

From Parasocial Interaction to Relationship: A Study on Virtual Intimacy in Otome Games——A Case Study of Love and Deepspace

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Abstract

In the digital media era, otome games, as a typical carrier of virtual intimate relationships, continuously shape the emotional experience patterns of young people. Based on the parasocial interaction theory, this study adopts in-depth interviews and participant observation to systematically explore the construction mechanism, typological characteristics and influence paths of virtual intimate relationships in such games. The research finds that games effectively promote the development from parasocial interaction to stable parasocial relationships between players and characters through realistic character shaping, narrative-driven plots and immersive scenarios. Virtual relationships are categorized into three types: friendship-oriented, romance-oriented and virtual-pet-oriented, which expand the typological dimension of traditional parasocial relationship (PSR) theory. Such relationships exert dual influences: they satisfy psychological needs through emotional compensation and identity recognition, while also triggering negative effects such as media dependence and excessive consumption due to emotional capitalization. This study provides a theoretical reference for understanding the complexity of digital emotional interaction, and offers implications for the ethical governance and healthy design of games.

Keywords

Parasocial Interaction; Parasocial Relationship; Emotional Communication; Virtual Intimate Relationship; Otome Games

1. Introduction

In the digital media era, otome games, as a typical carrier of virtual intimate relationships, shape young people's emotional experiences. Based on parasocial interaction theory, this study adopts in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore the construction mechanism, typological features and influence paths of virtual intimacy in otome games.

It finds that games foster stable parasocial bonds between players and virtual characters via realistic roles, narrative plots and immersive scenarios, which fall into friendship, romantic and virtual pet types and expand relevant theoretical dimensions. These interpersonal connections carry both positive and negative implications. They meet people's inner psychological desires through emotional comfort and self-group identity, yet may also lead to media attachment and irrational consumption behavior. Meanwhile, they provide valuable insights for academic studies and the ethical standardization of online games.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intimate Relationships

In a broad sense, intimate relationships emphasize mutual interdependence between both parties without being restricted to specific identities, while in a narrow sense, they mainly refer to romantic or marital partnerships[1]. This study adopts the broad definition. Existing researches are mostly rooted in psychology, focusing on satisfaction measurement, influencing factors and relational traits[2]. Xiong Jianfeng analyzed the internal psychological structure of college students' intimate relationship satisfaction[3]; Hou Jing and Song Lei verified that relationship attribution plays a mediating role between adult attachment and intimate relationship quality[4]. Kirchler summarized previous studies and concluded that intimate relationships feature close interpersonal distance, high mutual dependence, intuitive understanding and long-term willingness to stay together[5]. The development of the Internet has transformed the forms of intimate relationships. Gao Hanning put forward the concept of "virtualized intimate relationship" and interpreted emotional perceptions in subcultural communities with the mechanism of "virtual sexual characteristics"[6]. Some scholars conduct research from the consumption perspective; Lin Zhongxuan et al. criticized the emotional commodification practice of virtual lovers[7]. Meanwhile, human-machine virtual intimate relationships have gained increasing attention, with studies on virtual idol A-SOUL and intimacy in virtual idol worship[8-9]. Nevertheless, researches on virtual intimate relationships in the context of otome games remain insufficient, which forms the research perspective of this paper.

2.2. Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship Theory

Since Parasocial Interaction Theory was proposed by Horton and Wohl in 1956, it was initially employed to describe audiences' one-sided attachment to media figures[10]. TV's popularity revived the theory in the 1970s-80s, which later systematized under Uses and Gratifications research. There has long been a debate between the deficit perspective and the universality perspective in academia. The former regards parasocial interaction as a substitute for real-life social interaction[11][12], while the latter argues that parasocial interaction is a universal

experience for all individuals, regardless of one's satisfaction with interpersonal communication.

Methodologically, Rubin et al. and Hartmann successively developed measurement scales, advancing the empirical development of relevant research[13][14]. With the rise of digital media, the research objects of parasocial interaction have expanded from traditional media figures to social media influencers and even virtual characters. Wellman et al. put forward the concept of cross-media parasocial relationships[15], while Stein et al. found no significant difference in the intensity of parasocial interaction between audiences toward virtual influencers and real human influencers[16]. These studies demonstrate the theoretical extensibility of Parasocial Interaction Theory in the new media context.

In China, Fang Jianyi was among the earliest scholars to systematically introduce Western studies on parasocial interaction and commented on their limitations[17]. Yin Junli and Chen Dongxia reviewed the research history of Western parasocial relationship studies[18]. Along with the development of the internet, research objects of parasocial interaction in China have become increasingly diverse. Representative studies include Ma Zhihao and Ge Jinping's analysis of animation bullet screen comments[19], as well as Han Xiu et al.'s research on how users' parasocial interaction with social robots affects loneliness[20]. Nevertheless, the application of this theory in the specific context of otome games remains insufficient.

Parasocial interaction refers to immediate interactive responses, while parasocial relationship highlights stable and enduring emotional connections between audiences and media figures[21][22]. Scholars' understanding of parasocial relationships has expanded from single to multiple dimensions, with more focus on its dynamic complexity in games and other interactive media. Tukachinsky further categorized it into parasocial friendship and parasocial love[23]. Western scholars have achieved fruitful findings on parasocial relationships. By contrast, domestic research started much later and lacks a mature systematic framework. Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship are mutually complementary, and the development level of parasocial interaction affects the formation and maintenance of parasocial relationships. Based on this, from the perspective of otome games, this study focuses on how players engage in parasocial interaction with game characters and maintain parasocial relationships, rather than studying the two in isolation.

2.3. Otome Games

The term "otome" originates from Japan, referring to games developed, designed and operated by game developers targeting female users as the primary audience. Existing studies mainly fall into three research directions. From an economic perspective, scholars have analyzed its emotional marketing models and community economy strategies, revealing the interplay between commercial benefits and users'

emotional connections [24][25]. From an impact perspective, research focuses on how such games shape female players' views on marriage and love, pointing out that they may reinforce idealized expectations and discussing corresponding guidance strategies [26][27]. From an emotional perspective, scholars have explored the formation mechanism and functions of emotional bonds between players and virtual characters from the perspectives of narrative framework and compensatory satisfaction [28][29][30]. Although existing studies have touched upon players' emotional bonds, they lack systematic investigation based on parasocial relationship theory regarding the micro mechanism of relationship construction, specific typological classification, and the dual impacts on players. This study aims to fill this research gap.

A literature review indicates that current research on virtual intimate relationships between players and characters in otome games still has obvious deficiencies. Most existing studies focus on perspectives such as emotional labor, community culture and fan economy, while few systematically analyze the formation mechanism and maintenance paths of virtual intimate relationships from the dynamic developmental process of "parasocial interaction–parasocial relationship". Notably, few studies have explored what initially sparks emotional bonds. Researchers also struggle to identify how brief interactions develop into lasting steady connections, which limits our overall grasp of how such relationships evolve dynamically. In terms of research content, existing studies mostly concentrate on single paths such as compensatory satisfaction and emotional projection, without in-depth analysis of diverse relationship types shaped by differences in players' involvement levels and personal needs, failing to construct a clear typology of relationship categories. In terms of research methods, most studies rely on quantitative tools such as scales and questionnaires, lacking in-depth exploration of players' inner experiences and emotional logic through qualitative methods including in-depth interviews.

3. Research Objects and Research Methods

This study takes *Love and Deepspace*, China's first 3D otome mobile game, as the research object. Boasting technological innovation and immersive experience, the game achieved top-tier revenue upon public beta and has maintained sustained market popularity. The research targets female players aged 18 and above, including students and working professionals, with each interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes on average. To ensure sample representativeness, three screening criteria were set: no less than six months of gaming experience, a daily playing frequency of at least once or twice, and in-depth familiarity with game mechanisms, character settings and storylines. Ultimately, 17 qualified interviewees were selected. A small number of male players were excluded due to their limited quantity and poor representativeness. In terms of research ethics, all interviews were conducted with the informed consent of participants. Audio recordings and textual materials were

anonymized in strict accordance with the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymous information usage.

Adopting a mixed research design of in-depth interviews and participant observation, this study recruited eligible participants from player communities for semi-structured interviews to explore their gaming behaviors, emotional experiences and perceptions of virtual relationships, so as to delve into players' psychological states and the construction and maintenance of emotional bonds mediated by technology. Meanwhile, the researcher participated in the game and relevant social platforms to observe players' in-game interactions, community communications, offline activities and fan creation behaviors. This dual approach guarantees the richness and complementarity of research data. Thematic Analysis[31] was adopted for data analysis. All 17 interview transcripts and observation notes were transcribed and sorted out. After repeated reading and data familiarization, initial coding was conducted to identify basic meaning units. Relevant codes were then classified and merged to refine core themes including the formation and maintenance of virtual relationships, typology of parasocial relationships, and the impacts of virtual relationships on players, forming the analytical framework of this paper.

| Interviewee ID | Gender | Age | Occupation | Monthly Income (CNY) | Monthly In-game Spending (CNY) | Spending Tier | Marital Status | Interview Method |
|----------------|--------|-----|----------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| D1 | Female | 23 | Undergraduate | 6000 | 200-300 | Mid-spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D2 | Female | 21 | Undergraduate | 6000 | 1400 | Heavy spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D3 | Female | 22 | Postgraduate | 3000 | 1000 | Heavy spender | Single | Facetoface Interview |
| D4 | Female | 28 | Freelancer | 10000 | 400-500 | Mid-spender | Married | Tencent Meeting |
| D5 | Female | 22 | Postgraduate | 3000 | 100 | Low spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D6 | Female | 24 | Postgraduate | N/A | N/A | Low spender | In a relationship | Tencent Meeting |
| D7 | Female | 22 | Undergraduate | 3500 | 100-200 | Mid-spender | In a relationship | Tencent Meeting |
| D8 | Female | 22 | Undergraduate | 1200 | 0-200 | Low spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D9 | Female | 21 | Undergraduate | 20000 | 30 | Low spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D10 | Female | 20 | Undergraduate | 1500 | 200-400 | Mid-spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D11 | Female | 28 | TV Screenwrite | 20000 | 1400 | Heavy spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D12 | Female | 23 | Undergraduate | 0 | 600 | Heavy spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D13 | Female | 31 | Freelancer | 7000 | 200-500 | Mid-spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D14 | Female | 32 | Civil Servant | 8000 | 350 | Mid-spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |
| D15 | Female | 22 | Postgraduate | 4000 | 30-100 | Low spender | Single | Facetoface Interview |
| D16 | Female | 25 | PhD Student | 15000 | 100-200 | Mid-spender | In a relationship | Tencent Meeting |
| D17 | Female | 37 | Marketing Mar | 20000 | 3000 | Heavy spender | Single | Tencent Meeting |

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. Formation of Virtual Relationships

4.1.1. Character Shaping: The Initiation Mechanism of Parasocial Interaction

In Love and Deepspace, the five male characters are shaped into socially meaningful anthropomorphic symbols through physical images, personalities and behavioral traits, triggering players' interpretation and forming initial interaction intentions.

Interviews show that striking appearances are a major draw for new players. As Player D1 remarked: "I got into the game at first just because all the characters are so good-looking." Breaking the flat and stereotyped portrayal of traditional otome games, these characters feature distinct differences in appearance, personality and ability, offering diverse choices for players. Such elaborate symbolic systems drive players to develop virtual relationships. Player D2 stated: "Their looks drew me in at first, and then I noticed their powerful and steady inner selves." Moreover, the game adopts an imperfect narrative design. Delicate flaws such as Shen Xinghui's

sleepiness and Li Shen's reticence enhance the characters' authenticity and vividness. As Player D3 put it: "Li Shen is cold and dominant due to surgery; he does love others but is too burdened with responsibilities to express it."

4.1.2. Plot and Mission Design: The Promotional Path of Parasocial Interaction

General intimate relationships emphasize interdependence between both parties, and the multi-linear narrative and mission design of Love and Deep Space precisely promote relationship formation by constructing such a sense of dependence. The game designs an independent main storyline for each male character, guiding players into a specific "story world" and generating emotional involvement. Meanwhile, card storyline chapters serve as an important supplementary narrative, offering players opportunities to deeply explore the inner world of characters and significantly enhancing the depth of emotional bonds. "The most unforgettable storylines are Feiyu Xiangye and Feng Linye. I was so moved to tears at the climax of the card stories." (D2) "It is probably the plot that attracts me the most." (D4)

In terms of gameplay mechanism design, the game strengthens emotional connection through the mission system. While completing tasks, players can not only obtain item rewards, but also deepen their understanding of characters' personalities through interaction. This enables one-way parasocial interaction to gradually evolve into stable parasocial relationships.

4.1.3. Three-Dimensional Immersive Experience and Subjectivity Construction: Situational Support for Parasocial Relationships

Klimmt pointed out that parasocial relationships are characterized by "situational transcendence" [22], and 3D technology provides the carrier for such transcendence. Love and Deepspace has made remarkable breakthroughs in visual presentation and interactive experience. Horton and Wohl proposed that media figures simulate face-to-face gestures and conversations, allowing audiences to perceive "intimate behavior at a distance" and regard virtual characters as real individuals.

With advanced 3D modeling, the game boasts elaborate character designs and highly realistic scenes. The refined depiction of skin textures as well as subtle facial expressions and movements breaks the limitations of traditional 2D games, simulating the interaction logic of real intimate relationships. This realistic restoration of face-to-face communication enables parasocial interaction, making players treat characters as sincere emotional companions rather than cold codes. "I started this game for its high-quality modeling, the first domestic 3D otome game." (D5)

The game adopts multiple designs to enhance player subjectivity, reflecting users' role as content co-creators in participatory culture. It breaks linear narration and allows players to unlock different storylines via independent choices. The character customization system supports personalized avatars, and the social photo function enables virtual photos with characters to strengthen emotional bonds. "What makes

the game special is the face customization, which lets me shape my ideal self-image in the game." (D6)

4.2. Maintenance of Virtual Intimate Relationships in Otome Games

4.2.1. Simulated Social System: The Daily Maintenance of Parasocial Relationships

Love and Deepspace constructs a multi-dimensional realistic social system, extending virtual intimate relationships into real life. It designs interactive modules consistent with real social scenarios, including instant messaging, video calls and a Moments-like function. By embedding virtual characters into daily social frameworks, the game blurs the boundary between virtuality and reality and strengthens players' sense of **character presence**, serving as a behavioral extension of "participating in the character's life" in parasocial interaction. In terms of entertainment interaction, simulated mini-games restore physical features and differentiated character responses. The tap-triggered haptic feedback system on the main interface realizes non-verbal emotional communication through characters' real-time facial changes, making up for the limitations of text communication. "Tapping can make him change clothes, which is lovely. Shen Xinghui will sometimes blush and turn away when teased into anger. It feels so real." (D7) "I feel delighted every day when tapping triggers new voice lines or replies." (D8)

Moreover, the game adopts augmented reality technology to launch real-life photo stickers, allowing players to take photos with virtual characters in physical space. Personalized settings such as outfit matching and pose adjustment build carriers of emotional memory. Materialized into preservable and shareable images, the virtual relationship extends the temporal and spatial dimension of emotional experience, and consolidates the sense of reality of virtual relationships through the physical existence of photo albums. "I will specially buy costume props to take photos together just like real couples. The real-life photo sticker function especially makes me feel he is truly by my side." (D9)

4.2.2. Emotional Support System: In-depth Penetration of Parasocial Relationships

Love and Deepspace builds a hierarchical emotional support system, deeply integrating virtual intimate relationships into real life with three modules: situational companionship, emotional catharsis and life management. Its companion feature simulates real partner company to form an all-time emotional support network. "I turn on the companion system when studying, and it lifts my mood." (D10) The voice channel enables two-way emotional communication for players to release pressure and satisfy psychological needs for intimate interdependence. "When I feel tired or upset, talking to him calms me down, and his

replies bring real romantic feelings." (D11) The 3.0 version launches the "Remind Me" function. Its personalized menstrual care turns virtual companionship into tangible life services. "I love the Remind Me function. It helps my poor memory and enriches gameplay and companionship." (D10)

4.3. Core Types of Virtual Intimate Relationships

This study classifies gamers' virtual intimate bonds into three groups by engagement level and parasocial relationship theory.

4.3.1. Friendship-oriented Type: Parallel Parasocial Relationship Centered on Companionship Value

In otome games, friendship-based virtual intimacy is a kind of quasi-friendship centered on players' demand for companionship, conforming to the mutual dependence of broad intimate relationships. Devoid of romance, it features rational interaction, with virtual characters serving as outlets for players to share feelings and kill time. As Player D6 said: "The characters are my friends who keep me company and entertain me in my spare time." Their unconditional support brings players a strong sense of acceptance. Restricted by technical limitations and personal emotional experiences, many players prefer this friendship mode. Such players usually play for 15 to 60 minutes each time, with engagement fluctuating alongside game updates.

4.3.2. Romantic-oriented Type: Parasocial Relationship as Simulated Real-life Partnership

Romantic virtual intimacy is the most typical and prevalent mode in otome games, forming a stable and lasting quasi-romantic bond that simulates real-life romantic relationships. Players regard virtual characters as ideal partners and invest emotions through in-game interactions, while characters respond via plots, voice lines and animations, creating a two-way emotional cycle. Such players show deeper interaction, longer time investment and stronger willingness to pay for rare items and exclusive storylines. From the perspective of Uses and Gratifications theory, modern fast-paced life leaves many people socially constrained and emotionally lonely. Otome games provide ideal emotional sustenance. As Player D11 put it: "Working in a strange city, I feel unnoticed, and Shen Xinghui's Chapter 21 gives me emotional sustenance." Player D14 also stated: "I have emotional needs, and Xia Yizhou can meet my expectations for a partner."

4.3.3. Electronic Pet Type: Asymmetric Parasocial Relationship of Nurturing Experience

Electronic pet-style virtual intimacy forms a unique emotional interaction mode in otome games, transcending the traditional scope of parasocial relationships. Its core feature lies in the one-way emotional projection and controlling relationship

between players and virtual characters. In this mode, players gain a high degree of autonomy through customizing character appearances and selecting interactive scenarios, while virtual characters provide stable feedback set by algorithms to build players' emotional security. As interviewee D7 stated: "They are just like virtual pets I raise. I only connect with them when I open the game." Such players usually spend no more than 30 minutes per online session, and their interactions are distinctly task-oriented with shallow emotional engagement. This pattern stems from limited in-game resources as well as players' strategy of gaining emotional compensation with low time and emotional investment while reserving energy for real-life social interaction. Notably, this unequal relationship centered on control and nurturing transcends traditional parasocial relationship theories. Existing studies mostly focus on equal relationships such as friendship or romantic affection. By contrast, the status of players and characters in the electronic pet type is distinctly imbalanced: players act as dominators, while characters remain passive recipients of interaction. By identifying this electronic pet type, this study supplements new forms of parasocial relationship in the interactive media era. It proves that parasocial relationships include not only equal modes of friendship and romantic love, but also asymmetric patterns with power differences centered on control and nurturing.

5. The Influence of Virtual Intimate Relationships on Players

Existing studies on otome games mainly focus on emotional satisfaction and compensation, community identity attribution, media dependence, mate selection bias and weakened emotional expression, while rarely exploring players' overconsumption and its real-life impacts.

This paper divides players into four tiers by monthly expenditure: non-spenders (0 yuan), low spenders (1-100 yuan), mid spenders (100-500 yuan) and heavy spenders (over 500 yuan). All heavy spenders and most mid spenders have intense emotional demands. Emotional involvement acts as the core driver of high consumption, presenting the feature of emotional capitalization, which turns pure emotional needs into a tool for commercial appreciation.

The game constructs an emotion-oriented consumption loop, bonding emotional connection with payment behaviors. Gacha scarcity triggers players' loss aversion, and duplicate card upgrading further extends the consumption cycle.

"I recharge to reach Bond Level 100 for a ring." (D11) Some players even cut daily expenses and cancel travel plans for in-game spending (D2). Players often fall into cognitive dissonance, struggling between emotional needs and rational consumption.

6. The Influence of Virtual Intimate Relationships on Players

Based on the quasi-social interaction and relationship theoretical framework, this

study takes Love and Deep Space as a case to explore the mechanisms, typological characteristics and dual impacts of virtual intimate relationships in otome games. It finds the game establishes quasi-social interaction pathways via de-idealized characters, multi-threaded narratives and immersive 3D technology, with players forming three relationship models: companionship-centered friendship, couple-simulating romantic, and control-nurturing virtual pet types. These relationships are a double-edged sword with compensatory and risky aspects. Theoretically, it enriches the theory's application in digital media; practically, it provides references for game design. Limitations include limited, single-game samples and lack of quantitative data. Future research could expand scope, adopt longitudinal studies and explore technological ethics. In summary, these virtual relationships are a key part of contemporary digital culture.

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