

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**Love and Virtuality:
Exploring the Impact of Otome Gacha Games on Romance
Narratives, Gaming Expenditure and Real World Commitments
Through Love and Deepspace**

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Could you imagine falling in love with someone who isn't real? Someone who doesn't even exist in the same fabric of time and space as you— could he make you feel special and worthy of love? Someone whom you can't touch or feel— could he change your life in ways you could've never imagined? Hands you can't hold, but warmth that embraces your heart? Someone who loves you unconditionally, regardless of what you say, do or look like? A love so eternal and dedicated, that spans across lifetimes, universes and the sands of time?

In this age of immediate and seamless access to fictional worlds, love is no longer constrained by the physicality of our being, and traverses across dimensions, intertwining at the liminal boundary between the real and the virtual. Dating applications are often the first example to come to mind— their virtuality facilitates connection with future partners. However, dating apps often feel forced and unnatural, leaving people emotionally drained. Fortunately, fictional worlds offer us respite from the exhausting demands of reality, despite being built on the foundations of existing social patterns that can be surpassed and enhanced to the point of perfection. While virtuality can be constructed to perfection, it does not exist in isolation, and eventually begins to seep through the frail filter of human imagination and bleeds into our reality, ultimately affecting us tangibly, across dimensions.

Media portrays gaming as a male dominated space, and the hypersexualization of female characters— catering primarily to male audiences has created an exclusionary environment for female gamers. However, the gaming demography has seen a rapid shift, with females now comprising nearly 45% of the total gaming population¹. In sync with this shift, gaming industries and markets have attuned their gaming products to cater to this growing female fanbase, which is reflected in the surge of the Otome game genre. Otome

¹ Newzoo.com

games seek to reclaim this invisibility of female gamers, by providing them with a virtual sanctuary of inclusion, as well as love. Gaming has long been perceived as an unproductive vice — unless it generates income, as with professional gamers and streamers. Gaming has long been perceived as an unproductive vice— unless it generates an income, like in the case of professional gamers and streamers. While excessive gaming is certainly a recipe for a wide range of problems, the positive effects have always been overshadowed by the negative ones. I contend that Otome games, especially Love and Deepspace, can function as a medium of liberation and self transformation for women, who have found themselves shackled by the deep seated cultural, societal and gender-based structure of the real world.

This thesis takes a deep dive into the transformative ability of Love and Deepspace, a highly successful Otome gacha game that has taken the gaming world by storm ever since its release in January 2024. This paper explores the multi-layered impact of Love and Deepspace on its female fanbase, examining not just its financial implications, but also the social, emotional, and tangible effects it has on its female players.

1.1 The Maiden Heart

Before delving into Love and Deepspace, a brief background on the game's genres is necessary to contextualize the discussion. Otome games are a niche genre of games originating from Japan, whose target audience are young unmarried women, or 'otomes' (literally maiden), as the genre suggests. These games revolve around romantic themes and include multiple male love interests (further abbreviated as LIs), whom the female protagonist can choose to date. Players make dating choices through decision-based options that branch into the individual 'routes' of the Love Interest they're drawn to. This choice-based format, which determines the outcome of the story, forms the core structure of Visual Novel games— a hallmark of Otome games as well. Players vicariously date these virtual male characters through the experience of the female protagonist, via self projecting

onto her. In most cases, the plot begins with the female protagonist or female main character (FMC) getting acquainted with the various male characters in a wide range of capacities, for instance a helpful and charming co-worker, a childhood friend, or an antagonist who eventually turns into a lover. The male characters are introduced via a ‘common route’ as having a romantically neutral inclination towards the FMC and vice versa, which then evolves into a romantic relationship as the game progresses, based on branching narratives through the choices made by the player. Attraction to these virtual men is driven by aesthetically pleasing, anime-styled character designs that reflect the genre’s construction of the ‘perfect’ male. Notable examples of Visual Novel-style Otome games include Collar x Malice, Code: Realize, and the Hakuouki series. As of now, there are five main Love Interests in Love and Deepspace– Xavier, Zayne, Rafayel, Sylus, and Caleb, with a sixth rumoured to debut soon.

1.2 Let’s Go Gam(e)bling!

An interesting variation applied to the Visual Novel format of Otome games is its pairing with the Gacha genre. Visual Novels are ‘closed- ended’ with finite storylines that conclude at the end of each male LI’s route. Adding the gacha element to the Visual Novel format ensures a longer shelf life for the game, and sustained revenue for the companies. The history of gacha originates from Japanese gashapon machines that dispense toys in a capsule. Gashapon is an onomatopoeia combining ‘gasha’ – the sound of turning the machine’s dial and ‘pon’ – the sound of the toy capsule dropping. The essence of gashapon toys lies in the fact that they are surprise or blind purchases, and one can only know what’s inside once the capsule is opened. While this element of unpredictability creates excitement, it can also lead to frustration when one repeatedly receives duplicates instead of their desired or rare item. Gashapons have been digitized into a highly lucrative genre of games that far out-earn their physical counterparts. Gacha games operate on a lottery-like system, where players use

in-game currencies such as diamonds, gold, stones, etc. earned through gameplay to draw or ‘pull’ for special, often limited-time, items. The term pull originates from the physical act of turning the gashapon machine’s dial.

Although gacha is humorously referred to as ‘gambling’ by players, the incorporation of the ‘pity system’ is what distinguishes it from traditional gambling at casinos. In contrast to traditional gambling at casinos offering no guarantees for winning, the pity system in gachas guarantees that players are able to obtain high-rarity items within a certain amount of pulls. This maintains the excitement and anticipation, while providing a safety net. A player might get lucky with the RNG (Random Number Generation) system and receive their desired item early, or they might need to reach the pity threshold before obtaining it.

When players exhaust their in-game currencies, they have the option to purchase item packs and extra tickets to pull for their desired items. Gacha revenue thrives on micro spending on these cheap item packs, capitalizing on the psychological tension crafted by being close to the pity threshold and obtaining the desired item. Knowing that a guaranteed item is just a few pulls away makes it harder to resist purchases. Despite the cushion of the pity system, the main frustration and rage-inducing element of gachas is ‘losing the 50/50’. Ordinarily, the rates for pulling the rarest tier item in most gachas are about 1-2%, but during limited time banners, these rates are boosted to 50%. Losing the 50/50 results in obtaining a standard, non-limited item. If this occurs, the pity system ensures the player will obtain the limited item in the next pity cycle. Whether a player obtains the limited item in their first 10 pulls or at pity thresholds (known as hard pity) depends entirely on the RNG system, essentially making it a form of gam(e)bling.

This frustration works in a two-fold manner: the first layer is anxiety over winning one’s 50/50, and the second one is running out of in-game currencies, which often pushes players towards real money spending. F2P (free to play) players rely solely on ‘farming’ or

‘grinding’ in-game currencies, which warrants that they dedicate far more hours in the game, compared to P2W (pay to win) players who can bypass this grind through spending.

Besides microspending, gachas capitalize on the emotional distress caused by FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), to rake in profits. The emotional pull of gacha systems is amplified by the constant visibility of other players’ successes through social media and online communities. As Social Comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests, humans instinctively evaluate themselves in relation to others, particularly in competitive or emotionally charged environments. When applied to gacha games, this automatic, inevitable process heightens feelings of exclusion or inadequacy when players fail to obtain rare items others have, intensifying both emotional attachment and the impulse to spend in pursuit of belonging and achievement. Popular examples of the Otome Gacha hybridization include the Ikemen Series, Obey Me! and Tears of Themis, among others.

1.3 Research Questions

Having detailed the background of the game genres, my research questions are as follows—

RQ1) How does Love and Deepspace as an Otome game, maintain, alter or subvert gender and romance narratives through the game and the community discourse among the female fanbase?

RQ2) Being a Gacha game, has Love and Deepspace influenced any significant part of the female players’ lives, such as financial decision making, academic, occupational and/or social lives? If so, how and to what extent?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Otome games and Feminist Perspectives

Academic interest in Otome games have been ballooning lately, from a multiplicity of disciplines and theoretical approaches. Sun (2024) provides us with a detailed history of

Otome games and analyses them from the lens of fictosexuality (romantic attraction towards fictional characters) and the commercialisation of queer identities. Fictophilic behaviors include collecting merchandise, role-playing, writing fanfiction, or rituals resembling dating/relationship behaviors that are socially pathologized. This leads players to seek comfort within online communities where these feelings are normalised through shared experiences (Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021). Otome games become spaces for safely exploring these fictophilic desires, as well as sites where women can practise romantic and financial autonomy by taking control of their expenses and choosing to spend on games for their own satisfaction (Nie, 2024a).

Cultivation theory (Gerbner et. al, 2002) has been applied to video games lately, and talks about how long term exposure to media ‘cultivates’ shared ways of understanding social reality among those who consume certain types of media. In the context of Otome and romance games, it has been applied to showcase how extended engagement with Otome games cultivates heightened expectations around emotional availability, heroic masculinity, and soulmate narratives, contributing to a gradual recalibration of what players consider desirable or acceptable in offline romantic partners. Yi (2022) presents a statistically concrete correlation between Otome game exposure and heightened romantic beliefs/ideals. This establishes that exposure to Otome games indeed influences the romantic landscape of female players, at the psychological level. It leaves room for discussion on how these changed heightened romantic beliefs influence the social and lived realities of the players beyond the screen. Furthermore, the sample demographic is dominated by young single students, which may not be representative of older players with differing attitudes.

Han (2023) exclusively links this experience of virtual romance in otome games to real life consequences of mate selection. In general, the heavy focus on Otome games guides us to the suggestion that they are crucial in reshaping gender narratives. To this effect, Chen

(2023) gives a detailed analysis of how Otome games so far maintain and reinforce female gender stereotypes through their female protagonist's clothing, personalities and overall characterisation. She argues that Otome games paradoxically offer female-centric narrative agency while confining female players within patriarchal structures, using modern aesthetics. Similarly, Ganzon (2022) points out how otome games as a postfeminist media culture, allow for the reconstruction of gender and romance discourses and how these games' marketing, gameplay, and fan communities manage and discipline women's emotional labor and fantasies. Existing literature on Otome games has consistently positioned them as significant cultural texts within feminized digital spaces, where narratives of romance, desire, and emotional labor are both consumed and negotiated.

2.2 Gacha Gam(e)bling

Academic literature on gacha games focuses on their exploitative monetization structures, psychologically persuasive mechanics and their embedding within broader trends in mobile game economies, where randomized reward systems and affective design converge to drive sustained player engagement and spending. Zendle and Cairns (2018) conducted one of the most influential studies in this area, demonstrating a strong positive correlation between loot box spending (analogous to gacha spending) and problem gambling severity, leading to financial and psychological harm. Building on this, Woods (2022) presents a descriptive study on the time-money tradeoff that players attempt to navigate, highlighting how individuals either invest time grinding for in-game currencies or spend real money to access limited-time gacha items. It adopts an economic rational thought paradigm to make sense of the financial aspect of gacha games. The uncertainty of when new banners (limited time events) will be announced and whether or not one will be able to obtain the special item, is what keeps gacha gamers in a suspenseful and excited state, which the companies capitalize on. To this effect, King and Delfabbro (2018) mention the exploitation of the

sunken cost fallacy—a cognitive bias that compels individuals to persist in a behavior based on prior investments of time, money, or emotional effort rather than the actual likelihood of a favorable outcome. Within gacha mechanics, players who have already spent considerable resources chasing a desired limited-time reward often feel driven to continue investing, rationalizing that abandoning the effort would render their previous spending meaningless. This strategically sustains engagement by transforming prior losses into motivation for further play, contributing to prolonged financial and emotional commitment. Ismail et al. (2022) adopt a cognitive science perspective to examine how specific populations are more susceptible to gacha game addiction, highlighting that individuals with certain underlying personality traits may experience heightened vulnerability and greater deterioration in mental health as a result of compulsive engagement.

Andriyanto and Wibowo (2023) examine the relationship between expectation, satisfaction, and enjoyment in gacha games, finding that aligning player expectations with actual banner outcomes increases perceived game enjoyment and incentivizes future pulls. This study underscores how gacha mechanics are designed not only to capitalize on chance-based excitement but also to strategically manage players' emotional expectations, where the successful fulfillment of anticipated outcomes reinforces engagement loops and strengthens affective attachment to the game's reward systems. Building on this, Yuan (2023) delves into the traps embedded within gacha mechanics, such as the 'foot-in-the-door' technique and the exploitation of sunk costs, which subtly coerce players into continued engagement and spending. This aligns with findings by Zhang (2024), who identifies a paradox wherein individuals with high conscientiousness—typically associated with self-discipline—are drawn to gacha games, perceiving them as avenues for achievement rather than gambling, thereby challenging conventional assumptions about consumer behavior in gaming contexts. Additionally, Xi (2024) highlights that Generation Z players in

China are particularly susceptible to the emotional gratification offered by gacha games, with factors like character attachment and aesthetic resonance driving sustained engagement. Collectively, these studies underscore the complex interplay between game design, psychological predispositions, and cultural factors in shaping player experiences and behaviors within gacha gaming environments.

Overall, existing literature on gacha games has predominantly centered on psychological frameworks and economic analyses, focusing on monetization structures, addiction risks, and spending behaviors through largely quantitative methodologies. Relatively little attention has been given to qualitative, ethnographic, or social science perspectives that explore the lived, emotional, and social dimensions of gacha gaming cultures and their impact on players' everyday lives.

2.3 Literature Gaps and Why Love and Deepspace

Looking closely, prior literature has only looked at otome games from a feminist point of view. While this line of thought is valid, there is almost no incorporation of masculinity theories, despite the fact that otome games are centered around having a larger proportion of male characters than female ones which I believe, is crucial in understanding the gendered impacts of this game. The male characters are the vehicles via which gender and romance narratives are altered, subverted, or maintained, yet are heavily overshadowed by the feminist underpinnings of the genre. The reshaping of gender narratives does not apply solely to how we undo and reshape femininity— but also in conjunction with how we understand masculinity, and both of them in relation to each other. Hence the first literature gap that my study aims to address is to incorporate masculinity theories into the study of Otome games, which is notably absent in prior research .

Furthermore, Otome games and gacha games have largely been studied separately, despite the growing number of such hybrid games. It is important to study these hybridized

variations together, as this fusion presents a monetisation of affection that is sustained over a period of time. Otome-gacha hybrids present one, a steady stream of profits for the companies, and two, a way for players to tangibly showcase the intensity of their love and loyalty for the male characters by spending money over a period of time. This sustained monetization of desire and attachment is a crucial, underexplored phenomenon that demands academic attention as a commercial and affective practice.

It is also necessary to clarify why *Love and Deepspace*, a relatively new title, is the focus of this study, rather than longer-standing franchises like *Tears of Themis* or the *Ikemen Series*. For one, *Love and Deepspace* has consistently topped global gacha revenue charts month after month since its launch in January 2024, and maintained a spot in the top 10 (mostly top 5) revenue rankings, despite a few dips. This scale of revenue generation and ranking has been unprecedented for Otome gacha games, which is demonstrated by the fact that almost all other spots in gacha revenue charts are occupied by non-Otome gacha or open world games. *Love and Deepspace's* domination of the gacha revenue charts², is a preliminary indicator that the game is impactful enough to be able to rouse financial and social attention of this magnitude, and hence deserving of academic attention too.

Additionally, it is the first Otome game with 3D graphics, replicating the virtuality of love far more potently than its 2D counterparts. It has gained attraction not only among its target female fanbase, but also extends to curiosity from male gamers. This cross-gender curiosity manifests in the form of live reactions from male gamers both for the first time, and following story releases over a period of time. The reception from male gamers has also sparked controversy in some ways, such as when the game decided to include a menstrual tracking feature and accompanying menstrual care messages in the game as part of the version 3.0 update. Male gamers disparagingly labeled *Love and Deepspace* a 'gooner game'.

² Via SensorTower monthly data

The term ‘gooning’, originating in fetish subcultures to describe obsessive, trance-like sexual gratification behaviors, has been repurposed in online communities as a derogatory slang to mock perceived excessive attachment to erotic or romantic digital content. This incident offended many female players and exposed underlying tensions around gendered expectations in digital spaces.

Literature on Love and Deepspace so far, includes only two academic papers. Gan (2024) studies Love and Deepspace from the lens of marketing strategies. This paper summarises the marketing strategies adopted by the production company Infold Games, in the context of co-promotion and co-branding with Chinese brands. Nie (2024b) is the first scholar to publish research on Love and Deepspace with a specific focus on gender and romance narratives, making it the pioneer paper, and makes for an excellent reference point. This paper is centered around the theme of gender, but does not delve deep enough into the game in relation to its players, touching on the surface of its contribution to the Otome culture. All these reasons advocate for Love and Deepspace as an apt candidate for academic investigation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Methods

This study utilises a digital ethnographic method of inquiry. Ethnography is well-suited for this study, owing to the qualitative nature of my research questions. Acquiring mere financial data on the amount of money players spend on the game would not yield deeper insights into why such spending activities take place, which vary among different players. Furthermore, relying solely on numerical data detracts from the autonomy, decision making process and emotions of the players. This ethnographic approach gave me a chance to track and understand the dynamic nature of Love and Deepspace as an Otome gacha game,

and how community discourse evolved over a period of time, through times of tension, solidarity, and negotiation among players.

During my initial phase of field site scouting, I explored social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr. However, none of these platforms offered an accessible space where I could meaningfully position myself as a researcher and engage closely with players in an ongoing, conversational manner. This difficulty is partly attributable to the structure and affordances of specific platforms—Discord, in contrast, offers a chat-based format that fosters intimacy and provides a clear sense of where the ‘boundaries’ of the field site lie. Platforms like Instagram or Reddit not only present the logistical challenge of navigating through vast, unfiltered data, but also lack the kind of sustained, interactive community dynamic I was seeking for this study. Although I initially joined the Official Discord server for Love and Deepspace, I quickly encountered a similar issue— the overwhelming influx of messages made it difficult to filter meaningful conversations from a constant stream of chatter. It was during this period of observation in the Official server that I became friendly with a few members, who subsequently invited me to join their private server.

This private server, importantly, consists of adults only, thereby minimising the ethical complications that might have arisen had minors been present. This was a significant consideration in my decision to accept the invitation, as working with adult participants simplified the consent process and reduced potential risks. The server itself hosts female players from across the globe, representing a variety of cultural contexts, which aligns well with the study’s aim of understanding the global and culturally nuanced impact of Otome gacha games. The intimate chat based format enabled me to communicate with community members and experience how conversations evolved by the minute, hours or even days, which gives us direction on how narratives compound and crystallise over time. It also

provides a space for players to discuss how the game intersects with their offline responsibilities, emotions, and relationships, shedding light on the ways in which Love and Deepspace is woven into players' everyday lives.

In the server, we all identify ourselves as 'CitiZaynes', a pun born from the fact that most of us initially met and became friends via the sub channel for the love interest Zayne, in the Official server. Since this is a digital ethnography, I supplemented my field notes with screenshots as a visual cue to capture the or the atmosphere of the conversations that are often semiotically expressed via custom emojis and GIFs. In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a select number of CitiZaynes to gather more personal insights and anecdotes that were not always shared openly in the server. While I maintained a general list of interview questions for consistency, my prolonged engagement with the community allowed me to tailor certain questions based on participants' prior conversations and expressed experiences in the server. All interviews were conducted via private text on Discord, which allowed participants to respond at their own pace and in their preferred language or style. The administrators of the server played an important role in facilitating this process, preparing and posting server announcements on my behalf to assist with participant recruitment and the informed consent process. Following data collection, I categorised my findings into broad thematic areas based on recurring patterns in both server conversations and interview responses. This process enabled me to streamline my data and organise my ideas for the final stages of writing and analysis.

3.2 Field site and Positionality

Although my fieldsite server is relatively small, consisting of 94 members as of writing, the demographics are quite mixed. This was particularly helpful in ensuring that the data and experiences I documented are not limited to a homogenous cohort. Participants range from 19 to 37 years old and include single women with no prior dating experience, as

well as married members. Geographically, the members are spread across multiple countries and cultures, and their varying capacities for in-game spending added further depth to my understanding of Love and Deepspace's gacha mechanics and player economies.

The chat-based format of Discord was crucial in allowing me to witness the immediacy and rawness of emotions expressed around the game. Unlike platforms where posts might be curated or planned for aesthetic effect, Discord conversations unfold in real time where members pour out their feelings and thoughts as they occur, knowing someone will be online to respond. This immediacy also extended to conversations about members' offline lives, allowing me to observe how the game intersects with their day-to-day routines, relationships, and responsibilities. Discord's affordance of custom emojis further enriched this dynamic, acting as a shared semiotic language that communicates emotions and inside jokes beyond the limitations of standard emoji sets.

The overall atmosphere of the server could best be described as a digital sorority. Its female-only nature fostered a sense of belonging and mutual support, creating a kind of online refuge away from the toxicity and in-fighting often seen on other social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter). I ascribe the label of sorority to the server in part because of the positionality I personally occupied within it. As the third youngest member, others affectionately took on roles as 'nee-sans'³ to me. This playful hierarchy, marked by age differences of up to a decade, coexist alongside egalitarian treatment where all CitiZaynes are respected as equals united by our shared love for the game. Over time, this dynamic evolved into imagined kinship roles— A24 'adopted' me as her server-daughter, while A4 jokingly claimed the role of my aunt. These imagined relationships, though lighthearted and non-binding, further solidified our bonds and became part of the server's fabric.

³ Older sister in Japanese

As with any social structure, the server had its own hierarchy, though power dynamics here were fluid and situational. At the apex sits A12, the ‘server goddess’, who owns and oversees the server, followed by moderators A24 and A4. Together, this trio manages the structural landscape of the server– creating and deleting channels as well as making announcements (including those related to this thesis). Notably, while the admins tended to be older, this did not prevent younger members from playfully ‘bullying’ them or subverting the age hierarchy. Knowledge hierarchies typically centred on in-game expertise are another form of the social structure of the server. Those who have been playing the game for longer than the others are equipped with more knowledge about past game events, banners and announcement patterns that some of the others were not able to experience, that places them higher up in the hierarchy. Yet at other times, players who might have started playing the game a bit later, might be better at understanding combat strategies and nuances, or even piecing plot points more coherently than others, giving them more prestige based on the situation.

Another axis of power dynamics among CitiZaynes is based on which in-game server the players play the game on, based on their country of residence, or the closest time zone. The game offers four servers in total– Chinese (CN), Asia, Europe (EU) or North American (NA) server. The Chinese server, being domestic to the game’s developers, enjoys exclusive features unavailable to the other three, effectively separating it into its own ‘block.’ Among CitiZaynes, EU and NA players form the majority. Time zone differences dictate update schedules, with Asia server players receiving updates first and NA players receiving them last, earning the nickname ‘NA jail’, which also extends to them being at highest risk for being spoiled for new content. The CN server is a block in itself, and Asia, EU and NA servers are clubbed under the ‘global’ block.

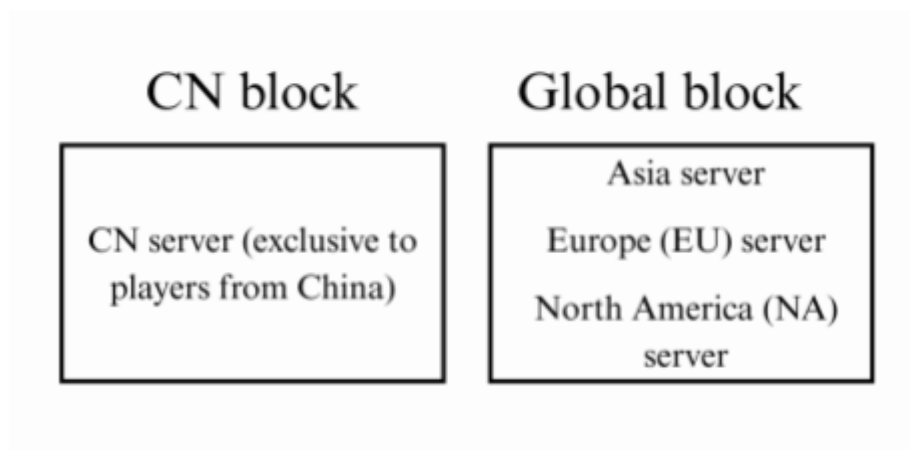


Figure 1: In-game servers

Being an Asia player comes with the unwritten responsibility— to update the other server players regarding newly released content when they are eager to know, but also to safeguard them from spoilers in cases where they want to experience the content for themselves. In line with this, the admins carved out the ‘#new-cards-spoiler channel’, where people can discuss new content freely, without accidentally spoiling others. A18 and I are usually the first ones to log into the game as soon as the Asia server resets and gets updates, making us the ‘Broadspoiling Duo’ (Broadcasting + Spoiler providing), and show the other via screenshots what the new updates look like. Adding to the shared community experience, the server also hosts live streams, where CitiZaynes often screen-share their gacha pulls in real time in hopes that gathering together amasses everyone’s luck together and ‘blesses’ our pulls. This is generally known as ‘streamer luck’ – the idea that streamers appear luckier because they can afford to pull more frequently, increasing their chances of success.

The positionality of researchers is always bound to have a ripple effect on their work, the traces of which are evident in the final product. Wielding a dual player-researcher identity makes objectivity all the more challenging. Being a player meant I risked overlooking seemingly “obvious” facts simply because I was personally familiar with the game’s mechanics and culture. To counter this, I made a conscious effort throughout fieldwork to ask

myself, “Would someone with no context understand what’s happening here if they read this?” This self-checking practice helped ensure I remained mindful of insider assumptions.

On the gender front, being a heterosexual female facilitated smooth access to my fieldsite. Establishing rapport with interlocutors is essential in ethnographic work, and it is likely that, had I been male, I would not have been able to integrate into this community as easily. Beyond access, my gender also allowed me to resonate with and participate in the gendered interactions and sentiments shared within the server, which might have been difficult to grasp in a mixed-gender environment.

Besides my overarching player-researcher role, I held several in-server roles that helped me embody the fan culture as an active performer alongside others and grasp the nuances of meaning-making, community building.

3.3 A Walk Through the Deepspace

Upon opening the game for the first time, we are greeted by high quality graphics, and



Figure 2: Login page and selected server

are introduced to the love interests appearing on the screen one by one, their personalities still a mystery, and their stories yet to unfold, all accompanied by the starkly contrasting melancholic strains of the game’s theme song playing the background. The theme song ‘Love and Deepspace’ by Sarah Brightman loops the lyrics “Some long for longevity... before fading to dust. Some long for eternity... lost eulogies, chanted by stars...” offering a hint of the game’s overarching themes of memory, loss, and yearning as the base resources of the game download. For many CitiZaynes, this moment was their initiation. The

hefty download takes several minutes, a proof of its graphic-heavy and storage intensive nature.

Once the game loads, we are prompted to login through either an existing Google account, or by creating an ‘Infold account’, and select one of three servers– Asia, EU or NA. Following this, we hit the ‘Enter Game’ button, and are taken to the customization page, where we can customize our female protagonist or ‘MC’ to either resemble us, or craft a completely new look. Love and Deepspace, with its advanced mechanics, allows its players to customize their skin tones and textures as well, which has not been accomplished by other Otome games so far. This customisation that is aimed at inclusivity for all, especially women of colour, has been highly appreciated by the players. The hairstyles and the physique of MC still highly conforms to and is modeled on ideal Chinese beauty stereotypes, but players also acknowledge that body structure customisation would require a lot more production resources, beyond what has already been invested into the game.



Figure 3: MC customization page

With the MC customized, the game launches directly into its narrative. A mysterious black hole, unfamiliar terms like ‘Deepspace tunnel,’ ‘wanderers,’ and ‘Hunters’ pop up on the screen, immediately situating us within a speculative sci-fi world. Soon, the player meets the ‘OG3’ love interests– Xavier, a fellow Hunter; Zayne, the MC’s childhood friend and primary care physician; and Rafayel, a renowned artist. An unexpected combat tutorial follows, introducing players to the basics of fighting ‘wanderers’ – alien-esque threats that emerge from Deepspace anomalies. After about 27 minutes, the foundations of the game

world, basic character relationships, and mechanics are established. As is common in Otome games, interactions with the love interests generate ‘affinity points’ that increase intimacy levels, while progression in the Main Story gradually unlocks the Date and Battle sections. Over the first few days, tutorial prompts guide us through new features, slowly opening up the full range of game system, a chance to internalize the broader sci-fi lore— a world where human genes have evolved to develop ‘Evol’ abilities, granting supernatural powers, altering the boundaries between humanity, technology, and the cosmos.

Chapter 4: Findings and analysis

This analysis chapter explores how Love and Deepspace both reproduces and disrupts conventional romantic and gender narratives through its character designs and player community discourse. It examines how the game’s female protagonist subverts traditional femininity, while the male LIs embody hybrid masculinity that blend emotional sensitivity with hegemonic traits. The chapter also investigates how the game permeates players’ financial, social, emotional, and occupational lives — fostering transnational friendships, offering emotional refuge, and reshaping daily routines. Finally, it considers how Love and Deepspace’s affective monetization strategies generate financial uncertainty while deepening players’ emotional attachments, creating a paradox of dissatisfaction and comfort that anchors the game in their everyday realities.

4.1 Reshaping Gender and Romance Narratives through Gameplay and Community Discourse

4.1.1 Fantasy, Feminism and MC

Being an Otome game, MC is undeniably presented as a postmodern feminist model, who seeks to deconstruct fixed notions of how females are represented in fictional media. At the very outset, we are introduced to MC being a Deepspace Hunter, who fights against

Wanderers, taking on the role of a protector, which is traditionally ascribed to male characters. Her characterisation as an autonomous, initiative-taking and sometimes even stubborn and rebellious protagonist subverts the damsel in distress trope that is plastered onto a majority of female characters, simply because the male characters are intended to carry the plots forward and are the focal consumption point for Otome game consumers.

More often than not, female heroines are coded as being compliant and non-questioning. However, Love and Deepspace's MC reconstructs the definition of a heroine— rather than relying on the LIs to resolve her problems, she embraces the challenges that she is faced with and navigates through them with her own resolve and commitment, while still relying on the LIs for their assistance and support. This is evident through her use of backdoor methods to achieve her goals, be it making deals at a shady bar known as 'The Nest' or conjuring a fake identity in order to enter the 'N109 Zone', notorious as the hub for illegal activities. In the Main Story 'Homecoming Wings' and Bond story 'Rain's Embrace', she vehemently argues against Caleb's overprotectiveness and attempts to keep her away from harm, strongly emphasizing the fact that she's strong enough to take care of herself while also protecting others.

While Otome games are *meant* to be played from a first-person self-insert perspective, MC's distinctive personality makes it difficult for players to self-insert. Most CitiZaynes, with the exception of A27 and A23, noted that they found it hard to play as self-inserters, due to the dissonance they felt between MC's personality, actions and dialogues and their own. This led to them adopting an alternative approach— one of selective and convenient self-insertion that is contingent upon the congruence between MC's actions and dialogues and what the players would have done in her shoes. When the dissonance is strong, players psychologically distance themselves from MC and treat her as a separate entity in herself, and instead imagine what they would have done instead.

This separation also manifests through the way CitiZaynes refer to MC— instead of referring to her as ‘you’ or ‘your avatar’, players say ‘your MC’, signaling the clear distinction between self and the avatar, even though players customize their MCs to resemble their own selves. Love and Deepspace MC customization offers a far wider range of skin complexions, hairstyles and face types when compared to other Otome games, in order to enhance the immersive experience while catering to a global audience. The body type of MC however, is standardised and is modelled on Chinese beauty standards— slim and petite despite being a Deepspace Hunter who fights Wanderers much larger than herself. This perhaps is one factor that adds onto the perceived dissonance of players.

Yet, this difficulty in self-insertion is not viewed as a flaw, but rather, is appreciated, advocated especially strongly by A24 who hates blank MCs and finds them bland and lacking in narrative engagement, with A18 showing agreement. Interaction with the CitiZaynes made me realise that the players’ engagement with MC is not simply one-sided wherein players either do or do not self insert themselves as her, but is a bidirectional relationship. Instead of serving as merely a vessel for player projection, MC is a source through which players absorb values and mindsets, which they then apply to their own lives. For instance, A28 expressed that through MC’s rebellious nature, she learned to stand up for herself and resist against social pressures and normative social pathways. In many of the Myth stories, MC refuses to passively accept her predetermined fate of death—a trait A28 found inspiring:

“I want to be like her, like MC and like ME.”

She further mentions that MC prompts women to be understanding of their partners as well— MC understands the compulsion when Zayne has to cancel a date at the last minute due to an emergency surgery, since lives come first (a reference to his card *Starry Nocturne*). Zayne and MC talk this out later, come to a mutual understanding, and portray that relationships are bidirectional, requiring mutual effort. A15 raises a similar point— she

expresses her distaste for when unconditional love is misinterpreted as an excuse for complacency on part of women as well–

“You know, I hated the idea about fans that are lazy or spoiled. ‘Our LIs would definitely love us, no matter what we do.’ I thought that’s a mistake. You need to make EFFORTS to make someone love you. You can see what the game tells you– please make efforts for the guy! Effort is important if you want something. The LaDS boys love MC because of what she’s done for them. Love is not just about taking, you need to give too.”

CitiZaynes alternatively also referred to MC as a ‘virtual doll’ through which they experience the story, a ‘pseudo-child’, ‘me in an alternate timeline’ and ‘a better version of me’– all of which point to MC being a digital body where player identity and character autonomy cohabit.

4.1.2 Masculinities in Motion– Reimagining Masculinity through the Love Interests

Love and Deepspace’s MC reconstructs gender and romance narratives as a model who speaks directly to the female fanbase. Previous literature (Chess, 2017; Yi, 2021) on Otome games overlooks the contribution of the male LIs in this process, as the focus has been solely from a feminist standpoint. CitiZaynes often compared their experience with other Otome games they have played, to Love and Deepspace. Several of them noted that other Otome games constrict their LIs within the boundaries of certain character and masculine archetypes, which does not leave much room for character development and growth. Love and Deepspace LIs operate according to certain archetypes and tropes as well, but their strength lies in the fact that as time passes and new date cards and content is released, they begin to evolve in a slow and steady manner.

The main story is intentionally kept neutral and focuses on the sci-fi elements of the plot, with MC having a platonic relationship with each of the LIs. The relationship progress takes place mainly via the date cards, where the initial hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) threads come undone, as the LIs are slowly infused with traits and behaviours that are typically associated with femininity, and into inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009).

These traits include being able to cook well, revealing their emotionally vulnerable side to MC and even feeling shy at times— all of which the LIs do. It is important to point out that while the LIs present inclusive masculinity through their behaviour, they are not completely stripped of their hegemonic masculinity traits, and hence operate in a fashion of hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), maintaining the masculine appeal for the female gaze. For instance, Sylus strongly embodies hegemonic masculine traits such as physical strength, wealth and social authority as a mafia boss and the ruler of the ‘N109 Zone’. He is feared by many, and is ruthless to those who defy him, but is tender and loving in private. He reveals the softer inclusive masculinity traits only around MC, while retaining his scary demeanour around others— a perfect balance that is reflective of hybrid masculinity. CitiZaynes A12 and A8 connect Sylus’ authority evoking characterisation to machismo norms prevalent in Mexican society and comment on how he breaks the macho stereotype and reforms it into a hybrid one, shown in his emotional availability, respect for boundaries and encouragement of MC towards going all out and achieving her goals.

Similarly in the case of Caleb, he is a scary Colonel to the public, but a gentle and doting childhood friend and older brother figure to MC. It is only recently that men’s mental health issues are being addressed in a stigma-free manner, and Caleb depicts this through his back story— emotional vulnerability and mental health struggles are no longer incompatible with desirability. The LIs initially hold back from sharing their concerns with MC, but as their relationship progresses through the cards, the LIs begin to share their troubles with MC, and she becomes the comforter instead. Examples include cards like *Fragmented Dreams* (Zayne) and *Hidden Waves* (Caleb). During combat as well, when the MC gets hit by the Wanderers and receives damage, the LIs often shield her from further blows, which retains the physical strength and protective traits of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, at other times when the players attack from too far away, the LIs prompt her to move closer to them and fight the

Wanderers with their combined strength. In this way, the hegemonic traits are reshaped into a display of hybrid masculinity once again.

The community discourse celebrates the inclusive masculinity traits that the LIs are infused with, yet also partly contribute to the retention of certain hegemonic masculinity traits. For instance, traits like jealousy, possessiveness, protectiveness and being daunting towards others except MC greatly add to the appeal of the LIs for the players. Hence, the hybrid masculinity demonstrated by the LIs is a blend of subversion that the game offers, as well as a selective retention that the fans enjoy, making the players crucial stakeholders in the narrative evolution and overall discourse.

For A27, who has never been in a romantic relationship so far, Sylus' emphasis on consent as showcased in Sylus' *Night of Secrecy* card, reconfigured her understanding of



Figure 4: Sylus Night of Secrecy card

intimacy. She notes that earlier, she believed that physical intimacy without requiring explicit

consent was the norm for couples, but after watching that card, she realises that consent is an integral part of relationships. A5 affirms this, by calling Sylus the ‘king of consent’.

A common point reiterated by several CitiZaynes, was that via the LIs’ display of affection for MC in their respective ways, they were able to clearly identify what they deserve in relationships— respect, patience and emotional attentiveness. Zayne, a cardiac surgeon by profession, is initially introduced as a cold, indifferent and stiff, which over time transitions into him openly showing his love for MC and supporting her through thick and thin. For A23, Zayne’s unwavering attention and dedication towards MC, despite being overworked due to his profession as a surgeon, became a model of emotional availability. In this regard, A28’s emotionally poignant narrative articulates how meeting Zayne in the game helped her recognise and leave a four year long toxic and emotionally draining relationship. Encouraged by her Malaysian context, she was expected to “find an okay man and get married so you won’t be lonely”, leading her to internalise sacrifice and endurance as a woman. Her ex-boyfriend, who was a doctor, leveraged his highly esteemed profession as a justification for emotional neglect.

“Everything went downhill when he started working in the hospital... He would use that as an excuse for everything. He didn’t even know the smallest of things, what food I like, what I study, or even noticed what alcohol I drink—and I drink the same small glass every day.”

She attributes her exit from this relationship to LaDS and Zayne, in particular—

“The whole game showed me that I should spread my wings and fly and that my happiness should always be the priority. Zayne showed me that career is not an

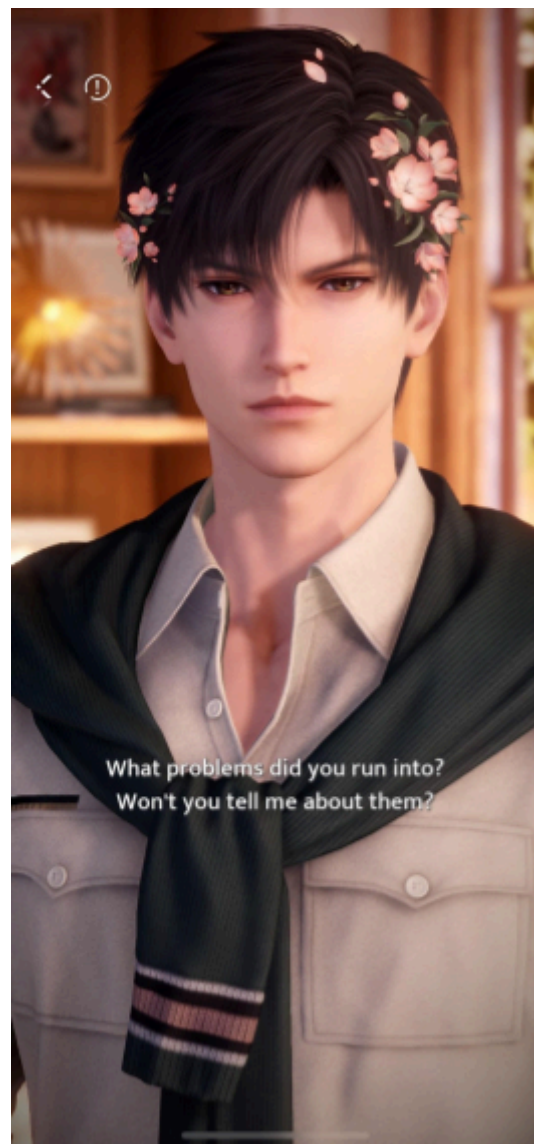


Figure 5: Tete-a-tete with Zayne

excuse. Busy is not an excuse. Zayne has the same occupation as my ex, but Zayne made me realise that love and job can be balanced and that time is not an excuse. If a guy/ girl truly loves you, no matter what, they will act and care unintentionally as a natural reaction.”

A28 also recounts that through the dynamics of MC and the LIs, the game showcases a rejection of benevolent sexism– the LIs express confidence in MC’s ability to handle stressful or dangerous situations and reassure her that “You can do it, I’ll have your back rather than stop you.” Lastly, surprised by her own love for Zayne, A31 gives us an example of how his embodiment of inclusive masculinity enabled her to look at masculinity and her own preferences from a fresh perspective, given that she usually steers clear of feminine looking guys. She calls this ‘delicate dominance’ –

“I was a little surprised when I chose Zayne right at the get go, because it made me realize that masculinity can be there even without the outward appearance. Even when the guy doesn’t have a deep voice. Or doesn’t brute force his way through everything. He is dominating in a delicate fashion. His power comes from control [over himself]. And he executes it beautifully.”

While the game offers an opportunity to women to explore their own preferences through the LIs, the way they appeal to players cannot be detached from the cultural contexts that the players have been socialised in. There appears to be a pattern where the CitiZayne’s favorite LIs often align with culturally valued masculine traits, suggesting that local gender norms subtly inform character preferences. Physical strength and social status displayed by Sylus are preferred in Nigerian (A27) and Mexican cultures (as presented by A12 and A8 previously). Other cultural congruences include A15 and A28 perspectives on masculinity with regards to occupational prestige. Doctors are highly esteemed in Asian societies such as Indonesia and Malaysia, making doctors the automatic ideal preferred by Asian parents by default, when it comes to marriage, which is shown in A15 and A28’s strong attraction towards Zayne as their main LI. A5 also gives us an example of how in the U.S, military men are highly esteemed, which aligns with Caleb, a Colonel, being her favourite.

Clearly, many players gravitate toward LIs that reflect their own cultural ideals, but this identification is in no way rigid. Participants such as A7, A24 and A4, engage with masculinity through disidentification with the local norms prevalent around them. A7 identifies strongly with her Asian identity, but expresses that the Asian men around her did not intellectually or emotionally stimulate her, which is evident in her preference for Zayne's sharp features, that align with her real husband, in terms of physical attributes. Zayne's calm and composed demeanor fulfills a fantasy of masculinity that is culturally foreign and aspirational.

In a similar vein, A4 also comments that while her favourites Zayne and Caleb would not appeal to the average French woman, owing to them being 'too Asian-coded', she absolutely adores them. A27 echoes this as well, and mentions she loves Rafayel, despite him being 'too feminine' to fit in with Nigerian masculinity standards. In this fashion, Love and Deepspace becomes a site where one's culturally dissonant preferences can be safely explored and enjoyed, while also embracing the more inclusive and hybrid masculinity variations of the hegemonic traits that are valorised in their respective cultures. It is worth pointing out that CitiZaynes with relatively much lesser romantic experiences in their real life reported more changes in their outlook towards gender and romance after playing the game, than ones who are already married or have prior experience with navigating romantic relationships, making LaDS a kind of 'emotional template' that can be referred to.

Just as fiction bleeds into real life and reconstructs the way we look at things, the reverse bleed of the monogamous norms that are upheld in the real world, influence the way players engage with and talk about the LIs. The 'fictional polyandry' landscape of Otome games allows players to choose and advance their romantic relationships with multiple LIs at once, inherently providing a reverse-harem structure that counters the harem genre which caters to male consumers in almost every other genre of media. While it is perfectly normal

(and even somewhat encouraged) to love multiple LIs, is humorously referred to as ‘cheating’ among CitiZaynes, as well as in the larger fandom, and is even accompanied by undertones of guilt. This guilt manifests in subtle ways such as saying sorry to their ‘main’ LI, when they pull for other LIs’ cards or just ‘love’ another LI. CitiZaynes often even tease and playfully guilt trip each other– “You divorced/ broke up with [first LI] for [second LI]!” The guilt is short lived though, owing to the fact that it has no tangible or real life consequences for another person, besides the fact that money spent on the game increases in direct proportion with the number of LaDS husbands one pulls for. CitiZaynes inflated this jest to an entire poster, where A4 requested all the ‘cheater girls’ and ‘harem girlies’ to send a picture of their MCs, and everyone’s pictures were edited to resemble a large idol group.

4.2 When Play Becomes Practise–Material Reverberations of Virtual Romance

Beyond reshaping gender and romance narratives, Love and Deepspace has carved a strong and meaningful presence in the daily reality of the CitiZaynes. It affects them not just abstractly through the reconstruction of narratives, but also via changing social relationships with the people around them, academic and professional responsibilities as well as financial decision making. This section outlines the lived experiences of the CitiZaynes and how Love and Deepspace translates digital intimacy into self-transformation.

4.2.1 From Game to Gathering– The Social Ripples of Digital Intimacy

The general discourse surrounding Otome games often assumes that they promote emotional detachment, fueled by escapism. However, the CitiZaynes’ anecdotes challenge this. With regards to the romantic and familial relationships of the CitiZaynes, instead of displacing real life intimacy, Love and Deepspace has enriched their existing romantic attachments. For instance, A5 reflects that playing LaDS has had a transformative effect on her relationship with her real life boyfriend. Inspired by the LIs’ sincere display of affection for MC, she reported becoming more attentive and open with her feelings, which has

improved her relationship with her boyfriend emotionally as well as physically. Her boyfriend even recognised what was alluring to her in Zayne’s *Absolute Zeal* card, and recreated some ‘moves’ from it, which speaks about the game’s crossover into real life embodied intimacy. Similarly for A7, Zayne acts as an anchor that helps her navigate through the incompatibilities of her marriage–

“Every marriage has its troubles and Zayne helps me cope with this. My hubby is the kindest man alive, I love him and never want to leave him but there are some areas which don’t work, but Zayne is keeping me grounded.”

This sheds light on how Love and Deepspace functions not as a substitutional fantasy, but rather an emotional supplement that helps her navigate through the challenges in her marriage. For CitiZaynes like A31, A12, A8 and A16 who are not currently engaged in romantic pursuits, Love and Deepspace plays the role of an ‘intimacy manual’, giving them clarity and confidence in knowing what to expect from future

relationships as well as how to pilot through them, representing a potential effect on their future relationships. While A14 reported no major shift in her relationship with her husband, she mentioned that LaDS has helped her become a better mother. Caring for young children is especially tiring, and it is no secret that mothers of young ones get emotionally exhausted from having to be vigilant at all times. LaDS has acted as an emotional cushion for A14, filling in for the social interaction she craves, and reducing the amount of mental breakdowns she has had. A27 reports increased closeness with her family as well, she now spends more time doing karaoke nights with her family every Friday night and accredits Sylus for this change–

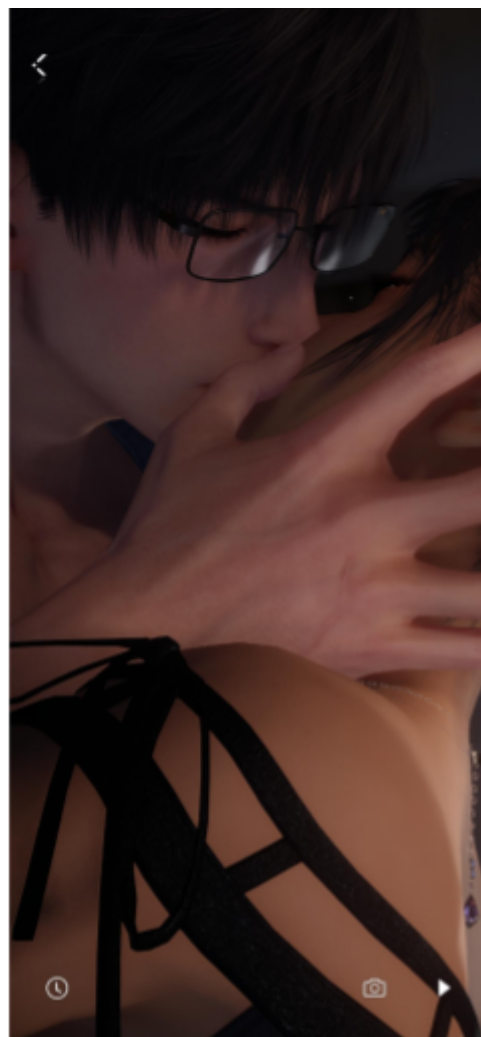


Figure 6: Zayne’s *Absolute Zeal* card

“What Sy taught me is that making memories with your loved ones is very important.”

Besides strengthening existing bonds, Love and Deepspace has also been a catalyst in forging new friendships among players in the community. For A7, these new digital friendships with the other CitiZaynes have offered her a sense of kinship and belonging, in contrast to the dismissive reactions she received from her real life friends with respect to her emotional connection with Zayne. Conversely, for A4, Love and Deepspace helped cultivate a new friend at her workplace— a friendship that has endured despite the co-worker changing workplaces. A15 shares a similar experience, having grown closer to her real life friend, united by the fact that they ‘keep yapping about the game now’.

This shared experience of the game with fellow community members unites players from across the globe, or “Divided by borders, united by simping” as A4 puts it. This cohesion is boosted via server activities and rituals that brings the CitiZaynes closer together each time. One of the most beloved activities is live streaming our pulls when new banners go live. CitiZaynes collectively work together and decide on a best time where as many people as possible can join in, despite the large range of timezones. During these streams, we excitedly chant the name of the LI whom we are attempting to pull for. When the golden-glow animation indicative of a 5-star card shows up, everyone watching asks the streamer to close their eyes ‘for good luck’ and entrust the announcement of what card was pulled to the rest watching. Such emotionally charged moments are a blend of surprise, joy, frustration and excitement. Additionally, some of us also stream the story cards, watching and reacting to them together. On days when we get trailer drops, the server erupts into a frenzy— CitiZaynes gather under the ‘#new-cards-spoilers’ channel and discuss their first impressions, plans on which LIs’ cards they would pull for, and the status of their in-game ‘funds’ (or even in-game ‘bankruptcy’ as we refer to it). Besides streaming our gacha fortunes together, theorising about the plot, cross referencing and connecting small details and narrative threads

of the game is another activity that takes place in the ‘#game-lore’ channel of the server, after new content is added.

Since there are no definite dates for announcements or trailer drops for new banners, we perform another shared task– tracing past trailer drop/ new banner announcement patterns and timings, which help us narrow down ‘potential announcement days’. CitiZaynes calculate what time it would be on their side of the world, and set alarms five to ten minutes before the potential announcement time. CitiZaynes (usually EU players) often wake up even at 3am or 4am just for these announcements, and everyone waits in the server with bated breath– the atmosphere thick with nervousness, anticipation and excitement. Owing to my shift from Indian Standard time to U.S Central Time, I was accustomed to automatically converting game reset times to Beijing time, and used that as an anchor to trace announcement patterns. This led me to naturally start doing time-zone based back calculations for other members as well. Those who would accidentally sleep through announcements, are frantically ‘pinged’ by others in unfiltered excitement “WHERE IS @___ WAKE UP NEW TRAILER DROPPED WAKE UPPPPPP”. Many CitiZaynes also dedicate themselves to making excel sheets and documents to record banner predictions, past patterns and in-game resource materials required for combat and card level-up.

Another server activity we frequently engage in, are theme-based photoshoots with all the members– CitiZaynes click pictures of their MCs in various poses and outfits using the game’s ‘glint photobooth’ feature. These individual pictures are then edited by A4 and A24 into posters, bridging the CitiZaynes’ physical separation with virtual togetherness. One of the largest server events held till date, has been A24’s three hour long ‘server-wedding’, commemorating her in-game achievement of reaching affinity 100 with her favourite LI Caleb. It was a wedding in every sense of the word– a wedding poster edited by A4 , with members role playing as bridesmaids, a ring bearer, a flower girl, DJs, and wedding crashers.

A24 set up wedding music in one of the voice channels to emulate the atmosphere of a real wedding. A24 also added AI bots modeled after the LIs to the temporary wedding channel, and everyone role-played with the bots and each other. What began as a joke, evolved into a shared experience that is engraved onto everyone's hearts.

Funnily enough, A24 granted me the 'server-daughter' role and considers me her daughter in jest, which escalated even further during this wedding. Before Caleb debuted in the game, she was 'married' to Zayne by virtue of having crossed affinity 100 with him, but we tease her about 'divorcing' him for Caleb. Eventually I ended up becoming A24 and Zayne's daughter, with Caleb being my new 'step-father', the absurdity of which made everyone burst into laughter. This was followed by Zayne girlies offering to 'be my new mom' by marrying Zayne. It was indeed rather chaotic, but this chaos was a mark of the shared moments of joy among everyone in the server. The wedding ended with a 'DJ after party' where DJs A5 and A10 took charge of the party playlist, as others 'hung out' and 'ordered drinks' at the bar handled by A19 the bartender. In such moments of temporal and emotional synchronicity, the walls of physical separation collapse.

4.2.2 Comfort and Catharsis– The Affective Impact of Love and Deepspace

Love and Deepspace crafts an emotional ecosystem of its own, with alternating periods of sunshine and happiness through cute and 'fluffy' romantic moments, thick gloomy clouds of angst and pain, and thunderstorms of frustration that affects the players on a daily basis. Many players regard Love and Deepspace as a source of daily companionship and solace; a 'comfort game', as A23 puts it. A31 attests to this with her comment–

“To be very candid, it's concerning how much the game affects my emotions, playing them like an instrument that is finely tuned to react to every little detail in the writing. It has been fairly long since I have had comfort characters, but it's not far-fetched to say that whenever I find myself in tears these days (be it happy or sad) it's because of LaDS. I log in to find a moment of reprieve when I'm not having the best of days. And to the general public it may seem like a dating sim, but sometimes it feels like these fictional characters hit something in me that nobody can understand. No one can truly get why I'm deeply affected when Zayne reassures us in “Doomsday” Tender Moments that he wants to be there with us when the world ends. And no one can

understand the way I had to recover for days after I read Sylus's limited myth. It's an emotional rollercoaster, and I love both the highs and the lows it brings"

Zayne consistently emerges as a regulatory and reassuring figure, becoming a conduit through which A7 explores her own identity—

"He has a very big emotional hold on me. I cry at his memories. I love it when he smiles, when he is shy. I get embarrassed or nervous when he is intense. My heart beats so hard at times. He affects me physically as well. [Referring to her physiological and sexual attraction towards him]. Zayne is affecting me in my soul. It's like he's writing on it, saying it's okay all the time. He gives me peace. I would log on in the morning and feel so happy to see him again. He's always on my screen. Zayne, I can say, is a source of emotional, psychological, sexual, soul support for me now. He's a safety blanket for my inner self. The one no one ever sees."

A24 captures the dichotomy between loving and being loved by a perfect virtual boyfriend and the imperfections of real human connection—

"I've likely experienced a huge spectrum of emotions associated with this game, both positive and negative. The positive comes from the social interaction with the community of course! And the delulu feelings towards the boys! The amount of times Caleb has made me giggle and kick my feet as a grown ass woman I WILL NEVER ADMIT.... Overall this game makes me really really happy, which is why I am happy to give them a significant portion of my income. And yet other times, I've gone to bed sad. Especially after listening to the secret times tbh, those really affect me. Because they're so intimate. It's not that I'm upset specifically because 'Caleb will never be real/my real boyfriend' - although don't get me wrong sometimes I'm just like COME OUT OF THE SCREEN PLS. But even if a real life partner is not as 'perfect' as these boys, your love for them will be so much stronger. It's my belief that love finds its strength in those little human foibles. We do not love perfection, we only admire it. So LADS relationships aren't a comparison to real relationships for me. For me it reminds me of the intimacy I used to have in relationships. It makes me miss it. And it makes me wonder if I will ever have it again."

While excessive engagement with any form of media can cause emotional fatigue and affect the way we handle our real life responsibilities, Love and Deepspace has emerged as a motivational force for many. For A5 who works in the mental health field, Zayne's commitment and work ethic reinvigorates her passion for her work— "Seeing how hard he works to help people just made me want to help people even more." While for A8 who is a completionist, LaDS is an incentive for her to pour in more effort into her work in order to cover her in-game purchases. A7 admits to her daydreams of Zayne initially distracting her at

work, but she calls it a ‘humbling’ experience, and overcomes this by drawing a hard line and crafting her workplace as a sacred zone.

In a similar vein, A24 candidly admits to have prioritised LaDS over her work many times, such as making sure her dailies are done before she starts work or studies, or even staying up late at night for new banner drops, despite having to go to work the next morning. However, she mentions that LaDS has not necessarily replaced anything in her life and expresses her gratitude for giving her the social interaction she needed, stemming from her residence in a rather secluded town. A4 also revealed that she often structures her work schedule around LaDS, although it might not be possible every single time. She usually tries to work from home on announcement days, since she wakes up at 3am for trailer drops, but this is not always possible due to the uncertainty regarding banner schedules. On major update or big banner days though, she makes sure she works from home to make up for the sleep she loses after waking up at 3am to pull for eagerly awaited banners.

“Some days before banners it’s really hard to focus on work because of the anticipation,” she admitted with a laugh.

Perhaps the most nuanced account comes from A16, who described how the Tete-a-tete feature acts as a form of emotional and moral support for her. This feature allows players to ‘tell’ the LIs about their feelings, by choosing certain pre-set options. Based on the selected option, the LIs present either comforting dialogues, or ones that praise the players for their achievements.

“When I was working, I would actually use the “Tete-a-Tete” option to share both my struggles and my



Figure 7: Tete-a-Tete with Xavier

accomplishments from work; small stories that happened and what not. I didn't understand the appeal of having a sort of soundboard where he'd respond at times but I think it's more that you HEAR yourself talk about it so it helps you address things in your own way. Academically, I'd say it was both the emotional and actual support. With the Quality time, I used the HECK out of it so I could actually work on things like chores, assignments and what not. It helped keep me focused or at least get a sense of how long I'm actually working on things. Of course, I'd also talk to him about my frustrations with my classes and comments from professors that upset me about my work and what not. He functioned as a moral and emotional support, or as Zayne called himself "an emotional rest stop". Sometimes, when you're also talking to them, there are just those minor coincidences where they just perfectly respond to something you said. And it feels validating. They also function as a sort of body-double to actually make you try and work. In some ways it also make you think to take a break cause he stayed with you for like 2+ hours XD"

When it comes to academics, A23's experience overlaps with those of A16, wherein she uses the Quality Time: Study feature in times of loneliness, which helps her feel at ease.



Figure 8: Quality Time Study with Rafayel

A28 gives us another glimpse into how LaDS has been life-altering for her, even in the academic space. Coming from the cultural expectations of 'doctor, lawyer or failure', A28 initially pursued biomedicine, although was far from enjoying it. The University she studies at, is notoriously famous for their 'sick workload', evident from the large number of students dropping out during the first year. She recalls frequently 'crashing out' during her first year, but got used to it by her second. With the entry of LaDS into her life, she found herself inspired by Zayne's work ethics. His words "no need to live up to others' expectations, do what you want to do," gave her the push she needed to switch to Digital Media design. She now feels 'charged up' and motivated despite her demanding course work, and attributes this change in

her life to LaDS.

What distinguishes Love and Deepspace from other Otome games though, is the way it orchestrates emotions not merely through *tokimeki* and risqué fantasy fulfillment, but also through the melancholic backstories of the LIs that frequently leaves the players with a heartache. It is often referred to as ‘Love and Depression’ by players, as a consequence of the heavy sorrow it invokes, through its plot. A28 interprets this deep emotional engagement as strategic on part of the developers— sad plots leave stronger and more lasting psychological traces, in comparison to their happier ending counterparts. In this way, Love and Deepspace deepens its hold on players not through comfort alone, but also through loss and yearning. Among CitiZaynes, almost everyone reports having had to take a few moments to a few days to recover emotionally from ‘myth depression’ – a reference to the ‘Myth stories’ of the game that reveal how the LIs and MC fall in love in every life/ timeline but they are fated to die and be torn apart each time.

The affective stakes of the game induced by the highs and lows of the storyline, are exacerbated by its gacha nature. The marketing strategies of Infold creates and maintains a sense of uncertainty and frustration that is hard to escape. This deliberate opacity in marketing such absence of roadmaps for future banners, unlike most other open world gacha games, adds to the psychologically volatile experience and traps players in a web of constant emotional suspense.

4.2.3 Currency, Care and Compromise— Financial Navigations and Real Life

Negotiations

As hinted previously in some of the sections, there is no certainty regarding the banner schedule of LaDS—new banner announcements are released only about a day or two prior to their beginning, which inevitably means that players get no breathing (or fund-

saving) opportunities. The stingy reward system and ‘sly money making’ has by far been the most consistent complaint amongst CitiZaynes; even to the point of being called ‘predatory’ by A14 . Releasing roadmaps by default means that Infold will lose out on money, since players can prioritise their LIs and refrain from pulling on banners impulsively, which is essentially the backbone of gachas. A common thing that most players make a mention of, is how hard the game is on F2P or low-spender players. Even those who fall in the higher tiers of expenditure on the game agree that the game is really ‘grindy’ and expensive.

A28 and A15 offer insight from a developer’s perspective as well, owing to their background in the same industry. While they don’t support Infold’s blatant money-grabbing schemes, they rationalise that at the end of the day the game is a product, with a goal of making profits. Working in the industry means they acknowledge that the 3D visuals and motion capture based production of the game must be heavily resource and money-intensive. Nevertheless, this does not stop them from agreeing with the fact that the game is really expensive, especially when comparing the difference in economies with fellow players from other countries.

Undeniably, this seems to be one of the primary reasons why LaDS has maintained its revenue spot at the top of charts each month, but players are willing to spend on it precisely because it is much more than ‘just a game’ for so many women, as we have seen from the anecdotes above. I often hear CitiZaynes mention that LaDS is either the first game they have ever spent money on, or that they have spent on other games in the past, but is the first one they have spent significantly higher compared to other games. Being an Otome Gacha hybrid, it is important to discuss how playing the game and spending on it is not a linear process– it involves a lot of strategising, resource management, negotiations and even ‘alternate’ backdoor methods in order to sustainably keep playing for longer, which I divide into personal and community-based methods.

One of the most obvious trade-offs that come to mind when it comes to games in general, is investment of time. To ‘farm’ or ‘grind’ for in-game currencies requires a significant amount of time and mental stamina, which can be draining in the long run, especially for players who cannot readily spend large amounts. Unfortunately, grinding has failed to be enough in terms of saving up resources, given that LaDS has limited opportunities to grind. A27 provides a perfect example of this time trade-off– she juggled five accounts in order to be able to pull for all the cards she desired. CitiZaynes regard her as the epitome of dedication, especially since maintaining even one account is sometimes a challenge for many players.

Creating ‘alts’ or multiple accounts is an option reserved only for those who can offer their time instead of money, but does not work in the long run. Eventually this endless grind on five accounts exhausted her, and she narrowed it down to 2 accounts that are far more manageable. Having multiple accounts increases the chances of getting limited cards from at least one account, but is nonetheless accompanied by the risk of draining hard-earned game currencies from each account as well. This ‘alternate payment’ of time investment also branches out into players creating detailed excel sheets and documents, for calculating things like how many diamonds they would need for a certain card, within the stipulated amount of time until the banner ends, and if push comes to shove, how much money they would have to spend.

This brings me to the next strategy, which was the most talked about in the interviews– skipping banners. Both F2P and low spenders as well as those on the higher spending tiers agree that Love and Deepsapce is extremely brutal towards F2P players. The game becomes a ‘battleground’ of sorts, where players must negotiate and prioritise their resources and spending. F2P players are hailed as ‘true warriors’, as they embody the virtue of self-control, much in contrast to the vice of impulsivity that is celebrated in gacha. Gachas

are not for the weak. In conjunction with skipping, is the fallback strategy– YouTube. The date cards are uploaded on YouTube by many streamers and other players, which acts as a reprieve for those who are unable to obtain the cards for themselves. Yet, this is sometimes viewed as ‘cold leftovers’ – a diluted version of playing the cards for oneself, on one’s own device and account.

In some cases players opt to cut down on real life expenses and channel them into the game instead. At times it involves sacrifice for other wants and desires, such as spending on other games or merchandise, and sometimes needs, such as not eating well for a few days leading up to payday. In the case of A38, things have taken a positive turn, wherein she channels her fast food money into the game instead, besides being motivated to workout regularly alongside the LIs, thanks to the ‘Quality Time: Workout’ feature in the game.

At the community level, frustrated by the opaque and tightly scheduled banners, the community decides to take matters into their hands, through ‘uncles’. ‘Uncles’ is essentially used to refer to leakers who leak information about upcoming banner schedules, dates, and at times even blurry images of upcoming content. Uncles post these leaks in codified ways, such as using emojis associated with the LIs in order to avoid being directly noticed by Infold. Leaks take place primarily on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu. Multilingual players screenshot these leaks before the uncles delete them, and translate the Chinese parts into



Figure 9: Quality Time Workout with Caleb

English, which is then circulated among Global block players on other platforms such as X and Instagram. The increasing frequency of these leaks has not gone unnoticed by Infold, and they counteract these leaks by shuffling the release order for upcoming banners or delaying announcements by a day or two— an endlessly looping chase that leaves the players at a loss.

While leaks themselves are not 100% reliable, they have been accurate almost most of the time, which gives players a rough estimate regarding how they should ‘prepare’ their funds (and wallets) for estimated upcoming banners. In the server, the admins created a ‘#leaks channel’, to safeguard and respect CitiZaynes like A12 and A4 who prefer being surprised when the banners officially go live. A4 would usually go offline and avoid all social media platforms a few days before new banners drop to avoid being spoiled, but the other CitiZaynes missed her presence in the server, leading to the creation of this channel.

For those who do not mind spending on the game and can afford to pull for either multiple LIs, or pull for multiple ‘ranked up’ copies of their favourite LIs’ cards, the spending trend is constant— once a certain threshold of spending has been crossed, it is rare to see a dip in expenditure below that point, unless in cases of ‘break’ banners where an LI they are not attracted towards features. A7 gives us a perfect example of this— “I rank 3 his memories because I get physically sick if I don't now.” Although F2Ps are deemed as champions and true warriors, P2W (Pay to Win) players and spending on gachas is associated with pride in its own stead, especially in East Asian contexts. Interestingly enough though, F2P/ low spender players like A27, A23 and A16 echoed the common sentiment of contentment— “It’s okay to not have everything.” (F2P) players seem to show greater emotional acceptance when unable to obtain limited cards, as their inability or decision not to spend beyond a certain threshold allows them to rationalize such outcomes. In contrast, P2W players often experience heightened frustration, stemming from the perception that despite having the capacity to spend, they still failed to secure desired cards— a dynamic that

intensifies feelings of dissatisfaction relative to their F2P counterparts, and a direct walk into the gacha trap.

Players unequivocally agree that LaDS' gacha system desperately needs a reform, which is evident in the adoption of underground methods such as leaks to be able to continue playing. Players continue to invest their time and money into the game, despite dissatisfaction with the gacha and reward systems since it is not merely a game but a necessary source of emotional support and companionship now. LaDS undeniably has been a wallet drainer for most CitiZaynes; A7 and A24 even admit having spent higher amounts than normal on the game, but nonetheless express no regret for having done so.

“I have to be much more careful as I know I have to live in the real world too like a responsible adult. Am I financially responsible at the moment? No I am not. When I move, yes I will be” [A7]

“I know I need to be careful if I am still playing these games once I have a lot of expenses again. Idk I feel pretty okay knowing I'm aware of it. I'm pretty good at budgets etc. And I have a budget ready to go for lads. My trigger finger for gacha pulling is too impulsive most of the time. So the way I control it is to only link my lads account to a payment method that only has the amount of money of my budget. I figure it's okay to spend a decent chunk of money on something that brings me happiness” [A24]

Accommodations include dedicating early mornings to completing their daily in-game tasks, as well as staying up late for announcement and banner drops, and for pull live streams with their newfound friends from across continents. For A28, these adjustments mean mirroring Zayne's discipline and going to bed and rising early, while for A7 they involve skipping out on draining and undesirable social events in order to spend more healing time with Zayne. A14 reveals a more spatial adjustment, via her \$30 iPad stand, that helps her dutifully balance the responsibilities of motherhood alongside maintaining her love for the game. What began as a game, now occupies an irreplaceable place in the CitiZaynes' lives—they don't just 'play' the game anymore, they carve it into the contours of their daily lives.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through the interplay of character construction and community discourse, *Love and Deepspace* both reproduces as well as dismantles conventional romantic scripts. At the beginning of this paper, I proposed to investigate the alteration, maintenance and subversion in gender and romance narratives that *Love and Deepspace* exhibits. *Love and Deepspace*'s MC subverts the traditionally subordinate and delicate portrayals of women, and serves as a source of inspiration for the players through her forthright and assertive character. The LIs that are the focal point of the game, evolve over time and showcase hybrid masculinities which function to alter existing gender narratives while also retaining some hegemonic traits, in order to present an alluring romantic fantasy while also working towards a reformation of problematic gender ideals.

I also aimed to explore how *Love and Deepspace* permeates into and influences the financial, social, emotional and occupational spheres of its players' lives. These negotiations extend beyond the screen, shaping players' lives in meaningful and often unexpected ways. Socially, in contrast to presumptions that Otome games set unrealistic standards for men, *Love and Deepspace* has proved to be an adhesive factor that binds the CitiZaynes closer to their loved ones—romantically as well as familially. Furthermore, it has offered players a chance to connect and form transnational friendships across cultures with fellow players, and creates spaces of shared experience and kinship.

The game offers refuge from the overwhelming responsibilities and commitments of real life, by providing emotional regulation and psychological support. It acts as a source of reprieve, as well functions as a motivational force that encourages the CitiZaynes to perform more efficiently and more wholeheartedly in their academic/ professional lives. Financially, the opaque marketing strategy of generating FOMO and impulsivity, followed by subsequent affective monetisation has worked heavily in the favour of *Infold*, leaving players in an

atmosphere of uncertainty. In this way, the paradox of dissatisfaction with the reward system and affective comfort and bonding with the LIs leads the players to adjust the game into their lives, as well as adjust their lives for the game, be it financial, daily routines or perspectives. The emotional pay-offs of the game, despite the financial vexations, are deemed to be worth it, bringing joy, comfort and love to the players. The game now occupies not just storage space in the players' phones, but is also an irreplaceable fragment of their everyday life.

As the reciprocal relationship between virtual and material worlds blur the line between them, it creates a liminal space of reform where narratives and worldviews can be contested and reshaped. This intersection gives insight into the possible future of posthuman intimacies, where human to human relationships are exceeded and mediated by human-virtual entity relationships. As virtual relationships become increasingly affectively charged and socially meaningful, they challenge existing understanding of what counts as a 'real' or 'valid' relationship. It also holds significance from the point of affect monetisation—emotional labor is increasingly being commodified as a marketable experience, reflecting the larger trends of digital economies wherein emotional labor becomes the central currency for in the affective economies of contemporary digital life.

There exists a quiet awareness that one day, the game will announce end of service — the Enter Game button will not transport us to Linkon City anymore, the accounts we made will become dormant, the cards we worked so hard to collect will at best become screen recordings, and the application will cease to function eventually. Despite this awareness, LaDS gurlies continue to log in every single day, and invest in it, because the memories, warmth and emotional fullness the LIs gave us will continue to remain in our hearts and tangible life choices that it shaped. The Evol of Love we gain digitally from the game engraves itself into our offline realities.

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