Research on the Character Traits of Female Protagonists in Games: An Example from the Otome Games

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Abstract: With the development of the game industry, the role of gender in game design has increasingly come to the fore, with particular attention being paid to the way female players are represented in games. In the domain of gaming, the otome genre, which is characterized by its distinct narrative and characterization, has garnered a significant female player base. However, for a considerable period of time, the portrayal of female characters in games has frequently been influenced by traditional gender concepts, thus resulting in the emergence of certain stereotypes and inequalities. As such, the examination of the character traits of female protagonists in otome games not only facilitates a more profound comprehension of the influence of game culture on gender perceptions, but provides insights and inspiration for the creation of games with more egalitarian and diverse gender images. In this paper, the characteristics of female protagonists in otome games developed by some Japanese game developers are analyzed, and their impact on gender equality is explored. By comparing the characteristics of the female characters across different types of games, the paper elucidates that, despite their frequent portrayal as independent, strong, and assertive, these characters are still shaped by traditional gender norms to varying degrees. Accordingly, the analysis presents recommendations for advancing more egalitarian and diverse gender images within the gaming industry.

Keywords: Otome Games, Female Protagonists, Character Traits, Gender Equality.

1.   Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapid advancements in information technology, otome games have emerged as a unique genre within the Japanese gaming industry, gradually gaining widespread recognition and popularity worldwide. Designed primarily for female gamers, these games present a distinctive immersive experience through rich narrative and character development. Nevertheless, despite their success in addressing the emotional needs of female players, the portrayal of female characters in otome games often remains influenced by traditional gender norms, reflecting certain stereotypes. The design of otome games reflects the developers' understanding and expression of gender roles, which can impact players' gender perceptions. Therefore, exploring the gender portrayal of female protagonists in otome games is crucial for understanding the influence of gaming culture on gender perceptions. This paper aims to examine the gender representation of female protagonists in otome games, with a particular focus on the games developed by Otomate, so as to elucidate how these characters reflect or challenge traditional gender roles and their impact on gender equality. Firstly,

this paper describes the development and characteristics of otome games, explaining how this genre provides a brand new gaming experience for female players. Subsequently, the paper examines the gendered portrayal of female protagonists and the gendered messages conveyed by these characters by analyzing several representative otome games. Moreover, it assesses the expected contributions and constraints of these games with regard to gender equality, as well as provides recommendations for enhancing the otome game industry to foster a more egalitarian and diverse approach. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide valuable insights into the design and development of otome games and contribute to the advancement of gender equality in gaming culture.

2. The Development and Characteristics of Otome Games

The otome game genre originated in Japan during the late 1980s, emerging as a distinct category of games designed for female players. The term "otome," derived from the Japanese word "おとめ," meaning "young maiden," reflects its focus on romantic narratives and character interactions from a female perspective. Initially, otome games revolved around romantic narratives, creating a romantic atmosphere through the interactions between female protagonists and various male characters. Over time, as game technology advanced, otome games diversified in themes and gameplay styles, gradually gaining international recognition. A defining feature of otome games is their narrative approach from a female perspective. Typically, these games are designed with female players as the primary audience, advancing the plot via the viewpoint of a female protagonist. Players immerse themselves in a fictional romantic world, interacting with different male characters to explore various emotional paths, which caters to the female players' desire for romantic and emotional experiences while offering a rich interactive experience. In addition, otome games feature a variety of male character archetypes, such as the aloof type, the gentle type, and the mysterious type, to meet diverse emotional needs. The games often include multiple branching storylines and endings, where players' choices directly impact the development of the story and its conclusion, enhancing replay value. Moreover, otome games concentrate on character growth, with the female protagonist typically undergoing personal development and self-discovery through interactions with male characters, increasing her abilities and confidence. The target market for otome games is primarily young women, but with changing market demands, they have also attracted some male players. The success of these games has not only highlighted the growing market for female players but also promoted diversity and inclusion in the gaming industry. While providing an emotional experience, otome games have also initiated discourse on gender representation and stereotypes, prompting developers to address issues of gender equality and diversity in character design and storytelling. In short, the development of otome games has signaled the gaming industry's increasing attention to female players' needs and has contributed to the enrichment and diversification of game content. However, challenges remain in terms of gender representation and character portrayal, necessitating further exploration and improvement to achieve higher levels of gender equality.

3. Gender Expression in Otome Games

3.1. Portrayal of Female Characters

In this paper, several otome games with official translations in languages other than Japanese have been selected to ensure that the selected games have a certain level of popularity among game users, including Piofiore: Fated Memories, Collar × Malice, and Olympia Soirée.

Piofiore: Fated Memories is set in 1925 Italy, where the protagonist Liliana Adornato is confined to traditional roles of domesticity and protection. Her freedom and capacity for action are restricted, resulting in a reduced sensitivity to social injustice. The game depicts female characters as either

"virtuous women" or "fallen women," mirroring Freud's Madonna-Whore Dichotomy and showing the constraints placed on women within a patriarchal society [1]. The binary representation not only upholds traditional gender roles but also reinforces the subordinate status of women in society [2]. Hoshino Ichika, the protagonist of Collar × Malice, is a police officer who breaks traditional female role limitations, demonstrating independence and professional capability. However, her gendered designs (e.g., short skirts and black stockings) deviate from the formal dress code of Japanese police officers, reflecting contradictions within gender performance theory [3]. Despite her professional authority on par with male colleagues, her image is constrained by cultural expectations of female gender roles. As such, this design reinforces gender stereotypes by associating female professional capabilities with physical attractiveness, limiting the diversity of female representation. Olympia Soirée is set in a hierarchical matriarchal society, known as Tengoudou. The protagonist, Olympia, is born into a society of all women, which forms a matriarchal community. Although Olympia has a symbolic role (e.g., helping the sun rise), she lacks real power, a setting that reflects the game's dual portrayal of matriarchal society: on one hand, Olympia's efforts to challenge the societal hierarchy demonstrate sensitivity to issues of gender intersectionality and criticism of an unjust system [4]; on the other hand, despite Olympia's attempts to improve societal conditions, her actual power remains limited, indicating that the game still adheres to traditional gender role allocations [5].

The depiction of female characters in these games reveals different aspects of gender expression. While Olympia Soirée challenges societal hierarchies and addresses gender intersectionality, the limitation of power for its characters suggests that it follows traditional gender roles [6]. Piofiore: Fated Memories confines female characters to traditional protective and domestic roles, reflecting traditional gender binaries. Collar × Malice, despite providing the protagonist professional authority, indicates how gendered design perpetuates cultural expectations and highlights the constraints on female representation. These games not only reflect prevailing cultural notions of gender but also illuminate the constraints imposed by the persistence of gender roles.

3.2. Presentation of Gender Relations in Otome Games

In the otome games, male protagonists are categorized into distinct types, each reflecting a different aspect of gender relationships. These categorizations not only shape character design but also reveal underlying cultural and psychological dynamics.

Firstly, cold-type characters are distinguished by their apparent indifference and arrogance. While they may outwardly display emotional distance, they are often driven by profound emotional responses towards the heroine. This type often embodies high capability and leadership qualities, aligning with societal expectations of intelligence and composure in men. The appeal of cold type characters lies in their emotional complexity and power dynamics. Despite initial brusqueness, their hidden feelings and personal monologues offer a profound emotional experience. The traditional masculine traits, such as detachment and dominance, exemplify cultural ideals of men, thus making them particularly popular. Secondly, gentle type characters are characterized by their tenderness and care, providing emotional support and security. And they typically display a stable and protective demeanor, meeting societal expectations for nurturing male figures. Nevertheless, their relationship dynamics are more conventional and less controversial, which contributes to their relatively low popularity. While gentle type characters can fulfill basic emotional needs, they lack the additional emotional stimulation that makes those with cold and mysterious personalities more engaging. Thirdly, mysterious type characters, with their complex backgrounds and enigmatic qualities, attract the female protagonist by inviting her to uncover hidden secrets. They appeal to romantic fantasies and reflect cultural internalization of intriguing and extraordinary masculinity. Their allure stems from their fantastical settings and unique traits, which provide them with an escape from reality. Their high status in the narrative allows players to experience fulfillment in the romantic storyline. The

popularity of mystery type characters highlights the influence of cultural ideals and the appeal of fantasy in shaping gender relations. Additionally, comedic or enthusiastic type characters, known for their humor and lively nature, bring a lighthearted atmosphere to the game. Despite their ability to create enjoyable experiences, their conventional relationship dynamics and personalities result in lower popularity. These characters often fail to evoke the same level of emotional depth as cold or mysterious types, highlighting the players' preference for more intense emotional engagement.

In essence, the higher popularity of cold and mysterious type characters illustrates their ability to fulfill players' desires for emotional depth and fantasy, while gentle and comedic types, despite their positive attributes, lack in providing additional emotional stimulation. This pattern reflects both player preferences and cultural influences on the idealization of male characters in games.

4. The Impact of Otome Games on Gender Equality

4.1. Otome Games and the Liberation of Female Desires

Japan, a nation that has been profoundly shaped by Chinese traditional culture, occupies a pivotal position within the Sinosphere. In ancient times, Japan was situated within this cultural sphere, where it absorbed various elements of Chinese culture, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Up to now, Japan's social norm is still influenced by Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism [7]. The rise of otome games marks a significant shift in the recognition of female sexual and romantic desires. Historically, erotic content has been primarily oriented towards male fantasies, with a long tradition of submissive or passive roles for female protagonists in erotic art, literature, and works, a trend that has often been criticized for reinforcing patriarchal views of women. Andrea Dworkin, for instance, argue that pornography perpetuates the objectification and degradation of women, while also endorsing violence and harassment against them [8]. Despite these critiques, the feminist movement during the 1980s facilitated a gradual acceptance of female professionals within the sex industry, as seen in the work of feminist scholars who advocated for more inclusive portrayals of women [9]. In contrast, otome game, a romantic genre aimed primarily at women, represents a departure from traditional erotic content by addressing and validating female desires. In the 1990s, the advent of computers and information technology led to the emergence of the "girls' games movement" in the United States, which aimed to cater specifically to female gamers. This movement, while sometimes criticized for reinforcing gender stereotypes, marked a significant step towards acknowledging and catering to female interests in gaming [10].

Otome games provide a platform where male characters are designed to appeal to female players. These characters are often portrayed as attractive, charismatic, and idealized figures, which allows female players to engage in romantic fantasies and explore desires within a safe and controlled environment. By focusing on the desires and fantasies of female players, otome games offer a unique counter-narrative to the male-centric portrayals common in other erotic media. This shift not only challenges traditional gender norms but also empowers women by providing them with narratives that align with their own romantic and emotional aspirations. Furthermore, otome games contribute to the broader conversation about gender and sexuality in media by highlighting the need for diverse representations of female desires. They serve as a medium through which female players can express their fantasies and desires in a way that traditional media often does not permit. This representation is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable media landscape, where women's desires are given equal consideration and respect.

4.2. Challenges to Gender Roles in Otome Games

While many otome games still adhere to traditional gender stereotypes, an increasing number have sought to challenge these frameworks through innovative character design and interaction models.

Modern otome games frequently present female protagonists as career-oriented individuals, leaders, or independent figures, moving away from the conventional depiction of women in passive or dependent roles. This shift in character design not only disrupts traditional gender expectations but also highlights a broader and more varied representation of female characters. For instance, female protagonists in these games are often depicted as competent and self-sufficient, reflecting a respect for gender equality and offering players a more nuanced view of women's roles in society [11]. In these games, interactions between male and female characters are often more balanced and respectful. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical dynamics, many otome games depict relationships where dialogue and interactions are characterized by mutual respect and support. This design choice fosters an environment that values gender equality and encourages players to engage with characters in a manner that reflects contemporary attitudes toward gender relations. For example, some games feature narratives where both male and female characters contribute equally to solving problems, making decisions, and advancing the storyline, which helps to normalize equitable relationships in the gaming context. Furthermore, male characters in otome games are frequently depicted in an idealized and attractive manner, which serves to cater to the fantasies and desires of female players. This portrayal can be seen as a challenge to traditional gender roles, as it provides a platform for female players to explore their own romantic fantasies and desires. The creation of male characters who are not only visually appealing but also emotionally supportive and respectful represents a positive representation of gender dynamics in otome games. This approach enables players to engage in a form of escapism that is both entertaining and empowering, contributing to the modernization of gender perspectives in gaming.

4.3. Recommendations for Promoting Gender Equality

In order to further promote gender equality, it is recommended that otome game developers integrate more gender-equal elements into both character design and storylines. It is of paramount importance to ensure that the design of diverse female characters is given due consideration in this effort. It is imperative that female characters in otome games represent a diverse range of professions and societal roles, moving beyond the confines of traditional gender stereotypes. In lieu of being depicted as passive or dependent, female characters can be portrayed as professionals, leaders, or individuals with significant social influence. For example, the portrayal of women in positions of authority, such as scientists or community leaders, demonstrates their autonomy and capabilities, which align with contemporary perspectives on gender roles and equality. It is similarly crucial to foster supportive and equitable interactions between male and female characters in order to advance gender equality. A significant number of otome games feature male characters who are idealized in a manner that caters to the fantasies of female players, which can serve to reinforce traditional gender dynamics [12]. Developers should design communication models where both genders contribute equally to the narrative and problem-solving. This can involve scenarios where characters collaborate to overcome challenges, or where female characters' opinions are given equal importance in decision-making. Such balanced interactions reflect respect for gender equality and enhance the gaming experience by offering a more realistic and fair portrayal of relationships. Finally, focusing on diversity and inclusivity in game content is vital for providing a comprehensive and just gaming experience. Developers should aim to include a variety of gender identities and experiences in their narratives and character settings. This means moving beyond binary gender representations to include characters that reflect a spectrum of gender identities and expressions. Incorporating non-binary characters or exploring themes related to gender fluidity can enrich the game's narrative and promote a more inclusive approach to character development. By embracing these diverse perspectives, otome games can challenge traditional gender norms and provide players with a broader and more inclusive understanding of gender issues. These changes not only meet players' expectations for gender

equality but also set a positive example within the gaming industry, contributing to a broader societal shift towards gender equity.

5.   Conclusion

Despite the ongoing challenges in the development of otome games—challenges that often stem from entrenched stereotypes and may inadvertently reinforce them—these games represent a significant step forward in acknowledging and catering to female desires. The advent of otome games reflects a growing recognition of female users' needs and interests within the consumer market, marking an important shift in the gaming industry's focus. The issues facing otome games are not insurmountable, and effective solutions are within reach. Addressing these challenges requires industry professionals to develop innovative approaches and to gain a deeper understanding of players' evolving needs. By prioritizing diversity in character design, promoting equitable gender interactions, and embracing inclusivity, the otome game industry can enhance its offerings and better align with contemporary views on gender equality. Looking ahead, the continued progress of the otome game industry hinges on both reflection and innovation. Through ongoing efforts to address stereotypes and to create a more diverse and engaging gaming experience, otome games have the potential to meet players' expectations, challenge outdated norms, and contribute positively to the broader discourse on gender equality. By fostering a more inclusive and representative gaming environment, otome games can play a pivotal role in shaping a more equitable and enriching experience for all players.

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