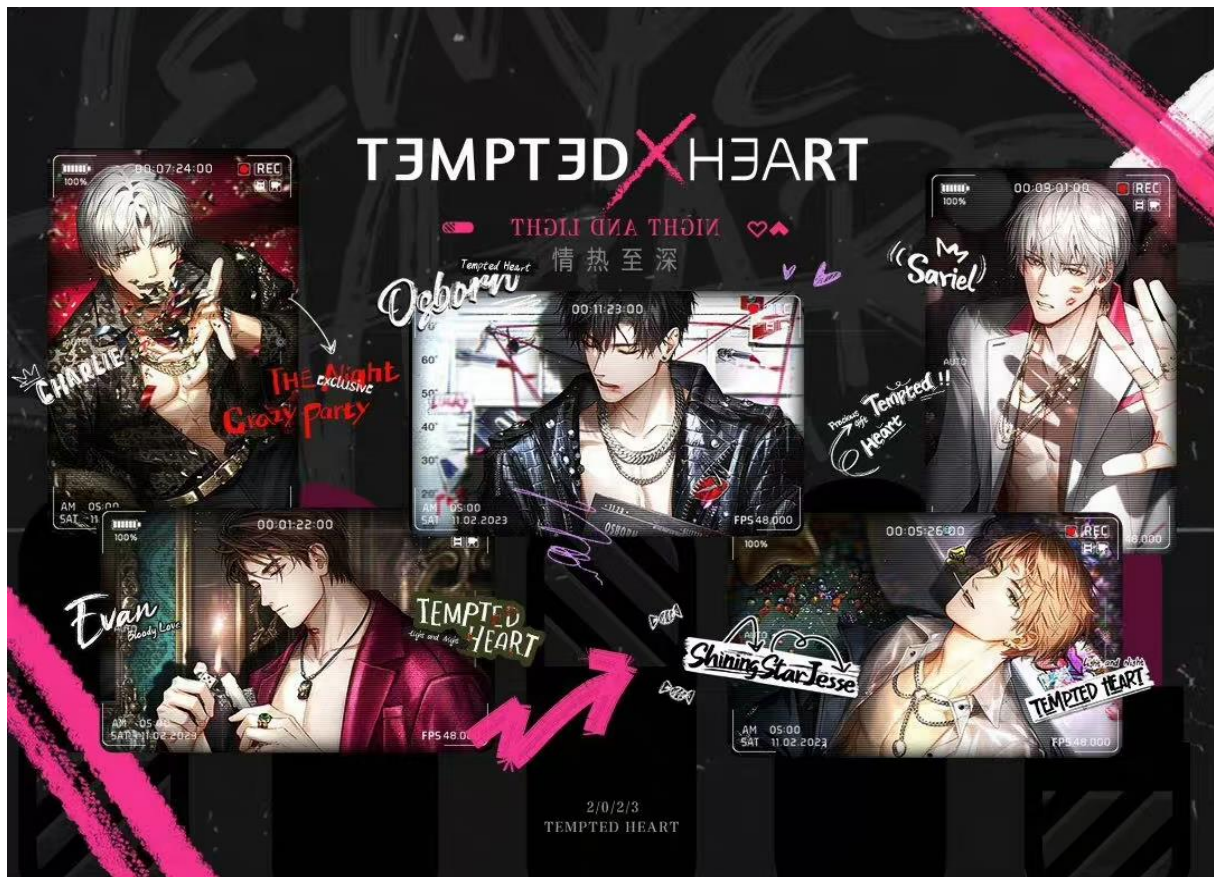


Female Players Worship Their Fictional Lovers:

Ritual Play in Chinese Otome Games with a Case of *Light and Night* (2021)



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Abstract

This thesis draws on theories of ritualized play, (post)feminism, political economy, and game analysis to study Chinese mobile otome games using *Light and Night* (2021) as a case study. Ever since their inception, Chinese mobile otome games have been famous for their gendered game space, unique card system, and male beauty. With the rise of female consumers to be the majority, leading the consumption of the neoliberal market and digital games, *Light and Night* serves to be a representative media product of ‘the female gaze’, challenging and resisting the long-lasting stereotype and ignorance of female players and the male gaze. Combined with players’ ritual play, I investigated players’ engagement with the female gaze to discover the dynamics between the female gaze and the capital market, as well as the complicated gender identification and attitude of female players. Using textual analysis of the game and the paratextual analysis of the game communities and relations to other media, this thesis dissects the deification of male characters through ritual play, thus carving out the logic behind the idolatry marketing of male characters and players’ consumption.

Key words: otome game; male beauty; female gaze; ritualization of play; digital feminism; game analysis

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Otome games originated in Japan and are a niche category of games designed specifically for women. Themes of otome games can vary from fashion, cooking, time management, to romance, with the latter being the most common.¹ In China, the term ‘otome games’ (*yí nǚ yóu xì*) is especially used to refer to titles resembling visual novel games with romantic role-playing and dating simulation. They are played by clicking options between dialogue choices to interact with multiple male characters and reach different story endings with mostly heterosexual romantic narratives. Among otome games in East Asian countries, the popularity of Chinese mobile otome games is particularly noticeable recently, which suggests the societal relevance of this study.² Additionally, this study is academically relevant in three aspects. First, Previously, game mechanics of otome games were rarely studied because of their easy controls.³ Second, due to the late development of Chinese feminism, game studies in China have been poorly investigated from a gender perspective and lack critical and postfeminist perspectives. Third, this thesis took a more recent and popular game title as an example. In the following two paragraphs, I will first examine general studies on otome games, then literature on Chinese ones which will not involve my case since it is too new.

As a gendered game category, previous literature on otome games tends to discuss the ingrained male dominance and the male gaze in games and society, the reflected desire of women, the gender identity of female players, and their association with current gender issues

¹ Sarah Christina Ganzon, “Growing the Otome Game Market: Fan Labor and Otome Game Communities Online,” *Human Technology* 15, no.3 (2019): 347. <https://doi.org/10.17011/ht/urn.201911265024>.

² Keith B. Wagner and Meng Liang, “Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: Otome Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women,” in *Transmedia in Asia and the Pacific: Industry, Practice and Transcultural Dialogues*, ed. Filippo Gilardi and Celia Lam (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 130.

³ Hyeslin Kim, “Women’s Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2–3 (2009): 170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103132>.

and the development of feminism.⁴ Gendered studies have a long history in game studies since the phrase “video games as gendered play spaces” has been noted.⁵ Further, videogames are described as a space that retain gender stereotypes and prejudice in the real world, but also the space to question the gender identities built by society and reflected in mainstream video games.⁶ Otome games with their romantic narratives and focus on male beauty, closely engage with the gender construction, self, and gender identity of female players, offering an opportunity to explore how the traditional subject/object of desire and gaze may be reversed in this study. With the growing market of women-oriented media products in China, the empowerment of female consumers has turned the male gaze into a female gaze, projecting women’s eroticized desire upon sexualized men and reversing the traditional power relationship between genders.⁷ The relationship between the female gaze and the capital of the neoliberal market remains complex with the question of “who is the product”.⁸ In the case of otome games, female players’ support of their fictional lovers and co-production within the

⁴ Saito, Kumiko, “From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games.” *Arts* 10, no. 42(2021): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10030042>; Kim, “Women’s Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction,” 165-188; Leticia Andlauer, “Pursuing One’s Own Prince: Love’s Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice,” *Mechademia: Second Arc* 11, no. 1 (2018): 166–183; Bingjie Zhi 支冰洁, “nvxing ‘leifengsi’ xingwei ji ‘manzuxing xuqiu’ xinli tanjiu” 女性“类粉丝”行为及“满足性需求”心理探究——以《恋与制作人》社群为例 [Research on the behavior of female “fans” and the psychology of “meeting sexual needs”——Take *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice* community as an example], *Xinmeiti Guancha* 新媒体观察 7, no. 12 (2021): 94-97. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.2096-0360.2021.12.029; Jingjing Yi, “Female-Oriented Dating Sims in China: Plays’ Parasocial Relationships, Gender Attitude, and Romantic Beliefs,” *Psychology of Popular Media* 12, no. 1 (2023): 58-68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000386>; Wagner, Keith B., and Liang, Meng “Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: Otome Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women,” in *Transmedia in Asia and the Pacific: Industry, Practice and Transcultural Dialogues*, ed. Filippo Gilardi and Celia Lam (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 129-156; Yufei Chen 陈雨菲, “Rongmeiti shidai – yin youxi zhong de nvxingzhuyi he chengjinshi chuanbo yanjiu” 融媒体时代——乙女游戏中的女性主义和沉浸式传播研究 [Age of Integrated Media: Research on the Feminism and Immersive Communication in Otome Games], *Zhongguo youxian dianshi* 中国有线电视, no. 5 (2020): 541-544.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces,” in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT, 1998), 262–297.

⁶ Jenkins, “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces,” 267.

⁷ Xiaomeng Li, “How powerful is the female gaze? The implication of using male celebrities for promoting female cosmetics in China,” *Global Media and China* 5, no.1 (2020): 55–68.

⁸ Li, “How powerful is the female gaze? The implication of using male celebrities for promoting female cosmetics in China,” 60.

fandom indicates the existence of the capitalized female gaze. Moreover, some studies highlight the commercialized fan spaces and gendered digital laboring within otome games, framing otome fan labor as a feminist concern.⁹ Agnès Giard describes female players' contributions to the fandom as worship-like practices to make fictional love possible and legitimates players' sacrifice with theories of ritualization of play.¹⁰ In this thesis, I not only explore Giard's focus on ritualized play within the fan community, but also involve in-game ritualized play as a part of players' participation, production and consumption and examine its potential of immaterial laboring. That is why I emphasized the importance of studying game mechanisms. This study examined the dynamic relationship between female consumers' positive female gaze practices and the capitalized female gaze or the capital gaze with the involvement of the female audience as prosumers in contemporary women-oriented products. To be able to engage with both in-game play and the fan communities and the feminist context, my research will employ Clara Fernández-Vara's game analysis method which enables the study of both the game text and paratexts.

In China, academic attention towards Chinese otome games started to rise after the release of a mobile otome game called *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* (lian yu zhi zuo ren, 2017, hereafter *Mr. Love*)¹¹ in late 2017. The game quickly gained popularity and reached the third position on the Apple Store game list within eight days, becoming a gaming phenomenon.¹²

⁹ Andlauer, "Pursuing One's Own Prince: Love's Fantasy in Otome Game Contents and Fan Practice," 166-183; Ganzon, "Growing the Otome Game Market: Fan Labor and Otome Game Communities Online," 347-366; Ganzon, "Investing Time for Your In-Game Boyfriends and BFFs: Time as Commodity and the Simulation of Emotional Labor in Mystic Messenger," 139-153.

¹⁰ Agnès Giard, "Sacralize a Digital Character to Enhance Its Charm? Japanese Love Games and Female Fan Strategy," in *Idology in Transcultural Perspective: Anthropological Investigations of Popular Idolatry*, ed. Aoyagi Hiroshi, Patrick W. Galbraith, and Mateja Kovacic (Gewerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 187-214.

¹¹ Paper Games, *Lian yu zhizuoren 恋与制作人 [Mr. Love: Queen's Choice]*. Paper Games. Android/iOS, 2017.

¹² Chyxx. "Research Report on market competition situation and investment strategy of China's second women's game

Chinese scholars also marked 2018 as the beginning of an era of women-oriented games in China.¹³ Existing studies on Chinese otome games are all published after 2018 and exemplified by the case of *Mr. Love* which is the most classic otome title in China but has no longer been the most popular one.¹⁴ However, as the leading Chinese otome game, *Mr. Love* has established a set of gameplays that almost unifies the game mechanics of the most of later-released Chinese mobile otome games --- the card game mode. As the main feature and source of in-game revenue, the new card system has not been studied yet. In my study, I will a means of providing a virtual altar for players' ritualized play. This study takes *Light and Night* (2021)¹⁵ as the case for its current popularity and outstanding pornographic content. After the *Announcement of the National Press and Publication Administration on Preventing Minors from Indulging in Online Games* was published and limited the gaming time of minors to 1 hour on Friday and at weekends, *Light and Night*, which ranked as the top in-app avenue of Chinese mobile otome games in 2021, banned minors from logging in and rising the adult-only contents in the game.¹⁶

industry from 2018 to 2024.” December 7, 2018. www.chyxx.com.

¹³ Yunrong Han 韩运荣 and Xingyu Wang 王杏予, “nvxingxiang youxi de yuanyuan, leixing ji moshi jiexi” 女性向游戏的溯源、类型及模式解析 [An study on the origin, genre, and mode of women-oriented games], *Xiandai chuanbo 现代传播*, no. 6 (2020): 141.

¹⁴ Wagner and Liang, “Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: Otome Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women,” 129-156; Chen, “Age of Integrated Media: Research on the Feminism and Immersive Communication in Otome Games,” 541-544; Zhi, “Research on the behavior of female ‘fans’ and the psychology of ‘meeting sexual needs’——Take *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice* community as an example], 94-97; Bian, Huilin 边慧琳, “Erciyuan yinv youxi chengjingan yanjiu: yi <lian yu zhizuoren> wei li” 二次元乙女游戏沉浸感研究：以《恋与制作人》为例 [A study on the sense of immersion in the second-dimensional otome game: a case study of *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice*], *Beijin yinshua xueyuan xuebao* 北京印刷学院学报 29, no. 6 (2021): 69-74. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1004-8626.2021.06.021; Yue Wu 吴玥, Yuannan Sun 孙源南, Ning Zhu 朱宁, and Xiaoyi Shi 师晓祎, “Yinv lei dianzi youxi dui nvxing wanjia lixiang lianaiquan de yingxiang” 乙女类电子游戏对女性玩家理想恋爱观的影响 [The Influence of Otome Video Games on Female Gamers Views of Ideal Love], *Qingnian Yanjiu* 青年研究, no. 4 (2020): 56-70; Xin Wang, Guang Yu, and Yongtian Yu, “Exploring the marketing strategy for the promotion of a new mobile game: love and producer on sina weibo,” *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 11, no. 117 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-021-00831-2>; Yi, “Female-Oriented Dating Sims in China: Plays’ Parasocial Relationships, Gender Attitude, and Romantic Beliefs,” 58-68.

¹⁵ Aurora Studio. *Guang yu ye zhi lian* 光与夜之恋 [Light and Night]. Android/iOS, 2021.

¹⁶ “Guojia xinwen chuban shu guanyu jinyibu yange guanli qieshi fangzhi wenchengnianren chenmi wangluoyouxi de

To further engage with the specificity of Chinese mobile otome games and the relevant local fan culture, my main research question is whether the ritualization of play in *Light and Night* is a way for the capital gaze to dissolve players' potential female gaze practice, and if so, how it proceeds. To address this question, I have formulated three subquestions:

- 1) How are ritual elements incorporated into the card mechanism and relevant procedures of Chinese mobile otome games in order to maximize profits?

This subquestion focuses on the in-game ritualized play and its connection with possible commodification;

- 2) How do female players constructure male characters across media?

Until this step, I can investigate whether and how the female gaze and capital gaze contribute to the creation of male beauty for female players to worship, thereby rebuilding unequal gender relations;

- 3) How might these players struggle with and resist the game's commodification and capital gaze?

This question investigates how female players would resist the commodification of the capital gaze if it dissolves the ideal female gaze. Meanwhile, players' reactions could provide a critical reflection of the potential dissolution by capital gaze, emphasizing the subjectivity of players rather than putting them into the position of passive receiver.

tongzhi 国家新闻出版署关于进一步严格管理切实防止未成年人沉迷网络游戏的通知” [Announcement of National Press and Publication Administration On Preventing Minors From Indulging in Online Games], National Press and Publication Administration 国家新闻出版署, August 30, 2021, <http://www.nppa.gov.cn/nppa/contents/279/98792.shtml>; According to Qimai, *Light and Night* gained about 8 million dollars in China by the end of 2021 on the iOS platform, ranking first in all Chinese mobile otome games as it was just released on June 2021. See Qimai, “*Light and Night*.” Last modified March 27, 2023. <https://www.qimai.cn/app/rank/appid/1439754823/country/cn>.

Chapter 2 will provide a description of the phenomena observed in Chinese mobile otome games before introducing the theoretical frameworks in Chapter 3. Upon the framework of ritualization of play built by Giard, I further develop it with a conceptual analysis of the relationship between the female gaze and the capital gaze. In Chapter 4, I will explain the methodology applied in this study, which includes Clara Fernández-Vara's textual analysis to examine in-game mechanics and players' co-production of the male character construction. Chapter 4 will consist of two subheadings to analyze in-game text and other paratexts, respectively.

Chapter 2. Phenomenon Description

Throughout studies on otome games, the definition of otome games has not been unified and mostly has its root in the Japanese game industry and media culture.¹⁷ Considering the influence of cultural translation and transnational circulation, the usage of the term “otome game” should be clarified in the context of China. Since the focus of my analysis is on the card mechanism, a detailed description of it will be provided.

Since the first Chinese mobile otome game *Mr. Love* became a new game and economic phenomenon, bringing women-oriented games and female players into the spotlight, the term “otome game” has been extended by Chinese players to refer to not only the Japanese (style) women-oriented visual novel games also mobile romantic role-playing/adventure games. Still, the defining features of Japanese otome games, as outlined by Kim, also apply to Chinese mobile otome games: easy game control, connections to other multimedia products, and dating plots or systems that allow female players to simulate interpersonal and especially romantic relationships with game characters through the avatar.¹⁸ By controlling the heroine as an avatar, players are able to interact or flirt with several fixed target male characters (TMCs); successful actions and dialogue choices will lead to increased interest from TMCs. Among these TMCs, players often have their own personal favorite, known as their ‘oshi’.

The “playness” of traditional Japanese otome games mainly lies in simply pointing and clicking. However, in Chinese mobile otome games, more ludic modes are added. Even though the interactable narrative mode is kept in mobile titles, the importance of narration as the core of otome games’ gameplay is declined. Among those ludic modes, the card system

¹⁷ Ganzon, “Growing the Otome Game Market: Fan Labor and Otome Game Communities Online,” 347.

¹⁸ Kim, “Women’s Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction,” 170.

dominates and unitizes other systems, including the narrative system. This new card game system includes the card collection game (CCG) mode, the deck-building game (DBG) mode, and the card battle game mode, which generate in-game revenue. There are several “card pools” set in the game and players can draw cards with computer graphics (CG)¹⁹ of TMCs randomly²⁰ from each pool. Card rolls require a specific in-game digital currency which can be obtained slowly by accomplishing game tasks or be topped up directly with real money. Cards can be categorized

¹⁹ CG, computer graphic, generally refers to graphics made by the computer including original painting/illustrations, 3D models of characters, game motions, game effects. Here in otome games, CGs are mainly illustrations.

²⁰ Randomly is for a general description. Actually, the probability of drawing cards varies from levels. The higher the level is, the harder the card is possible to be drawn. For example, normally, in Light and Night, the rate for 6-star cards is 2%, 10% for 5-star cards, 30% for 4-star cards, and 58% for 3-star cards. The probability explanation of each mobile otome game is public announced.

based on star, level, attribution, and character (TMCs). Higher-level and higher-star cards grant advantages in card battles, unlock new story chapters, and provide additional bonuses



Figure 1. (left) the “card pool” in *Light and Night*, the button on the left says “one card roll” and the button on the right says “ten card rolls”; (right) the front of a card with the heroine and Jessy. © Tencent Games.

such as explicit content (CGs, plots, dates, and audio) or TMC secrets. Card pools vary in themes and ranked cards, for example, the card pool on the left side of Figure. 1 is related to the main plot and players can get a five-star (or above) ranked card for every ten card rolls. In *Light and Night*, each card roll has a value of around 18RMB (300 Ursa Minor = 6 Polaris = 18RMB).²¹ Additionally, there is also a unique ritual associated with drawing cards, where

²¹ Ursa Minor and Polaris are the names of different kinds of special currency.

players must sign a virtual piece of paper before initiating the card draw. Relating to the modern city theme of *Light and Night*, the signing ritual simulates signing a contract, and cards are sealed into envelopes leading to the term "collecting letters" for the act of drawing cards.

In *Light and Night*, gamers play as a fashion designer of Warson in Guangqi City to meet with five TMCs: Evan (Lu Chen), the CEO of the Wanzhen and SONDER company; Serial (Qi Sili), the creative director of Warson; Osborn (Xiao Yi), a race car driver; Jesse (Xia Mingxing), a musical performer; Charlie, a doctor from the burn unit. As the avatar learns more about them, the city starts to show its dark and mysterious side and a story of thousands of years is waiting for discovery.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, two key theoretical frameworks will be introduced to provide a conceptual basis. I will elaborate on the cultural discipline embedded in the play with theories of ritualized play (3.1) and on the relationship between the female gaze and capital gaze from the perspective of (post)feminism and semiotic political economy (3.2).

3.1 Ritualized Play and Game/Fan Culture

I will first introduce the term “ritualized play”, then its application in an otome game community study by Agnès Giard, and how I will develop it with game studies.

Ritualized Play

The framework of ritualized play can be built as the fictional space created by playing has an impact on reality, from Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.²² Huizinga argues that play can be applied to every dimension of human culture, including religion.²³ He contends that play is not just a leisure activity, but rather a crucial component of social life, serving as a means for individuals to explore and express their identities, form and maintain social bonds, and create and transmit cultural values and traditions.²⁴ In terms of the relationship between play and ritual, he also argues that play profoundly affects how religious ideas are transmitted and understood, enabling individuals to reinterpret and redefine religious symbols and narratives.²⁵ Anthropologist Roberte Hamayon also posits that games and rites share the same structure leading to the

²² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1949 [1938]).

²³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 13.

²⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.

²⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 58.

transformation of social actors, which means players and believers are driven forward by “a speculative movement” regardless of whether the object of belief is religious or not.²⁶ In my study, the card system is viewed to be a site where ritual play is concentrated, and with the other modes and fan cultures that extend from it, the whole process is formed. In Chinese mobile otome games, the ritualized play of the card system is related to the functions provided by the system itself and the emotional needs of the players themselves.

Game/Fan Culture

In Giard’s study of the fan community of the Japanese otome games, she further develops the evolution theories on the ritualization of play and marks the fan culture as religion-like with three features, commensality, derived products or secondary production as altar rituals, and sacrifices.²⁷ Different from the general theory of ritualization of play, “rites” in Chinese mobile otome games have a specific object, that is, they are performed for a specific “god” --- the players’ oshi. Oshi is the one character (usually only one) chosen from the main male characters by the player as her favorite. In Japanese, “oshi” means “my recommendation”, which means players would recommend their oshi and share him with other fans. In this way, otome game culture is similar to idol culture, players have to struggle between possessive and exclusive love and supportive sharing.²⁸ This feature of commensality is based on a simple commercial logic that “recommendation” makes popularity: if one character is not popular, his storyline would not be promoted; if the game is not popular, it would be terminated.

²⁶ Roberte Hamayon, *Why We Play: An Anthropological Study*, trans. Daniel Simon Roberte (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), 6.

²⁷ Giard, “Sacralize a Digital Character to Enhance Its Charm? Japanese Love Games and Female Fan Strategy”, 192.

²⁸ Gogatsu Kaede, “Ria koi to gachi sūhai no hanashi,” Hatena Blog, April 2, 2017.

<http://dailyshikawaii.hateblo.jp/entry/2017/04/02/175435> ; Giard, “Sacralize a Digital Character to Enhance Its Charm? Japanese Love Games and Female Fan Strategy”.

Commensality and paying for game merch can be seen as a sacrifice to extend the life of players' oshi. These three features are rooted in the "divided attitude" of otome players concluded by Giard: their love/lover is neither fictional nor real.²⁹ From the perspective of religion, Octave Mannoni states that belief is to admit the possibility of something is neither true nor false.³⁰ Thus, Giard argues, the pattern of rites in games can be performed to make fictive love and being possible.³¹ That is, the connection between players and their oshi is felt and deepened via those rites and sacrifices which act as proof of love. In her study, she examines two main rituals of otome game fans: attending "collabo café" and making their own altar.³² Collabo café is usually a collaborative campaign by the game company and its café partners to serve original dishes associated with characters. Attending this event, fans are able to meet their oshi and other fans and celebrate oshi's "birth-festival" by building an altar on dishes or cake. With the food metaphor of this fan activity, Giard emphasizes the commensal dimension of otome games.³³ For altar making, Giard describes the consumption phenomenon of this culture which enables fans to embody invisible love and gives tangible shapes to their oshi,³⁴ such as paper, metal badge, acrylic stand, and plush doll (Figure 2). In this study, a more critical perspective of commercialization and capitalization is applied to the analysis of the fan culture to release the overall structural problem rather than only examining it as a self-determined choice of individuals for "love" which has been done by Giard.

²⁹ Giard, "Sacralize a Digital Character to Enhance Its Charm? Japanese Love Games and Female Fan Strategy", 193.

³⁰ Octave Mannoni, *Je sais bien, mais quand-même.... In Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scene* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 9-33.

³¹ Giard, "Sacralize a Digital Character to Enhance Its Charm? Japanese Love Games and Female Fan Strategy", 191.

³² Giard, 194.

³³ Giard, 194.

³⁴ Giard, 198.

Further developing Giard's framework of ritualization of play in otome games, I will bring the study of the feature of "altar" into the game text, analyzing the ritual affordance of the card system and the digital altar or shrine built within the system. This theoretical framework of ritualized play expands the concept of "ritual" to refer to game procedures for textual analysis. According to Knottnerus's presentation of a theoretical formulation that

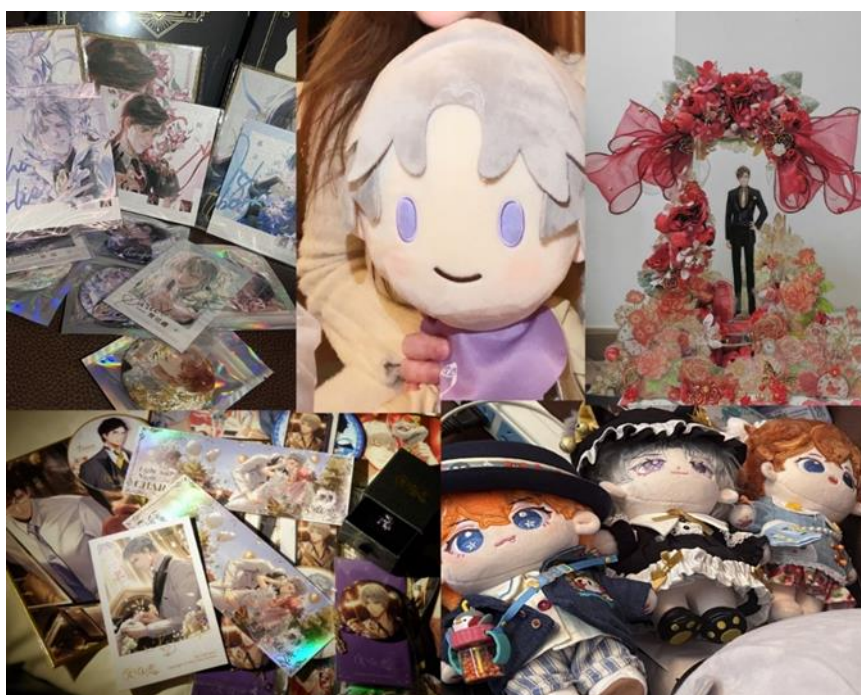


Figure 2. (upper right) an altar; (other) different "shapes" of characters. (Photo by the author)

focuses on ritualization, ritualization is used to refer to routinized interaction sequences and social behaviors to examine the structurization processes occurring in a social group that is embedded within a larger social environment.³⁵ This approach is consistent with Kertzer's definition of ritual as a socially standardized and repetitive symbolic activity as well as *proceduralism* as a videogame analysis and design strategy.³⁶ Adapting Ian Bogost's work on procedural rhetoric which provided a comprehensive philosophy and rhetoric of

³⁵ J. David Knottnerus, "THE THEORY OF STRUCTURAL RITUALIZATION," *Advances in Group Processes* 14 (1997): 257-8.

³⁶ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

proceduralism, this thesis takes proceduralism as the material specificity of videogames to be analyzed and as the internalized behavior pattern of videogame players which implies the ritual essence of digital game's media material.³⁷ Moreover, this conceptual combination is important to stress game mechanics' connections to the symbolic and social resources gamers inherit from a broader social environment and influences on the habits of thought and action of the members of the game community. Bogost also argues, "...for my purposes, procedural expression must entail symbol manipulation, the construction and interpretation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action."³⁸ Players' interactions with game mechanics reflect the process of newly developed routines and conventions in a game community in turn become established, solidified, and enduring social arrangements, that is, objectified.³⁹ Namely, Judith Butler famously proposes the theory of performativity of gender, challenging the stability and very existence of the category of woman which feminist politics has organized itself around.⁴⁰ The performativity of gender is a repetitive, processual, happening activity and a process of coercion, a forceful shaping of the body along the narrow constraints of gender difference based on the heterosexual matrix.⁴¹ In the gendered game space of otome games, players have to recognize and perform as women to take up the space. Meanwhile, players are also building their oshi as an ideal man and lover within the frame of heterosexual matrix and masculinity through their co-production.

³⁷ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Bradley J. Fest, "METAPROCEDURALISM: THE STANLEY PARABLE AND THE LEGACIES OF POSTMODERN METAFICTION," *Wide Screen* 6, no.1 (2016): 8.

³⁸ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 5.

³⁹ Knottnerus, "THE THEORY OF STRUCTURAL RITUALIZATION," 257.

⁴⁰ Angela McRobbie, "No Woman, No Cry? Judith Butler and the Politics of Post-feminist Cultural Studies," in *The Uses of Cultural Studies: A Textbook*, edited by Angela McRobbie (London: SAGE, 2005), 68.

⁴¹ Angela McRobbie, "No Woman, No Cry? Judith Butler and the Politics of Post-feminist Cultural Studies," 84-5.

3.2 From Female Gaze to Capital Gaze

The second theoretical framework focuses on the interplay between the female gaze and the capital gaze within the context of women-oriented media products, including Chinese mobile otome games. I will further explain the overlap of postfeminist critiques between semiotic political economic critiques with two aspects: emotional laboring in gameplay and male beauty consumption. Getting cards is not always for play; it can be just for collection, fetish of beautiful, attractive, and sometimes sexual illustrations. Male beauty is actually the main selling point of cards in these games and recently has been tending to lean on meeting female players' erotic desires after several leading Chinese mobile otome games have forbidden underage players' access. Otome games are challenging the mainstream game field since contemporary game theories and culture in Asian countries are mainly framed by the male-oriented desire for "retrieving (the illusion of) power, as well as for obtaining ownership of characters as sexual objects".⁴² While otome games reverse the male gaze⁴³ and try to place male characters in the position of sexual objects, shifting the male gaze to the female gaze. However, just like the objectification of women, the new images and symbols of male beauty across media are the result of a joint decision made by merchants, media, and other stakeholders to draw money from the new powerhouse of consumption, women.⁴⁴ Echoing McRobbie's and Gill's critiques of the postfeminist media culture, which recenters women's

⁴² Saito, "From Novels to Video Games: Romantic Love and Narrative Form in Japanese Visual Novels and Romance Adventure Games," 12.

⁴³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," *Screen: The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television* 16, no.3 (1975): 6–18.

⁴⁴ Chufa Zhou, "'Nanse xiaofei – nanxing daiyan nvxing huazhuangping guanggao de xiaofei wenhua tanxi'" '男色消费'——男星代言女性化妆品广告的消费文化探析" ['Nan Se consumption': Cultural analysis of advertisements featuring male celebrities for female cosmetics], *Wenhua yu Chuanbo* 文化与传播 6, no.1 (2017), 5; Li, "How powerful is the female gaze? The implication of using male celebrities for promoting female cosmetics in China," 60.

agency toward heteronormativity and consumer culture,⁴⁵ Zhu and Niu argue that the capital gaze converts the female gaze into consumption potential while secretly manipulating the product of male beauty to be symbolized, sacralize, and worshipped as a "created God".⁴⁶ Then in the context of the capital gaze, the female gaze is redirected to be performed as a form of "commodified attention", in which people's attention is seen as a valuable commodity that can be bought and sold in the market.⁴⁷ The commodified attention (time) and producing ideas in the form of visual signs are the main way to grow profit in the "attention economy".⁴⁸ Semiocapitalism, a term deployed by Jean Baudrillard and later Franco Berardi, designates this late stage of capitalism in which economies that capitalize on attentive time – for instance, otome games in this thesis – which are framed as consumer preferences have partially replaced the production of goods.⁴⁹ In this regard, productivity is based on cognitive labor rather than material labor. Combined with Henry Jenkins's theory of mass media and fan culture, fans as consumers also participate in the interpretation and production of visual signs for further consumption. Thus, in the case of otome games, fans' cognitive labor on visual signs mainly consists of two aspects: gameplay and male characters.

Gameplay is for players themselves; players' investment and contribution to gameplay is players' concern on their own desire and self-identification. In Ganzon's study on a South Korean mobile otome game, she argues that the game's emotional labor becomes a way of

⁴⁵ Angela McRobbie, "Post feminism and popular culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, (2004), 255–264; Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007), 147–166.

⁴⁶ Zhengde Zhu and Jing Niu, "Nanse xiaofei dui nvxing ningshi de yingxing xiaojie" 男色消费对女性凝视的隐性消解——以优酷IP剧《镇魂》为例 [The implicit dissolution of the female gaze by the consumption of male beauty], *Dongnan Chuanbo* 东南传播, no. 9 (2018), 38-39.

⁴⁷ Sotirios Bahtsetzis, "Semiocapitalism, Spectacle, Eikonoma, and the Function of Art," *Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 25 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2019.25.2072>, 5.

⁴⁸ Bahtsetzis, "Semiocapitalism, Spectacle, Eikonoma, and the Function of Art," 5.

⁴⁹ Bahtsetzis, "Semiocapitalism, Spectacle, Eikonoma, and the Function of Art," 4-5.

monitoring women's desires, a way of reinforcing the priority of nurturing roles over women's desires and of commodifying female player's leisure time to trade as currency.⁵⁰

The term "emotional labor" is from Arlie Hochschild and adapted by feminist game scholar Shira Chess and feminist journalist Hartley to define the performance of feeling and expression control outside the workplace in their studies, they pointed female players are always expected to do emotional work in women-targeted games: "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."⁵¹ In my case with the card mode, to get more, more beautiful, higher-ranked cards or more oshi-related cards, players could collect game currency through gaming except for topping up. Thus, the boundary between play and labor is vague and I will examine how female players perform digital laboring as a delay of gratification motivated by emotional laboring.

On the other hand, the co-generated consumption of male beauty by feminism and capital logic features both visual politics and consumption spectacle.⁵² Referring to Zhu and Niu's study on Chinese female fans's consumption of male beauty in TV series, they argue that male beauty is reformed male bodies by capital; it is not signifying any real men but part of the image myth, just like the theory of the female spectacle in movies.⁵³ Visual signs of male

⁵⁰ Ganzon, "Investing Time for Your In-Game Boyfriends and BFFs: Time as Commodity and the Simulation of Emotional Labor in *Mystic Messenger*," 139.

⁵¹ Shira Chess, *Ready Play For Two: Women Games and Designed Identity*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Gemma Hartly, *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women, and the Way Forward*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2018); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 20th Anniversary Edition (London: University of California, 2003), 7.

⁵² Zhu and Niu, "The implicit dissolution of the female gaze by the consumption of male beauty," 38.

⁵³ Zhu and Niu, "The implicit dissolution of the female gaze by the consumption of male beauty," 39.

characters are commodities, also the simulation defined by Baudrillard.⁵⁴ Zhu and Niu claim that these signs have no actual signifier and their material images are generated from postmodern collages of patriarchal values and masculinity.⁵⁵ Moreover, female fans' consumption of male beauty is not based on its use value but symbolic value, so their consumption demand is believed as induced by capital rather than instinct. Therefore, with the deified male beauty signs, Zhu and Niu believe that the female gaze is dissolved by the conspiracy of the patriarchy and the capital gaze.⁵⁶ Similarly, in postfeminist studies of women's consumption of male beauty, Zhou emphasizes that media intensifies the patriarchal control of women while providing pleasure for women.⁵⁷ Whereas, Li suggests that we cannot confirm women are being used by the capital and the market by just a dichotomy since the current situation is more complicated with male celebrities involved.⁵⁸ Even in the case of otome games where no real men are involved, the ownership of fictional male characters is not completely held by the capital or the game company. Throughout the fan culture and fanart, I will discuss the co-production of the character construction that players participate in and how players are vying for their determinant.

⁵⁴ Zhu and Niu, 39; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁵⁵ Zhu and Niu, 39.

⁵⁶ Zhu and Niu, 38-9.

⁵⁷ Zhou, "Nan Se consumption?: Cultural analysis of advertisements featuring male celebrities for female cosmetics", 5.

⁵⁸ Li, "How powerful is the female gaze? The implication of using male celebrities for promoting female cosmetics in China", 60.

Chapter 4. Methodology

With its popularity and leading revenues and downloads,⁵⁹ *Light and Night* is taken as the representative of Chinese mobile otome games to be studied. This thesis adopts game studies scholar Clara Fernández-Vara's game textual analysis methods to analyze game mechanics and players' co-productions as paratexts of Chinese mobile otome games. The research corpus consists of two parts: the game system study, and the game/fan culture study. The former focuses on game systems and procedures: the card mechanism, game store, and game daily flow system, and the latter on the character construction of male characters co-created by players across media and across the virtual and the real. Both of them also aim at the interactivity of the game.

I will first introduce Clara Fernández-Vara's game textual analysis method and building blocks (3.1). Then, I will list certain building blocks I will apply to the analysis of the particular game text of *Light and Night* and elaborate on them (3.2).

4.1 Clara Fernández-Vara's building blocks

Clara Fernández-Vara claims that the textual analysis works for “the system of the game and its components, as well as how the system is presented to players.”⁶⁰ According to this guideline, the game's “rules, control system, interactive design, and visual style” are the formal aspects that showcase the composition of the game text.⁶¹ This thesis thereby narrowed the research corpus down to the card game system and other relevant game

⁵⁹ Chyxx, “Research Report on market competition situation and investment strategy of China's second women's game industry from 2018 to 2024;” Qimai, “Light and Night,” <https://www.qimai.cn/app/rank/appid/1439754823/country/cn>.

⁶⁰ Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17.

⁶¹ Fernández-Vara, 17

mechanics. The research will spread by analyzing how the procedures are embedded within gameplay and how these procedures could be performed and interpreted as rituals or laboring. Moreover, the three building blocks, *the context*, *game overview*, and *formal aspects* developed by Fernández-Vara also allow this thesis to study the game content and features within a specific context in textual analysis.⁶²

In order to simplify the way into game analysis, Fernández-Vara divides three interrelated areas of building blocks: *the context*, *game overview*, and *formal aspects*. Sets of building blocks in each area can be seen as plastic bricks and researchers can choose some of them to construct the analysis based on their research purpose or questions. Building blocks in different interrelated areas can be associated with each other so the analysis is not limited to one specific series. Some of the building blocks in different areas also overlap with each other. A brief overview of the different areas and building blocks that consist of these areas is in Appendix: Fernández-Vara's Building Blocks for reference.

4.2 Building blocks implied

To be able to answer my research questions, I need six building blocks and the first three of them will be intensively analyzed and the last three are just for sufficient use: game mechanics, game communities, relation to other media, game genre, socio-historical context, and economic context. In this research, I focus on the core mechanic which is the card system and the fan's co-production of the game characters, so the game mechanics block is separate and the game communities block and the relation to other media block are combined. Then I

⁶² Fernández-Vara, 13-17.

will explain how they will be applied precisely. In the first section, I will explain the details of the game mechanics block. In the second section, I will justify the reason why this study needs to engage with game/fan culture and associate players' co-production and the fan culture with Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's model of interactivity combined with Joost Raessens's interpretative strategies of players based on Friedman's "demystification" and Turkle's "seduction of simulation". In the last section, I briefly name the three building blocks to be used for clarifying the context of my research question.

- Game mechanics

A core mechanic is defined by Salen and Zimmerman as "the essential play activity players perform again and again in a game" which is a single action or a set of interrelated actions.⁶³ Game designer Chris Crawford also identifies the mechanics as the *verbs* of the game, such as run, walk, jump, and pick up.⁶⁴ As what has been mentioned before, this building block is used to explain the regulations applied to player behavior, which means players' experience and possible interactions with the game can be better generalized and described in a rich game world with complex rules. Thus, in this thesis, the card system, related mechanics, and routines of *Light and Night* are identified as core units of the gameplay to explore how the basic logic underneath interactivity is established to motivate players' devotion. In Salen and Zimmerman's *A Multivalent Model of Interactivity*, they describe the interactions with these game systems as functional interactivity and explicit

⁶³ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004), 316.

⁶⁴ Chris Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: New Riders, 2005), 91-110.

interactivity. Functional interactivity is based on the system's material components, whether real or virtual.⁶⁵ For example, real material components can be the buttons the player presses, and virtual material components can be the interfaces presented to players. Explicit interactivity involves procedures into the interactive experience. For proceduralists, a game means what the rules mean; the mechanic is the message.⁶⁶ To answer the first subquestion, this building block still needs to be combined with the block of economic context which will be elaborated in the last section of 3.2.

- Game communities and relation to other media

In addition to in-game text, I also investigate how the fan culture constructs the male characters, closely connecting players with male characters and growing romantic relationships. As I will adapt Giard's application of ritualized play in otome games in which ritual is a part of the fan culture, then involving fan culture as a part of game text generated from players' different play is reasonable. In Salen and Zimmerman's *A Multivalent Model of Interactivity*, the fourth mode of interactivity they develop is called *Beyond-the-object-interactivity* which is exemplified by fan culture. Fan culture of otome games has been studied mostly with anthropological methods and is rarely connected to the in-game play for analysis. In game scholar Joost Raessens's chapter on interpretative strategies of game players, based on Friedman's "demystification" and Turkle's "seduction of simulation", he argues that game text received by players can vary from three strategies activated as a

⁶⁵ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals*, 72.

⁶⁶ Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no.3 (2011), 6; Brenda Brathwaite and John Sharp, "The Mechanic is the Message: A Post Mortem in Progress," in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, ed. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (IGI: 2010), 317. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61520-845-6.ch019>.

reaction.⁶⁷ Players can be passive receivers (simulation resignation), deconstruct the frames built within the game (simulation understanding), or can completely deny the social and political significance of the game (simulation denial).⁶⁸ This thesis tends to emphasize the second strategy by analyzing players' different play with the same game and their positive participation in co-production. According to Fernández-Vara's building block of game communities, she also points that game communities as the paratext of the game allow us to know how players receive the game, also, how to create content for the game, and participate in the co-construction, which guides us to answering the second and third subquestions. Although Fernández-Vara refers *relation to other media* as the game's inspiration and sources, fanart usually is spread across media and transmedia mapping is a type of marketing strategy for the game. In this thesis, the analysis of this building block will be narrowed within the fan's co-construction of the male characters in *Ligh and Night*.

- Game genre, socio-historical context, and economic context

These three building blocks are used in this thesis to offer background information and basic understating for the analysis and are mainly addressed in previous chapters. Since otome games are designed for women and feature mainly heterosexual romantic narratives in China, it leads us to focus on the gender issue within otome games and related cultures. Hence, the building block of socio-historical and economic context is used to place this game analysis in the context of feminism and postfeminism and engage with the concept of the

⁶⁷ Joost Raessens, "Playful identity politics: How refugee games affect the player's identity," in *The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 254.

⁶⁸ Raessens, "Playful identity politics," 254.

female gaze and the capital gaze. Moreover, Fernández-Vara claims that one of the most valuable cultural dimensions to explore in video games is likely the analysis of the localization process.⁶⁹ Localized otome games in China can be seen as epitomizing or paralleling the localization of feminism in China.

⁶⁹ Fernández-Vara, 75.

Chapter 5. Analysis

In this chapter, I will analyze the game text and paratexts of *Light and Night* utilizing the methodology discussed in Chapter 3. I will explore how the card system of *Light and Night* could form ritualized play to stimulate players' consumption through emotional laboring with the game mechanics building block (4.1). Then, I will expand the analysis of players' ritual play to the broad fan community with the game communities and relation to other media blocks (4.2). Players' terminology, altar-building, pilgrimage, and especially, the co-construction and reconstruction of male characters will be analyzed with the perspective of new religious movements and then postfeminism.

5.1 Praying for a Card: Ritual Play in *Light and Night*

According to the definition of Sicart, a game mechanic is the action invoked by an agent to interact with the game world, as constrained by the game rules.⁷⁰ Thus the mechanics in *Light and Night* can be generally separated into three parts: the card mechanic, the quest mechanic, and the story mechanic. I will mainly focus on the card mechanism but in order to map the game mechanism block more clearly, I will make some connections with the card mechanism and other mechanisms.

The card mechanic is centralized with the "card pool" where players pay game currencies such as Ursa Minor, Polaris, and Feather, for card rolls. To get these currencies, players have to accomplish daily and stage quests and finish new story chapters. Meanwhile, to unlock new story chapters or interact (date, chat, and video call) with TMCs, players have to get new

⁷⁰ Miguel Sicart, "Defining Game Mechanics," *Game Studies* 8, no.2 (2008), <https://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart?viewType=Print&view>

cards or win more card battles. Thus, the quest mechanic is the bridge between the card mechanic and the story mechanic and connects different ludic modes with card battles. Moreover, the card mechanic is determined as the core mechanic as it is “the game mechanics (repeatedly) used by agents to achieve a systemically rewarded end-game state.”⁷¹ Popular mobile Chinese otome games like *Light and Night* usually do not have an end-game state that traditional otome games have, as they are B2P (buy-to-play) games while *Light and Night* is a F2P (free-to-play) game with an item mall. For those games have no end state as such, there are “desired states towards which players focus their efforts”, Sicart further adds. The desired states of *Light and Night* are keeping the romantic relationship with oshi and reaching the end of the story, even though the latter seems to be impossible to achieve in a F2P game. The story mechanic is meant to be the core of otome games, while in *Light and Night*, the story mechanic is declined because of the unreachable story ending and the bonus carried by cards which are weighted more than the main storyline by players. Rather than waiting for being told a love story which ends in fantasy, players tend to rush to the card pool to get some real passion and thrill to feed their desire.

⁷¹ Sicart, “Defining Game Mechanics.”

The card pool is the digital altar in the game, attracting players' pilgrimage and organizing their ritual behaviors. In order to have luck in drawing the card with their oshi's CGs or more stars, players would draw "magic figures" which is called *fú* in Chinese when they are supposed to sign to open envelopes containing cards (see Figure 4.). These rituals are



Figure 3. (left) a screenshot of the paper that players need to sign on; (right) efficacious figures summarized by a player and posted on *Red*, a popular social media platform among Chinese female users.

shared among players as walkthroughs, with certain figures believed to conjure specific character cards being the most common. For example, the *fú* in the corner of the right bottom of Figure 3. is used specially to conjure Osborn. Additionally, some players pay special attention to the direction that their phones are holding to, their locations, dates, and the time

while they are rolling cards based on Feng shui, while others find placing particular objects related to their oshi on the table or in the room would be helpful. Generally, these experiences and rituals are referred to as "the metaphysics of card."

The operation of the card pool bears similarities to religious indulgences and wish boxes, where individuals pay for a chance to make a wish or seek redemption, but it's not guaranteed. The act of making the wish establishes a spiritual connection between players and their oshi and getting cards of their oshi or with more stars is hearing from oshi/God. In the 1200s, as indulgences were truly commercialized,⁷² money was placed on an almost equal footing to faith and wealth became a more explicit criterion for measuring the degree of piety. However, three hundred later, the printing press was introduced and the market was flooded by overprinted indulgences, which caused "spiritual inflation" and the collapse of the indulgence market.⁷³ At present, indulgences get their rebirth through digitalization and the internet. In popular culture, indulgence is abstracted and commercialized and used as a marketing tool and consumer product. Making consumers believe that purchasing a product can relieve their "guilt" or wrongdoing is actually a marketing tactic that stimulates the emotional needs of consumers, known as "emotional marketing" or "psychological marketing". The goal of emotional marketing is to evoke emotional resonance in consumers, make them have strong emotional reactions, and thus influence their purchasing decisions. The core of emotional marketing is to find consumers' emotional needs and design products and marketing activities that meet their needs to achieve the greatest effect. At the origin of indulgences, there is the

⁷² Nathan Hitchcock, "Bankrupting Heaven: The Printing Press and the Collapse of the Indulgence Market," in *Human Flourishing: Economic Wisdom for a Fruitful Christian Vision of the Good Life*, ed. Greg Forest and Anthony R. Cross (Eugene: Pickwick Publication, 2020), 90.

⁷³ Hitchcock, "Bankrupting Heaven: The Printing Press and the Collapse of the Indulgence Market," 94-95.

practice of transforming the penance and punishment assigned by the confessor into something else, such as a payment.⁷⁴ Thus, in *Light and Night*, cards as indulgences transform “punishment” and pain assigned to players because of the unreachable lover and the unrealistic relationship with their oshi into payment. Since indulgences seem to originate from redemptions that are implemented by personal penance, other forms of service, or payment,⁷⁵ players are realizing self-redemptions through paying for card rolls.

Not only is it about redeeming oneself through reaching their oshi, but also about rescuing their "god", pulling them out from the virtual world, giving intangible characters tangible existence, and bridging the vast distance between them and the player ever so slightly. This is how “Get out of Hell free” cards turn to “Get out of fiction free” cards. Guangming Daily has commented on a similar phenomenon in the idolatry of a male celebrity: in the view of fans, their idols are seen as unfortunate and controlled puppets of capital, while also being flawless in appearance and of high moral character.⁷⁶ Thus, buying the products endorsed by their oshi is seen as the best way to rescue them from their predicament.⁷⁷ Different from celebrities, paying for indulgences does make game characters and the game live longer, socially and physically. This whole consumption system is not built on need and enjoyment but on desire, a code of signs and differences: “the consumer doesn’t look for a product/service that meets both the needs and rational processes, but for an object that becomes a center of symbolic meanings, psychological and cultural, a source of feelings,

⁷⁴ Alberto Cassone and Carla Marchese, “The Economics of Religious Indulgences,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE) / Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 155, no.3 (1999): 433.

⁷⁵ Cassone and Marchese, “The Economics of Religious Indulgences,” 433.

⁷⁶ Guangming Daily. “Philosophical Reflections on the Fandom Culture,” *Guangming Daily*, April 27th, 2020.

⁷⁷ Guangming Daily, “Philosophical Reflections on the Fandom Culture.”

relationships, and emotions.”⁷⁸ Jean Baudrillard has argued that in contemporary society, the purpose of consumption is no longer primarily to obtain the use value of commodities, but rather to obtain commodities as signs --- consumption marking the individual identity and identification, is an active, collective behavior. However, it should be noted that players may not always obtain the desired cards despite their financial investments, as game developers control the availability of desired cards to avoid market saturation. This cautious approach by Chinese otome games reflects the lessons learned from the collapse of the indulgence market in the 1500s, where overprinted indulgences led to "spiritual inflation" and a decline in their value.⁷⁹

From the player's perspective, there are two ways to deal with the disappointment of not getting what one wants: emotional depression and/or more consumption. On the one hand, players would wonder whether they love their character or the game enough to deserve a good outcome, which can lead to self-doubt and discouragement. On the other hand, as long as players spend enough money, they'll eventually get the desired card. This phenomenon is often referred to by players as "forced marriage" and there's a popular joke among them that goes, "We have no fate, it's all about my payment." It reinforces the consumerist mentality among female players, as they believe that by consuming, they can prove their existence and self-identification - "I'm empowered by what I buy".

For players who are unwilling to spend money, they may endure the emotional pressure and procedural compulsion intermittently. With their emotions controlled by the game,

⁷⁸ Domenico Consoli, "A New Concept of Marketing: The Emotional Marketing," *BRAND. Broad Research in Accounting, Negotiation, and Distribution* 1, no. 1 (2010): 3.

⁷⁹ For the precious explanation of the probability regulation, please refer to the 1.1 Phenomenon description.

investing more time (as currency), or ultimately quitting the game due to the gradual loss of a sense of achievement and satisfaction. For players who are uncertain about spending money may be constantly tempted and pushed, hovering around that line until they cross it and start sliding towards the second point of "it's okay, I have money and I can pay for it", behind which is the belief that money can always get them what they want. For players who have a high acceptance of virtual consumption or are not so cautious, they recognize the logic of the second point from the beginning. That is, they can gain the power to control their emotions and game experience with money, but ultimately, their desires are insatiable. Just like indulgences only imply the remission of temporal punishment for sins already forgiven as far as guilt is concerned, but do not eliminate sins and temporal punishment, which must be borne in this life or after death. Indulgences are never to take the place of repentance.⁸⁰ For some players, the price they pay for owning a perfect lover is irreconcilable separation; the pain of the separation may be alleviated but the separation cannot be solved. In Domenico Consoli's clarification on the concept of emotional marketing, he says "In a saturated market, the desires are more important than needs and thus the state of mind, the emotions, sympathies become predominant."⁸¹ Furthermore, Baudrillard writes in *La société de consommation (The Consumer Society)*, taking need as the theory of consumption is a naïve rationalist mythology, since in the field of consumption, need is never the need for a particular object but the "need" (the desire for the social meaning) for difference and the objectless craving for objects.⁸² Consoli further adds the first target of emotional marketing is

⁸⁰ Hitchcock, "Bankrupting Heaven: The Printing Press and the Collapse of the Indulgence Market," 89.

⁸¹ Domenico Consoli, "A New Concept of Marketing: The Emotional Marketing," 3.

⁸² Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London: Sage, 1998), 77-78.

to identify the type of experience that emphasizes the involvement of the consumer and the perceived differentiation.⁸³

Furthermore, the emotional pressure and procedural compulsion result in emotional laboring. Cassone and Marchese claim, indulgence as the main device to recover member participation is a procedure of self-accusation.⁸⁴ Players who stay on the first path have to work hard for at least half an hour every day to finish the fixed daily routine for game currency and other materials. They then exhaust devoutly weeks of the accumulation in a few seconds in the card pool. Meanwhile, players on the second path do not fully rationalize their monetary consumption as a substitute for time and energy devoted to the game. The direct and instant pleasure obtained through consumption is in conflict with the norms of social morality which essentially remains one of voluntarism, action, efficiency, and sacrifice.⁸⁵ Such contradictions generate a strong sense of guilt and self-reflection accompanying the new hedonistic behavior. Therefore, these players still try to persist in their daily half-hour routine to save resources or make their gaming experience more participatory. At this place, the complexities of emotional laboring are precisely illustrated and exemplified. In both careers and play, women are always expected to control their emotions and suppress personal needs.

5.2 Expanding the Virtual Existence: Ritual Play in the Co-production

I discussed the card mechanism and cards as commodities from the perspective of ritualized play and political economic critiques (4.1). However, cards are not the real commodities but

⁸³ Consoli, "A New Concept of Marketing: The Emotional Marketing," 5.

⁸⁴ Alberto Cassone and Carla Marchese, "The Economics of Religious Indulgences," 433.

⁸⁵ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 35.

rather the players' oshi, the god to be saved and worshiped. In this section, I will elaborate on how the male beauty of players' oshi is sold and how their virtues are preached with the game communities and relation to other media blocks.

As part of the ACG culture, the game culture and fandom of otome games are deeply affected by the Japanese idol culture which is believed “to be analogous to the pattern of idolatry found in new religious movements and the way these movements are differentiated from the rest of society.”⁸⁶ Pop culture plays a role in shifting the objects of worship from divine beings to people, or any existence and then inventing a new type of religion.⁸⁷ Female fans who are enthusiastic about their favorite fictional characters often idolize them as god-like figures. In their online and offline conversations, fans' discourses overflow with religious terms: “propagation” (fukyo) to mean the missionary work of inviting more people to see their oshi, “donation” (ofuse) to mean purchasing goods and related services, and “altar” (saidan) to mean an altar-like display consisting of novelty goods related to their favorite characters.⁸⁸ Similarly, in the otome game community, female players are also using the same set of terms to communicate with each other. Moreover, Giard names the food metaphor of otome game players' discourse and terminology to explain the commensal dimension of otome games and the similarity between “collabo coffee”, the most emblematic of players'

⁸⁶ Hiroshi Aoyagi, “Idol Fans and the Adoration Cult,” in *Island of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge and London: 2005), 208.

⁸⁷ Kyungjae Jang, “Contents Tourism and Religious Imagination,” in *Contents Tourism and Pop Culture Fandom: Transnational Tourist Experiences*, ed. Takayoshi Yamamura and Philip Seaton (Bristol and Blue Ridge Summit: Channel View Publications, 2020), 119; Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *The Secular Religion of Fandom: Pop Culture Pilgrim* (London: Sage, 2016); Markus Altena Davidsen, “The Secular Religion of Fandom: Pop Culture Pilgrim,” *Culture and Religion* 14, no.4 (2013): 378-395.

⁸⁸ Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, “‘He Is My Precious’: The Cross-Referential Consumption and Use of ‘2.5-D’ Idols in the King of Prism ‘Oenjo eī’ Screening Series,” in *Idology in Transcultural Perspective: Anthropological Investigations of Popular Idolatry*, ed. Aoyagi Hiroshi, Patrick W. Galbraith, and Mateja Kovacic (Gewerbstrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 215-6.

rites and a sacrifice meal. However, this food sharing is digitalized and abstracted with an updated version of the food metaphor by Chinese otome players.

The metaphor of food in Giard's chapter serves to help her complete a discussion of the commensal dimension of otome fan culture as a pseudo-religious practice and culture.⁸⁹ However, in Chinese otome game communities, the food metaphor takes on a different meaning that deconstructs the power relationship between fans and oshi, which is similar to that between disciples and the god. The food metaphor used by Chinese otome players highlights the agency and subjectivity of players, while also bringing attention to issues of class and power dynamics within the fan community. Different from the Japanese otome game players in the “collabo café” who view their oshi as food,⁹⁰ Chinese players apply the metaphor more broadly. Both the commercial and non-commercial products of their oshi are named after food: fanfiction and other online fanart are named “*fàn*” in Chinese, meaning rice, while physical merchandises are named “*gǔ*” or “*gǔzǐ*”, meaning grain and food. The latter gets its name from the pronunciation of “good” in English which resembles that of “*gǔ*”. One who produces *fàn* is called “cook” or “mom” and is respected for their contributions to the community and parenting for other fans. Thus, the oshi and contents of oshi are not seen as feasts offered by the god (oshi) but by the cook (fans). Fan creators’ contributions and significance are emphasized, at the same time the power is driven toward those creators, leading to the forming of a hierarchy within the community. For otome players, paying for their oshi is equal to paying for food (fanart and male beauty as spiritual food), as they also

⁸⁹ Giard, 194.

⁹⁰ Giard, 194.

call their consumption behaviors as “*chī*” which means “eat.” Additionally, fans would not only “eat” their oshi’s male beauty but also “eat” oshi’s virtues.

In previous chapters, we have discussed the socio-historical and economic blocks of otome games and Chinese otome games, as well as their inherent feminist color. The birth of otome games in Japan meant an increase in women's position in both the game industry and the game market. Following its localization in China, the topic of this thesis, Chinese mobile otome games emerged alongside the rise of Chinese women, especially young urban women as a new powerhouse in the new liberal market⁹¹ and the awakening of Chinese young women's gender identification and feminist thoughts.

Most Chinese otome players have a clear consciousness of consumption: “I am here to consume men” and “I am here to make men please me.” The objectification and consumption of men are encouraged within Chinese mobile otome games. The bare male bodies, suggestive images, and sexually explicit bonus audios and plots in the cards are particularly popular among players and are often specially designed by the production team for important in-game events. At the same time, the narrative and interactive mechanisms depict the relationship between the player’s avatar and several male characters as an open relationship (polyamory), challenging traditional value of monogamy and chastity. Playing otome games goes beyond mere entertainment or leisure; it represents a form of identity politics for female gamers. By supporting female-related practitioners, consolidating and expanding the female consumer group's market position, and transforming games and online spaces for women,

⁹¹ Wagner and Liang, “Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: Otome Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women,” 130.

playing otome games becomes a means of participating in the construction of the female gaze and conceiving an ideal world for women. Playing otome games is considered an important practice in participating in the construction of the female gaze while pursuing male beauty is a powerful behavior that liberates female desire and promotes the objectification of men. Overall, this reflects a strategy of digital feminism in China, a downward strategy that seeks to achieve equality by lowering men's status, potentially implying a retaliatory mentality and forcing understanding. It replicates patriarchal norms: women become “fathers” and exercise the cruel consumption logic. Under the female gaze created by the consumer capacity of women, the existence of individuals is reduced, and gender issues are weakened as secondary contradictions, while the overall alienation under the power of capital becomes the primary contradiction. The inadequacy of understanding the complexity and severity of the dilemma faced by women under the male gaze can be observed here. Objectification is not merely or only about women being treated as commodities for casual consumption, being zealously pursued and interpreted by the market and consumers. Rather, it involves the transformation of a person into an object, becoming something that can be easily ignored, becoming a ghost in society and the family, an item on the table that is noticed only when it is knocked over. While this strategy may seem radical, it presents limitations in understanding the broader gender issues at play.

Apart from theoretical discussions, the practice of this strategy is problematic because the attitudes of female players are actually divided, and the influence of real-world factors can easily derail this fast-moving radical train. Giard in her chapter proposes the “divided

attitude” of otome players, referring that players know well that their oshi is not a real person, nevertheless, he is a real person.⁹² Here, I suggest another divided attitude, that is, players are trying to objectify male characters and consume male beauty while not being able to see them entirely as commodities, even deifying and worshiping them.

The main method of deifying their oshi is co-production even reproduction of characters through fan interpretation. The interpretation is to analyze the original text and predict later story chapters and usually in the form of video or post. Meanwhile, they emphasize the virtues of these male characters and use literary motifs to build them as spiritual models. It can be exemplified by fans’ interpretations of male characters in *Light and Night*.

Two of the prototypes of Osborn, Antoine from *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) and Nezha from traditional Chinese mythology are related to classic figures from other media.⁹³ The game production team named one of Osborn’s cards after François Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows*, one of the defining films of the French New Wave, and described Osborn’s similar childhood to Antoine’s. Based on this, fans develop his image with the metaphor for the story of *Nezha Conquering the Sea* to emphasize his difference from Antoine and his superego.⁹⁴ Despite facing neglect from his mother, contempt from his teacher, and bullying from his classmates, Osborn displays bravery and stands up against a school principal who is a sexual assault and illegally runs a school as a juvenile detention center to abuse children and teenagers. As a bounty hunter, Osborn becomes a rebel for

⁹² Giard, 190.

⁹³ *Les quatre cents coups*[*The 400 Blows*], directed by François Truffaut (Les Films du Carrosse, 1959), 99min.

⁹⁴ *Nezha Nao Hai* 哪吒闹海 [Nezha Conquers the Dragon King], directed by Shuchen Wang, Dingxian Yan, and Jingda Xu (Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1979), 65min. The figure of Nezha has been shifting since Jin Dynasty till now, the common understanding of Nezha at present is mostly based on *Nezha Conquering the Sea* (1979) and film and television works afterward.

justice in the modern city, corresponding to the image of Nezha who is the rebel challenging the authority of the divine, the patriarchy, and filial piety. Moreover, Osborn was willing to cut off all ties with evil and the corrupted world at the cost of his own life, which expresses his self-destructive pursuit of freedom. This spiritual image resonates with the image of Nezha killing himself, carving up his own flesh, and dismembering his bones to return these to his parents in repayment for the debt of his birth and to cut off the blood bond in pursuit of spiritual freedom.

Similarly, the spiritual essence of Charlie is another type of rebel and tragic idealism. Charlie is interpreted by fans with metaphors of Oedipus and the phoenix. He is believed to be the most godlike character, committing patricide, marrying the mother (here is symbolized by player's avatar, representing the goodness and freedom which Charlie is resolved to defend), and recreating himself by erasing his past memory and inventing a new one. Charlie makes a new personality of the superego upon himself, which attracts fans to worship him: "Charlie is an idealist thrown out of his heaven, making an ideal of his hell."⁹⁵

Additionally, the most popular (unofficial) image of Evan as "daddy" implying the entertained "daddy issues" in pop culture shows an entirely different preference. Although many players may not have prior knowledge of its sexual connotation to the term of 'daddy issue,' which exactly affirms its entertainment and symbolization. With public understanding and acceptance and even the popularity of BDSM culture,⁹⁶ "daddy" indicates flirtatious

⁹⁵ Charlie's fans paraphrase a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 218: "The idealist is incorrigible: if he is thrown out of his heaven he makes an ideal of his hell."

⁹⁶ BDSM, means bondage & discipline, domination & submission, sadism & masochism. BDSM practices are symbolized by the famous slogan: safe, sane, and consensual, separate itself from sexual violence. See Teguh Wijaya Mulya, "Fifty Shades of the Bible: Sadomasochism, Otaku Sexuality, and Christian Spirituality" (paper presented in the conference

scenes with a dominant and powerful man. Players, in this case, are placed in the submission, calling for the man to obtain them. This is how pop culture's fixation with "daddy issues" functions, it transforms women's suffering in a patriarchal society into the pain of the lack of a patriarch and the desire for a patriarch's validation.

Although fans have individual interpretations that vary from one another, being a member of the community is to be unique yet overlaps with others. Each one of the fans projects their own desire or fantasy onto their oshi, but they would reach an agreement in the comment section of different interpretation videos or posts to share the overlapped understandings and preach personal interpretations. Online public spaces such as comment sections, blogs, and forums encourage "emotionally driven collective authorship"⁹⁷. They are not only places for players and fans to get endorsements from others or share fan creations but also can be "a way that players and fans control their own consumption and the various discourses surrounding the games they love."⁹⁸ Players' interactions in these places are productive and ritual interactions. The symbolically envisioned images of their oshi are ritualistically revised through controlled discourses, which is described as a digital symbolic pilgrimage. Based on Aden's definition of pop culture fans' 'symbolic pilgrimages,' Jang concludes it as "a link between an individual, the contents, and place", in which "individual" is individual imagination and projection and "the contents" are game texts.⁹⁹ In this way, fans'

Changing minds and hearts: Towards acceptance of queer identities within religions and cultures, Jakarta Theological Seminary, 21-24 November 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31371.64803/1>.

⁹⁷ Louisa Ellen Stein, *Millennial fandom: Television audiences in the transmedia age* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 156.

⁹⁸ Ganzon, "Investing Time for Your In-Game Boyfriends and BFFs: Time as Commodity and the Simulation of Emotional Labor in Mystic Messenger," 148.

⁹⁹ Roger C. Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 10; Jang, "Content Tourism and Imagination," 118.

oshi (male beauty and virtues) is the commodity, a symbolized postmodern collage of literal motifs and pop culture references, and the simulation. These fictional male characters are not signifying any man, but rather serve as objects of power being sought and a type of media spectacle.

When analyzing whether the worship of male characters as divine beings reinforces unequal gender relations and subtly reinforces patriarchal training, there are two paths to consider. On the one hand, the female gaze is dissolved through a combination of patriarchal and capital power with three steps:

- 1) Feminism is diminished by patriarchy: Female characters (including the avatar) are dwarfed, emphasizing the packaging of male characters and promoting masculine values. It is obvious to see all five male characters in *Light and Night* and the main male characters in most other Chinese mobile otome games are the representations of the Asian elite - “they are good-looking, pedigreed, and loyal in a friendship or romantic relationship but are also arrogant, aggressive, and stoic in their demeanor—particularly how they conduct themselves in their professional lives, hardnosed and possessing an obnoxious confidence” – more mature and reliable than the avatar.¹⁰⁰ Then female fans become obsessed with worshipping their men of perfection and expect to be possessed. For instance, fans may refer to themselves as Evan’s bunny, Charlie’s fiancée, Sariel’s birdie, Jesse’s Miss, and taking Osborn’s surname (Xiao).

¹⁰⁰ Wagner and Liang, “Love and Producer as East Asian Transmedia: Otome Games, Sexless Polyamory, and Neoliberal Choice for Chinese and South Korean Young Career-Oriented Women,” 138-9.

- 2) Consumer sovereignty is denied by the capital and market: In the fan economy, desire takes precedence over needs. Otome fans' consumption of male beauty and their oshi is promoted by the market for symbolic value rather than use value. The symbolic value is to establish connections or parasocial interactions with their oshi and present their loyalty and sacrifice. However, achieving this through payment reduces an intimate social relationship between people into a monetary one between objects. With erosion by modernity, female players fall into symbolic fetishism.
- 3) The real is dissolved by hyperreal: Women's emotions and attention are consumed and their resources are seized by immersing themselves in heterotopia fantasies that divert attention from the rational consideration of reality and current social issues.

On the other hand, based on the concept of simulation, male characters worshipped by fans do not actually refer to any real individuals, that is, there are no corresponding real man or masculine values to which they can attach their worship. The oshi that players shape and love are unrelated to real men or gender norms. In other words, although female players try to shape these characters as heterosexual partners, the players themselves are not engaged in heterosexual relationships but rather participate in homosexual or narcissistic desires.¹⁰¹ In the game community with significant participation in fan production, instead of saying that female players fall in love with the male image created by a nearly all-female game community catering to female tastes, but a male character role-played by

¹⁰¹ players also refer to themselves as "paper-sexual" or "Nijigen Complex". Nijigen Complex is the affective perception that characters in ACG works are more attractive than people from the real world or only fictional characters are attractive. It is also named "otaku sexuality." Here I did not spread on this since I tend to focus more on the realistic indications of the complex and players' connections with society.

women. The origin of this emotional attachment also derives from women who perform as male characters. Therefore, this worship and celebration can be understood as a homosexual desire hidden under and mediated by the heterosexual norm. That is, the consumption of both male beauty and female spectacle can be understood as a result of power oppression, guiding individuals' exploration and desire for same-sex relationships and self-discovery due to the lack of self and gender identification. Similar to the female spectacle which is not an objective representation of women, but rather an object or container of desire under the male gaze, male beauty does not necessarily signify actual men. Both serve as means for people to perform as “the other” to understand themselves, implying that homosexual/homosocial relationships are imprisoned under the heterosexual matrix.

Drawing on Lacan's argument that heterosexuality is a constructed reality generated by social and cultural factors and observation of the phenomenon of “mirroring” in heterosexual relationships, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity describes that gender is not a natural biological fact, but rather a social construct that is created through role-playing and performance.¹⁰² According to Butler, gender roles are constructed through the physical practices of body movements, language, and symbols; gender is a performative accomplishment consisting of a stylized repetition of acts imitating dominant norms.¹⁰³ In this way, individuals are expected to conform to specific gender roles that have been socially and culturally constructed.¹⁰⁴ Through the inevitable discontinuity of this repetition of

¹⁰² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰³ Stavroula Dargonaki, “Performing gender on Twitch.tv: Gendered playbour through Butlerian theory,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 14, no.1 (2018): 104. doi: 10.1386/macp.14.1.103_7; Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

imitating dominant norms, the illusion of a stable gender identity is revealed and subversion becomes possible. Later, Butler acknowledges a theoretical mistake of only focusing on bodily acts and taking the internality of the psychic world for granted, resulting in missing bringing the psyche world forward into the thinking of performativity.¹⁰⁵ She then suggests that a psychic theory of performativity is possible¹⁰⁶ which gets exploration in the example of Chinese otome game culture. Bringing this theory into the ACG culture with imagined heterosexual relationships and partners by women, we can better understand the reconstruction of women as subjects of feminism through gender performativity in the co-production of their oshi.

In addition to the co-production of male character personality by interpretation, there is another cultural practice in fandom that directly embodies psychic performativity: chat cosplay, known as "yǔ c/yǔ cā" in Chinese. It is worth noting that the discussion here focuses on this new form of cosplay rather than regular cosplay is based on the special nature of otome game culture. Within the otome game community, many female players oppose and resist regular cosplay which involves real-human (especially male) cosplayers portraying virtual characters. Therefore, chat cosplay that allows cosplayers to only chat with people online in the persona of their oshi to simulate a real daily romantic scene is popularized among Chinese otome players. These cosplayers are also loyal fans of their oshi and as they immerse themselves in the role-playing experience, their understanding and emotional connection with their oshi deepens. Chat cosplay thus is an exact practice of psyche gender

¹⁰⁵ Butler, xv.

¹⁰⁶ Butler, xv.

performativity. Cosplayers not only strive to imitate an idealized man but also yearn to become the “man” for other players, meanwhile, their oshi becomes women (players). In other words, this practice of gender performativity helps construct these male characters and gender roles against that of the heterosexual matrix in Chinese society – the more players love their oshi, the closer they are to real women and the reconstruction of their subjectivity. Moreover, due to the unique interactive form of chat cosplay, this performance is usually private, paid, and long-lasting. As Butler clarifies, “...performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization.”¹⁰⁷ By examining the co-production of oshi in otome game culture with ritual and gender performativity, we can better understand how the heterosexual matrix plays its role in gameplay and how the avenue to explore alternative gender identities can be.

¹⁰⁷ Butler, xv.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will answer my research questions based on the analysis. The main research question will be answered after an overview of what I have analyzed for my subquestions. The three subquestions will be answered in order. First, the ritual elements of the card mechanism and relevant procedures of *Light and Night* are not designed to be embedded within to maximize profits. Instead, players utilize the affordance of the card pool to generate rites spontaneously. Whereas, the ritual elements in gameplay reinforce the effect of emotional marketing and the emphasis on the emotional needs and desires of otome games centering on romance and love. It aims to transform emotions and desires that cannot or are not readily satisfied into monetary consumption. Additionally, rites within otome game culture regulate player interactions and other behaviors, becoming a tradition. Under these regulations and the environment, the otome player group proceeds with the structurization meanwhile the ritual consumption (indulgences) can be seen as tools for better performing activities of selecting, controlling, and enforcing while strengthening the power of the hierarchy within a group.¹⁰⁸ Secondly, the ritualization of play is involved in the process of players' in-game play and consumption and in their production and co-production. Based on the discussion of players' production of media texts and physical goods related to the game and their oshi, the co-production of the male characters by female players and the game is materialized through players' interpretations, involving their fan creations and interactions. During the process of the co-production, the dominant image of their oshi is ritualistically

¹⁰⁸ Cassone and Marchese, "The Economics of Religious Indulgences," 432.

revised and constantly reinforced and the male beauty is combined with virtues to build the image as a deified moral model of perfection. Meanwhile, the identity as player or fan is fluidic and mixed, Lastly, players monitor and dominate the co-construction of their oshi and the co-production of the game, indicating a denial of the authority of the original game text, then in the later analysis I refer to it as reproduction or reconstruction. Hence, it shows a way of female players' resistance in the sense of seeing the game produce team as the evil who locks up and controls their oshi's holy soul and as the representative of the capital, while consumption behavior is acceptable and supported.

In conclusion, the main research question “whether the ritualization of play in *Light and Night* is a way for the capital gaze to dissolve players' potential female gaze practice, and if so, how it proceeds?” can be answered with the discussion of players' “divided attitude” mentioned in 4.2. The ritualization of play may be not designed or planned to be the way at the first stage but it is the representation of the unstable and incomplete simulation of the male gaze by female players. In terms of imitation behavior, the female gaze itself is still a repetition of the patriarchal norms and heterosexual matrix. As McRobbie explains Butler's work, in popular culture, in a post-feminism environment, “some degree of gender equality is nominally invoked and upheld, nonetheless works to reconsolidate gender norms.”¹⁰⁹ Apart from the conceptual argument, in practice, female players' agency and subjectivity of interpretation do present their resistance and questioning against the authority of the game produce team though their execution of power has to be under the framework of the

¹⁰⁹ Angela McRobbie, “No Woman, No Cry? Judith Butler and the Politics of Post-feminist Cultural Studies,” in *The Uses of Cultural Studies: A Textbook*, ed. Angela McRobbie (London: SAGE, 2005), 70.

consumer market. In this way, we can see the shift of alienation in the usage of “gaze”, from objectification to commodification. The female gaze is born from consumerism in popular culture and used in Chinese digital feminism for conceptual discussions and feminist discourse construction. Women are always invited to find their personality and “true self” and to be closer to their reference ideal which used to be a housewife or a femme fatale while now it is a feminist. With the self-indulgence directed at women, the pressure is exerted on women through the “myth of Woman” and one’s relation to oneself becomes a consumed relation.¹¹⁰ In this case, female players’ relations to themselves are objectified and fueled by signs, signs which make up the feminine model and the unique personality – feminism. Some people have commented that feminism has become a fashionable accessory for some women to be different from others; it is not an enjoyment of singularity but a reflection of collective features even internalized misogyny.

Limitations and Future Research

By using the six building blocks, I have given more insight into the unique game mechanism of Chinese mobile otome games which has never been studied in detail before. However, I only used the game textual analysis, while for further studies on the players’ interpretations and the game communities, interviews and focus groups should be conducted. Apart from the method, with the focus of this thesis on the gender issue, the mapping of the player group could involve more diversity in future studies. This thesis investigates the player group based on the original and popular definition of otome games in China and the majority

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 95.

of players – (heterosexual) female players. Whereas the case is in fact rather more complicated. According to my prior knowledge of the players, there are a certain amount of lesbian and male players among them. In-depth research on the player group in the future can help to discover more relations between otome game culture and the heterosexual matrix. With the strong identity politics value of playing otome games, the differences between “girl’s games” and “boy’s games” are being undermined while at stake in the marshaling of gendered games, showing “popular culture continues to define and redefine the boundaries of gender”.¹¹¹ Chinese mobile otome games are new and their lives are usually short. It prompts us to envisage the direction and the future of “female-oriented” games, maybe when they all disappear, new boundaries and categories are set again.

¹¹¹ McRobbie, “No Woman, No Cry? Judith Butler and the Politics of Post-feminist Cultural Studies,” 71.

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Appendix: Fernández-Vara's Building Blocks

● The Context

The context of the game encompasses the conditions under which it is created and played, along with additional texts and communities that may be associated with it.¹¹² Building blocks that define the context of a game are listed as follows:

- **Context inside the game:** Units of the game that structure and divide the game, such as play modes, levels of difficulty, different locations, stages, chapters, and quests. Identifying units of the game and what aspects of the game to be used will help us situate our discussion and analysis.
- **Production team:** One of the paratexts of the game. Identifying who has participated in the development of the game can provide vital information about the possible impacts on and the process of the production. Revealing the process of how a game is made is emphasized here. The production team will lead the analysis to make associations with other games that have been done by the same company or people, as well as other relevant media texts.
- **Game genre:** Game genres help us group and classify games, thus forming relationships and distinctions between different games. A game genre is usually defined by the formal features of the game which then become the genre conventions.
- **Technological context:** Identifying technological context influences what types of games the analysis focuses on and the particular version and content differences of the game. According to Fernández-Vara's explanation, she mainly emphasizes the importance of the technological platform including hardware, game engines, and development platforms.
- **Socio-historical context:** The dates when a game is made, released, and played give information related to other building blocks. Situating the game within the social and historical contexts also helps us to see games as reactions or reflections to current and historical events. In a broader sense, the intersection of cultures and transnational circulation can be explored by identifying the socio-historical context.
- **Economic context:** The economic context of the game can be defined by the location in which and when a game is produced, as well as its distribution, marketing, and monetization.
- **Audience:** This building block approaches the "audience" from the perspective of commercialization. Identifying who the audience is and how the game is trying to approach and appeal to them expands the socio-economic background of the game. To

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use this building block, we usually need to combine it with some relevant ones and paratexts.

- ***Relations to other media:*** From adaptation to transmedia storytelling, studying the relation between a game and other media is directly related to other disciplines and highly stresses the participatory nature of digital games. Fernández-Vara counts other media in her book as the inspiration or sources of the targeted game to be studied.

● **Game Overview**

This domain focuses on the content, the fundamental features that distinguish the game from others, and the various ways in which it has been interpreted, embraced, and altered by different players and audiences. Building blocks under the section of game overview are as follows:

- ***Number of players:*** Both digital and non-digital games involve the design for different numbers of players. Through the design, we can understand more about how the game is played, how players take participation in the game, and how they are related to each other (player(s) to the game/player(s) to player(s)).
- ***Rules and goals of the game/game modes:*** In a game analysis, the summary of the main rules and restrictions of the game suffices to convey an idea of what the game is about. Since the rules of digital games sometimes are locked in a “black box”, in an analysis we also write about the goals and the game mechanics of the game.
- ***Game mechanics:*** The mechanics of the game refer to the rules that build how the players take a part in the game while the rules as we mentioned above refer to how the game works. Thus, this building block accounts for the regulations applied to player behavior.
- ***Spaces of the game:*** the term “space” can be the space where the game takes place, how it is organized and arranged (a chapter, a level, for instance), and the range of potential game actions and activities.
- ***Fictional world of the game:*** Not all games have fictional worlds. Identifying the fictional world allows us to confirm the theme, conventions, and stories of the game.
- ***Story:*** Related to the fictional world of the game as the basic setting, this building block helps us to learn how games create narrative experiences. Besides, the story of the game can also be defined within the domain of the story of players.
- ***Gameplay experience:*** By describing the gameplay experience, the readers can understand the game and gameplay to be analyzed if they have not played themselves.

This building block is subjective and mainly focuses on feelings and personal interactions.

- **Game communities:** The “Audience” building block in the domain of The Context refers to players as an abstract concept, while this building block concerns how players are formed as a community and how the community is related and reacts to the game.

● **Formal Aspects**

This area concerns how the game text is constructed and what constructs it. Thus, formal aspects usually refer to game systems and their components (rules, the control schemes), and the representation (interface design, visual style). Building blocks forming the formal aspects of the game are as follows:

- **Rules of the world:** Rules of this building block refer to rules of the fictional world mentioned in the building block of “Fictional world of the game”. These rules simulate and distinguish from those of the real world.
- **Diegetic vs. extradiegetic rules:** Diegetic elements are for the fictional world and are experienced by avatars or characters in it while extradiegetic elements are for players and out of the fictional world.
- **Save games:** Save games are one of the extradiegetic elements. In digital games, the system can store the state of the game so players can go back to it again. Fernández-Vara claims whether there are save games, it is important to the analysis of the gameplay.
- **Relationship between rules and the fictional world:** A continuation of the previous building blocks. The relationship between rules and the fictional world can be studied by investigating whether and how these rules are implied and how the fictional world is presented.
- **Values and procedural rhetoric:** Rules and system processes of the game can express a set of cultural and social values and reflect an ideology.
- **Procedural content vs. hard-coded content:** Hard-coded content in the game involves files of graphics, text, and sound. Procedural content, on the other hand, refers to instructions given to the computer on how to create that content.
- **Game dynamics:** Game dynamics consist of how the game proceeds, different types of strategies would be applied, any kinds of exploitation of the rules, and all the results of the rules.
- **The gap between the players and the game: mediation**

The idea of mediation or mediation space refers to the formal elements that allow players to interact with the game and that are used to present the game via the screen, such as user interface design, the point of view of the camera, controllers, and the avatar.

- ***Control schemes and peripherals:*** This building block discusses how the game utilizes pieces of hardware such as game controllers, the keyboard, or the mouse.
- ***Difficulty levels/game balance:*** Identifying the difficulty of game levels helps us explore more about the game design and the audience. Game balancing refers to the process of adjusting the dynamics of the system into adequately difficult or easy to targeted players.
- ***Representation (visual design, sound design, and music):*** This building block requires analyzing theories and methods from other disciplines, such as film, art, and music, but at the same time the participatory nature of the game should be stressed. The representation of the game materializes the mood creation, themes, and narrative.
- ***Rule-driven vs. goal-driven games:*** These are two different way of defining games. Fernández-Vara refers to two terms *emergence* and *progression* to correspond with these two ways; the former refers to the aspects of player making decisions, related to the rule structure while the later refers to goals and sub-goals in the game, related to the goal structure.
- ***Levels and level design:*** Levels divide a rule-based space in the “Space of the game” and level design defines moment-to-moment interaction. In an analysis of this, we have to give a detailed description of what happens within levels, the rationale of the design, and the reason why the level is arranged as it is.
- ***Choice design:*** Choice design relates to how the players are exposed to choices and the consequences and how the game presents them.
- ***Cheats/mods/hacks/bugs:*** These non-standard ways of playing may change the supposed approach to the game and the ideal game experience, which then may affect gameplay and formal aspects of the game. Alternative content provides new ways of seeing games.