

From virtual to reality: the bidirectional domestication of otome games and young female players

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Abstract. Otome games have rapidly gained popularity among young women in recent years, yet existing studies mostly remain confined to binary judgments such as positive vs. negative or immersive vs. sober. Taking the Media Domestication Theory as the framework and combining in-depth interviews with 12 young female players, this paper examines how otome games enter players' lives and how virtual intimate experiences are transformed into real views on love. The study finds that players domesticate games into their daily lives through appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion, while games in turn domesticate players through idealized relationship scripts, forming a bidirectional domestication between the two. The two dimensions of "sense of identification" and "sense of boundary" determine the way and degree to which virtual experiences infiltrate real views on love, leading similar gaming experiences to diverge into different orientations such as learning, comparison, prudence and substitution.

Keywords: otome games, bidirectional domestication, views on love, young women

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the popularization of digital media and the expansion of the female-oriented cultural market, otome games have rapidly emerged among young female groups. Different from previous competitive or adventure games dominated by male audiences, otome games target women as their main audience, center on romantic plots, emotional interactions and character development, and construct an idealized and immersive virtual intimate space. Players play female characters and develop romantic relationships with multiple virtual male characters. Players not only interact with characters in the game, but also purchase peripherals, participate in support activities, create fan works and organize offline events, extending the game into the real world. Otome games have transformed from mere entertainment products into a socio-cultural field carrying emotional expression and identity construction.

This phenomenon reflects the complex situation of contemporary young women in terms of real marriage and love, social gender expectations and changes in emotional culture. Therefore, the study of otome games not only helps to understand the youth emotional culture in the digital age, but also helps to respond to the real emotional problems of young people in the new media context. This paper focuses on how virtual intimate experiences are transformed into real relationships through players' identification practices and boundary negotiations. Based on this, this paper revolves around the following three questions: First, how do young

female players appropriate, objectify and incorporate otome games in their daily lives, transforming them from entertainment products into emotional companionship resources? Second, how do players negotiate the distance between virtual intimate relationships and real intimate relationships through identification practices and boundary practices? Third, in the above process, how are the virtual intimate experiences in otome games selectively transformed into mate selection criteria and relationship expectations in real views on love?

2. Literature review and research questions

2.1. Research on otome games

The systematic discussion of domestic otome game research began with the launch of *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* in 2018, which is roughly divided into two directions: one is the perspective of industrial culture and market mechanism, exploring the commercial value of female-oriented games; the other is the perspective of audience and cultural consumption, analyzing participation motivations, interactive behaviors and emotional attachment. In terms of motivations, Wen et al. and Li pointed out that otome games provide women with a psychologically safe space and emotional compensation [1, 2]. Zhi summarized their attractiveness as the psychological motivations of "pursuing beauty, pursuing fun, conforming to the crowd and pursuing proximity" [3]. In terms of behaviors, the quantitative study by Wu et al. showed that the deeper the immersion, the more players tend to expect idealized love [4]. Xiao et al. used the theories of interaction ritual and symbolic consumption to reveal that players form stable parasocial relationships with virtual characters through check-ins, consumption, peripherals and community communication [5]. Overall, existing studies mostly remain at the descriptive analysis level and lack a systematic explanation of the mechanism by which otome games are internalized and reproduced in players' lives.

2.2. Research on otome games and young people's views on love

Most studies focus on analyzing the impact of otome games on young female players' views on mate selection and love. First, in terms of mate selection, most studies hold a cautious or even negative attitude, worrying that otome games will raise players' expectations of real partners. Chen et al. pointed out that existing discussions generally believe that otome games make young women have unrealistic expectations of real love, habitually resist getting out of single status, and have more difficulty establishing intimate relationships in reality, thus having a negative impact on their mate selection views [6]. Chen's study also found that the male characters set in otome games are highly perfect, which can satisfy players' fantasies about ideal partners and further push up their mate selection expectations [7]. Second, in terms of the impact on love, current studies present both positive and negative orientations. Some studies emphasize their positive value. Wang et al. examined players' gaming experiences and pointed out that otome games can enhance women's sense of self-worth in intimate relationships and prompt them to pursue more equal relationships [8]. Pu et al. warned of their potential risks, arguing that the popularization of digital emotional products such as AI virtual boyfriends will make young women's mate selection criteria tend to be idealized, especially with stricter requirements in terms of economic conditions and appearance [9].

2.3. Research progress and deficiencies

In summary, existing studies have revealed the multiple meanings of otome games from the perspectives of emotional compensation, parasocial relationships, emotional consumption, subjectivity construction and the impact on intimate relationships, but there are still three deficiencies. First, some studies tend to regard otome

games as external influencing factors, focusing on whether they lead to idealized views on love or real gaps, but rarely analyze how players actively process these gaming experiences. Second, existing studies mostly emphasize that otome games provide virtual intimacy and emotional satisfaction, but insufficiently explore the process by which this virtual intimacy enters daily life, is objectified and incorporated into time rhythms. Third, discussions on the relationship between otome games and real views on love often stop at binary judgments of positive vs. negative or immersive vs. sober, ignoring the continuous boundary negotiations that players conduct between the virtual and the real.

3. Theoretical framework and research methods

3.1. Media Domestication Theory

The Media Domestication Theory was proposed by British sociologists Silverstone, Hirsch and others, initially used to analyze how media such as television are accepted, arranged, used and endowed with meaning after entering families, and integrated into daily life [10]. Its core viewpoint is that media do not passively enter society, but are gradually "domesticated" into a part of the life world through the active selection and meaning construction of individuals and families; the socialization of media is a two-way interaction between media and users—while accepting media, users continuously redefine and recontextualize them to fit their own life logic and cultural needs. The process includes four stages: appropriation, which means media are taken possession of as they enter the private sphere from the public sphere; objectification, which means media are endowed with emotional and symbolic meanings and become concrete symbols; incorporation, which means media are integrated into daily rhythms and coordinated with life practices; conversion, which means media use experiences are externalized into social interactions and in turn affect identity construction and social relationships. The Media Domestication Theory focuses on how media technologies are incorporated into individuals' daily lives and endowed with emotional, social and identity meanings in the process of continuous use. Media are not merely technical tools, but gradually transform into a part of life structures and emotional relationships in users' practices.

3.2. Analytical framework

The four-stage model can describe the process by which media enter life, but it is insufficient to explain why similar gaming experiences produce different results. As a highly emotional and self-projective medium, otome games may make players deeply engaged and immersed, or they may criticize, filter and even refuse to transfer gaming experiences. This means that the effect of otome games on views on love is more like a meaning negotiation process in the continuous interaction between players and games. Therefore, in addition to the four links, this paper incorporates "sense of identification" and "sense of boundary" into the analysis.

Sense of identification refers to the degree to which players regard the protagonist as a self-projection object and place themselves in virtual relationships; sense of boundary refers to the limit by which players distinguish, connect and adjust virtual emotions and real relationships. The former affects the depth of the transfer of gaming experiences, while the latter affects the direction and degree of the transfer. The combination of the two forms different conversion orientations (see Figure 1).

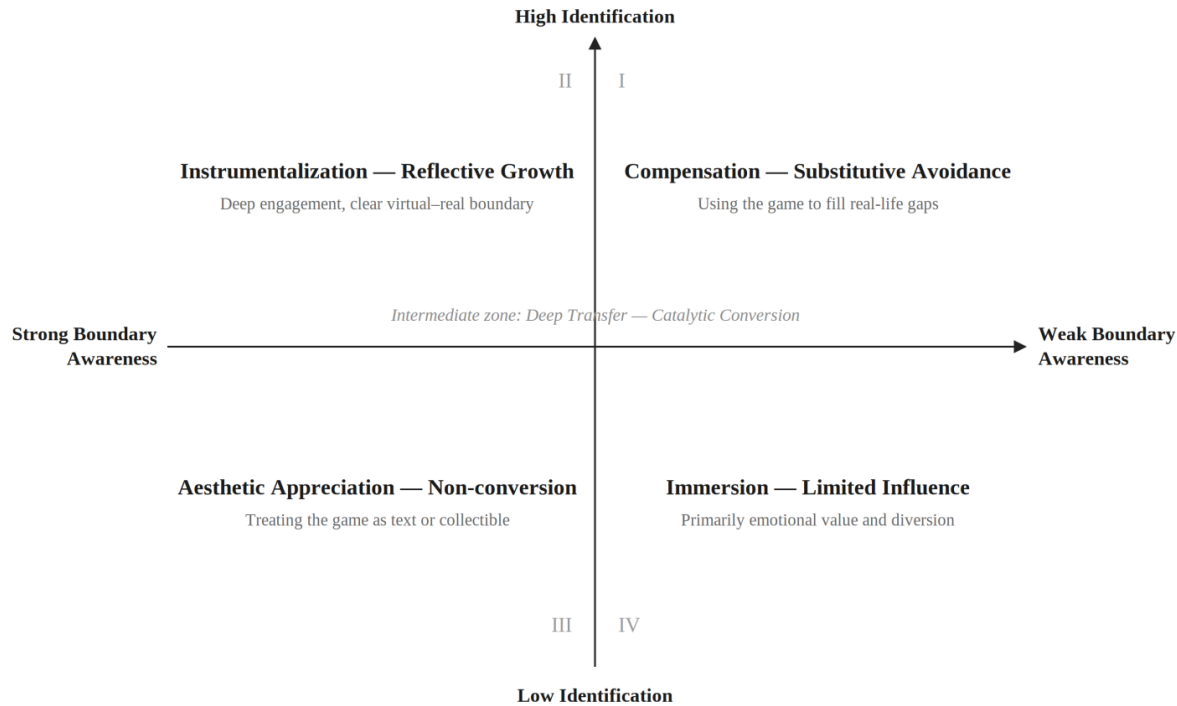


Figure 1. Different domestication types shaped by sense of identification and sense of boundary

Players with high identification and clear boundaries tend to transform games into resources for reflection and growth; those with high identification and blurred boundaries may use virtual relationships to compensate for real-life gaps; those with low identification and clear boundaries mostly stay at the level of aesthetics and pastime; those in the intermediate zone present limited and specific experience transfer.

Accordingly, the analytical framework of this paper can be summarized as follows: Otome games first enter players' daily lives through appropriation, objectification and incorporation, and are transformed into emotional companionship, community interaction and identity expression; in this process, players enter virtual intimate relationships through identification practices, and screen and adjust virtual experiences through boundary practices; finally, games in turn shape players' understanding of real love relationships through relationship scripts, interaction mechanisms and idealized characters.

3.3. Research methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research method combining semi-structured interviews as the main method and online observation as the auxiliary method. The research subjects are young female players who have been continuously exposed to otome games for more than half a year and still have stable gaming or related attention behaviors in the past six months. The samples were obtained through purposive sampling and snowball sampling, and finally 12 valid interviews were formed, all anonymized as F1 to F12 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information of respondents ($N = 12$)

ID	Status	Occupation	Gaming experience	Main games played	Romantic status	Classification (Figure 1)
F1	Employed	Freelancer (Blogger/Model)	About 1 year	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice, Love and Deepspace	Single	Deep Transfer - Catalytic Conversion
F2	Employed	New workplace entrant	About 2 years	Light and Night, Love and Deepspace	In a relationship	Deep Transfer - Catalytic Conversion
F3	Employed	Office worker	About 2 years	Love and Deepspace	Single	Compensation - Substitutive Avoidance
F4	Student	College student	About 10 years	Love and Deepspace	Long-term single	Aesthetic Appreciation - Non-conversion
F5	Student	College student	About 2 years	Meet in the Reverse Water, Japanese otome games	No romantic experience	Aesthetic Appreciation - Non-conversion
F6	Employed	Office worker	About 2 years	Love and Deepspace, Light and Night	Single	Immersion - Limited Influence
F7	Employed	Office worker	About 7 years	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice (Pape Games series)	In a relationship	Instrumentalization - Reflective Growth
F8	Employed	Office worker	About 10 years	Tears of Themis	In a relationship	Instrumentalization - Reflective Growth
F9	Employed	Office worker	About 5 years	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice, etc.	Single	Instrumentalization - Reflective Growth
F10	Employed	Office worker	About 10 years	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice, Tears of Themis	Broken up	Deep Transfer - Catalytic Conversion
F11	Student	College student (Science and Engineering)	About 8 years	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice, Light and Night, Love and Deepspace	No romantic experience	Deep Transfer - Catalytic Conversion
F12	Student	College student	About 7 years	Love and Deepspace, Light and Night	Single	Instrumentalization - Reflective Growth

Data analysis adopted a grounded theory-oriented coding approach. First, open coding was conducted to extract concepts as close as possible to the respondents' original words; then axial coding was carried out to merge the materials into six core categories; finally, integration was carried out around the theme, and the specific content is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of axial coding of interview data

Axial categories	Core meaning	Related open coding
Daily embedding	Otome games enter players' time rhythms and life scenarios.	Getting into the game, returning to the game, daily check-ins, completing daily tasks, bedtime companionship
Emotional objectification	Virtual characters are placed as visible, tangible and displayable emotional objects.	Naming, character customization, wallpapers, peripherals, merchandise display cabinets, cosplay commissions
Community externalization	Private emotions are expressed through social platforms and offline activities.	Showing gacha pulls, fan creations, interactions with fellow fans of the same character, birthday support events, offline gatherings
Identification practice	Players enter or observe virtual intimate relationships in different identities.	Protagonist as myself, phased identification, spectator reading, idolization
Boundary negotiation	Players distinguish between the virtual and the real and decide whether experiences can cross the boundary.	Separation of the 2D and 3D worlds, rejection of Out of Character (OOC), real-life gaps, selective connection
Shaping of views on love	Gaming experiences are transformed into judgments on real relationships.	Specific mate selection criteria, communication expectations, self-subjectivity, sexual and physical boundaries

4. Research findings

4.1. From entertainment consumption to emotional companionship: The daily embedding of otome games

4.1.1. Appropriation: Access and possession of otome games

Domestication theory focuses on how media technologies are accepted, adjusted and integrated into daily life in the practices of users after entering the private sphere from the public sphere, and then endowed with new meanings [11]. Appropriation is the starting point for technologies to enter private life and be endowed with meaning. The access of otome game players often does not start with clear romantic demands, but with more daily reasons such as entertainment, social interaction or consumption inertia.

Otome games build a generation space for virtual intimate relationships for players through emotional narratives that fit female aesthetics [12]. However, in the initial access link, entertainment and social motivations with lower thresholds often play a dominant role. Conformity and curiosity are often the direct reasons for getting into the game; many players even had no romantic demands at first, "I have basically zero demand for love, I just went to join in the fun when I saw a new game and treated it as a literary work to read" (F11). Commercial touchpoints further lower the threshold of access. Cross-border co-branding and recommendations on social platforms constitute common scenarios for players' first encounter with games, "I saw the co-branding of HeyTea and *Light and Night* when drinking milk tea, and then brushed some content, thought it was interesting and started playing" (F2). Consumption inertia also drives players to switch from dress-up games of the same manufacturer to otome games, "I used to play *Miracle Nikki*, so I wanted to see what its new game was like" (F7).

Download and access are just the starting point. Players will then lock in a "favorite character" among several male protagonists provided by the game, concentrate gacha resources on specific characters, strive to collect all their card illustrations, and continue to invest around them, thus completing the real possession of the game. "I pile all resources on the character I like, and I must fill the collection book and max out the levels" (F4). Through repeated investment in gacha, development and collection, a public product issued for the public gradually precipitates into an exclusive object with personal imprints.

4.1.2. Objectification: Placement of virtual avatars and living spaces

Appropriation means how otome games enter players' lives, while objectification focuses on how media acquire emotional and symbolic meanings. For otome game players, this process includes both projecting themselves into the game and bringing characters into the real space.

Games often revolve around "me", and the characters' expressions are directed at the player as the protagonist. Players can adjust the protagonist's facial features, hair color and other appearances. Some players will "create the character based on their current image, and change it when their image changes significantly" (F1). This exclusive customized image prompts players to project themselves onto it, and the prominent features of the virtual avatar often merge with the players' ideal selves [13]; the virtual avatar is not a simple visual setting, but an important entrance for players to embed "themselves" into the game world. The prominent features of the virtual avatar may merge with the players' ideal selves. Players thus regard the protagonist as an extension of themselves and understand character interactions as "words spoken to me".

Characters also enter the real space through wallpapers, acrylic standees, badges, dolls and even "merchandise display cabinets". The paper characters on the screen are transformed into tangible, placeable and displayable objects, making companionship visible and fixing the invisible emotional connection into a daily visible existence, "Putting some merchandise and small acrylic standees on the desk at home gives a sense of companionship" (F8). When going out, pin peripherals "on the bag and hold them up to take photos in suitable scenes" (F2), characters follow players into the flowing public space and become a portable identity marker. At this point, characters are no longer just figures on the screen, but emotional objects embedded in players' living spaces.

The density of spatial placement also reflects players' sense of boundary between the virtual and the real. Some players refused the statement of "being filled with characters" in the interview, "The word 'filled' is not appropriate... Even when playing games, I have not lost my subjectivity in life" (F11). On the one hand, players bring virtual characters into daily life as emotional companions; on the other hand, they also clearly recognize that "games are games and reality is reality", and repeatedly weigh between accepting characters and maintaining boundaries.

4.1.3. Incorporation: Discipline of daily time and instant companionship

Objectification places games into players' spaces, while incorporation further asks how games are embedded into players' daily time rhythms. Otome games actively cut and arrange players' schedules through a set of fixed time mechanisms. The daily check-in system, limited-time events, daily tasks, weekly rewards and the periodic replacement of gacha banners anchor gameplay at specific time nodes, and this mechanism carries clear "unrecoverable" pressure, "Domestic otome games require bit-by-bit daily check-ins, and if you miss that period, you miss it forever, there's no way to make up for it" (F4). Players with deeper investment even adjust their real arrangements around game schedules, "The exams were only those few days, but for the anniversary, I would get up at five in the morning to finish the game before going to the exam" (F11).

This daily gameplay gradually becomes an almost obligatory check-in. Players often describe themselves as "going to work" or "doing odd jobs", "Logging in is just like going to work, spending 15 minutes a day on daily tasks" (F12). They even feel uncomfortable when they fail to complete them, "I have to log into the game

at twelve o'clock every night and finish the tasks before going to bed, I feel uncomfortable all over if I don't do it" (F3). Gameplay seems like labor, and platforms continuously transform players' leisure time into unpaid investment to maintain user retention through check-in and task design [14].

At the same time, voice, call and confession functions make characters online at any time, filling players' emotional vacancies. "He will call on White Valentine's Day and holidays, and you can call back... Listening to the recordings when I'm sad makes me happy" (F12). This on-demand response is the key for otome games to stabilize virtual intimate relationships through emotional response mechanisms. Thus, incorporation presents a duality: on the one hand, players actively weave games into every moment of their time; on the other hand, games also domesticate players' rhythms in reverse through retention design. Otome games have precipitated from a pastime into an inseparable daily attachment.

4.1.4. Conversion: Externalization of private experiences into community culture

Conversion focuses on how players externalize private gaming experiences into public social interactions and reconfirm their identities and interpersonal relationships in this externalization. The externalization of otome games is mainly reflected in showing gacha pulls and peripherals, fan creation, birthday support events and offline activities.

The most basic conversion is transforming private gaming moments into displayable content on social platforms. Players are happy to "show off" the good cards they drew and the peripherals they bought, "I used to like posting the good cards I drew, and I also keep posting about my peripherals" (F5). Screenshots and picture sharing replicate and preserve experiences in specific situations, and complete a visibility management through selective disclosure [15]. What to show and what to hide is itself an external display of players' self-identity.

Creation and gathering push externalization to a deeper level. Fan creations elevate private emotions into texts that can be shared by the group. Some players "have been writing fan fiction for six years" (F10). This cultural reproduction endows game characters with higher meanings. To further confirm the existence of characters, players gather to hold birthday support events for them. For some players, the meaning of offline gatherings has gone beyond the characters themselves, "Shanghai in winter is where all my dreams began" (F11). In meeting with like-minded people, individuals move from "I" to "we", and private love is transformed into shared meaning and belonging in the community.

4.2. From virtual intimacy to real views on love: The differentiation of experience transformation

In the conversion link, players' private gaming experiences extend outward and intertwine with their understanding of intimate relationships, and this intertwining shows differentiation among different players. Players may connect virtual relationships with real views on love, or actively draw boundaries to limit transfer. The reverse shaping of games and the resistance of players coexist, and the differentiation depends on the degree of identification and sense of boundary [16].

4.2.1. Identification practice in virtual intimacy: How players enter relationships

Players establish adjustable relationships with otome games, and they enter virtual intimate relationships in different ways. Based on the interview materials, they are summarized into three types: strong identification, switchable identification and non-romantic intimacy.

Identification is first supported by mechanisms such as character customization, naming, nicknames, card illustrations and wallpapers. These settings provide specific entrances for players to place "themselves" into relationships, enabling abstract emotional investment to obtain visual and material support.

The first is the "protagonist as myself" type of strong identification. Players directly equate the protagonist with themselves and recognize the male protagonists as romantic partners, "I personally treat him as my boyfriend" (F3), "Isn't the protagonist me?" (F10). For them, the game is not a story to watch, but "I" being in a relationship. When players identify with the virtual avatar, the avatar will replace their real self to a certain extent, and the self-concept related to the avatar is activated and strengthened accordingly [13].

The second is switchable identification. Players are neither fully immersed nor completely onlookers, but flexibly switch between "I" and a spectator according to the plot type, protagonist's personality and character relationships. Some players believe that the degree of identification is only "thirty to fifty percent" (F8); when the protagonist's behavior exceeds their recognition, she will "jump out and treat it as a literary work" (F6). Players actively choose to identify or disengage, and take the initiative to control their degree of involvement.

The third is "non-romantic" intimacy. Studies have shown that parasocial interaction is a one-way, imagination-based emotional relationship formed between media users and media figures. The audience knows that the other party is not a real communication object, but still pours real emotions and obtains satisfaction, and this relationship does not necessarily take romance as the form [17]. Such players conform to its basic characteristics. They do not regard characters as lovers, but still maintain a genuine emotional connection with them. This connection is manifested as "a sense of companionship that is more than friends but less than lovers" (F4), and can also be emotional consumption not attached to the name of romance, "Not an idol, nor a boyfriend, I just want to spend money on him" (F7). Characters are placed in a position between romance and aesthetics here, undertaking the functions of companions, aesthetic objects and even emotional sustenance.

In summary, identification is a switchable relational practice. The strong identification type regards the protagonist as an extension of themselves, the switchable type adjusts the depth of involvement according to the plot, and the non-romantic type maintains emotional connections outside of romance. Virtual intimate relationships are generated in players' continuous positioning of "who I am", "who the character is" and "what this relationship has to do with me".

4.2.2. Boundary negotiation: Drawing boundaries between the virtual and the real

Identification determines how players enter virtual intimate relationships, while the extent and way in which these relationships affect reality depend on how players handle the boundary between the virtual and the real. Sense of boundary is an ongoing negotiation work for players [18], enabling them to continuously adjust the distance between virtual relationships and real life among division, connection and filtering.

Players with strict boundaries regard the game world and the real world as two separate parts. Players at one end view the virtual and the real as two mutually disconnected worlds, "The 2D and 3D worlds are two worlds separated by an iron wall" (F8); this boundary is also externalized into specific behavioral choices. They avoid commissions and role-playing that materialize characters, and limit their favorite characters to the screen. Players at the other end let the boundaries loosen and actively let characters enter reality, "It's hard to say about sense of boundary, I am a person with very weak sense of boundary" (F12), and are willing to make virtual relationships take temporary physical forms in real scenarios through booking cosplay commissions and offline dates. The positional difference between boundary drawing and connection indicates whether and to what extent gaming experiences can enter real life.

Boundary negotiation constitutes a relatively independent dimension in terms of body and sex. Even players who are highly emotionally invested tend to strictly limit sexual-related fantasies to the virtual, "Anything goes in the game, but in real life... I am cautious about sex" (F5). Players enjoy themselves to the fullest in virtual experiences because virtual experiences do not lead to real physical risks, thus coexisting the emotional "authenticity" and real-life safety [19].

Sense of boundary will be repeatedly revised during long-term gameplay. Some interviewees mentioned, "At first I thought I would just play this game for the rest of my life and not look for a boyfriend, but now I think it's unrealistic" (F11). This revision shows that players' judgments on the relationship between the virtual and the real will adjust with changes in life situations and gaming experiences. Boundaries may tighten or loosen, and are the product of continuous negotiation in the domestication process.

Therefore, boundary negotiation determines how much the same identification experience flows into reality. It also constitutes the channel through which gaming experiences enter real views on love.

4.2.3. Shaping of views on love: Learning, comparison, prudence and substitution

After identification and boundary negotiation, virtual intimate experiences begin to affect players' understanding of real love relationships. Players do not copy game scripts verbatim, but screen and reorganize gaming experiences according to real experiences, emotional needs and relationship situations.

First, players can regard the game as a low-risk practice field and take interaction methods in the plot as learning cases. Players not only learn love methods from it, "I will learn from Qin Che's way of treating me and prepare romantic surprises for my partner" (F1); but also learn the qualities of characters, who are "more like my life mentors. When encountering things, I will think about what I would do in reality" (F8). Characters transform from romantic partners into action references, and virtual plots also transform from immersive stories into materials for reflecting on reality.

This also shows that virtual relationships provide a mirror for players to compare reality. Characters in otome games are usually highly idealized templates. They can respond to players' emotions in a timely manner, continuously express attention, and act around players' needs. Such relationships certainly cannot be equated with real relationships, but they make some originally vague needs visible. Players begin to realize that what they really value is not necessarily the characters' careers, appearances or dramatic experiences, but the feelings of being listened to carefully, treated equally and responded to stably. Games amplify the ways of getting along that are ignored in real intimate relationships, "I never thought I could be treated like this before, otome games made me reflect on my previous relationships" (F9). "I will bring what I felt in otome games into reality and ask the other party to do the same" (F11).

This reflection also makes players more cautious about real love. Virtual relationships in games have the characteristics of safety, controllability and exitability, and players do not have to bear physical risks, social pressure and long-term responsibilities in real relationships. Because they have experienced relatively equal interactions in games, players gradually "can recognize offensive words in reality" and become more cautious in mate selection; some players also revise their judgments on virtual companionship after long-term gameplay, "At first I thought I would just play this game for the rest of my life and not look for a boyfriend, but now I think it's unrealistic" (F11). This change shows that players have established a more detailed filtering mechanism between the virtual and the real. They both admit that games provide referable emotional experiences and realize that real partners are not characters running according to scripts.

When players have a large real emotional gap and the boundary between the virtual and the real continues to loosen, games also undertake a temporary emotional compensation function and become a "utopia". "Many people in reality can't love me as much as he does, which makes me very pessimistic about real love" (F3). Compared with the uncertainty of real relationships, virtual characters have the characteristics of being summonable at any time, low conflict and exitable, providing emotional value that real relationships can hardly give stably. Games retain companionship, response and comfort, but eliminate the coordination, compromise and conflict in real intimate relationships. At this time, virtual intimacy becomes a low-friction companionship solution. A player is well aware that virtual characters are not real partners, but still regards games as a weighed emotional choice: "He is there whenever I look for him, and I can just not log in when I

don't want to look for him; if I really find a real person, I will quarrel over trivial things" (F9). When controllable, instant and low-risk emotional responses become a stable substitute, the attractiveness of real intimate relationships may decrease accordingly.

5. Conclusion

Taking the Media Domestication Theory as the clue, this paper reveals that there is a bidirectional domestication relationship between otome games and young women. On the one hand, players domesticate games into their daily lives step by step through appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion, making virtual characters emotional objects that can be accompanied and attached to; on the other hand, games also continuously domesticate players in reverse during interactions, quietly implanting their idealized relationship scripts into players' expectations of intimate relationships. These two directions are two sides of the same process: the deeper the players' identification, the stronger the reverse shaping of games on their views on love; and whether the boundary is clear determines whether this shaping can truly enter reality.

Existing discussions either worry that they lead to addiction and deviation of views on love, or emphasize their emotional empowerment, both placing players in a position to be judged; this paper returns to the players' own narratives as much as possible, making how they use, how they choose and how they understand this relationship the subject of analysis. In this sense, the effect of otome games on views on love is neither empowerment nor alienation, but provides an emotional buffer zone where young women can enter and exit repeatedly. They practice intimacy and identify their needs in it, and also reflect on the "difficulty" of reality through the "authenticity" of the virtual. When real marriage and love increasingly carry uncertainty and risks, more and more young people turn to such controllable and exitable emotional relationships. Rather than simply reading it as escapism, it is better to regard it as an active attempt made by a generation to place their emotions in the increasingly difficult situation of intimate relationships.

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