they were in danger.

RQ2. What is the effect of character design from gender stereotype?

- Appearance: their delicate and slender outlooking met the stereotypes of young women images in Chinese digital media. Also, the cute elements of their images were related to anime culture, which were the women appearance preference from men.
- Profession: their jobs and career met the stereotype of traditional stereotypes of women, in which women were supposed to good at art and emotional feeling, rather than logical thinking and engineering field. Besides, the female characters always needed help from male characters in their work.
- Characteristics: they mainly met 2 kinds of women stereotypes. The first one was the traditional women images, which were weak, delicate, and highly depending on male characters. The other one is stereotypical modern female images, which are independent and brave, but momentarily weak in a romantic relationship with a male character.

RQ3. What is the relation between female character and traditional gender paradigms?

- All female characters' image followed the design logic of "strong men and weak women", especially body shapes and social status. Their weakness was the support and evidence to show the strength and power of male characters.
- A fragile female character was recognized to provide better immersive experience to the player, since she could echo with the stronger and more powerful male characters, and

she was given more protection and romantic rewards. Actually, this kind of romance relationship is just an unequal relationship covered by benevolent sexism.

The portrayal of women in otome games differs significantly from the sexually suggestive manner often found in other types of games, particularly those targeted at a male audience (Ivory, 2006; Downs & Smith, 2010). However, despite being a genre specifically designed for female players and supposedly that written from a female perspective, otome games still predominantly feature content that is constructed from male perspectives, failing to achieve true gender equality within the gaming setting. The influence of conservative game development processes and entrenched gender paradigms is evident in player comments and rushed production. While some female characters in the game samples defy the stereotypical portrayal of women in the gaming industry, with instances where women can protect male characters and serve as the main attack outlet during times of crisis, there remains a disparity in truly expressing game content from a female perspective.

7.2 Future work

Otome games have been a game genre that has developed for over 20 years. Although they are primarily active in the Asian market, particularly in China, Japan, and South Korea, there are also numerous romance-focused female-oriented games in the Western world. Undoubtedly, otome games primarily attract female players and have amassed a large player base globally. However, they have not received significant attention in related game academic research. Most studies on female character image discussions are based on large multiplayer games.

As mentioned in the discussion, the design flaws in otome games extend beyond the female character images and encompass aspects such as repetitive gameplay, stereotypical male characters, unrealistic plots, and illogical narratives. These design flaws correspond to the game industry's lack of understanding or even the absence of relevant information about female players' gaming abilities, the stereotypical portrayal of male character images, and the breakdown of narrative logic in order to create more surprising and unexpected elements. These types of studies are not common, leaving significant research space for female-oriented games. In future research, there is potential to explore the design and development of otome games and other types of female-oriented games from various perspectives.

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Appendix A - Information of Game Samples

Game name (Chinese)	Game name (English)	Game background/word setting	Publisher	Release Year	Website	Status (April, 2023)
恋与制作人	**Evol x Love**	Modern	Paper Games	2017	https://evol.papegames.cn/home	
光与夜之恋	**Light and night**	Modern	Tencent	2021	https://love.qq.com/main.html	
未定事件簿	**Tears of Themis**	Modern	Mihoyo	2020	https://wd.mihoyo.com/main	
时空中的绘旅人	**For all time**	Modern, Time travel	NetEase	2020	https://hlr.163.com/index.html	
神仙记事录	/	Modern, Magic	Icesimba	2021	/	
梦间集天鹅座	**Dreamscape Albireo**	Modern	Perfect World	2020	https://al.games.wanmei.com	Closed
掌门太忙	**Busy Master**	Ancient	Sincetimes	2020	https://zm.sincetimes.com/	Closed
梦浮灯	**Dream of Floating Light**	Ancient	ReveAVG	2020	/	
灵猫传	/	Ancient	Dreamart	2021	/	
遇见逆水寒	/	Ancient	NetEase	2019	https://yujian.163.com	
少女的王座	**The throne of girl**	Ancient	Rastar	2021	https://sndwz.rastargame.com/	
半世界之旅	**A tour of the half world**	Ancient	Joymore	2018	http://bsj.mobygame.cn/p-index/	

Video resources of 6 games' walk-through:

Evol x Love: https://b23.tv/aM6PryT

Dreamscape Albireo: https://b23.tv/O9dcoLq

Tears and Themis: https://b23.tv/7xSsCOE

Light and night: https://b23.tv/OwOxYlt

For all time: https://b23.tv/gsKNVQn

Fairy Chronicles: https://b23.tv/cIhZMPZ