

From "strategy" to "resonance": emotional narration in otome games

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Abstract. This paper explores how otome games have evolved from their original "strategy-base" logic into an interactive narrative medium focused on "emotional resonance". First, it sorts out the definition and development context of otome games, as well as the social, cultural, and technological drivers behind their growing demand, pointing out that they respond to the dilemmas modern women face in real intimate relationships and their pursuit of subjectivity. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the core emotional design mechanisms of otome games, including branching narratives and multiple-ending structures, affinity and interactive feedback systems, and realistic scenario construction driven by voice, haptics, and AI technologies. It argues that these mechanisms collectively construct a form of "digital intimacy" that immerses players and encourages their active co-creation. Finally, the paper examines the cultural implications of otome games, suggesting that beyond entertainment consumption, they provide women with a utopian space for identity construction and emotional exploration, and discusses the ethical challenges that may emerge in future development. This study aims to reveal the underlying emotional structure and socio-psychological significance of otome games as an important cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: otome games, interpersonal relationships, emotional development

1. Basic definition and development context of otome games

As a distinctive genre within the gaming world, otome games target female audiences as their primary demographic and construct unique gaming experiences centered on romantic interaction. Their core mechanism lies in allowing players to control a female protagonist who engages in emotional communication with multiple male characters, thereby composing romantic narratives within a virtual world.

Since the 1990s, alongside the rapid development of the electronic gaming industry, female-oriented romantic games have gradually emerged from the margins and moved toward independent development, forming a unique aesthetic system and consumer community. In 1994, Japan's Koei Tecmo Games released Angelique, which is widely regarded as the starting point of otome games, marking the formal emergence of a game genre oriented toward female audiences with romantic interaction as its core mechanism [1]. Early otome games emphasized a "courting targets" gameplay logic, in which players achieved "ideal romantic" endings with specific male characters through mechanisms such as option selection and attribute enhancement.

This design foregrounded a clearance-style experience characterized by goal orientation and a sense of achievement.

Entering the 2000s, otome games gradually expanded their thematic scope and narrative depth, offering more diversified character settings and storylines. Representative works such as *Harukanaru Toki no Naka de* and *Hakuouki* guided players to resonate with characters' growth experiences beyond romance alone [2]. During this period, emotional development and character backstories became increasingly central to narrative design.

Since the 2010s, with the widespread adoption of smartphones and the rapid development of mobile application platforms, otome games have further transformed into daily companionship-oriented interactive experiences. Titles such as *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* and *Light and Night* construct highly immersive emotional worlds through the integration of visual illustrations, real-time interaction, and narrative continuity. In this context, players are no longer merely strategists optimizing outcomes but co-creators of virtual emotional relationships [3].

Based on these developments, this study explores how otome games have gradually shifted from being "strategic" to "resonant", becoming an important platform for emotional expression and subjectivity construction in digital media. Digital narration, with its inherent interactivity, offers new possibilities for emotional expression that differ fundamentally from traditional linear texts [4].

2. Factors driving the growth in demand for otome games

The sustained growth in demand for otome games is rooted in emotional motivations shaped by transformations in social structures, gender culture, and media technologies. From a macro perspective, since the 1990s, women in Japan and other East Asian regions have attained higher educational levels and more mature ideological frameworks. They are no longer satisfied with passively receiving narratives shaped by the male gaze but increasingly seek media forms that reflect their own emotional experiences, thereby fostering the rise of otome games [5].

At the same time, changes in traditional models of romantic relationships have provided important real-world impetus for the development of otome games. In contemporary urban and digital life, accelerated rhythms and increasing social pressure often render real interpersonal relationships unstable and emotionally demanding. For women in particular, intimate relationships may involve dilemmas such as gender power imbalance and constrained emotional expression. Within this context, otome games offer an idealized, controllable, and low-risk alternative form of intimacy. Through virtual interaction, players can experience understanding, companionship, and emotional projection that are difficult to achieve in everyday life [6].

From the perspective of media culture, the emotional narrative form of otome games aligns closely with users' demands for personalization, immersion, and participation in the digital age. By incorporating mechanisms such as multiple endings and interactive choices, otome games allow players to actively participate in narrative development and experience a sense of emotional co-creation. This participatory structure enhances emotional resonance and strengthens players' sense of subjectivity, positioning them as active constructors rather than passive recipients of narrative meaning.

In sum, the growth of otome games results from the convergence of gender consciousness, transformations in intimate relationships, and continuous innovation in digital media. These games respond simultaneously to women's emotional dilemmas in reality and to broader cultural shifts toward interactive and emotionally resonant digital experiences.

3. Narrative structure and emotional design mechanisms of otome games

3.1. Branching narratives and multiple endings

Branching narratives and multiple-ending structures constitute the core narrative charm of otome games. This structure breaks away from the linearity of traditional storytelling by providing multiple possible paths of story development. Players' choices directly influence narrative progression and emotional outcomes, enabling deep participation and a sense of authorship over emotional experiences.

Typically, players adopt a first-person perspective as the female protagonist and interact with multiple male characters. At key narrative junctures, players are confronted with choices that function as narrative crossroads, directing the plot toward divergent outcomes. Each decision may alter the emotional trajectory between the player and specific characters, shaping the eventual ending. This empowerment through choice enhances players' sense of agency and subjective involvement.

In *Light and Night*, for example, players interact with male characters possessing distinct personalities. At critical moments, choosing whether to accompany a character to an important event may unlock exclusive storylines or foreclose certain relational developments. Different choices lead to diverse endings, ranging from idealized romantic conclusions to regretful separations, thereby encouraging repeated exploration and emotional investment.

The multiple-ending mechanism not only increases replayability but also accommodates varied emotional preferences among players. While some pursue idealized romantic resolutions, others favor open-ended conclusions that leave space for imagination. This diversity allows each player to locate personal emotional resonance within the narrative framework.

3.2. Affinity and interactive feedback systems

The affinity system is a central component of emotional design in otome games. Typically represented through numerical values or progress indicators, affinity reflects the evolving emotional relationship between the player and each character. Players influence affinity through dialogue choices, task completion, and gift-giving, thereby shaping emotional development.

Crucially, player actions receive immediate emotional feedback. Supportive dialogue may elicit warmth and affection, while inappropriate responses may provoke disappointment or tension. This responsive system enhances immersion and simulates the emotional dynamics of real interpersonal relationships.

In *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, players interact with characters through text messages, phone calls, and dates. Each interaction modifies affinity levels and is accompanied by changes in language, expression, and behavior. Such feedback mechanisms deepen emotional realism and reinforce players' perception of mutual emotional responsiveness.

Some otome games further introduce hidden affinity systems, requiring players to infer emotional states through subtle cues. This design encourages careful attention to interaction details and intensifies emotional engagement, fostering deeper immersion in the process of relational development.

3.3. Realistic scenario construction

Advances in digital technology have driven otome games toward increasingly realistic emotional experiences. Through multimodal design—including voice acting, haptic feedback, and AI-driven dialogue—these games blur the boundary between virtual and real interactions, creating heightened emotional immersion [7].

Voice systems play a pivotal role in conveying emotional nuance. Professional voice acting enables characters to express subtle emotional shifts in tone and rhythm, enhancing their perceived vitality and

realism. In many games, vocal performances dynamically respond to player choices, reinforcing emotional interactivity.

Haptic feedback, particularly on mobile devices, further enhances realism. Subtle vibrations accompanying phone calls or narrative climaxes simulate physical sensations such as heartbeat or touch, synchronizing bodily perception with emotional experience.

AI dialogue systems represent the latest frontier in otome game design. By enabling more flexible and personalized interaction, AI-driven characters can respond to players' input in seemingly autonomous ways. This continuous, conversational interaction strengthens the illusion of companionship and emotional presence.

4. Conclusion: cultural implications and future trends

The evolution of otome games from strategic systems to emotionally resonant narratives reflects both technological advancement and the diversification of women's cultural needs. Through branching narratives, affinity mechanisms, and realistic interaction design, otome games have transformed from simple romance simulators into complex media spaces for emotional participation, identity construction, and psychological adjustment.

Beyond entertainment, otome games articulate and respond to real emotional tensions faced by modern women in intimate relationships. By offering a utopian space for experimenting with idealized relational models, they function as tools for emotional exploration and temporary relief from real-world constraints. Research suggests that such virtual intimate interactions can partially satisfy emotional needs and foster psychological well-being [8].

Looking forward, the continued integration of AI and immersive technologies will further complicate the relationship between virtual and real intimacy. Future challenges lie in balancing emotional authenticity with ethical responsibility, ensuring that digital intimacy complements rather than replaces real interpersonal relationships, while maintaining respect for female subjectivity within commercial frameworks.

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