Analysis of Otome Mobile Game from the Perspective of Feminism in China

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Abstract: Computer and mobile games have become popular ways of entertainment. Currently, the number of female mobile game users is increasing year by year, accounting for roughly the same proportion as that of male users. Therefore, otome games, which are mainly targeted at female players, have gradually attracted more attention in the Chinese game industry. In China, YunShangYuYi stands out among mobile games for women after publishing. From the perspective of feminist theory, this paper will study the current situation and characteristics of mobile games represented by YunShangYuYi, and analyze the influence and limitations of otome mobile games on the development of feminism.

Keywords: Mobile game, Otome game, Feminism, YunShangYuYi.

1. Introduction

Recently, computer and mobile games have become increasingly popular forms of entertainment (Dickey, 2006). Globally, mainstream digital games are defined as a space with mandatory norms of sexual orientation and hyper-masculine gender roles (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019). Traditionally, video games have been considered an entertaining activity for men (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). However, according to the 2017 White Paper on the Global Mobile Game Industry released on Digital Entertainment Industry Annual Summit (refer to as DEAS), male and female accounted for about the same percentage of mobile game users in 2017, with female gamer accounting for 50.2 percent, slightly ahead of male gamer (which is 49.8 percent) (Game Forum, 2018). Therefore, otome games has gradually gained more attention in the Chinese game field.

Otome game (also referred to as ‘maiden game”) is story-based video games for women. In addition to experiencing the main plot, the player can change the relationships between female player characters and different male game characters (Wikipedia, 2021). In this kind of games, the player always takes on the role of a heroine surrounded by young men and develops several romances (Andlauer, 2018). Similar to otome video games, otome mobile games are designed and operated for female gamer as the main customer group. In China, YunShangYuYi, the first Chinese 3D vintage style mobile game with collocation of clothes as the main gameplay, stands out in the female mobile game area. The game is so engaging due to its simple operation, beautiful scenes, rich storyline and sociality that it ranked No. 1 on the Apple store free app list in the first day of public beta (Kang, 2019).

From the perspective of feminist theory, this research essay will study the current situation and characteristics of otome mobile game represented by YunShangYuYi, applying political liberalism and postmodernism to analyze the impact of otome mobile games on the development of feminism, and critically analyze its limitations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Ethnography

The research was conducted by collecting academic studies and articles from the Internet to analyze the current situation and characteristics of otome mobile games. At the same time, through playing many types of otome mobile game and participating in the online discussion, the long-term observation experience of such games and players is also beneficial to the completion of the research subject.

2.2 Case Study

This essay takes the popular Chinese 3D dress-up mobile game YunShangYuYi as an example to discuss, which occupies a certain position in the Chinese market. The characteristics of otome mobile game represented by YunShangYuYi mainly include amusement, romantic storyline, strong sociability and exquisite scenes, which meet the emotional and social needs of female players and show some femininity characteristics.

3. Otome Game Analysis—Take YunShangYuYi as an Example

3.1 The Rise of Otome Game

Otome games originated in Japan. The first otome game was Angelique (1994), made by an all-female Japanese team. The game was originally aimed at teenage girls, but has since become surprisingly popular with older teens and women (Wikipedia, 2021). In the United States, Barbie Fashion Designer, which was designed for female, was then released in 1997 and sold more than 600,000 copies in its first year (Dickey, 2006). Early otome games borrowed heavily from the conventions of retro shoujo manga, which emphasized pure romance and stable setting (Wikipedia, 2021). But as mobile games became popular, other narrative and game elements were introduced, including action, adventure, and combat (Kim, 2009). Gradually, otome games have broken the traditional gaming market, which has long been dominated by male (Shi & Chung, 2019).

In the context of the development of otome games in the world, Chinese otome games have also become popular.
Yuxin (2018) divided the development of otome mobile games into three stages based on the ranking of game application downloads, combining with the time nodes of the emergence of mobile games. The first stage is from 2014 to 2015. Then the second stage is from 2015 to June 2016. At this time, the emergence of more than 100 million female players in Honor of Kings proved the huge potential of the female player market. The third stage is from June 2016 to present, and otome mobile games formed a preliminary content construction model. Many female players have appeared in mobile games, including LoveR and YunShangYuYi. As of the end of 2018, 44.2% of gamers in China were women (Liu & Lai, 2020). In addition, the large increase in the number of female game users in 2020 also shows that the potential of female games’ development in China (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: From China industry information network](image)

3.2 Introduction of YunShangYuYi

The influx of large-scale female players has promoted the creation of excellent otome games, and YunShangYuYi is one of them. This game is a mobile game with dress-up tasks as the main storyline. The costumes of the game are mainly classical and modern style (Figure 2). The game player will play the heroine with superpowers with the help of an elf and travel through different space to find five princes who are closely related to the fate of the world and maintain the order of the space.

![Figure 2: Screenshots from YunShangYuYi](image)

The main feature of the game is the female dress-up element, that is, players need to match the most suitable costumes according to the plot to obtain points and coins (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the game adds a lot of love adventure elements on the basis of dress-up. The protagonist will contact and cooperate with the princes of destiny to complete tasks, and can also develop romantic relationship with them (Figure 4).

![Figure 3: Points system (screenshots from YunShangYuYi)](image)

![Figure 4: Princes of destiny (screenshots from YunShangYuYi)](image)

In addition, the game is not limited to stand-alone gameplay. When players complete dress-up and love tasks, they can also participate in group gameplay, that is, dozens of people form an organization and participate in the game together. These members will also establish common communities on other platforms, which promotes online social communication.

3.3 Characteristic Analysis of Otome Mobile Game

Taylor (2003) found that female players regard online socialization, exploration, graphics, team participation, proficiency, and status as reasons for playing video games. She also pointed out that players will ask to build their own characters instead of letting them be assigned. Similar research also claims the importance of rich narratives, attractive characters, social interactions, multiple activities, and exploration opportunities in female’s games (De Castell, & Bryson, 1998). The research results of an American organization called AAUW (2000) can be used to supplement young women’s preferences for game features, that is, in addition to the above features, female games also include appropriate challenge levels, opportunities for design or creation, and the use of strategies and skills. Apart from these characteristics, YunShangYuYi also has another characteristic that needs to be emphasized, which is catering to female’s psychology and needs. Sherry and Lucas (2004) developed a study on the comprehensive video game choices of players and found significant differences between the needs of the male and female participants. This study is based on the use and gratification theory, which states that people develop different gratification-seeking behaviors through media consumption and activities based on perception (Lucas & Sherry, 2004). This means that otome mobile games need to catch the psychology of female players which is process-oriented emotional experience and satisfaction (Kang, 2019).

Process-oriented emotional experience and satisfaction means the game satisfies the player’s fantasy of ideal boyfriends and the construction of ideal self, allowing female players to...
release their emotions through the game. In this kind of love
game, they value autonomy, physical integrity and freedom of
choice. This reflects the core concept of postfeminist, which is
choosing to ‘be oneself’ and ‘please oneself.’ (Gill, 2007). In
the past, women were in a relatively passive position in social
activities due to the influence of the social culture with male
hegemony as the mainstream. This means that the unequal
status and the state of passive acceptance have existed for a
long time. With the improvement of female’s self-awareness,
 feminisms becomes now part of the cultural area (Gill, 2007).
Using otome games as a medium, women can build a social
platform where everyone in this group can truly express
themselves, which satisfies women’s emotional and
interpersonal communication demands.

4. The Impacts of Otome Mobile Games on
Feminism

The description of women once in the media presented them
as passive and silent objects of assumed male gaze (Gill,
2007). In the game field dominated by male players, female
players are also in this marginalized state. Nowadays, in
otome games, women are often the first point of view and
have absolute initiative in the game. This is undoubtedly a
challenge to the male-dominated game market in the past. In
otome mobile games such as YunShangYuYi, women are not
directly objectified, but portrayed as active sexual subjects,
while male characters are transformed into objects who are
selected and viewed. Also, women have the freedom and
speaking right in otome games, and can control the direction
of the game. This part will mainly analyze the construction of
female’s dominant position by otome games and the role of
otome games in the development of feminism from these two
aspects.

4.1 The Transformation of Subject and Object

In the traditional patriarchal society, the value of women can
only be presented by relying on men, and the existence value
of female can be proved through male’s gaze and prying
(Irigaray, 1985). This rule of object and subject is also evident
in traditional games. In most of the popular games, women
have a wide range of designs, but most of them are almost
naked. Beasley and Standle (2002) found that 70% of female
characters in mature video games have obvious cleavage, and
86% of female characters are depicted as having low-cut or
exposed necklines, and 48% of female characters wear clothes
without sleeves. In addition, the vast majority of female
characters are found to be unplayable, which means they
cannot be played by players (Miller & Summers, 2007),
which also shows their secondary status. In short, when female
characters appear in video games, they usually occupy
stereotyped gender roles, such as sexual existence and objects
of sexual desire (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

However, otome mobile game challenges the inherently
male-supported games and appeals to female players by
emphasizing stereotypical female gender roles. In
love-oriented games such as YunShangYuYi, women can
choose their virtual love objects independently. In order to
strive for the preferences of female players, designers need to
design male characters from the perspective of female players.
This is a challenge to the traditional male dominance of the
gaze subject (Irigaray, 1985), that is, the male role becomes
the object of the female gaze. In addition, the story of the
female game represented by YunShangYuYi also present the
characteristics of a ‘powerful heroine’. The heroine travels
through time and space with super powers to complete the
heroic story of saving the world. Through practice of the game,
women have played their heroine roles and become the
protagonists of romance novels in the otome world. Andlauer
(2018) found in the survey that when teenage female players
were talking about the heroine, they mentioned that they are
the same as the otome heroine, who looks weak, but in fact
they can be powerful when they are feminine. Also, in the
relationship established on the basis of the knight tradition,
the boys in the otome game are people who depend on their
girlfriend, that is, the male characters should accompany and
obey the heroine. By adapting fantasy for the female
protagonist, otome cultural industry has constructed a kind of
masculinity, which actually questions the traditional concept
of masculinity Andlauer (2018). In a word, the popularity of
otome games means female’s liberation of self-desires and
emotional resolution, and resistance to male’s gaze as the
subject.

4.2 Free Expression of Female

In female mobile games, the role setting must satisfy the
aesthetics of female players. Take the female image in
YunShangYuYi as an example, the female image of the game
has multiple cultural aesthetic perspectives, including female
warrior, gentle and lovely images, which allows female
players choose freely. Designing characters from the
perspective of female subjects and relating the female
aesthetic of self-appreciation and self-pleasing, can enable
female players to gain and deepen their sense of gender
identity through the game medium, which represents the
modernization of femininity (Gill, 2007).

Especially, the most prominent meaning of the game is
women’s free expression. The act of free choice is the core
of postfeminist discourse, which portrays women as autonomous
subjects who are no longer bound by any inequality, and
women follow their desires just because of good feelings (Gill,
2007). Otome dress-up games such as YunShangYuYi show
female’s pursuit of beauty and individuality. In this game,
female players can complete clothing matching, printing and
dyeing according to their own preferences, and share in their
social circles. Also, otome mobile games have given female
players material and inspiration for secondary creation.
Relying on the 3D face and clothing customization system
launched by YunShangYuYi, female players can display their
imagination and creativity. Some female players even have
gained a large number of fans on social platforms by making
game guides and publishing clothing data. With the support of
otome mobile games, female players have established a
unique female game cultural space, which is a place where
femininity can be confirmed.

5. Limitations of Otome Mobile Games

Due to the long existence of gender stereotypes, otome mobile
games still have limitations in the development of feminism.
First of all, traditional gender stereotypes give men and
women respective personalities. Compared with femininity,
courage, seriousness, and strength in masculinity are qualities that people strongly admire, while weakness and ignorance in femininity are regarded as defects in human characteristics (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Although the roles and social status of both sexes have undergone significant changes, people’s stereotypes of male and female genders are still very fixed, and the resulting prejudice usually unconsciously affects people’s attitudes and behaviors (Feasey, 2009). In the gender setting of otome games, women are sometimes at a disadvantage, and the masculinity and hegemony paradigm have not been completely challenged and subverted. For instance, in the plot of an otome mobile game named LoveR, which is similar to YunShangYiYi, the heroine is a young woman who runs a film studio. Although she can choose the man she likes to fall in love with, she can only do her business with the help of four wealthy men. This girl is popular among fans of the game, who think it is a romantic, sweet experience, unaware of the sexist mechanics behind the story (Andlauer, 2018). Besides, otome mobile games may lead to a misunderstanding that female players are only suitable for casual games without complex gameplay. The gentle and romantic game type will correspond to the conventional femininity in the cultural order. Then both game manufacturers and players are under the influence of this culture, showing collective unconscious blind obedience. From the perspective of domestic game creators, their inheritance and continuation of otome mobile game styles is a convention based on gender stereotypes, which over-exaggerates the role of gender differences in game design and is not conducive to the development of feminism.

6. Conclusion

The otome mobile games focus on females and set corresponding styles for female users. Otome mobile games pay attention to the game plot, social space, and emphasis on the beauty of the screen. Players will obtain virtual love satisfaction in love development games, and at the same time realize the construction of their ideal self. The emergence of otome mobile games has increased female’s right to speak in the game market and built a platform that shows the unique values and ideas of women. However, the design of otome games is based on the solidified gender differences. Otome games generally ignore operating skills and personality settings, which may solidify gender prejudice and exacerbate gender discrimination in the game industry.

In summary, otome mobile games have positive meanings of feminism in terms of female subject status and freedom rights, but female players and game makers are passively restricted by gender culture, which requires more exploration and promotion in the game industry.

References


