A Summary of Otome Games Associated with Character Attachment, Parasocial Relationship and Place Attachment

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing proportion of female players in the mobile game market, female-oriented romantic games are increasingly sought after by players. It is necessary to conduct research on this kind of female-oriented romantic games (scientific name Otome Game). This paper will focus on summarizing the effects of Character Attachment, Parasocial relationship and Place Attachment on female players related to Otome Game. According to the analysis of this paper, as Otome Games are integrated into players' lives, the three psychological mechanisms and players reinforce and influence each other.

KEYWORDS

Otome Game; Character Attachment; Parasocial Relationship; Place Attachment.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Social Situation

At the end of 2017, a pioneering Chinese domestic romance mobile game for female users, "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice", became the phenomenal Otome Game of that year upon its release. As of February 2018, the number of female mobile game users reached 367 million, with a net increase of more than male users [1]. As of 2022, in the national game market, Chinese female players exceeded 300 million, accounting for more than 47% of the national game users. The market size of female-oriented romance games is expected to reach 95.8 billion yuan - about 13.4 billion dollars by the end of 2023 [2].

1.2. The Concept of Female-oriented Games

The term female-oriented game originated in Japan (Japanese: 女性向けゲーム) and refers to games developed specifically and suitable for women to play. Otome Game, the female-oriented romance game explored in this study, belongs to one of the three branches of female-oriented games, and is a kind of relationship simulation game with female users as the main target audience [3]. In Otome Games, players will develop a relationship with one or several male characters according to the development of the storyline. The virtual game world will have an interpenetrating interaction effect with the real world, so that players can be fully immersed in it and feel a real relationship experience [4]. Currently, there are fewer studies on Otome Games, and the proven relevant psychological mechanisms are not summarized in the existing empirical studies.

This paper will provide a brief introduction to Otome Game and focus on the impact of Character Attachment, Parasocial Relationship and Place Attachment on Otome Games.

1.3. Reasons for the Popularity of Otome Games

1.3.1. Characteristics of Otome Games

Most of the Otome Games appear in the form of mobile games (handheld games), which are a kind of role-playing romance games with a simple and easy-to-operate game mode and an established story line [5]. The player acts as a "heroine" and chooses a "love interest" from among multiple male characters, who usually have perfect appearance, personality, and identity [6]. Game developers also invite professional voice actors to voice each male character to increase the sense of realism [5]. The core concept of Otome Game design is human-centered [7], that is, the male characters and the plot of the game are all centered around the player's interaction and development, and the language in the game is set to the first-person "I", so that the player can be better engaged in it [5]. As a result, Otome Games have won the love and admiration of female players for their rich character settings, wonderful plots and good interactive experiences.

1.3.2. Characteristics of Female Players

According to the statistics of Aurora Mobile in 2018, most of the players of Otome Games live in economically developed cities, and most of them are aged 16 to 25, who have high spiritual pursuit and focus on the quality of life [1]. With the rise of female consciousness and economic and social development, Chinese women no longer live in the world only as daughters, wives and mothers [8]. Nevertheless, compared to men, modern women still struggle with individual fulfillment expectations and family caregiving responsibilities [9]. In such a social environment, young women face greater pressure to marry and bear children. In order to escape from this pressure and relax their minds and bodies, they begin to engage in "virtual relationships" in the game world. Coupled with the fact that players can explore the unknown and feel a sense of self-achievement in love games, Otome Games have exploded in popularity in China [10].

2. OTOME GAMES WITH CHARACTER ATTACHMENT, PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

As the market of female gamers is expanding, related research on female gamers is also gradually carried out. Compared with men, female gamers pay more attention to the process experience, the game plot, and the relationship and emotion between game characters [11]. In a research study using interview method, female gamers showed a preference for RPG (Role-Playing Game) games [12]. This shows that women's preference for RPGs is conducive to the creation of an emotional connection to women's games, which in turn is conducive to women's attachment to the game and the formation of Parasocial relationship.

2.1. Otome Games with Character Attachment

Character Attachment was understood at the beginning of the research as the assimilation, integration, and psychological intermingling of the player's thoughts with those of the character [13]. After subsequent research by other scholars, Character Attachment is defined as "the sum of feelings of favor, connection, and closeness that a player feels toward any game character, including Player Character and Non-Player Character, that the player controls. the sum of feelings of favor, connection, and closeness"[14]. In character attachment, "identification" is a key factor commonly mentioned by researchers [13]. Identification is reflected in the player's belief that he or she is the character in the game [14]. In addition to this, "relevance" is also an important factor influencing character attachment. When the player feels a sense of belonging to the game character, or when the player believes that he or she has a parasitic relationship with the controlled character, this relevance is increased, which makes the player willing to emotionally assign significance to the game character, resulting in a sense of well-being and enhanced character attachment [14]. Therefore, the core of Otome Games as a type

of Role-Playing Game (RPG) is that the game develops according to a basic story framework, while some details of the storyline development will have different directions depending on the player's choices. This allows the player to form an actual, tangible connection with the virtual interactive game [13]. That is to say, such a form of gameplay allows players to tie their memories to the game (e.g., players can independently choose how to respond to moments of WeChat and text messages in the game), and game developers enhance the player experience and promote self-expression by increasing the autonomy and immersion and positivity of the game [14]. To summarize, the patterns of Otome Games and character attachment promote and reinforce each other. Moreover, different emotional traits will form different forms of character attachment: for example, players will be excited about characters who are cool and capable; players will admire characters who have high moral character and can be used as role models. Players worry about characters they want to be responsible for; they sympathize with characters who have similar experiences to them, etc. [14].

2.2. Otome Games with Parasocial Relationship

"Parasocial Relationship" was first used to describe a seemingly face-to-face, but virtual attachment between viewers and TV actors, where viewers interact with their favorite media characters as if they were friends [15]. Parasocial Relationship has some similarity with real social relationships, but because the two sides of the Parasocial Relationship in the identity, occupation and life circumstances are more different, and this relationship does not have the characteristics of interactivity and authenticity, so it is called "Parasocial Relationship". In TV programs, some scenes are shot in such a way that it seems as if the actor is facing the audience and communicating with them. In Otome Games, the first person "I" is used in the narrative, the other characters in the game and "I" are interacting with each other through a dialogic process that builds a Parasocial Relationship [16]. In Otome Games, male characters provide players with a stable and continuous intimate relationship [16], and as long as the player opens the game, his or her "partner" will always be there; in other words, the partner in the game can be integrated into the player's real life just like real-life people, e.g., in the game "Light and Night", players who are online for more than twenty minutes can get a random Moments of WeChat or text message from one of the male characters. And the game developers will also according to the real world festivals (Valentine's Day, Spring Festival, Christmas, etc.) and birthdays of the main male characters in the game to carry out the corresponding activities, for the players to break the boundaries between the virtual world and the real world, so that this kind of Parasocial Relationship has really become a part of the player's life. Nowadays, many players also take the initiative to establish real-life connections with these virtual characters. For example, some players will place big-screen ads and book birthday cakes and flowers in major Chinese cities to celebrate the birthdays of their favorite male characters. Thus, it can be seen that Parasocial Relationship, although developed from the virtual world, will be integrated into players' daily life [16]. Moreover, in this ever-changing and disturbing world, game characters have their own "fixed values" [16], such as fixed height, weight, and even fixed personality. These male characters are emotionally stable and empathetic. Because their personalities are "unchanging," everything they do and say becomes predictable, giving the player a sense of security that's hard to come by in a real relationship. Although players do not have complete initiative in the game world, the choice to maintain or not maintain this Parasocial Relationship is firmly in the hands of the players - they can choose to uninstall the game at any time and end the relationship; and for those players who are willing to continue to play the game, their choices provide the basic Parasocial relationship framework [16]. Over time, players will empathize with the characters they control [16], immersing themselves even more in parasocial interactions. Parasocial Relationship is not unhealthy. Because it fulfills the fantasies of ordinary, not-so-sparkly girls, it is a complement to the reality of people's social lives. It is important to note, however, that Parasocial relationship is considered pathological when it replace people's interactions in the real world and when their presence renders objective reality completely invisible [16].

2.3. Otome Games with Place Attachment

Place Attachment, is the bond between a person and a place [17]. Attachment, refers to human emotions; places, which have been categorized into tangible and intangible places, are given meaning after passing through the activities of a person or a group of people [18]. People's attachment to a place is not only due to a specific thing that exists in a place, but may be due to their own experiences and interpersonal relationships [18]. With the development of science and technology, since the emergence of the Internet in people's lives, virtual worlds have been put in front of people with the concept of a "virtual place" [19]. It is worth noting that video games are a richer interactive experience than traditional visual media [19]. Many players consider their experiences in the virtual world as equally important as those in the real world [19]. In Otome Games, most of the game's environmental design (cityscape, etc.) references real-world design, such as the skyscrapers in the main interface of "Light and Night", which positively reinforces players' place attachment [19]. In existing research, "interaction" has been recognized as an important factor in enhancing place attachment [19]. In the game "Mr. Love: Queen's Choice", the player, as a TV program producer, can complete different tasks in different locations: in the "Company", players can carry out "departmental training" and "recruitment of specialists"; after "returning home", players can decorate their own rooms, give gifts to male characters to increase intimacy and so on. These are all examples of Otome Game. All these reflect that Otome Game have a certain degree of explorability, and this kind of exploration of the virtual world is very close to people's experience in the real world [19]. People will remember everything they see and hear, remember their behavior in the game, and this realistic interactive experience makes people experience a stronger sense of attachment [19]. In addition, in social media (micro-blogs, etc.), players often express their dissatisfaction with the game and make suggestions for optimization, which demonstrates the seriousness with which players treat the game and confirms that the attachment to the virtual world is completely real [19].

3. DISCUSSION

The popularity of Otome Games is undoubtedly due to the fact that they not only "perfectly" address the psychological needs of women in relationships, but also avoid many of the problems that exist in real relationships. The close connection between female players and Otome Games, as well as the increasing number of female players, makes it necessary to study and discuss Character Attachment, Parasocial relationship and Place Attachment.

First, identification and relevance are the key factors for character attachment in Otome Games. The higher the player's identification with the character in the game, and the deeper the player's relevance to the character, the easier the role attachment can be formed; second, in Otome Games, male characters can be easily integrated into the player's real life through the game's setting, and even some players take the initiative to establish a real-life connection with the game character to maintain Parasocial relationship; lastly, the interactions and the player's memories give meaning to the game's virtual worlds with meaning, so that place attachment has a profound effect on players.

At present, there are fewer studies on the psychological mechanisms related to Otome Games, and many things have not been confirmed, for example, it is not known how long-term immersion in Otome Games will have positive or negative effects on players. In addition, the role of cultural background in the psychological mechanism behind Otome Games is also one of the important directions for subsequent research.

With the rapid development of science and technology, some advanced technologies, such as AI, have been applied to Otome Games, with the purpose of enabling players to better engage in them, making Otome Games become an inseparable part of the lives of more and more players. Therefore, it is very meaningful to study the psychological mechanism of players and Otome Games.

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