

# **Eroticism and Design Workshops in Game Interfaces: Exploring a Mobile Otome Game for Chinese Women**

## **Abstract**

This article examines the interface design of otome games, focusing on how it reflects the trend of eroticism and the emergence of social media-driven design workshops in gaming for Asian women. Against the backdrop of heteropessimism—disillusionment with heteronormative relationships—the study uses *Light and Night*, a Chinese otome game, as a case study to explore these dynamics. Through digital ethnography and interviews with 58 players (32 from *Light and Night*), the research reveals that interface elements—such as graphics, audio, and mechanisms operationalizing sex-play—create immersive experiences catering to women’s erotic needs despite state censorship. Furthermore, social media platforms act as transgressive “design workshops,” where feedback from women gamers directly shapes game updates, reflecting both commercialized and censored forms of eroticism. This study underscores the overlooked role of female players in shaping the production and consumption of games in contemporary China, offering critical insights into the complexities of eroticism in game design.

Key words: Otome games; user-interface design; Chinese women; sex; digital technology; heteroecism

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## Introduction

Xiao Yi, a sexually attractive male non-player character (NPC) in the popular Chinese otome game *Light and Night* (*Guangyuye Zhilian*; hereafter referred to as *Light*), developed by Tencent, has garnered considerable interest from players.<sup>1</sup> In this game, players assume the role of a young female fashion designer and engage in romantic encounters with five exceptionally good-looking young male NPCs. Like other otome games, the male characters featured in *Light* are intentionally crafted to embody the cultural archetype of “tall, rich, and handsome” (*gao fu shuai*). These characters are depicted as idealized figures possessing attractive physical attributes, financial success, and a sense of refinement, which aligns with the desired masculine ideal (Zavoretti, 2016). They are also set to embody the aesthetic appeal of “little fresh meat,” possessing physically fit and attractive appearances reminiscent of characters found in Asian comic books, while also avoiding any effeminate or queer characteristics (Hu, Ge, Chen, & Xia, 2023; Li, 2020; Song, 2022).

In the game’s latest feature, launched in March 2023, players are presented with significant advancements in game interface design: a unique interactive scene based on the auditory stimuli Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), where they can engage in on-screen “body measurements” with Xiao Yi. Through touch interactions on their smartphones, players follow a dotted line on the screen to select the desired measurement location, allowing them to customize an armed gear for Xiao Yi (see Figure 1). The game incorporates ASMR elements and distinct voiceovers that correspond to different measurement accuracy levels, including “perfect match” and “normal match.” Specifically, it includes seductive responses specifically tailored for the “perfect match” for the intimate parts of Xiao Yi’s body. When the player touches private areas such as his pecs, abs, or genitals, seductive responses are activated, with Xiao Yi whispering flirtatiously in the avatar’s (player’s) ear, as exemplified by the phrase, “You want to measure from another part of my body first? Sure, we can do that too.” After the release, *Light*’s players have reported a deep immersion in the sexual experience, expressing sentiments such as “I am dying from the romance!” and “Xiao Yi’s flirtatious tone sends pleasurable shivers down my spine!” on social media.

As such, due to *Light*'s progressive interface design that effectively entices and satisfies female players, as of June 24, 2022, *Light* ranked as the fourth best-selling game on China's iOS platform in a market traditionally dominated by male players (Liu & Lai, 2022). Released in June 2021 by the Chinese Internet giant Tencent, *Light* has attracted over 10 million users and has seen monthly player spending approach over US\$30 million, ranking as China's top dating simulation game by daily active users (DAU) in July 2021. On August 4, 2022, *Light* distinguished itself with its impressive revenue conversion. Following the Valentine's Day event launched on February 11, 2023, the game ascended into the top five of China's iOS mobile game bestseller list and became the highest-grossing interactive story mobile game worldwide.<sup>2</sup> During the Qixi Festival event (the Chinese traditional Valentine's Day), the game generated approximately 6.87 million *yuan* in revenue on the App Store, nearly equaling the combined revenue of other competing games.<sup>3</sup> Currently, *Light* is one of the most favored games among female players in mainland China and Taiwan and is actively expanding into other Asian markets, with its latest target market being South Korea. The influence of *Light* is also evident in how its interface design breakthroughs have inspired other female-oriented games to follow suit, including recent updates of *Tears of Themis* (by miHoYo), *For All Time/다시그리는시간/時空の絵旅人* (by NetEase), and the ancient-style *Fate of the Empress* (by FriendTimes Inc.), among others. The significant success of *Light* in business, market share, and technological innovation underscores its importance and has positioned it as one of the most sexually enticing mobile games for Chinese women, potentially setting a new trend in otome game design across Asia. However, the academic community has not yet provided a thorough analysis of this phenomenon.

To address this gap, this article examines the evolving user-interface design elements of *Light*, and engages with Kristine Jørgensen's (2013) theoretical framework of gameworld interfaces. This examination is situated within the Asian context where the sexual desires of women are traditionally silenced and suppressed, paralleling the increasingly visible trend of Asian women's collective disappointment with heteronormative relationships involving cis men (Ueno, 1999, 2003, 2009), a phenomenon referred to as heteropessimism in Western feminist cultural studies (Chu, 2019; Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022; Seresin, 2019). In the West, discussions around heteropessimism and its implications for post-feminism have

gradually unfolded (Chu, 2019; Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022), but in Asia, despite its increasing visibility, corresponding academic discussions remain scarce. In this regard, *Light* serves as an example of the creative industry's latest response to heteropessimism, offering a valuable case study to critically examine how heteropessimism influences the production and consumption of Asian otome games.

### **Revisiting the “Gameworld Interface”**

The importance of the interface in facilitating human-device interaction during digital gameplay cannot be overstated, as the effectiveness of this interaction, the level of immersion, and the overall enjoyment of the gaming experience are all closely tied to the quality of the interface design. Surprisingly, there has been a dearth of scholarly research dedicated to exploring the intricacies of user interface design in digital games, despite the increasing complexity and engineering capabilities of digital games. In this realm, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) provide a fundamental framework for conducting critical discourse analysis that bridges critical game studies with game design practice. They emphasize that game systems are a unique, multi-layered medium comprising a complex interplay of experiential and pleasurable elements, meaningful narratives, simulated environments, and social interactions. Later, in their edited volume (Salen & Zimmerman, 2006), Bjork and Holopainen (2006) introduce an extensive and thorough terminology for critically analyzing game elements, treating the game “as a holistic entity” (p.415).

To note, Bjork and Holopainen (2006)'s chapter was written relatively early in the field of game design and may not fully reflect contemporary mobile game design mechanisms. Presently, alongside game rules, goals, and modes (Bjork & Holopainen, 2006), the visual component of game design has gained significant importance in the evaluation of user interface design in games. This is due to the increasing use of high-fidelity graphics, encompassing elements such as setting, characters, camera-alike movement, and props, which are comparable to those found in television visuals (Dekavalla, 2020; Friedman, 2015). In this line of inquiry, Liu (2019), Dekavalla (2020), and Mee and Jackson (2022) have acknowledged the necessity of conducting research on the visual component within the game framework in empirical investigations that examine the relationship between digital games

and current cultural and political occurrences. However fruitful, current research examining game interface design still tends to focus solely on single elements—such as visual elements, in-game characters/representations (Everett et al., 2017; Klevjer, 2019), or audio components (Bosman, Buruk, Jørgensen, & Hamari, 2024; Collins, 2017; Jørgensen, 2006) separately, rather than recognizing how these various components are interdependent and contribute to the creation of a cohesive gameplay infrastructure that allows players to develop their own unique experiences (Dekavalla, 2020; Liu, 2019; Mee & Jackson, 2022).

Our research is indebted to the holistic and contextualized perspective of game studies (Bjork & Holopainen, 2006; Jorgensen, 2013). According to Jorgensen (2013), the gameworld interface is a complex and multifaceted entity that encompasses not only the *representational*, multimedia environment itself; but also the *informational* spaces instructing and mediating the player's interaction with the game system (p.32). This two-party framework—involving game interfaces and players—transcends the notion of viewing the game interface as merely a playable tool or an isolated layer of representation; it is fundamentally integrated into the fabric of the game experience, merging content, medium, and gamers' engagement into a holistic entity (Jorgensen, 2013). That said, the gameworld interface serves as a representation of the game system, facilitating player engagement with the game's rules and mechanics, while providing insights into the gameplay, various in-game objects, and both playable and non-player characters. Importantly, the gameworld interface can *empower* players by maximizing their enjoyment through interactions with these in-game elements (Jorgensen, 2013).

Continuing this line of inquiry, the gameworld interface proves crucial not only in shaping a player's relationship with the game but also in potentially molding players' group identity (De Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015; Jorgensen, 2013). In multiplayer or online game settings, the interface can play a regulatory role in interactions among players, facilitating the making, unmaking and remaking of selves within group dynamics (De Grove et al., 2015). This is particularly evident where friendship networks—whether long-term or loosely formed online—provide a vital context for the construction of gamer collective identities (De Grove et al., 2015; Lai & Liu, 2023). That said, as digital games continue to broaden their reach and integrate into the cultural mainstream, the gameworld interface

becomes instrumental in what Foucault (1982) terms “subjectification”: the transformative process of shaping oneself into players who behave, think, and operate within specific gameplay frameworks. Furthermore, identity as a gamer intersects with other identity dimensions such as gender, race, and sexuality (Liu & Lai, 2022; Shaw, 2011). The negative stereotypes associated with gaming may lead individuals to disassociate from identifying as gamers, to abandon certain games, or to switch to different types of games (Shaw, 2011). Research also indicates that the identification process for female gamers is particularly complex (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2021). Women must navigate and negotiate their identities in relation to the dominant gamer discourse, which often involves contending with and challenging the hegemonic, masculine constructions of gameplay (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2021). This situation is particularly true in the Chinese context, where games are still primarily developed by and for heterosexual cisgender men (Liu & Lai, 2022).

### **Expanding the Framework of “Gameworld Interface”**

If we consider the social contexts of Asian female players—especially their paradox where affective attachment to heterosexist romance persists, while the younger generation increasingly feels regret, embarrassment, and hopelessness about heterosexual relationships (and heterosexual men) in the still patriarchal society—the two-party framework reviewed above alone is not sufficient to explain the development of interface design in otome games. Here, we incorporate Ramia Mazé’s insights on critical design studies, particularly feminist and future-oriented critical design (Mazé, 2009, 2019; Maze, 2019; Mazé & Redström, 2009), to expand the two-party framework of “gameworld interface” analysis. In addition to the representational and the informational of game interface design—such as graphics, audio, touch functions and gameplay mechanisms (Jorgensen, 2013), this paper proposes integrating the contextual desires of players, the culture of gaming communities, and their interactions with game developers and design teams into the “gameworld interface” framework.

This approach initially considers Chinese otome games as a new genre of future-oriented “social innovation”—the provision of inclusive social services and resources where design increasingly plays a role in the complexity and dynamics of service provision (Mazé, 2019; Maze, 2019). Social innovation involves the co-production of progressive alternatives

and raises political questions about the role of design in determining how, where, by whom, and for whom, as well as in what forms, broader social practices, systems, beliefs, and authority may be transformed (Manzini, 2014; Mazé, 2019; Maze, 2019).

The emergence of Chinese otome games as a new genre of future-oriented “social innovation” can be attributed to two key factors. Firstly, as a genre of video games specifically designed for heterosexual female players with a primary focus on romance that caters to their romantic and sexual desires preferences (Kim, 2009), it disrupts a Chinese game market traditionally represented (if not dominated) by male players’ preferences (Hasegawa, 2013; Lai & Liu, 2023; Liu & Lai, 2022). Since the immense commercial success of the otome game *Mr. Love* by Papergames in 2017, the Chinese game market and landscape have been fundamentally transformed. This shift has not only forced the market to recognize the significant consumptive power of female gamers but has also led to the formation of a predominantly female-oriented online public sphere surrounding the female-oriented gaming (Lai & Liu, 2023).

Secondly, *Light* distinguishes itself from other non-sexual otome games (such as *Mr. Love*) through its firm commitment to delivering sexually sensational audio, video, and touch content to adult female gamers, despite China’s stringent censorship on sexually explicit materials. Overseen by the Chinese Communist Party and China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, China’s censorship has long imposed strict bans on pornographic content, making it nearly impossible to find in mainstream media and heavily scrutinized and targeted in online media (Hu, Jin, & Liao, 2023; K. Jacobs, 2012). In recent years, the censorship has intensified, especially regarding female desire and homoerotic content. The 2021 “Internet Clean-up Campaign” exemplifies this, as it further tightened controls over sexually explicit and homosexual material, particularly targeting the Boys’ Love (BL) genre. In this context, *Light* bravely introduces a much-needed cultural product embracing sex positivity in China, where, despite multiple waves of feminist movements in the last decade, this aspect remains underdeveloped (Yang & Kavka, 2024). *Light* daringly highlights and embraces women’s sexual pleasure through interactive gameplay, crafting a transformative erotic space that intertwines with feminist discussions on liberation through pleasure, redefining pleasure as a form of women’s self-determination (Yang & Kavka, 2024).

Moreover, our approach continues to see the development of *Light* as a new form of transgressive “design workshop” (M. Jacobs & Mazé, 2004), where interaction goes beyond just between the game developers and technical experts. Certainly, to navigate the restrictions and censorship, *Light*’s developers have adopted innovative strategies, such as shifting the focus towards romance rather than explicit sexual content and using visual and auditory techniques to subtly incorporate erotic content without triggering censorship (Hu, Jin, & Liao, 2023; Hu, Ouyang, Zhang, & Wang, 2022). In our analysis, viewing the development of *Light* as a “design workshop” extends to encompass the dynamic relationship between gamers and developers (M. Jacobs & Mazé, 2004). These workshops are not confined to the typical user research sessions conducted before game updates but rather include the ongoing conversations that emerge within the gamers’ community—discussions, critiques, and support that arise after each update of *Light*. Currently, these workshops primarily unfold on platforms like Sina Weibo and Bilibili, focusing on topics such as player support for the game when *Light* faces scrutiny from state censors. Additionally, when gameplay mechanics are deemed unreasonable—such as when the plot becomes illogical or when high paywalls are imposed on key erotic scenes—players often organize collective boycotts against the game. Due to the particularly intense and direct public opinion on Chinese social media, game company operators often immerse themselves in these social media spaces for extended periods to gather feedback, gaining insights on game updates. These interactions significantly influence the game’s design and iteration, as we will explore further in this article.

## Methodology

This article draws from a doctoral research project spanning over four years, which investigates the experiences of Chinese female gamers. Specifically, the analysis of the development of the interface design of *Light*, is based upon two sets of research data.

The first dataset focuses on the representational and informational aspects of *Light* (Jorgensen, 2013), employing the walkthrough method—a systematic examination technique that meticulously navigates through the game’s interface, mechanics, and content to uncover the nuances of its design (Huang, Liu, & Chen; Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018). The walkthrough begins with the game’s onboarding process, carefully examining each element



of the user interface, including menus, settings, and characters, to understand how they guide the player's experience. Particular attention is paid to how *Light* integrates visual and audio elements, as well as lesser-known, under-studied but emerging interactive features such as touching, swiping, and tapping to convey romantic and sexually suggestive themes within the constraints of Chinese censorship.

To further expand Jorgensen's (2013) framework, the second dataset primarily draws from in-depth interviews with Chinese otome gamers (sample size of all otome gamers = 58; sample size of *Light*'s gamers = 32; aged between 20 and 35). We employed snowball sampling to recruit participants, of whom only one is biologically male, while the rest are biologically female (two identify as bisexual, the rest as straight). We conducted interviews from August 2022 to August 2023, often engaging multiple times with respondents via social media to follow up on their stories. Our open-ended, semi-structured questions were organized around three main themes. The first theme established general background information, with a particular focus on their experiences with all types of games. The second theme explored their specific engagement with otome games. We designed questions to elicit information relating to players' preferences for character interactions, habitual activity, and consumption within the otome game. The third theme encouraged participants to reflect on their general views on romantic relationships, sex, gamer friendships, and marriage. Interestingly, conversations often brought up frustrations over heterosexual relationships, highlighting the dynamics within otome gameplay. To further elaborate on the dynamic "design workshop," specifically the relationship between gamers and game operators/developers, we conducted participant observation of the female gamers' online community on Sina Weibo and Bilibili from May 2021 to the present day. This online observation, as suggested by Wang and Ge (2023), helped us understand the player community's efforts at solidarity-building and action, particularly in negotiating with game companies over excessive commercialization, as well as the initiatives of the game's online operational teams to favor gamers.

## The Representational and the Informational Interface

The interface of *Light* demonstrates that, despite ongoing government censorship, the game's visual and audio components effectively establish a women-centric representation, creating engaging and aesthetically pleasing sexual scenes, thereby confirming Jørgensen's (2013) idea that the gameworld interface can serve as a liminal and empowering feature that blurs the lines between the fictional world and the game system. Additionally, the newly developed interactive system enhances operational features such as touching, swiping, and tapping, integrating various frames of representation and addressing the player as a software user (Jorgensen, 2013), beyond the roles of a fictional character and a player. As we will demonstrate below, the dynamic and multifaceted interface of the otome game makes it a unique and powerful tool for creating engaging and immersive erotic gaming experiences.

### *Sexualizing the graphic*

All male NPCs in *Light* are crafted to portray a robust body shape and exude a highly sexual and confident presence. The game focuses on close-up visuals to accentuate the appealing aspects of five characters through their stylish haircuts, striking attire, and distinctive accessories, mirroring their personalities. Specifically, Xiao Yi, showcased in the "Dark Knight" scene, stands out with his minimalist yet sophisticated fashion sense. Highlighted by a diamond-studded earring that complements his sharp features and intense gaze, Xiao Yi's allure is undeniable. He sports a black double-breasted jacket over a V-neck shirt, fashionably unbuttoned to reveal his sculpted torso, enhancing his magnetism. Accessories like a ribbed necklace and nut bracelet round off his captivating ensemble, magnifying his aesthetic charm.

*Light* also exemplifies traits of the dark romance genre, a category of romantic storytelling characterized by the inclusion of darkly handsome, supernatural men and narratives that extend beyond emotionally satisfying and optimistic endings (Hogan, 2010; Jowett & Stuller, 2013). This is evident through its character design and narrative elements, notably with the mysterious character Lu Chen, who is depicted as a vampire with a human appearance—a common trope in dark romance that blends the familiar with the supernatural, creating irresistible allure and compelling tension. Lu Chen's ability to unleash aggression

with red eyes is significant; red eyes often symbolize a loss of humanity and an embrace of more primal, animalistic instincts, which are simultaneously terrifying and visually attractive.

Without being able to directly deliver penetration or other forms of sexual intercourse, *Light* instead features men in clothing and accessories that are suggestive of sexual play. For example, as the CEO, Lu Chen typically dons his signature suit and tie along with leather gloves and gold-rimmed glasses, exuding a sense of mystery and dominance. His image is reminiscent of the classic porn-man-in-a-suit archetype (Figure 2). Moreover, in the scene of *Tied Hands*, Xiao Yi remains restrained in handcuffs and leg irons, his neck locked in a collar, confined to a blood-drenched cell. One might imagine the female avatar dominating him sexually, while he wears an expression of blissful submission. For another instance, in one of the dates with Xiao Yi, the scene depicts a conversation between the two lovers in a state of half-sleep, lying in bed during the early morning hours. Xiao is lying in bed, wearing a form-fitting white tank top and stylish underwear that reveal his well-toned physique. The female protagonist is only wearing his shirt without any shorts. Her expression is dazed and flushed with exhaustion after their lovemaking. Meanwhile, Xiao, with his eyes half-open, looks at her with a firm and possessive gaze, lying on his side and using his arm as her pillow. In the corner of the image, there is a small depiction of a box of Panther strawberry condoms, serving as a reminder of their passionate sexual encounter from the previous night (Figure 3). The male NPCs also consistently engage in sexual teasing of the player's avatar. The NPCs extend invitations to female players to partake in sadistic behavior, which may entail the infliction of pain or humiliation upon the NPCs. In the interactive dating scene of *Crime and Love*, for instance, Lu Chen invited the female character to attend a mystery game held at a playhouse. The two characters played the roles of opposing spies. Eventually, the female protagonist overpowers Lu Chen, and restrains him to a chair with handcuffs and transparency tape (Figure 4).

### ***Pornifying the audio***

The sound design in *Light* reveals a meticulously crafted auditory experience that leverages the nuances of voice acting and sound effects to engage the audience on a deeply sensual level. To start with, the five voice actors are strategically selected to tailored to the

erotic preferences. For instance, Zhang Jie, a prominent voice actor known for his rich baritone voice and skills in portraying sexually confident characters, recorded the voice for Xiao Yi. Zhang Jie started his professional voice acting career in 2005 and has since been involved in over 100 movies, TV dramas, video games, as well as some BL anime and audio dramas. One of the prominent examples is his portrayal of the main protagonist in “Stars of Chaos,” a 2017 audio drama adaptation of one of the most popular *danmei* (Boy’s Love) novels by Priest.

The introduction of voice date cards further represents an innovative use of sound to create an ASMR experience. These cards, featuring scenarios like the “Tenderness” date with Qi Sili, utilize a combination of dialogue, sound effects, and ear-to-ear whispers to simulate a sense of physical presence and intimacy. The detailed sound design, from the simulated sensual sounds to the specific auditory cues like clothing rustling and shallow kissing sounds, is crafted to trigger a visceral response to the listener. For example, in the voice date scenario titled “Tenderness,” the male protagonist Qi Sili, who is also the female avatar’s superior, engages in a conversation with the player in his mansion. In this voice date, the female avatar rushes to finish her swimwear design for the upcoming competition work at Qi Sili’s mansion. Initially, Qi Sili teases her by calling her a “deadline fighter,” but later helps her by being a model for her swimwear designs while the female avatar serves as the female model. As a talented designer, the female avatar gauges Qi’s body measurements without using a measuring tape. She then offers him a massage to alleviate muscle stiffness as a gesture of thanks. Despite the intimate nature of the scene, Qi speaks curtly with a critical tone, telling her “Your touch is too light. Move a bit lower.” When the female avatar tries to seduce him, he immediately makes a suppressed gasping sound, stops her and says,

You mentioned that you couldn’t find any inspiration, but inspiration often stems from real-life experiences, so real-life experience is important (sound of clothing rubbing). Close your eyes (Qi’s shallow kissing sound) and forget about your design drafts. Don’t let anything else distract you (whispers into the left ear). Free your mind and your body (the word ‘body’ is whispered directly into the left ear).

As such, each line of dialogue is delivered with a sensuous tone, enriching the game's atmosphere with a consistently seductive quality. The audio component has been identified as a crucial element in *Light*'s success. This strategy allows players' imaginations to fill in the narrative gaps, supported by the voice actors' enticing performances and the strategic use of background sounds and ambiance, which enhance the erotic undercurrents of the game without triggering censorship.

### ***Operationalizing the sex-play***

*Light* introduces a sophisticated interactive system in its date sessions, presenting players with four distinct options: "do nothing", "calling", "intimacy", and "heartthrob", each leading to varying levels of interaction and intimacy with the male NPCs. "Do nothing" allows players to experience the visual novel segments, whereas "calling" activates the game's voice recognition system, offering dynamic conversations. The "intimacy" option provides tactile engagements, inviting players to initiate touch interactions that prompt diverse reactions from the male NPCs. The "heartthrob" option offers players romantic scenarios, allowing them to navigate various narratives with their chosen NPC. *Light*'s players are also transported into a vividly interactive world that mirrors the functionalities of WeChat, China's most popular social media platform. Unlike television shows or other moving pictures, the immersive nature of games breaks traditional boundaries by enabling players to engage in real-time messaging, make voice or video calls, and even peek into the social media lives of male NPCs, thereby fostering a deeper connection and sense of realism.

One standout date scenario with Xiao Yi, titled "Splendid Battle," exemplifies the depth of interactive engagement *Light* offers. In this scenario, Xiao Yi invites the female avatar to watch his 13<sup>th</sup> match in the seasonal competition. As a champion, Xiao Yi has already secured the first place for this year's points accumulation chart. After watching the prologue, the player will move into the four interactive options. In terms of "calling", the player can cheer loudly for Xiao by pressing a button. There are three possible responses in the choice of "calling": If the player just calls his full name as usual, Xiao may not hear the player's cheers and will not respond, or he may stare at the player just for a moment without further interactions. However, if the player uses terms of endearment such as "darling",

“husband”, or “Brother Xiao” (*ge ge* in Mandarin),<sup>4</sup> it triggers a scene where Xiao winks flirtatiously at the player.

When it comes to selecting “intimacy”, the subtitles at the bottom of the screen will prompt players to tap Xiao’s shoulder. If the player taps Xiao’s shoulder, Xiao will smile broadly with his eyes squinting and say, “Cool, you’re really good at this! Looks like I need you by my side all the time from now on,” accompanied by subtitle text and a heart emoji. Interestingly, the player will activate different outcomes if they tap anywhere other than Xiao’s shoulder. When the player taps on Xiao’s abs or below his waist, such as his genitals, he’ll appear taken by surprise at first before playfully teasing the player with a suggestive gaze and sensual tone, “Who taught you to touch here when you’re celebrating for me? Hmm, are you sure you’re just celebrating for me?” Through the provision of these interactive options and storylines, *Light* has discovered innovative ways of sustaining the erotic appeal of the game while bypassing censorship and avoiding punitive measures from regulatory agencies.

### **The “Workshop” between Gamers and Developers**

As we reasoned earlier, focusing solely on the representational and informational aspects of the gameworld interfaces can easily lead to overlooking the significant role of female gamers, whose needs, preferences, and opinions profoundly influence the development of game interfaces. One dimension of this influence is the collective disappointment of women with heteronormative relationships; another is the ways in which players’ opinions directly impact game updates and iterations, occurring within the “workshop”—the online social media space.

Although the dissatisfaction of heterosexual women with cis men in reality may not be directly related to the development of otome games—since games are fundamentally virtual and not mutually exclusive with real-life intimate relationships—our interviews reveal that female players often compare the respect and love they experience in otome games with their real-life interactions with men. This comparison, alongside the increasing purchasing power of Chinese women (Lai & Liu, 2023; Li, 2020), has become a primary driver for the

increasingly sophisticated development of otome games. The following quotes from interviews with our research participants, vividly illustrate this point:

How can one expect real-life intimate relationships to surpass the experiences offered by otome games, especially with Chinese men? Based on my own dating experiences, most of them exhibit chauvinistic tendencies after spending some time together. How many genuinely respect women, avoid being overbearing, and are capable of meaningful communication? To be honest, after playing *Light*, my disappointment with real men has only deepened. The characters in otome games are not perfect, of course, but at least they excel in respecting women, creating a sense of equality in relationships—a feat that real men often fail to achieve. (ZDD; aged 20, living in Changsha, Hunan Province, single, interview date: 28<sup>th</sup> May 2023)

Another participant, JJ, aged 24, single and living in Wuhan, Hubei Province, shared similar views about the shortcomings of heterosexual relationships in reality during her interview. She compared the men she has encountered throughout her life, including schoolmates from her childhood and her friends' boyfriends, to those in *Light*, saying:

The boys I knew from school, from elementary to middle school, were all very disappointing. They may also be influenced by their family backgrounds, exhibiting strong chauvinistic attitudes with very little reliability—I can say almost none. It was the same in university. I don't know where the problem lies, but why is it that all the men I met, as well as those my friends encountered, are so problematic? One of my friend's ex-boyfriends was so controlling that he wouldn't even allow her to share a coffee order with male colleagues at work, and he continued to harass her even after they broke up. These things make me somewhat hesitant to date real men. On the contrary, men in otome games are risk-free (interview date: May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023).

A large number of female players held similar sentiments. *Light* also frequently employs micro-celebrities in its promotions to brand itself as the game that best understands women's needs.<sup>5</sup> Numerous online users admit that even though they recognize *Light*'s

tactics, they are still deeply drawn to the game. It is no wonder that one of our respondents, JM (interview date: April 27, 2023), expressed a wish that real-life men could learn from the male NPCs in *Light* how to please women.

Certainly, female gamers do not solely offer positive feedback about *Light*; their critical evaluations, shared within social media platforms, are crucial for game developers. This feedback helps developers, who consistently monitor online discourses—a routine practice in China’s game development—understand which aspects of the games are lacking and require improvement. Primarily, when gameplay mechanics are deemed unreasonable, such as illogical romance plot developments or high paywalls blocking key erotic scenes, players often organize collective actions and boycotts against the game.

A notable example occurred during the 2021 anniversary event of *Light*, when a time-limited wedding-themed gacha (random draw) system sparked outrage due to its high cost and randomness. In *Light*’s newly updates, players were invited to unlock themed date scenarios with one of five male characters by drawing “wedding cards,” but securing a specific character required up to 140 draws, costing over 13,000 *yuan* RMB, based on an in-game price of 18 *yuan* RMB per draw. Additionally, players were invited to collect wedding dresses for the female protagonist to enhance the experience, but these were randomly distributed from gift boxes, often not matching the preferred male character and necessitating further resource investment.

This situation incited a vigorous boycott among the player community, particularly vocalized on platforms like Weibo. Our rough estimates indicate that the boycott spurred over 97,000 replies, 11,000 shares, and a popularity score of 712,244 views on Weibo within less than a week, which reflects the overall engagement and visibility of the topic on the social media, indicating a high level of attention and discussion among users. Players expressed their frustration with comments like, “We waited ages for this romance, only to be met with exploitation?” and “This costs more than an actual wedding!” Some players even threatened to quit the game entirely. The collective feedback from players led to a swift apology from the developers of *Light* and led to changes in the gameplay mechanics, including offering the five wedding dresses for free to all players. This incident highlights the potent influence of community backlash in the gaming industry. Due to the particularly intense and direct public



opinion on Chinese social media, game company operators often immerse themselves in these social media spaces for extended periods to gather feedback, gaining insights on game updates.

The implications of viewing these heated discourses in online spaces as emergent transgressive “design workshops” for studying the agency of women gamers are profound and multilayered. These workshops function as participatory platforms, marking a historic moment for Chinese women to openly express their consumptive, romantic, and sexual desires. These “design workshops” not only influence the development of game interfaces that more effectively meet women’s needs but also contribute to reshaping broader societal perceptions and practices regarding gender and gaming. On a practical level, these workshops transcend conventional user experience research, which is often conducted within the confines of a still male-centric game industry, by providing a space where women can actively co-create content that aligns with their desires and experiences, thereby challenging traditional male-centric narratives in gaming. On a discursive level, these workshops enhance the visibility of female gamers within both the gaming community and the broader industry. They prompt critical reflections on the role of design in shaping societal norms and critique existing power structures, especially in contexts where female sexuality is censored or marginalized.

### **Concluding remarks**

Digital gameplay has increasingly become integral to the gender identity of Asian women players (Liu & Lai, 2022; Shaw, 2011). Existing studies on game interface design seldom address the context of these players’ lived experiences, particularly their collective heteropessimism and their growing demands for rationalized game mechanics and fair pricing, which shape the otome game—a burgeoning erotic, women-centric game genre in Asia. This research into the eroticism of otome game expands the framework of the “gameworld interface” by incorporating women’s needs, viewing the social media spaces as a new form of transgressive “design workshop.” In these spaces, game corporations’ operators consider women’s comments and dissatisfaction, and subsequently make updates that better cater to women players’ consumptive and erotic needs. Overall, by combining a systematic

examination of *Light's* interface design with in-depth interviews and online observations of Chinese otome gamers, this article argues that, beyond the representational and informational aspects of game design, a complex interplay of heterogeneous actors and influences—centered on women's emotional and erotic needs—are deeply embedded in the game's design.

Some understudied aspects, however, were beyond the scope of the present study and should be prioritized in future research. First, the findings of this study suggest the emergence of a form of transgressive “design workshop” that unfolds in game-related online social media spaces—often passionate and occasionally confrontational, overlapping with fan disputes (Wang & Ge, 2023; Hu, Jin, & Liao, 2023). The effects, generalizability, and potential downsides of these “design workshops” remain to be explored. Second, during the qualitative research, we only occasionally encountered gamers from rural backgrounds or queer gamers, whose otome game experiences remain to be fully examined. Third, we did not include observations of male otome gamers, nor did we explore how male gamers in general perceive women's enthusiasm for otome games and their collective disappointment towards men. Another limitation of this study is the lack of comparison between otome gamers from different countries, especially given the active global expansion of the Chinese otome game market. These aspects should be addressed in future research.

## Notes

- 1. The following is the necessary glossary for this article:
  - **Otome game:** An otome game is a type of story-based video game targeted towards women. The main goal of these games is to develop a romantic relationship between the female player character and one of several male characters.
  - **NPC (Non-Player Character):** In video games, an NPC is a character controlled by the computer rather than by a human player. NPCs often serve as supporting characters or antagonists within the games overarching storyline. In otome games, NPCs are often male characters who are commonly the objects of romantic and sexual interest for women.
  - **ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response):** ASMR is often described as a tingling sensation that begins at the scalp and moves down the back of the neck and upper spine. It is frequently induced by specific auditory or visual stimuli. Many individuals use ASMR for

relaxation or sleep. Some creators have adapted ASMR techniques into erotic audio content, sometimes referred to as “voice porn.”

- 2. For details, see via: <https://www.taptap.io/post/5802964>
- 3. For details, see via: <https://syzs.qq.com/blog/news/20220808A007YV00>
- 4. “Brother” is a respectful term of address for males in Chinese and can also be used as an affectionate nickname between partners, friends, or family members in a friendly or loving way.
- 5. For details, see via: <https://www.donews.com/article/detail/5143/41821.html>

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## Appendix



**Figure 1.** Xiao is engaging in a flirtatious conversation with the player (Captions: Where's the promise to measure my waist? If you keep teasing me like this, I'll have to strike back.)



**Figure 2.** Lu Chen in signature suit and tie along with leather gloves and gold-rimmed glasses





**Figure 3.** A small depiction of a condom in the corner (in the red rectangular) in a date scene with Xiao



**Figure 4.** Interactive dating scene of Crime and Love with Lu Chen