Playing at Romance

Otome Games, Globalization and Postfeminist Media Cultures

Sarah Christina Ganzon

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_____ Chair
Dr. Masha Salazkina

_____ External Examiner
Dr. Florence Chee

_____ External to Program
Dr. Matthew Penney

_____ Examiner
Dr. Sandra Gabriele

_____ Examiner
Dr. Fenwick McKelvey

_____ Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Mia Consalvo

Approved by   _____
                     Dr. Krista Lynes, Graduate Program Director

22 August 2022   _____
                     Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean Faculty of Arts and Science

Abstract

Playing at Romance: Otome Games, Globalization and Postfeminist Media

Sarah Christina Ganzon, Ph.D.

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Otome games is a category of games originated in Japan that are marketed specifically to women. While genres in this particular category tend to range from RPGs to visual novels (the latter being the most common), they notably have the following common features: these games contain a system that allows the female player character to form relationships with the mostly straight and predominantly male game characters, they have simple controls, and they are related to other multimedia products, often imitating plots and art styles from manga and anime. Moreover, romance is often features as a part the games' narratives, often imitating plots from shoujo manga. Although otome games occupy a niche sector of the game industry in its country of origin, the number of titles that are being adapted for audiences outside of Japan have steadily increased during the past decade.

This thesis explores this largely unexplored category of games, its players and the ways in which these titles have migrated out of Japan. Focusing on games, platforms and its predominantly female fandom, I examine cultural sensibilities, economies and online social formations that allow these migrations to happen. I apply a mixed-methods approach of textual analysis and interviews to help formulate my analysis of these games and the fan communities, which operate quite similarly to Radway's book clubs. The results of this study indicate how communities and postfeminist media cultures both allow women to shape discourses around gender and romance, but also at the same time limit these discourses in ways that are beneficial to companies that create and localize these games.

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I. Introduction

Becca, my best dog friend and beloved Dalmatian of thirteen years, died during my first winter in Canada. To console myself, I downloaded a game on a Steam sale to play in bed. The game is called *Dandelion: Wishes Brought to You*-- a stat-raising game and dating simulator. My player character was a college student named Heejung who finds out that all her pets suddenly turned into men she could date and romance. In order to acquire and keep the guys' attention, I needed to acquire a certain number of points on the following skills: femininity, beauty and art. All of these can be raised by doing activities mostly located in the player characters' home. Despite the obvious sexism of the stats, I actually enjoyed this game.

In the course of my playthrough, Heejung started falling for a rich snobby rabbit man named Jiwoo. Though I disliked his initial snootiness, I grew to like his awkward interactions with Heejung, which are made even more endearing because of his almost unhealthy obsession with romance novels and tv dramas (and he runs a romance book club!). In his own way, he encourages her character to be more assertive, to be more upfront about her dreams and to resolve her mommy issues. Together, Heejung and her rabbit boyfriend overcome misunderstandings, hang-ups, and family and class barriers. I ended up ugly crying at the bittersweet ending of this unlikely romance.

After the credits rolled, I noticed a tagline flash before the game sent me back to the main menu: "Cheritz, Sweet Solutions for Female Gamers." This line surprised me because I played this during the year of Gamergate. The combination of those last two words–"female gamers"– this particular symbolic hailing of women as gamers–was not something I was used to. Quite frankly, I was not used to seeing those two words alongside each other. A search on Google gave

me more information. Cheritz is an all-female company in Seoul that makes otome games. According to one interview, *Dandelion*'s creators wanted to make a game for women by women (beSuccess, 2012). These sentiments draw existing parallels to similar endeavors such as the 90's pink and purple games (Cassel and Jenkins, 1998), and Ruby Party's *Angelique* games (Kim, 2009). While *Dandelion* was not the first otome game that I played, it was the game that got me curious about the category–one that inspired this larger study.

Hyeshin Kim (2009) defines otome games as a category of games originated in Japan that is marketed specifically to women. Ruby Party's *Angelique* (1994) for the Superfamicom is widely considered to be the first otome game. While genres in this particular category tend to range from RPGs to visual novels (the latter being the most common), they notably have the following common features: these games contain a system that allows the female player character to form relationships with the mostly straight and predominantly male game characters, they have simple controls, and they are related to other multimedia products, often imitating plots and art styles from manga and anime (Kim, 2009). Moreover, romance is often featured as a part of the games' narratives, often imitating plots from shoujo manga.

Collar x Malice (2017) is one popular example. In this visual novel and mystery game, released on the Playstation Vita and the Nintendo Switch, the player takes on the role of Ichika Hoshino, a policewoman in Shinjuku who one day, while in the process of carrying out her daily routine wakes up in a chapel with a collar on her neck placed on her by a member of a criminal organization named Adonis. A mysterious voice tells her that unless she solves the mystery behind a series of murders in the city and stops Adonis within the set number of days given to her, poison from this collar will kill her. Assisting her are five other police officers intent on stopping Adonis who also function as her love interests in the game. On the surface, *Collar x*

Malice is reminiscent of adventure and mystery titles such *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* and the *Zero Escape* series. However, successful completion of the game is still highly dependent on the ability to romance one of Ichika's companions, and the game narrative branches out depending on who the character chooses to partner with to solve cases and the character she chooses to romance. Noticeably, all of Ichika's love interests tend to follow the mold of character types from popular manga. For example, Takeru, the hacker who Ichika can partner with, is easily the game's token tsundere character or character who is often cold towards the player character but warms up to her depending on one's narrative choices. Kei Okazaki, the SP (Special Police) assigned to protect Ichika and her companions can easily be classified as a nemuidere character or that character who appears sleepy all the time but finds motivation when he falls in love. Aside from the game, relations to other forms of Japanese media include drama CDs for each of Ichika's love interests, a fan disk, character merchandise and an upcoming anime adaptation.

While otome games occupy a niche sector of the game industry in its country of origin, the number of titles that are being adapted for audiences outside of Japan have steadily grown. Apart from localized titles for popular consoles such as various Playstation platforms[1] and the Nintendo Switch, companies such as Voltage USA and similar companies have produced visual novels in English on mobile. Other companies in the East Asian region such as the South Korean all-female company Cheritz, and Chinese mobile game company PaperGames, both produced titles in their country of origin and have localized their games in English due to popular demand. Additionally, the popularity of crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter, and the availability of digital distribution platforms like Steam have also allowed a number of indie makers outside Japan to create their own titles. Despite the lack of infrastructure that the anime media mix

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[1] These include Playstation Portable, Playstation Vita and Playstation 4

provides in its country of origin and its lack of coverage in larger gaming publications, online communities doing the work of promotion have thrived online.

On the surface, the increasing popularity of otome games outside its country of origin seems to indicate a number of things. Firstly, it reasserts the transcultural nature of fandoms (Chin and Morimoto, 2017). Secondly, despite their exclusion from larger game communities, women continue to create communities of their own. Thirdly, similar to pink and purple games of the nineties, with enough clamor and support from players, game industries occasionally would design games for women, albeit in very gendered ways similar to what Chess (2017) describes as "designed identity." Chess describes designed identity as textual and industry by-products that allow "specific women to be a valid sales point for companies attempting to tap into this emerging demographic, but also operates as a means of keeping that very demographic in stasis." This analysis also applies to otome games, as I will discuss in chapters of this work, not only in the way these games primarily target women, but also the way many games have a tendency to simulate emotional labor and privilege.

But more importantly, because of the diversity of their creators, otome games in English feature female player characters that demonstrate varying degrees of agency. For example, Chizuru, the protagonist of the popular visual novel *Hakuoki*, despite being a female oni[2] with the ability to heal quickly, key moments in the game often place her in situations wherein she always needs to be rescued by the male romanceable characters. Choices are mostly about selecting who one should go to for protection. Her value in the game seems to rely on her resilience and her ability to emotionally (and at times physically, by literally giving her blood to them to keep them fighting) support them. Moreover, save for a few moments in the game,

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[2] A demon.

Chizuru's relationships with her love interests were mostly chaste. In contrast, Mika, the heroine of the PC title *Seduce Me*, is a mostly self-rescuing heroine who is never shy about her sexual attraction to her love interests. More interestingly, Mika's romance options in this latter game feature both male and female options.

The diversity of these representations of women also reflects the diversity of the category itself and its status as a staging ground for discourses of femininity. In many ways, otome games participate in various discourses of femininity and the representation of women in games, because they directly address women as players, and enact various adventures and fantasies often coded as feminine. At the same time, the category's cultural migration allows for shifting definitions of what makes an otome game an otome game.

This work examines otome games' symbolic hailing of women as players, the category's migration outside its country of origin, and what both those factors mean for its players. What are otome games outside Japan? What do discourses of femininity within these games imply about changing discourses about women? How do players negotiate agency in playing and doing cultural production around otome games? What does fan labor look like surrounding otome games? These questions I will address in this work alongside my findings. The chapters of this work are outlined as follows:

Chapter one reviews the literature on otome games, gender and games, and globalization. I discuss the theoretical framing of my work drawing from various theorizations in media studies on media and globalization, especially on how it relates to Japanese games. I explore the work on transcultural fandoms to frame my post-nationalist analysis surrounding otome games and its fandoms. Lastly, I review various theorizations of intimacy and emotion to situate my analysis

on the variety of emotion work especially in playing otome games, and fan labor around otome games.

Chapter two is a brief methodological chapter that discusses various methods employed in this study–specifically game analysis and interviews. I also discuss my position as a Pinay aca-fan, and how this ties with an intersectional lens, especially when interviewing women for this study.

In chapter three, I analyze the first two best-selling otome games in English–*Hakuoki* and *Code Realize*. By analyzing these games and their localizations, I point out how localization allows postfeminist sensibilities to travel.

Chapter four continues my analysis on otome games, specifically focusing on mobile otome games. In this chapter, I extend my postfeminist lens to examine the intimate economies of mobile otome games, more specifically how mobile app economies operate through the monetization of women's choices–their bodies and emotions–and the larger implications these bring on how capitalist modernity via platform economies operate in intimate scales.

My fifth chapter combines game analysis and player interviews to present an overview of networks of circulation around otome games outside Japan, specifically focusing on otome games made for PC, otome games created by indie companies and fan translated work. By examining these, I demonstrate how these networks functioned to deterritorialize otome games outside its country of origin without the infrastructure of the anime media mix.

In my sixth chapter, I use data gathered from my interviews to examine how otome game players define otome games. My analysis of these responses from my interviews indicates how players redefined otome games as a genre that in a lot of ways replicates what Berlant describes

as "the female complaint" or a self-contained mode of representation meant to capture experiences of disappointment, suffering and desire under patriarchy (p. 243). This redefinition becomes a form of positioning so its predominantly female players can become experts of genre. While this positioning does have its advantages, particular in the formation of intimate publics or publics that tend to center around womens' cultures, in the context of otome games, it reproduces the female complaints' problems especially with its orientalization of Japanese games.

Chapter seven continues discussing several responses from player interviews, specifically focusing on fan bloggers to illustrate the kind of labor these bloggers do to create publicity around otome games. These interviews indicate how the ability to shape discussions around otome games also hinges on maintaining the image of players as good consumers. The importance of maintaining this image demonstrates a postfeminist ethos that disciplines its players.

Finally, in my conclusion, I describe recent developments pertaining to otome game workers and more recent releases, such as Paper Games' *Love and Producer*, and their more gamblified elements. I argue about the importance of remembering victories and resistances through the intimate publics that women and marginalized folks create for themselves, but also at the same time think about the limits of these formations.

In understanding otome games, I seek to offer an understanding of womens' cultures in games and game culture. This study aims to examine cultural flows between game industries and transnational game communities, and to analyze discourses of gender within player communities, wherein the primary demographics do not conform to the traditional straight white male gamer stereotype. In doing so, I examine what it is like for women to create game cultures of their own.

II.   Chapter 1: Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Most of the literature directly related to otome games focuses on the analysis of individual games. Kim (2009) is most notable for being the first to publish on otome games, elaborating on key characteristics of two early otome game titles *Angelique* and *Harukanaru Tokino Nakade,*[3] as described in the introduction. Kim adopts an ambivalent attitude towards the representation of women in otome games, pointing out the potential of these games in allowing individuals to enact fantasies that are considered feminine but not ignoring the problems of segregating female gamers as niche markets. This analysis, I will return to in chapter six in player definitions of otome games as well as my conclusion. Tina Richards (2015), in her analysis of the popular *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* series, notes how the gameplay makes the player perform femininity to avoid dying alone, which according to the game is the worst fate that could befall a woman. In this way, the female gaze (presumably the player's) is mediated by the male gaze, and the series in this way reinforces dominant heteronormative Japanese values in encouraging women to be docile and eager to please men. Hasegawa (2013), in her reading of *Hakuoki,* points out that while the narratives are centered on the male characters, she argues the game offers the opportunity for players to "queer history," to insert themselves and their own desires in a traditionally male centric and nationalistic historical narrative. Lamerichs (2012), whose analysis is centered on the independent title *Hatoful Boyfriend*, points out how the game's weirdness—the protagonist is a human girl who is made to date pigeons—parodies and subverts

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[3] Roughly translates as "In a Distant Time." Kim points out how this RPG is reminiscent of popular shoujo title *Fushigi Yuugi*. In contrast to Angelique, who has to choose between giving up her position as queen to be with her love interest, Haruka needs to save the world in order to get the guy she likes.

otome tropes that are often constructed as cute, especially when the player unlocks a game wherein one is made to solve the mystery behind the murder of the protagonist. Wagner and Liang (2021) discuss the Chinese mobile title *Love and Producer*, pointing out how the game's mechanics which allow a sexless form of polyamory provide a way for women to enact fantasies especially in particularly gendered cultural contexts that restrict articulations of women's' desires.

A couple of studies examine otome game players either as audiences or as a way of examining cultural production among players. Tanikawa and Asahi (2013) in their paper "The Study to Clarify the Type of Otome Game User" takes the angle of a market researcher and their survey focuses mostly on Japanese otome game players. Survey results show how interest in the game can wane among players if they are not interested in the heroine. Moreover, their study also notes the growing market for otome games outside of Japan in terms of sales and concludes that market researchers should survey overseas otome game players. Song and Fox (2015) examine   survey responses of a number of female Chinese players of otome games and indicate how they affect these players' romantic beliefs. Similarly, Andlauer's (2018) analysis of the *Uta No Prince Sama* series and its fandom point to how fans of the game utilize the ability to play through fictional relationships to question norms about heterosexual love. Ernest Dit Alban's (2016) report on the circulation of otome and yaoi game-related products indicates the emergence of certain urban networks surrounding these games, specifically in Ikebukuro. Steinberg and Ernest Dit Alban (2018) return to this subject proposing a pedestrian method in the study of otakus and otaku culture while centering their analysis on the female focused space of Ikebukuro. Ernest Dit Alban (2020) elaborates on their work further pointing to how bookstores and recycled goods shops helped create the circulation of otome games and otome game related

content. Tosca (2021) analyzes fanfiction written about the otome game *Hakuoki* to demonstrate how Western fans of the game appropriate forms of cultural production—worldbuilding and transmedia practices--to explore the world of the game, to understand characters, and to reinterpret history and cultural norms. Much of these will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

I have specifically listed these texts to illustrate the very sparse amount of literature on otome games. Nonetheless, a number of these studies do traverse important discourses in both games studies and fan studies. In this chapter, I elaborate on how the studies on otome games touch on the familiar topics on gender and games, and studies on audiences and players, particularly operating in media contexts outside of North America. Moreover, in my theoretical framework, I link the study of otome games to the analysis of games and globalization. Lastly, I wrap this chapter exploring the methodological considerations of this study that uses a combination game analysis and interviews.

2.1 Literature Review: Gender and Games

The earliest studies on games and game culture have touched on the topic of gender whether to point out how the space of game culture is male dominated[4] or how stereotypical representations of women in games are seen to reinforce rigid gender boundaries[5]. While they tackle gender in some respect, it is not the central feature in these studies. Compiled after a conference at MIT with the same name[6], Jenkins and Cassell (1998)'s collected volume of

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[4] For example, Fine (1983) mentions the existence of women within the groups he worked with but does not really go into detail about them. See also McNamee (1998).

[5] Provenzo (1991) and Kinder (1991) to name a few

[6] Also written as a response to the success of titles such as *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996), which clearly indicated that there is a market for girls in gaming

essays, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, establishes the early tradition of feminism in games via their examination of girl games and the girl game movement, whose project is "to transform gender relations within American culture and to create a new and potentially profitable market" (p. 16) at the same time. In their introduction, Jenkins and Cassell critique the essentialism within the logic of creating games specifically tailored for girls and how they naturally play, as well as the compromises made for feminism to get a foot in the door at the games market, while acknowledging the efforts made by the girl game movement to create a space for women in gaming. In addition to these they pose the following questions: "Do we encourage girls to beat boys at their own game, or do we construct a girls-only space? The problem is that both sides ultimately start from the assumption that computer games are boys' own games, and thus both scenarios can result in disparaging of girls' interests" (pp. 34-35). While the authors have more questions than answers, they have effectively presented ongoing issues that need to be addressed in order for games and game culture to be much more welcoming to those marginalized within them.

In the next two decades after the publication of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, two other volumes would emerge in response to it that would seek to define the waves of feminism in game studies. Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun's (2008) edited volume *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* expands the field towards exploring women in gaming communities and women in design, and design and pedagogical possibilities that seek to challenge mainstream games. Kafai et al. (2016)'s compilation emerges from a post-Gamergate context, which placed toxic game cultures at the center of conversations around game culture particularly in mainstream media. The authors and editors of the volume call for intersectional approaches in games studies and more inclusive game design to define the third wave of feminism in game studies. While there

are definitely large numbers of notable studies on games and gender outside of these volumes—for example, Taylor's *(*2006) chapter on female players of Everquest in *Play Between Worlds*, Ruberg and Shaw's (2017) edited volume on *Queer Game Studies*, and Malowski and Russworm's edited volume on *Gaming Representation* to name a few[7]—how the "waves" of feminism has been delineated within these volumes in response to *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* provide interesting histories of how discourses over gender and games have emerged over time beyond girl games, and while the contexts through which these volumes were written may slightly differ, the call for diversity in games, game culture and game studies still remain.

Throughout much of the expanding area of gender in game studies, discussions around identification and representation remain central. Consalvo (2003) identifies questions in the examination of gender and sexuality in the analysis of games, using *Final Fantasy IX* and *The Sims* as case studies, indicating the ways in which heterosexuality is almost always a presumed default. Other studies and edited volumes that examine romance and sexuality in games (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006; Pinckard, 2012; Sunden and Svenningson, 2012; Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; MacDonald et al. 2017) not only expand on questions on sexuality, but also tackle broader discourses of being in love with games, with other people in games and game culture, while examining how these interactions also help shape identities. Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* (2016) deconstructs discourses of diversity and identification in games, arguing that the complex ways individuals identify via experiences instead of specific gender or race identifiers should be the reason to pursue diversity for its own sake. Other studies, mostly on mobile and console gaming, also give some insight as to other gendered assumptions as to how

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[7] Other excellent volumes that collect excellent gender studies critique include Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen's *Feminism in Play* and Harper, Blythe, Adams and Taylor's *Queerness in Play*. All these volumes continue to challenge feminist theory and practice within game studies.

women play (Thornham 2008; Hjorth 2009). Chess (2017), in examining a number of game genres designed for women such as casual games, discloses a number of gendered assumptions about women, how women play and women's leisure time.

Moreover, a number of other studies provide much insight to experiences of women in games (Taylor, 2006; Thornham, 2008) and their gendered experiences within game communities (Valkyrie, 2012; Nakamura, 2012; Liu and Lai, 2020). Cases of harassment such as the Dickwolves controversy (Salter and Blodgett, 2012) and Gamergate, spurred the examination of toxic cultures (Consalvo, 2012). Women and queer folk also have demonstrated signs of resistance, crafting games (Westecott, 2013) and creating tools (Harvey, 2014) to reclaim spaces and game culture for themselves. What these small pockets of resistance indicate is the fact that in relation to the larger gaming public, smaller gaming counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Vossen, 2014) exist to resist them.

Much of the literature on otome games responds to these issues, framed within these various waves of feminism in game studies. In introducing the category, Kim (2009) situates her discussion of otome games alongside the argument for girl games, noting the parallels with girl games in the West. While otome games emerged separately from girl games, Kim notes the parallels between the two—indicating how they are created and marketed specifically for girls[8]. While she notes that Ruby Party--the first designers of otome games--unlike creators of pink and purple games in the nineties, did not specify any political or educational intentions in creating *Angelique* (1995), she points out the political implications of creating a predominantly female market for games, as they allow women to enact fantasies that are often coded as feminine, and

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[8] While their target demographic were teen girls, many of these girls have now grown up, signaling shifts in player demographics.

acquire opportunities to see themselves as a dominant market for games, thus making her own case for girl games. Other texts (Lamerichs, 2012; Hasegawa, 2013; Richards, 2015) situate their analyses within the representation of sexuality in games. As they examine different games, they also reflect a diversity of opinions on the games they critique. Additionally, as these texts tend to focus on the analyses of individual games not game players or fans, some authors encourage scholars to look into practices of otome game players themselves (Kim 2008; Hasegawa 2013), as they can give light to the implications of various subcultures for women, which other studies (Song & Fox 2015; Ernest Dit Alban, 2016; Ernest Dit Alban, 2020) contribute to.

2.2 Literature Review: Texts, Convergence and the Anime Fandoms

Audience studies and fan studies have both tackled ways of characterizing how readers collaboratively read texts and the various ways they take ownership of them. While the full range of audience research tradition is beyond the scope of this section, a number of studies have helped mark the transition to current studies on fandom. The most notable and pertinent among these is Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance.* Though it begins with a critical feminist examination of the romance novel industry and romance literature, her interviews of a specific romance reading group show how these readers find multiple points to resist patriarchy, despite having more or less conservative beliefs about romance and relationships. Indeed, much of Radway's work is grounded on Stanley Fish's interpretative communities (1980), which highlights the norms in certain communities and how members of that community engage and use particular texts. Similarly, Tony Bennet and Janet Wollacot (1987) also borrow from the notion of interpretative communities, in conceptualizing reading formations, arguing that both texts and readers are co-produced. Focusing on interpretative communities foregrounds the social

aspect of interpretation and possible resistance. Though written decades later, Song and Fox's (2015) study of female Chinese players of otome games follow in this vein of analysis.

Important to studies of fandom are the various ways in which fans take ownership of texts. Jenkins (1992) casts fans in the role of the "other," operating "from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness" (p. 27). Much of the tone is celebratory, because fandom was seen as a tactical position against dominant ideologies. Textual poaching is a way that fans "assert their mastery over mass produced texts" (p. 24). In the process of poaching, they "become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (p. 24). Although *Textual Poachers* is massively instrumental in defining fan studies, its binary assumptions, particularly in its positioning of fans, have been widely criticized. Hills (2002) enumerates how Jenkins' work creates a number of dualisms: the separation of the fan and the academic, and the idealization of fans as producers versus mere consumers. Such binaries reproduce hierarchies, and removes the "taint of consumerism" to salvage fans for academic study. Another issue with *Textual Poachers* is the focus on fan engagement, and the issue of taking fan testimonies as gospel (Hills, 2002; Gray, 2003). Not only does it create the binary of the good fan versus the bad consumer (Hills, 2002), but it also limits the analysis to one type of textual understanding and interpretation and results in the under theorization of textuality. Nonetheless, Jenkins' model imagines fandom as social and cultural networks, and he highlights their function as interpretative communities that position themselves in opposition to capitalist control of culture. *Textual Poachers* outlines his initial construction of participatory culture that will figure heavily in fan studies, especially with the coming of the Internet.

Much of Jenkins' later work would focus on exploring media convergence (2006) and various forms of fan engagement within this particular context. His examination of participatory

cultures (Jenkins, 2006) brings reinterpretation and creativity back to communities, and this is highly pertinent especially in studies of online fan communities and digital fandom. Studies on digital fandom (Bennett, 2014; Stein, 2015; Hills, 2015; Booth, 2018) definitely foreground this shift from the individual to the community in order to make sense of both online and offline fan practices, especially after fandom acquired mainstream appeal over the years. These studies point to the formation of emotionally driven collective authorship is that it emerges over time, and with their growth is quantified within social networks (Jung, 2011; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2012; Highfield, Harrington & Bruns, 2012; Wood & Baughman, 2012; Stein, 2015). Moreover, these studies tend to argue that digital platforms challenge traditional notions of authorship and emphasize intertextual relations between different media features heavily in a number of studies (Jenkins, 2006a; Booth, 2018; Stein, 2015). They also complicate the boundaries between amateur and professional (Stein, 2015), and point out issues of fan labour, as fans have become a source of free labor because of their love for texts (De Kosnik, 2013; Chin et al., 2014) and as companies regift grassroots models of exchange back to them (Scott, 2009). In this way, these studies also reimagine the discipline as one that engages with Web 2.0 platforms as both subjects and modes of engagement, to keep pace with fans both in terms of their thinking and also in terms of scholarly practices.

Media convergence also imagines how fans negotiate media flows. Jenkins (2006b) also suggests that media convergence is global and argues that "global convergence is giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism" (p. 155). Studies in anime fandoms indicate how such fandoms have developed via network cultures (Napier, 2006; Eng, 2012). Practices such as fansubbing have allowed hybrid forms of distribution (Leonard, 2005; Denison, 2011; Lee, 2011; Ito, 2017),

allowing fans to take charge of localization to help grow the industries around anime outside of Japan.

However, as Consalvo (2009) notes, many case studies that examine textual poaching or media convergence tend to privilege Western examples and omit other forms distribution outside of the center-periphery model and other strategies that Japanese companies have chosen to adapt in response to globalization. Studies centered on media convergence also have a tendency to privilege digital media, and sometimes exclude non-digital media. As such, it also disregards forms of consumption prevalent within anime fan communities. Azuma (2009), for example, describes what he calls database consumption, which is a type of consumption wherein readers are not merely interested in the original but its copies. This idea of course, is based off of Otsuka's (2010) theory of narrative consumption, which proposes that individuals pattern their consumption around grand narratives. If one takes these perspectives into account, current perspectives on media convergence may not sufficiently account for practices of doujin, the collection of recycled goods, or the continued importance of non digital media within the anime media mix (Ito, 2010; Condry, 2012; Tamagawa, 2012; Steinberg, 2012; Dit Alban, 2020). Exclusions such as this are a consequence of what Chin and Morimoto (2017) describe as a form of "ghettoization" of non-Western fans in fan studies, which needs to be amended if fan studies is to become more inclusive.

It is this knowledge gap in fan practices and forms of consumption within the anime media mix that Ernest Dit Alban (2016; 2020) responds to. The report is part of an ongoing study on the circulation of otome and yaoi goods and how they shape the urban environment of Ikebukuro. Nonetheless, what is significant in this is how this study also asserts not only the existence of analog and digital media that co-exist within these spaces, or the commercialization

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of recycled goods, but also the ways they have helped shape a form of Japanese girl culture through them. Moreover, while this text was not written as a games studies piece or as an analysis of player culture, these arguments are also important in diversifying the examination of player practices around the world.

As traditions in player studies mirror fan studies quite closely, particularly in their examination of textualities[9], the analyses of social contexts of play and fan practices and discussions concerning online participation, it is arguable that player studies has been subsumed in the wider field of fan studies', not only because it diversifies it, but also because case studies in games allow the critique of wider assumptions in fan studies, such as the celebratory rhetoric of participation or new media. However, player studies also mirrors fan studies in how the studies of non-Western players are mostly segregated to special journal issues or anthologies that may be easy to overlook. Hjorth & Chan (2009) point out that this lack of focus on certain regions such as the Asia Pacific and game studies' Eurocentric approach "further perpetuates stereotypes around Asian production and consumption of media. It is arguably problematical when socio-cultural differences and contextual specificities are elided or neglected in 'global' studies of games" (p. 4). That quote was written in their introduction to their edited volume *Gaming Cultures and Place in the Asia Pacific*. Outside of North America and Europe, players in East Asia are the most studied, from studies of Chinese MMO players (Chan, 2006; Fung, 2009; Lindtner et al, 2008; Lin & Sun, 2011; Lee & Lin, 2011) to players in game rooms in Korea (Chee, 2006; Huhh, 2009) and player cultures around e-sports (Jin, 2010). Studies which include samples from regions other than East Asia are even rarer, but these can also be promising

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[9] For example, Gray (2002) and Consalvo (2003) have notable parallels in the way that they argue about paratexts and different forms of textual engagement.

especially since that may be able to give insight not only on practices that are considered "local" but also look into how they negotiate identities in global contexts. Faizal (2017)'s study on Malay women's identity construction on Sims Social, for example, sheds light on how the women of the study experience globalization and modernity, via Facebook and *Sims Social*, negotiating Western consumerist values with their own culture. The small number of such studies indicate that there is still much work to be done in diversifying player studies.

2.3 Literature Review: Gaps and Contributions

Existing literature on otome games and game players are focused on analyzing representations of gender and sexuality mostly in individual games, and how women engage with romances in games, and how the circulation of otome games and related goods allow the construction of spaces. Each contribute to discussions about gender and sexuality in games, and how players and fans engage with them, and what they imply about media contexts particularly those that fall outside models of Western media convergence. Nevertheless, most studies that discuss otome game audiences (Hasegawa, 2013; Song and Fox, 2015; Dit Alban, 2016) tend to me limited to certain "local" audiences. Additionally, as these studies are limited to analyzing local audiences within national frameworks, they also do not take into account the wider scope of globalization, which could potentially help balance the analysis of global games (De Peuter & Dyer-Whiterford, 2009; Nichols, 2013; Aslinger 2013; Kerr, 2017) that mostly focus on large scale media strategies of companies and cultural and creative industries. In the next few sections, I elaborate on my framework in the analysis of otome games, building from scholarship on games and globalization.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: An Overview

A number of game studies works that discuss globalization focus on political economy. These studies point to how the analysis of global flows of images, goods and services are key in the examination of game industries (Kerr, 2006, Consalvo, 2006; Cao & Downing, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009; Jin, 2010; Consalvo, 2016; Kerr, 2017). While there is a lot pointing to how globalization help contruct and maintain game industries, there are not a lot of pieces that tackle globalization within studies focusing on players. There is a dearth of studies on players outside of North America and Europe, and the small number of studies that look into players outside the West focus on East Asia[10] (Hjorth & Chan, 2009; Ng 2009; Lindtner & Dourish, 2011; Hjorth, 2011), with some exceptional cases (Apperley, 2011; Faizal, 2017; Penix-Tadsen, 2016; Penix-Tadsen, 2019). As a result, while games and game communities have almost always been global, player studies does not reflect this. Similarly, while earlier studies on media convergence celebrated pop cosmopolitanism (Jenkins, 2006), Chin and Morimoto (2017) lament problems in fan studies' "depoliticized use of imagined communities" in the way that they "elide the critique inherent in imagined communities as a way of thinking about how and why communities of affect and belonging are constituted" (p. 2). They also point out that fan studies scholarship is "ghettoized," indicating that there is a tendency for anything outside the more mainstream English language media fandoms to be segregated in special issues or panels so they are easily ignored. Though there are currently a number of calls for diversity within both game studies and fan studies, diversification of audiences often tends to happen within pluralized versions of national, or at times regional, frames. While it is indeed important to acknowledge

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[10] Much of them are in a special issue of Games & Culture in 2009, and some edited volumes such as *Gaming Cultures in the Asia Pacific*, *Gaming Globally*, and *Transnational Contexts of Development History, Sociality, and Society of Play*. Given the characteristic of special issues and selected volumes, studies like these are also very easy to overlook.

that national identities and language may be embedded in norms especially regarding the flows of international media (Jung 2011; Kustritz 2015; Mitra, 2020), ignoring transcultural exchanges and solidarities made outside the national frame may result in missed opportunities in observing and understanding the fluidity of images, desires, and identities among players/fans around the world. These issues within both player studies and fan studies invite a broader contextual revisioning of media reception for the analysis of player, game cultures and fans.

In the next few sections, I describe my framework for the study of games, player communities and game cultures, by reviewing and combining theoretical work on the concepts of globalization, particularly its use in fan studies. Firstly, I briefly look at the notion of hybridity and its application in the analysis of geemu and the anime media mix. Next, I review the discussion of cosmopolitanism, and then research around fans in the context of the rise of soft power, media sub-Empires, such as Japan and Korea, and brand nationalism. Studies in that first category often attempt to envision a form of global solidarity and connection among fans, and the other has a tendency to take a more pessimistic view given perceived power relations in media economies and its tendency towards post-national critique. I argue for a more balanced approach by taking account the much more complex ways in which fans negotiate belonging and identity. Sandra Arnett (2014) describes fan communities as groups wherein "people from many national, cultural, ethnic, gendered, and other personal backgrounds find a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest while negotiating the frictions that result from their social and historical contexts" (p. 6). Taking a cue from Chin and Morimoto, I have chosen to use the term "transcultural" instead of "transnational" as the term transcultural can be

understood as something that may be nation-centered, but may not be as well, a

transcultural orientation enables us to conceive of extranational subject positions that

assert themselves to varying and always shifting degrees at the levels of both the

individual fan and fandom generally (par. 5).

Using the term "transnational" implies a privileging of one's national orientation over other

subject positions in defining fan identities, and it is this is the particular orientation that I would

address, as I would argue that identities are much more complex than that.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Media Studies and Globalization (An Overview)

Scholarship in globalization is mostly defined by three broadly distinct schools of

thought. The first approach sees globalization as homogenization or an extended form of cultural

imperialism (Said 1993; Villas 2002). According to this point of view, the forces behind

globalization are usually American and they have a tendency to subject people belonging to other

nations less powerful than they are. This model has been widely critiqued one that is too

simplistic (Appadurai 1996; Chadha and Kavoori 2000), as it ignores the existence of non-

Western media going towards the West, and other regional players, that may also create sub-

media empires of their own within those regions (Iwabuchi 2002; Shim 2006).

The second view of globalization frames it as an outcome of modernity, which in turn is

tied to the development of capitalism. While it does share some ideas with the first, by

characterizing the various ways in which capitalism creates cultural homogenization, they also

specify various forms of resistances (Giddens, 2003; Castells, 1996; Appadurai, 1996) and

identify the existence of sub-Empires within regions such as Japan and Korea (Iwabuchi, 2002;

Shim, 2006). Castells (1996), for example, indicates that while there are those that "enforce

existing domination or seize structural positions of domination," "resistance to power" can be

"achieved through the same two mechanisms that constitute power in the network society: the programs of the networks and the switches between network" (p. 778). As his idea is centered on how global capitalism has allowed the emergence of networks, networks too can allow forms of resistance. Giddens (2003), on the other hand, places the possibility of resistance in the complexity of individual identities, which often calls for a process of negotiation that can accommodate different and even contradictory values. Perhaps the most prominent in this school of thought is Arjun Appadurai (1996) who argues that alongside cultural homogenization, a number of factors allow heterogenization, particularly with the movement of people (ethnoscapes), technologies (technoscapes), capital (finanscapes), images (mediascape) and ideas (ideoscapes) thus creating various disjunctures. For this reason, Appadurai contends that homogenization and heterogenization actually reinforce one another rather than being mutually exclusive. It is this particular view that would be much more widely used particularly in fan studies and game studies for a number of reasons. Firstly, both Castells and Appadurai call for the analysis of networks, which have become useful in discussing online communities (Rowe, Ruddock & Hutchins, 2010; Koulikov, 2010; Brough & Shresthova, 2012) and media convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Ito, 2010; Verstraet,e 2011; Jung, 2011). Jenkins (2006a) borrows from Appadurai in illustrating the conditions which bring about pop cosmopolitanism, or the grassroots forms of convergence, wherein fans who are presumably deemed as cosmopolitan become active participants in cultural production. Secondly, Appadurai's notion of the global imagination provides a critical framework for the analysis of the flow of images and goods across national boundaries. For example, Iwabuchi (2002)'s concept of cultural fragrance and Allison's (2006) techno-animism build significantly on Appadurai's ideas to point out how Japanese goods and images are travel and adapt outside Asia, particularly North America.

However, as I will explain in a later section, while Appadurai's concepts of the global imagination, and the production of localities can be useful in the analysis of local industries and audiences alongside global forces, how his arguments have been reworked by others become problematic as they led to readings that tend to privilege national identities over others.

Finally, the third approach borrows from postcolonial theory in its discussion of center-periphery power relations using cultural hybridity. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994) utilize the term hybridity to describe minority and migrant discourses particularly in colonized areas. By using disparate cultural forms, styles and/or identities, hybridity mostly defined as a subversive tool whereby colonized people can challenge forms of oppression. However, others have pointed out how hybridity too as a discursive practice can become complicit with transnational capitalism (Dirlik, 1994; Kraidy, 2002). Kraidy (2002), in his study of the Washington Post's "American Culture Abroad" series, notes how the discourse of hybridity can be "enlisted as a natural dimension of global strategic marketing" and in this way painting "progressive force spearheading the global expansion of democracy […] driving the current stage of globalization, with its relentless push towards opening new markets, dismantling state barriers to market expansion, and widespread consumerism" (p. 324). To create a more balanced approach to hybridity, he introduces the idea of critical transculturalism, which I will describe in the next section. Many studies, particularly on the Korean wave and its audiences, utilize the concept of hybridity to describe how media industries appropriate styles and ideas to create new ones that may be deemed marketable locally, regionally and globally (Shim, 2006; Lin & Tong, 2008; Ryoo, 2009; Jung, 2011; Oh, 2014; Jin, 2016). Similarly, hybridity has also been utilized in game studies to describe how some game industries adapt and develop alongside the monolithic North American game industry (Consalvo, 2006).

Each of these scholars above describe certain realities within globalization. As enticing it is to pick one school of thought, a more nuanced understanding of globalization acknowledges how these realities can all co-exist alongside each other (Embong, 2011; Faizal, 2017). Much of my data and analysis, as will be described in the succeeding chapters, reflect that. In my chapters wherein I analyze games, for instance, I illustrate how localized versions of otome games and otome games created outside in Japan demonstrate hybridity, to cater to media structures (ie. Hallyu), to different modes of consumption (ie. The anime media mix) and to discourses about gender (ie. postfeminism) at the same time. However, in another chapter, I will also examine networks created by fans for circulation and the power dynamics between them, while also analyzing transcultural conversations about the games they love. In this way, this study will combine these various perspectives to demonstrate these multiple realities within globalization and they ways in which texts and player cultures are shaped through them. In the next few sections, I explore some of these to look at the wider applications in fan studies and the analyses of cultures around games, particularly games produced in the anime media mix.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Texts, Geemu and the Changing Anime Media Mix

The notion of games as hybrid is nothing new, particularly if one takes into account scholarship around Japanese cultural products and the anime media mix. Studies on manga particularly note how hybridity comes with the contact of both Japanese and Western images (Bryce et al., 2010). One also gets this idea from Anne Allison (2006) when she describes technoanimism---mostly used to describe an aesthetic in Japanese cultural products and Japanese fantasy that is "built from a bricolage of assorted and interchangeable (machine/organic/human) parts where familiar forms have been broken down and reassembled into new hybridities." Though it is used to describe how mecha is ever present in Japan's cultural goods, it also

describes the process of Japanese fantasy production, which involves a lot of transformation and mixing.

Studies on Japanese games or geemu (Picard, 2013; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011) also note how cultural mixing and international collaboration between Japanese subsectors and American industries is central to the emergence of Japanese games in Japan, and how Japanese games eventually helped shape North American game culture (Picard, 2013). They also describe how some Japanese games are designed to allow easy localization in various cultural contexts, thus consequently lacking in traits considered to be Japanese. For this reason, Pelletier-Gagnon (2011) critiques what he characterizes as "binary interpretation of the video game culture of circulation through the performative creation of different forms of Japaneseness by both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities" (p. 84). His work in particular indicates how the marketing of Japanese games and interpretative fan communities in North America have a tendency to resort to this binary interpretation, defining "Japaneseness" usually as something that is not Western, thus hinting a problem that in these contexts, Western taste is still seen as the default. Taking their cue from Pelletier-Gagnon, Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López (2015) instead argue that

> "The notion of gêmu should not be a closed, unchangeable list of mandatory traits, but a practical idea that helps critics, designers and scholars obtain a better understanding of Japanese games both as part of their markets of origin and an international, transnational conversation at industrial and creative levels where transfers and influences are constantly occurring" (p. 11)

Thus, in consideration of looking at these games' markets of origin and transnational conversations, studies on geemu often consider their context within the anime media mix and

discourses about "Cool Japan." However, in the analysis of geemu, the synergistic nature of the anime media mix needs to be recognized more, especially as companies in the anime media mix sometimes produce games to market anime or film, and vice versa (Steinberg 2012). Steinberg (2012) states that media relationality should be emphasized, because it "points to a transformation in the nature of the media text itself: from a model of the text as a relatively self-enclosed entity to the text as a transmedia fragment" (p. 160). While the media mix does have what can be described as a "gameic character" (Steinberg, 2015, p. 52), the media mix and game cultures that emerge from it are more than just games.

More importantly, much of the examination of geemu tends to examine the anime media mix as it was in the 1980s to the 1990s (Picard, 2013; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015; Ramesal and Lopez, 2015). While it is important to examine the anime media mix as it was in those decades, the problem here is that not all of these studies acknowledge how much has changed since then. As mentioned in my introduction, the history of otome games in Japan indicate that while its earliest titles were produced in the nineties, much of the discourse and practices around them have shifted in the 2000s with the emergence of Otome Road, which is a space in Tokyo dedicated to female oriented popular fandoms including these games, and with companies such as Otomate dominating the market in Japan. Ernest Dit-Alban (2016), in their consideration of fan practices in Otome Road, makes the case for the consideration of "otaku pedestrianity as a notion unifying various nuances of media, human and cultural mobility in the urban space of the everyday life." They make these arguments particularly given the fact that anime media mix products particularly in the late 2000s were made to be transportable as otaku themselves have become increasingly mobile. Thus otome games, if seen in this context, are part

of a changing ecological system, especially given how recycling culture around the anime

sanctuaries are also changing.

Furthermore, as I argue elsewhere (2018), the producers of Japanese-style games are not

only Japanese. For instance, if one were to consider producers of otome games in English,

Korean companies and game makers, such as Cheritz or independent developers from North

America such as SakeVisual, were equally influential especially in the early 2010s. The fact that

these producers also helped shape otome games in English early on hints at deterritorialization.

Appadurai (1996)'s work points to how deterritorialization is a core feature in globalization and

how increased mediatization intensifies distances between cultures and locality. In the case of

otome games, as I point out in the various chapters of this work, the work of players, bloggers

and creators outside help intensify the distance between these games and Otome Road.

Moreover, I argue that it is even more essential to recognize mutability and agency

especially when games studies theorize hybridity in games. I favor Marwan Kraidy's (2006)

notion of critical transculturalism, as a balanced approach to hybridity. He describes critical

transculturalism as a framework that "focuses on power in intercultural relations by indicating

both agency and structure in international communication analysis" (p. 147). He rejects the idea

that cultures are "stable autonomous units" and instead argues for a "synthetic view of culture"

which indicate that social practice "acting translocally and intercontextually is a site of agency"

(p. 147). Arguably, examining social practices are important, as these can indicate how games

and game cultures can change especially with deterriorialization. In the next sections, I point out

that agency is particularly important, especially in examining crosscultural game players and

game culture. Because of this reason, it is also important to view ideas about how games studies

and fan studies argue about how players and fans are cosmopolitan, and what these indicate
about these players and fans.

2.7 Theoretical Framework: Players, Fans and/as Cosmopolitans

Perhaps the most widely circulated discussion of cosmopolitanism in games/popular
media can be attributed to Henry Jenkins (2006a) who coins the term "pop cosmopolitanism,"
using the term to "refer to the ways in which transcultural flows of popular culture inspires new
forms of global consciousness and cultural competency" (p. 156). For Jenkins, the rise of pop
cosmopolitanism is a resulting condition of global media convergence. There are a few problems
with this. Firstly, it does not critically engage with brand nationalism, such as Cool Japan, and
question power relations in the globalization process particularly within fandoms (Iwabuchi
2010). Secondly, as Orgad (2012) points out: "the sheer diversity of voices contesting each other
in the global media space neither means, not in any way guarantees, interaction and exchange of
ideas, understanding or the enhancement of imagination" (p. 27). Thirdly, it gives an overly
idealistic, almost utopian picture of fans who, by engaging with culturally different texts would
create a global form of solidarity, which may not be the case for all fandoms. While Jenkins may
have moved on from his more utopian ideals of fandom towards a slightly more critical notion of
participatory culture and media convergence (Jenkins, 2011, 2014), this remains as one of the
few theorizations of globalization within fan studies[11].

Consalvo (2016) also addresses cosmopolitanism in her study of players of Japanese
games. Borrowing from Skrbis, Kendall & Woodward (qtd. in Consalvo, 2016), as well as Urry,
she describes how her interviewees "exhibit many facets of a cosmopolitan predisposition" as

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[11] Morimoto & Chin (2013) for example, discuss transcultural fandom and cite Jenkins but does
not critically engage with the term.

described by Urry, and how "they went beyond consumption of foreign media to active exploration and construction of their own creations" (p. 39). What is most interesting here is the notion of how playing games can result in cosmopolitan orientations[12], and this notion points to a lot of questions about how identification in games (Shaw, 2015) and how the dynamics of domestic spaces wherein games are played (Thornham, 2008) can possibly facilitate these orientations. Those are questions that I seek to answer. However, in discussing cosmopolitanism, it is my wish to move beyond the characterization of cosmopolitanism as an attribute or a form of reflexivity--as at times cosmopolitanism may result out of pragmatic reasons (Noble 2009) or emerge in the context of imperialism (De Kosnik, 2017). Borrowing Nava (2007)'s work, I characterize cosmopolitanism more as "a structure of feeling" (Nava, 2007) and to locate it in the everyday (Noble 2009).

Nava (2006, 2007), in her case studies of British urban history in the nineteenth and twentieth century, draws attention to the gendered hierarchies—as well as racial and class hierarchies—that facilitated cosmopolitanism. She describes the case of women in Britain as such:

> "I make the claim that there are a number of reasons – social and psychodynamic – why gender is significant and why women in Britain have figured more prominently than men in the history of twentieth-century cosmopolitanism as recounted here. These include historical and geopolitical factors, among them the demographic consequences of two world wars, which seriously reduced the numbers of available men; and also the gendered patterns of migration to Britain over the course of the twentieth century which meant that indigenous women were the first to have intimate relations with the predominantly male

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[12] Previous studies mostly use television as an example. See Robertson (2013).

visitors and travelers from elsewhere. Women were also distinctively located in relation

to the new social formations of popular modernity. In their capacity as the main shoppers,

readers and cinema goers, they were more likely to encounter the proliferating cultural

and commercial narratives about the allure of abroad and difference" (Nava 2006, p. 48).

In another example, in the case of her study of Selfridges' history (2007), which focused its

marketing of orientalist fashions to working class women and migrants, Nava characterizes the

popularity of Selfridges as a form of rebellion to traditional Englishness, thus tying "the allure of

difference" to the discourse of consumer culture. While the racist implications in this marketing

of orientalism is certainly problematic, what Nava also successfully argues is how discourse and

power in this is case is certainly not binary. Furthermore, she also posits that cosmopolitanism

can exist independently outside of foreign travel or the knowledge of foreign languages, adding

that they can be located in homes and "micro publics of the city" such as schools, streets,

shopping centres, etc. (Nava, 2006, p. 68).

Nava's cultural history of cosmopolitanism in London has a number of parallels in

research on cosmopolitanism among migrant communities. Noble's (2009), in his study of

migrant communities in Australia, describes cosmopolitanism as "forms of practice"

emphasizing "the hard work that goes into the production of connection." (p. 53) In highlighting

the productive nature of cosmopolitanism, he points to not only the labor of cosmopolitanism but

he also draws attention into how communities and identities are constructed within this form of

labor. Wang (2018) extends these ideas in their research among Chinese migrants in New

Zealand. He states that cosmopolitanism is "socially situated, subject to pressure and enacted

within uneven power relations" (p. 1). Echoing Woodward and Skrbis (2004), Wang (2018) also

stresses the performativity of cosmopolitanism and the ontological work of emotions that go into these performances, similar to many other forms of identity[13], especially within contact zones.

In relation to fandom, Morimoto and Chin (2017) point to how fandoms can become contact zones, pointing out how "the normative fandom of shared affinities and even aspirations is, in its intrinsic transculturality, always already a site of difference, and even potential danger, for fans who do not hew to the cultural norms of the imagined community" (par. 17). Notably, they argue that these fandoms are "intrinsically transcultural" because individuals who are not North American or European have always existed in these fandoms though they are hardly written about. They also illustrate that similar to many of the communities described above, power relations are also at play within fandoms that can exclude fans whose identities may be not normative. Indeed, these echo a number of works on toxic cultures in both online fan communities and game cultures (Consalvo, 2012; Nakamura, 2012; Busse, 2013; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). By drawing together these descriptions of cosmopolitanism, I situate the study of cosmopolitanism not only on individuals, but also call for an examination of how transcultural power dynamics are at play in fan and player communities.

More importantly, these characterizations of cosmopolitanism speak more to my experience and position as transcultural aca-fan and transnational migrant: I was born in the Philippines, educated in Britain and am currently living in Canada. As such, my experiences within fandoms mostly fall outside the default characterizations of North American English-language fan scholarship. Being a migrant, sometimes my contact and openness to culture also comes out of the need to adapt and assimilate. These points I would further expand on later in the chapter as I discuss my positionality in relation to my methods.

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[13] See also Butler (1990)

Nonetheless, as can be surmised with these studies of cosmopolitanism, much of these are also tied with locality, especially as they point to the effects of deterritorialization (Appadurai 1996) in bodies and communities both online and offline. In the next section, I explore some of these ideas further, and show how they have affected work on fans.

2.8 Theoretical Framework: Media Reception and Postnationalist Critiques

Appadurai (1996) describes the destabilization of localities, which he argues is "primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial" (p. 178) and has "become deterritorialized, diasporic and transnational" (p. 188). In his post-nationalist critique, he situates agency in the realm of the imagination:

> "The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleasing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (p. 21)[14]

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[14] See also Orgad (2012) who expands Appadurai's work on imagination by characterizing it as "a process of negotiation and interaction between personal and collective thinking and feeling"

Thus if one were to adapt Appdurai's analysis for fan studies or player studies, it points to a form of analysis that examines practices in relation to daily life, and various collective practices within fan communities, and potentially locating agency within those practices. Nonetheless, despite Appadurai's particularly anti-nationalist stance, much of the critical work on media reception and global audiences stemming from Appadurai's work seem to focus on nations as a point of analysis.

One of the most representative of this is Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) who builds on Appadurai's arguments on imagination, but insists "that such a transnational imagination still needs to be articulated within a specific cultural geography" (p. 204). As a result, much of his work on fans reflect a certain trend in the study of transnational fandoms, as Chin and Morimoto (2013) point out, which privilege national identities over others to fit specific post-nationalist critiques at the cost of writing off fan subjectivities and affective engagements. In the case of Iwabuchi's (2002) study of the predominantly female Japanese fans of Hong Kong stars, it is done in order to make a point about "Japan's nostalgia for a different Asian modernity" (p. 192). Indeed, his study details how a lot of activity and circulation around this fandom are centered around fan clubs[15]. Most notable in his data are some of the interviews that he decided to include, which contain a lot of interesting details about how these fans communicate their preference for certain stars that demonstrate an "unaffected but cosmopolitan charm," their anxieties on how their favorite stars being commodified and represented by Japanese media, and

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(p. 93), as something that "is both factual and normative, referring to both meaningful real actions and the fantastical" (p. 97), one that "involves thinking and feeling and can be messy and contradictory" (p. 98), "is dialectic" (p. 99) and "is a moral force (p. 100).

[15] In this way, one could note some parallels to the dynamics of book clubs in Radway's (1984) study of romance fans.

how their choice of Hong Kong pop music ties into how they choose to express their individuality against mainstream Japanese media. Yet Iwabuchi dismisses them and concludes that they are "closer to those dupes [of mass media] than they care to admit" (p. 188). This kind of dismissal of female fans and female fantasies that has plagued studies of mass culture directed at female audiences (Modleski, 1982; Chin and Morimoto, 2013) is particularly glaring, because in doing so, he denies of the possibility of even mild forms of resistance (Radway, 1984), especially as these women actually communicate and even insist that this is their own way of defining themselves against mainstream commodity culture. In some cases, the opposite can even be contended as Lavin (2017) indicates that "mass cultural consumption" can be used "to negotiate border crossing and elective belonging in ways that are primarily separate from identification with local or national governments" (p. 181)

Moreover, in Iwabuchi's (2010a) critique of fandom in the context of brand nationalism, he suggests the "need to seriously attend to the strengthening of a nation-centered framework, which in the name of inter-national cultural exchange and understanding reproduces mutual cultural othering and suppresses the complexity, unevenness and diversity actually existing within Japan" (p. 93). While he does point out serious sociopolitical issues, much of this actually downplays how fans can resist (Pearson, 2010; Wood, 2012). In this way, he reproduces binary perspectives of fans as either "semiotic guerrillas or capitalist dupes" (Pearson 2010) and replicates the "dichotomy of good/bad that has plagued fandom studies for decades, contrasting 'good' scholarship of the sociopolitical implications of fandom with 'bad' scholarship of its affective meanings and pleasures for fans" (Chin and Morimoto, 2013, p 97).

Similarly, Anne Allison (2006) in her study of *Sailor Moon* and its fans, describes how a number of her interviewees and survey respondents stated that they identified with its characters,

and notes how despite its "Japaneseness" it is the recognition that it is different from American cartoons that made it more appealing. She goes on to point out that the show's central attraction is "the shifting identities of the characters: girls/monsters who transform in both directions, and are at either end, a complex of attributes" (p. 158), and makes the conclusion that "Sailor Moon embodies the cultural logic of post-Fordism: fragmentation, flexibility, customization" (p. 160). Her conclusion, of course, fits in her wider critique of Japanese post-war capitalism and aesthetic of techno-animism, which she contends is centered on portability. However, by shifting her analysis this way, she misses the opportunity to interrogate how and why Sailor Moon fans identify with its characters, and the range of fan activities around Sailor Moon's cult following. In another analysis of *Sailor Moon*'s North American fandom, Erik-Soussi (2016) indicates that Sailor Moon's legacy among its millennial fans are its use of the Female Gaze and how it became an avenue to create female centered fan community, which introduced a lot of girls to each other and to various forms of cultural production such as doujinshi and fan fiction. Thus, comparable to Iwabuchi, Allison dismisses fans' affective engagements with texts and their ability to organize amongst themselves.

These types of readings are not isolated. It is indeed very ironic that the focus on post-national critique can also lead to the privileging of national identities over others and can be found in a number of studies on transnational fandoms[16]. If national identities are meant to be the focal point of analysis, this poses a problem particularly in my study. In my interviews with otome game players of various nationalities[17], while there are some who mention national

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[16] To name a few, Jung (2011), Huat (2008) and Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon (2007). Interestingly, a bunch of them are on Hallyu fans.

[17] To be detailed my methodological chapter.

identities in relation to their media consumption, a number of my interviewees never even broached the subject of national identity, preferring instead to discuss their own online activities as well as engagements with other fans online. Instead of dismissing these, I choose to highlight this fact even more so, as I will discuss in later chapters, because they indicate how games and fandoms can become ways in which women and non-binary folk living in different parts of the world can connect with each other, though not without the absence of tension or conflict[18]. Nonetheless, the privileging of national identity in a number of studies makes broader arguments easier, particularly given that these studies also tend to tackle soft power and national branding such as "Cool Japan" or Hallyu. While I do think it is important to acknowledge those, these should not come at the cost of oversimplifying various fans connect and relate to texts.

Thus, in response to Appadurai's (1996) recommendation to explore links between the imagination and social life "that is not so resolutely localizing" (p. 55), I amplify Morimoto and Chin's (2013) call for "the greater contextualization of studies of transnationally circulating media, in which researchers are exhorted to be more closely attuned to the socio-historical and political economic backdrop of popular culture and consumption and consumerism" that is also

> equally informed from our understanding of fan behaviors, motivations, and the
>
> processes of meaning-making as driven by affective pleasures and investments […]
>
> Rather than shying away from fan knowledges and taxonomies, we embrace them, not as
>
> uncritical reproduction, but as an essential means of comprehending their complexity and
>
> implications for the ways we understand both the transcultural circulation and
>
> consumption of media, as well as fans' multivalent relationship to it. (p. 98)

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[18] As will be described in a later chapter, most of them has a lot to do with the varying ways they discuss piracy, and there is also a notable tension between those with access with otome games in Japanese vs. those who can only play in English.

Furthermore, I also propose the examination of intimacies as a way of examining different ways of articulating and negotiating belonging across a number of domains.

2.9 Theoretical Framework: Towards Intimacy and the Work of Emotions

The literature around intimacy stems from the work of Giddens (1991), who describes it as a practice of a dialogue of self-disclosure sought across cultures. In recent years, the discussion of emotion shifted towards the discussion of affect, in what is notable called "the affective turn" in contemporary scholarship (Clough, 2010). For fan studies, the affective turn allowed the conceptualization of "affective play" (Hills, 2002). Hills (2002) defines this term as playful engagements with texts that allow fans capable of "creating culture as well as being caught up in it" (p. 93), thus allowing for a more complex theorization of fan cultures. As Hills contends,

> "Fan cultures […] are neither rooted in an 'objective' interpretive community or an 'objective' set of texts, but nor are they atomized collections of individuals whose 'subjective' passions and interests happen to overlap. Fan cultures are both found and created" (. 113).

In the case of feminist scholarship, the affective turn poses a challenge to examine both bodies and emotions in a more globalized frame (Ahmed, 2004a; Pratt & Rosner, 2012). In this way, feminist geographers have also reclaimed the concept of intimacy as a way of disrupting geographical boundaries and hierarchies that structure ways of thinking and social norms that are bound to hierarchies as dictated by race, class, gender and nationalities (Pratt & Rosner 2012; Sioh 2017). Wilson (2012) points out, "the term 'intimacy' offers an appealing rubric for representations that undo familiar connotations about 'private' life by emphasizing its historical

and social situation—for example, in the everyday effects of global modernity or the inner operations of social hierarchies" (p. 32).

I bring up intimacy in this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows me to incorporate feminist analyses on emotion. Sara Ahmed (2004a)'s work on emotion, in particular, points out, "the very public nature of emotions and the emotive nature of publics" (p.14). More importantly, in describing "affective economies," she (2004b) argues

> emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. In particular, I will show how emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence), with reference to the figures of the asylum seeker and the international terrorist (p. 119).

This description of binding and sticking also applies to fandoms and player communities, especially as emotions glue them together whether it is mutual love for the text (Galbraith, 2015) or the emotional labor of community management (Lukacs, Embrick and Wright, 2009), and as emotions, particularly hate speech in toxic online communities, function to also alienate individuals from these communities (Gray, 2014).

Secondly, in cultural production, it is important to look at both the affective and the material, particularly since fan labor involves both aspects (Sandvoss, 2011; Jones, 2014; Hills, 2015). The notion of intimacy helps bring both material and affect together, and it also helps

bring in concepts that define fan practices within anime media mix scholarship. For example, the concept of moe is often roughly defined as love for 2D characters. Hiroki Azuma (2009) argues that moe indicates a shift towards postmodern database consumption practices wherein players and consumers are more interested in copies more than the original. However, Patrick Galbraith (2015) also defines moe as both a response to fictional characters, and a form of affective communication between fans particularly of boys love manga. In anime fan communities, many fans notably take charge in the circulation and cultural production around the texts that they love. Thus, moe is both affective and material. Similarly, Ian Condry's (2012) concept of dark energy, a term which he uses to describe collaborative creativity among anime fans, is defined as

> a collection of social forces that enlivens the connections between content and desire, which in turn helps drive the circulation of media products […] More broadly, it provides a way to conceptualize fluid links among fans, media content, technology and producers (p. 283).

He calls it dark energy specifically because he points out that a lot of these practices and collaborations are largely unseen pointing to invisible labor and gray economies. The examination of moe and dark energy also invite the study of various forms of intimate connections between fans, texts and communities, particularly as it is emotion and desire that connect these together. The concepts of unseen labor and gray economies will definitely be examined further especially in my chapter on otome game bloggers.

Thirdly, emotions are tied to formations and expression online. Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013) suggest that "emotion is being mobilized and industrialized through online cultures as transmittable, spreadable, networked and without self-containment" (p. 3), and that affect "functions as a collective energy that initiates and sustains gatherings of people or ideas"

(p. 33). Their arguments similarly denote the productive nature of emotions, especially as they function to gather and stick users together. In her study of Tumblr users, Stein (2015) describes the millennial "culture of feels," which "thrives on the public celebration of emotion previously considered the realm of the private; emotions remain intimate but no longer private" (p. 156).

Lastly, games also work affectively, and analysis of the productive nature of emotions in games can draw attention to the cultural and ideological work of game interfaces, narratives and systems. Aubrey Anable (2013) indicates how games "work on us and work us over in terms of impinging on our feelings, our identities, and our everyday lives." Studies on casual games (Anable, 2013; Chess, 2017), in particular, shed light on how these games are designed in a way to convert womens' leisure time into labor. Similarly, as I will point out in later chapters, otome games mechanics—narrative choices, stats, the use of real time, etc.—tend to simulate emotional labor, especially as many games tend to structure their narratives and gameplay around the development and the player character's interaction with the games' male characters. As I will discuss in a later chapter, this simulation of emotional labor often functions to perform the ideological work of communicating ideas about girlhood, re-appropriated to fit postfeminist narratives of women and choices.

Ultimately, it is my hope that discussing intimacy and forms of attachment in relation to games and fandom will not only bring all these forms of analysis together, but also open up more intersectional critiques of game cultures and fan cultures. Discussions and forms of analysis of transcultural fandoms or player cultures are still very nascent. In assembling the above, I wish to foster conversations about transcultural fandoms and possible ways to look at fandoms transculturally. In the next section, I describe my methodology, and detail particular advantages

and some challenges in following a translocal approach to my study of otome games and otome

game players.

III.   Chapter 2: Methodology

3.1 Overview: Games, Romance, and Players in the Shadow of Radway

During the earliest drafts of my thesis proposal, mentors were quick to point out how my-then project at the proposal stage share key aspects in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984). *Reading the Romance* was something I read in passing as an English literature undergrad in the Philippines in a literary theory class but was quickly glossed over in favor of more popular literary theorists such as Terry Eagleton or Elaine Showalter. Consequently, after my proposal defense, I dedicated a lot of time to re-reading Radway. Upon reading her introduction one day, my eyes were glued to the following extract:

> If reading varied spatially and temporally, and one did wish to use literature in an effort to reconstruct culture, it would be necessary to connect particular texts with the communities that produced and consumed them and make some effort to specify how the individuals actually constructed those meanings as meaningful semiotic structures. Hence my conclusion that American studies needed ethnographies of reading (p. 4).

The notion of making sense of how players construct meaning within communities, in a lot of ways, also helped me understand the larger tradition I am writing in, and how works such as T.L Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006), or Consalvo's *Cheating* (2007) have done the work of constructing ethnographies of play. Thus, it is this extract, alongside discussions with my supervisor, that convinced me to combine textual analysis with player interviews--both of these I discuss in the sections below.

3.2 Otome Games and Textual Analysis

Alan McKee, in *Textual Analysis* (2003), defines the term as "an attempt to gather information about sense-making practices" (p. 14). The focus on sense-making practices centers on a form of analysis that examines how particular cultures (and subcultures) inform the ways people understand texts. Thus, there is a lot of focus on context.

Clara Fernandez-Vara (2014), building from McKee's work, point to the centrality of players' interpretations of games as points of analysis:

> The player is a necessary part of the text; it is difficult to find games where there is no player input, as the game is not really a complete text without a player that interprets its rules and interacts with it. When we study games, we investigate how players engage with the text at different levels: how players understand the rules, and follow or break them, how players create goals for themselves, how they communicate with each other, to name but a few (p. 7).

This focus on players' and player communities' understanding parallels much of McKee's work. Alongside games and their formal elements, Fernandez-Vara elaborates on several layers of contexts including game genres, technological contexts, economic contexts, socio-historical contexts, and the audiences these games are created for. Hence, in my own analyses of otome games, these contexts are all taken into consideration, particularly how gender relates to all these contexts.

Hyeshin Kim's early analysis on otome games argues for a categorical definition, instead of a genre definition. Instead of a genre that has particular conventions, a market category defines how women are addressed as players. With this, any analysis of otome games would be remiss without acknowledging how gender informs its perceived audiences, from the first titles

produced in Japan in the 1990s, to popular mobile game apps produced in Korea, China or the US. In the case of the first, one could point to socio-historical contexts of female game developers in the 1990s carving a niche for themselves and for female players. In the case of the latter, one could definitely make connections to various discourses on platformization (Steinberg, 2019) and on postfeminist media cultures (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007) especially on how they manifest in game cultures (Chess, 2017). Those contexts above are ones that I will explore in upcoming chapters.

Additionally, I also highlight the importance of examining localizations as important in understanding socio-historical contexts, particularly how localizations translate postfeminist sensibilities from one context to another. Several titles that I played for this study are English localizations of otome games. Among these titles include multiple editions of *Hakuoki* (the Aksys Games' localization and Idea Factory's two-part edition), *Ikemen Sengoku* and *Mystic Messenger*. These games, though their interfaces have been translated to English, all kept their original languages' audio. While Japanese and Korean are not languages I am fluent in, in my gameplay and gameplay notes, I listed particular areas in these localizations that stood out or sounded odd to me, even with my minimal knowledge of both languages. These parts, I made saves of or did video captures to show friends and colleagues, more capable of understanding those languages to translate the original languages' audio for me. The gaming websites, fan forums, and video sites also gave me access to noted paratexts of the originals--in the form of walkthroughs, achievement lists, and gameplay videos.

Understanding sense-making practices around otome games also involves understanding the online spaces that players utilize to share walkthroughs and to recommend games via reviews. I will discuss the functions of these online spaces in later chapters, but these spaces

allow their players to redefine what otome games are and which practices are acceptable around otome games. They also provided preliminary data to help with my interviews.

3.3 Interviews and Otome Game Player Communities

Alongside textual analysis, interviews played a key part in providing in-depth information on my research subjects. Bonnie Brennan (2002) points out how interviews "broaden our knowledge base while other information may also help us to understand alternative points of view" (p. 27). In a lot of ways, this describes what interviews contributed to my research, especially given that much of the information on the latter half of this thesis would not have been accessible to me without interviews.

Following ethics approval, I immediately posted a call for participants on forums, Tumblr and Reddit. This call was circulated in several fan blogs, and the response I got was overwhelming. For this study, I interviewed 30 individuals in total. These interviews were scattered from May 2017 to late 2018. Information on my interviewees are listed below:

Figure 3-1 Interviews and Their Demographic Information

Study Name	Role	Country/Nationality	Racial Identification	Pronouns	Age	Occupation
Anne	Blogger	Australian-American	White	She/her	31	Student
Pandora	Blogger	Canadian	White	She/her	27	Student
Julia	Translator	Russian	White	She/her	Did not specify	Did not specify
Claire	Blogger and Translator	Canadian	White	She/her	Did not specify	Did not specify

Giselle	Blogger	Brazilian	White	Did not specify	24	Student
Kooriiko	Maker	British Filipino	Asian	She/her	29	Nurse
Jen	Maker	US Hawaiian	Asian-Okinawan	She/her	23	Video Editor
Click	Maker	Singapore	Indonesian-Chinese	She/her	22	Administration
Letitia	Maker	France	White	She/her	Did not specify	Did not specify
Amanda	Maker	US	White	She/her	31	Lawyer
Jane	Blogger and Maker	Canadian	White	She/her	25	Did not specify
Nadia	Translator	Malaysia	Asian	She/her	20	Student
Chloe	Maker	UK	White	She/her	Did not specify	Did not specify
Joy	Maker	Vietnam	Asian	They/them	18	Graphic designer
Vocaotome	Translator	Bangladesh	Asian	She/her	28	University lecturer
Caitlin	Maker	South Africa	Did not specify	She/her	25	IP Engineer
Twix	Maker	Australia	Did not specify	Did not specify	Did not specify	Teacher
Tara	Blogger	US	White	Did not specify	21	Student
Eleanor	Translator	US	White	She/her	26	Museum Curator
Charlee	Bloger	US-Canada	White	She/her	37	Writing

						Specialist
Yona	Blogger	US	White and Native American	They/them	25	Fraud Detection
Shelby	Blogger	US	White	She/her	23	Cat Groomer
Zenri	Blogger	Philippines	Asian	She/her	24	Student
Two Happy Cats	Bloger	Australia	Did not specify	She/her	23	Student
Cecilia	Blogger	US	White	She/her	27	Photographer
Alyssa	Blogger	Philippines	Asian	She/her	22	Student
Jill	Blogger	Canada	White	She/her	40	Finance Manager
Daya	Maker	US	Native American	They/them	19	Student
Anna	Translator	US	Asian	She/her	22	Student
Naja	Blogger	US	Black	She/her	29	Pharmaceutical

Among my interviewees, I conducted 2 live in person interviews, 4 Skype interviews and 24 email interviews. The interviews were semi-structured. Live and Skype interviews ranged from an hour to five hours.

While most of these interviewees followed my semi-structured questions, some ignored structure altogether in some live and Skype interviews. These interviewees proceeded to show games that they had, talking freely about their favorite games and characters like they were showing a friend through their collections of games, and answering questions that stood out to

them, especially in relation to games they were talking about. And I was more than happy to oblige. As for email interviews, participants were given as much time as they needed to reply to the questions. Some responded within days of receipt. Many took weeks or even months to answer questions, noting busy schedules.

My interviewees were given the choice on the level of anonymity they preferred. Levels of anonymity became a challenge especially in my chapter on translators and game makers because many of these interviewees elected for anonymity. Thus, I could not make reference to names of projects or specific examples from these projects that would identify my interviewees. In contrast, several fan bloggers elected to have their real names be used for the study.

The representation and distribution of participants in my study differed from what I expected the larger otome game community to be. Among my participants, only four identified themselves as non-binary. A large number of my interviewees are white and come from first-world countries. However, this may not have been avoided given that I mostly circulated in particular online spaces where some types of voices and demographics may have larger platforms than others. Intersectional feminist researchers have notably called this issue the "sampling dilemma" (Cuadras and Uttal, 1999). But it is also for this very reason that I decided to extend my call to have as much diversity in my participants as much as possible.

With my interviews, I used a participatory approach recommended by feminist researchers (Oakley, 1981, Coterill, 1992 and Oakley, 2016), where I allowed my interviewees to ask questions about me and my research. I answered them to the best of my knowledge and with preliminary data that I am allowed to share. I also checked up with participants during the course of my writing my thesis chapters on how they want to be represented.

The help I received from the larger otome game fan community cannot be overstated. Several blogs with large followings circulated my call. During interviews, particularly live and Skype interviews, my interviewees all responded to me as if I was a friend with who they could chat about some of their favorite games. Most of them brought their favorite games in these interviews. Some even brought snacks in reference to some of the games. From these, it is quite apparent that my interviewees saw me as one of their own.

3.4 Reflexivity: How Exactly Do I Write Myself in this?

Prior to this study, I have been playing otome games for some time. I picked up *Hakuoki* during the summer of 2014 from a Playstation bargain bin in a game shop around the time I was moving from the Philippines to Canada to start my Phd. Little did I know that I would replay this later for my study. Later that year in Canada, another friend got me to play *Hatoful Boyfriend*. I found a site called Lemmasoft that had links to a number of free games, and various walkthrough sites that made playing the games a lot easier. For a time, otome games became a refuge in my world that was rapidly changing with all the cultural adjustments. During the time of Gamergate, these games provided an imaginary space where women seem to be at the center, and where men were not too mean to women, at least not in the way Gamergaters were to emerging feminist scholars such as I. In hindsight, despite some of these games' sexism, I felt addressed as a cisgender woman in contrast to a wider North American game culture that seemed to hate women.

I wrote my first paper on Cheritz for a graduate seminar, because the idea of a Korean all-female game company making games that target women using a category that was from a country (one that previously colonized them) fascinated me. This paper eventually got published in a volume on *Digital Romance* (Ganzon, 2018b), and things progressed from there. Outside my

scholarly work, I occasionally wrote about my playthroughs and critical reflections of otome games I played on my Tumblr blog. Some of my posts have also been circulated in the otome game community on Tumblr.

Fan studies devote a lot of critical attention to the aca-fan to describe the use of self-reflexivity in analyzing fandoms, their representative politics, and their power dynamics especially when scholars represent fans in their work (Evans and Stasi, 2014; Cristofari and Guitton, 2017). This is something that I am aware of during my interviews. With live interviews especially, I got the sense from my interviewees that I would give them a fair representation because they know I am also a fan of a number of otome game titles. With a few women of color in the study, there were discussions of accessibility and positions on piracy or free games, which will be discussed in later chapters, that occurred during those interviews because these interviewees know that as a woman of color from a developing country, I would understand their position. Because I posted the call on my Tumblr blog, which was then reblogged by larger otome game bloggers. There was that immediate signaling to the community that I am doing this research as an insider. Being afforded an insider position allowed me access and acceptance within the community. But at the same time, this position highlights subjectivity more than objectivity. But at the same time, I am still a researcher. Thus, I cannot completely occupy the insider position. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that researchers tend to occupy the space in between:

> Perhaps, as researchers we can only ever occupy the space between. We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions (p. 61).

In a lot of ways, this best describes my position as a researcher.

Feminist methods (Oakley, 1981, Coterill, 1992, Oakley, 2016) also point to the idea of reciprocity and friendship, especially in interviewing women. Moreover, these works point to how interviews and relationships in these interviews can become tools to highlight women's voices. Oakley (1981) argues:

> Interviewing women was, then, a strategy for documenting women's accounts of their own lives. What was important was not taken-for-granted sociological assumptions about the role of the interviewer but a new awareness of the interviewer as an instrument of promoting a sociology for women--that is, a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society (p. 48-49).

This is one particular idea that I also try to balance out via an intersectional lens because race, class, nationality, sexuality and other hierarchies also factor in alongside gender in these narratives and conversations (Reismann, 1987; Phoenix, 1994). With this said, let us now move to the results and analysis of this investigation that these methodologies yielded.

IV.   Chapter 3: The Fujoshi Trophy, Badass Female Heroines and Ridiculously Hot Men: Otome Games and Postfeminist Sensibilities

In the 2011 Anime Expo, members of Aksys games' marketing team came dressed up as anime versions of historical Japanese samurai Hajime Saito and Toshizo Hijikata. After announcing their localization of Fate/EXTRA, the team plays another trailer. Interspersed with images from the game, the trailer text read:

> A historical tale from Japan…

> Set at the finale of a grand era

> Filled with honor, courage and sacrifice…

> And ridiculously hot men?!

> Aw yeah.

That last two lines in particular triggered numerous laughs and cheers from the audience as the trailer cuts to a subtitled version of the opening music video for the game. The trailer in question is for *Hakuoki: the Demon of the Fleeting Blossom* (2012), which they were releasing the following year for the PSP.

Hakuoki was first released in 2008 for the PS2 in Japan. The year before this announcement, the anime adaptation was released, which helped create some interest among anime fans outside of Japan. While *Hakuoki* is not the first otome game translated to English[19],

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[19] The first otome game localized in English is *Yo-jim-bo* (2006) by Hirameki International for the PC. Little is known to what happened to this game or the company that localized it, but years later, fans and bloggers would replay this and talk about this as the very first title localized in English. Examining blogs and forum discussions around 2011-2012 prior to Hakuoki's release, one would find fans encouraging each other to support and purchase Hakuoki to show companies

there was a lot of speculation of how much this type of game would sell outside its country of origin, especially given that it is a game mostly marketed to women in Japan, and most people who know about *Hakuoki* via the anime are considered very niche audiences even in otaku communities. Moreover, since 2006 there had been no localizations from Japanese otome companies or their partner companies into English. While there would be independent makers outside Japan making games—games such as Sake Visual's *RE: Alistair* in 2010 or localizations of Korean online otome games such as Galaxy Games' *Star Project*, in between 2006 and 2012—and fan-made localizations such as the English patch for *Starry Sky in Spring* in 2010, there are be no official localizations from Japanese companies or their partner companies from the period of 2006 to *Hakuoki*'s release in 2012. Though the subject of otome games from 2006 to 2012 was considered a novelty, discussions on hot men in Japanese games were not. Many years prior to this announcement in 2011, games such as *Final Fantasy VII* also instigated conversations among its players on androgynous men, and these discussions also denote how certain masculine ideals help create perceptions of these games' "Japaneseness" among player communities (Glasspool 2016). Using "ridiculously hot men" as a punchline plays into these ideas.

Fast forward four years later in the fall of 2015, Aksys Games released its third otome game title, *Code: Realize –The Guardian of Rebirth* (2015) for the PS Vita. Around this time, Aksys received much love for both *Hakuoki* and *Sweet Fuse* (Spencer, 2012)—their second otome game released in 2013 for PSP. Despite the successes of those two prior releases, *Code: Realize* was considered a gamble because unlike those two previous titles, *Code: Realize* did not

that there is a market for otome games outside Japan, and so Hakuoki won't "fail" like Yo-jim-bo did.

have a North American anime that preceded it or associations with other game titles, such as

Sweet Fuse[20]. Nonetheless, *Code: Realize*'s localization was well received, even outselling the

Japanese release within the year (VGChartz, 2015). Fans praised the game for its female player

character, who they considered a breath of fresh air to play as, considering that many otome

game player characters are usually passive and emotionless, and usually without backstories of

their own (Lada, 2015; Yssamashii, 2015).

This chapter situates some of the first otome game bestsellers in English—*Hakuoki* and

Code Realize--in various discourses and cultural contexts. Firstly, I look at the history of otome

games in Japan, situating changes in the category and the takeover as a postfeminist disciplining

of women within consumer cultures. Secondly, I look at *Hakuoki* and *Code Realize* more closely,

looking at how the gendered discourses within each game channel female agency towards the

performance of emotional labor. Thirdly, I look at Hakuoki's localization as a transcreated text

that communicates assumptions about its player, pointing out how certain creative decisions in

the localization indicate how it repositions fujoshi identity and desire for men as something that

is productive, and heterosexual androgynous masculinity as markers of Japaneseness. While this

rechanneling of desire looks a lot less restrictive in comparison to the Japanese discourse on

otome games and masks the more heteronormative aspects of the game, it nonetheless still

channels desire towards hegemonic masculinity. Fourthly, in my analysis of *Code: Realize*, I

examine fan reviews and fan reactions to the game and its heroine. These discussions indicate

that fans of the game can be critical of choices and representation presented to them. While many

otome game players do not always expect their heroines to be badass, seeing options that they

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[20] *Sweet Fuse* features Keiji Inafune as a game character and it contains many references to his
games.

would pick for themselves is always, as is described in another study (Shaw, 2015), "nice when it happens." These two games indicate how otome games and postfeminism can travel and adapt to a number of discourses.

4.1 Key Concept: Postfeminism

A continuously growing body of literature in feminist media studies and literature is concerned with postfeminism—a cultural sensibility made up of several interrelated ideas. Rosamond Gill (2007) enumerates the following key ideas within postfeminism:

> "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (p. 149).

Within postfeminism, Angela McRobbie (2004) describes a "double entanglement" of neoliberal values to discourses of gender and sexuality. In this way, the celebration of womens' choice and freedom is tied to individual lifestyle choices and consumer culture, thereby removing the link between agency to feminist political action. Gill (2007) further elaborates on that this renegotiation of agency and choice points to a shift in mass culture towards depicting women as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects. In addressing women as subjects, postfeminism interpellates women to make themselves as desirable sexual subjects for men and the male gaze, and empowerment often articulated via consumer culture and via choosing traditional gender roles.

While the literature on postfeminism primarily concern texts and discourses from the Western world, Dosekun (2015) extends the analysis of postfeminism towards its manifestations

in the non-Western world. Postfeminism, she argues, is "readily transnationalized […] because it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and a set of material practices" (p. 961). Though she acknowledges that postfeminist sensibility emerged in the West as a reaction to second wave feminism, she further articulates how "because post-feminism is a commodification and hollowing out of this feminist history, […] that under conditions of globalization, post-feminism is sold and consumed transnationally without this history" (p. 968). Furthermore, she explains her usage of the term "transnational" since it

> "refers to a critical mode of thinking across borders and thus thinking across multiple intersections, forms, and sites of difference at once. To think transnationally is to think of what Grewal and Kaplan (1994) call 'scattered hegemonies': the lines and clusters of power that do not respect local, national, or regional borders but traverse them and thereby come to constitute other kinds of boundaries and belongings. Therefore, to think transnationally about post-feminism is to consider how, as an entanglement of meanings, representations, sensibilities, practices, and commodities, post-feminism may discursively and materially cross borders, including those within our feminist scholarly imaginaries" (p. 965).

Yet by pointing out how postfeminism transcends those borders above, I argue for the use of the term "transcultural" as a much more fitting description, especially since postfeminism, defined this way, is not always nation-centered, even though at times it could be.

Recent game studies literature borrows from postfeminist criticism, particularly in the critique of gendered discourses in games and game culture. John Vanderhoef (2013) links the feminization of casual games to discourses in popular games media and points out how post-feminist culture dismisses sexist comments about casual games simply as tongue-in-cheek

remarks while simultaneously reinforcing these gendered notions. Sarah Stang (2017), borrowing

from Hannah Hamad's critique on postfeminist fatherhood, extends this analysis to constructions

of fatherhood in her analysis of father-daughter relationships in a number of AAA games.

Harvey and Fisher (2014) call attention to how postfeminist discourse, tied with neoliberalism,

constrain women's participation within game industries.

For this chapter, I take account of these varying definitions and ways of reading

postfeminist media and use these to situate the histories and spaces in which otome games

emerge and thrive. These I will explain further in the next few sections. In the case of some of

the first otome games in English, transcreation becomes a postfeminist way of masking some of

the sexist aspects of these games to focus on redirecting these, often through the use of humor,

towards desiring heteronormative masculinity, and towards characteristics that some female

characters may have that may be seen as "badass." The transcreation of otome games shows how

postfeminist media cultures seek to accommodate female gameplayers into game cultures that

are still male-dominated, by giving women their own niche segment but also disciplining

discourses of femininity within these spaces, in ways that still benefit the markets that otome

games thrive in. However, before I look into my examples—*Hakuoki* and *Code Realize*—it is

necessary to review the emergence of otome games in Japan to demonstrate how postfeminist

sensibilities can emerge outside of the West and travel back.

4.2 From Joseimuke to Otome: Towards Constructing a History of Otome Games
Previous scholarship traces otome game history to womens' fanzine communities, the

gray market of second-hand shops and how industries seek to police these communities and

spaces. Edmond Ernest dit Alban (2020)'s study on the development of fan sanctuaries in

Ikebukuro and Otome Road shed light on this. Ikebukuro is a commercial district in Tokyo with

a thriving female-focused otaku culture in Otome Road, one of its thoroughfares with a number of bookstores and recycling shops that function as sites of exchange—both of official and fan created goods. Their work points to the existence of a fanzine culture in the 1980s where bookstores functioned as intermediaries between industrial and fan practices, and housed a gray economy that sold mostly recycled character goods and supplies to make fanzines. Around the 1990s, they point to how the anime media mix industries researched fans and fan practice to utilize the market of female fans. It was around this time that the first otome games were released. As other scholars would point out later, these first few games thrived because of this female-focused fan culture (Kim, 2008; Lee, 2018).

The release of Ruby Party's *Angelique* in 1994, for the Super Famicom marks the beginning of josei muke gemu or womens' games in Japan (Kim, 2009). Ruby Party was an all-female team at Koei, led by Keiko Erikawa. Similar to *Nobunaga's Ambition*, a game that some of Ruby Party's team members worked on, *Angelique* is partly a turn-based strategy game wherein one plays a female protagonist who is asked to participate in a contest that will determine the next queen of its fantasy universe. In this game, the player character can become queen by managing the continent assigned to her, getting enough votes from the world's guardians, and building enough manors to bridge the continents within the game. However, unlike *Nobunaga's Ambition*, *Angelique*'s aesthetics borrow heavily from shoujo or girls manga[21], and building relationships with other characters becomes key in building one's kingdom. The team added a dating simulation to cater to female audiences, and romance is featured in the game as a mechanic to gain certain stats in the game (Lee 2018). In some ways,

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[21] For instance, character designer Kairi Yura was instructed to borrow art from a 70's shoujo manga called *Candy Candy*. See Lee (2018).

by adapting these aesthetics and mechanics, *Angelique* indirectly critiques games and the game culture of its time, which were mostly seen as hypermasculine and male-dominated. Though initially *Angelique* notably did not sell much, it gained a steady fan following (Kim 2008). Moreover, while the game itself is not without its problems[22], the release of *Angelique* and the formation of Ruby Party, notably helped get a generation of girls into gaming, and interested in design. In an interview, Erikawa states that from the beginning, they had plans to incorporate the game *Angelique* in the anime media mix (Lee, 2018), but since the Super Famicom did not support voice acting, drama CDs and other tie-ins helped fill the gap.

There is very little history of otome games, and subsequent scholarly analysis of this history. One such attempt is Hyeshin Kim's (2008) "Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction." What's noticeable here is that Kim does not use the term otome games but women's games or josei muke, which is an early term for the category. Kim defines womens games as a categorical term instead of a genre definition—one made by industry to simply classify these games and their market rather than a definition of key gameplay characteristics. Nonetheless, using *Angelique* (1994) and *Harukanaru Tokino Nakade 3* (2004), Kim enumerates key characteristics of these games: the focus on romance, easy controls and the link to various media, particularly shoujo manga. However, given that this early work mostly describes earlier games, some things regarding this characterization should be clarified. Firstly, in describing "easy controls" Kim does not make any connection to casual games or casual gameplay. *Angelique* is, after all, a game that has multiple guides on different aspects of the game—romance, stat-raising, etc. Instead, easy controls, in this context, are controls that are

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[22] For instance, Hyeshin Kim (2008) points out how the game's depiction of gender is noticeably essentialist and heteronormative.

meant to cater to a demographic in Japan—women and girls in this case—who were thought of to be unfamiliar with games and gaming in general. Secondly, while the connections to shoujo manga is mentioned, how the game category evolved through the anime media mix is not sufficiently explored.

Edmond Ernest dit Alban's (2020) study sheds more light into this. They describe how the 2000s marked the beginning of the time when the anime media mix industry started limiting and controlling amateur female fan practices. Their accounts point to how industry took over fan spaces in Ikebukuro—institutionalizing gray markets and fans' recycling of character goods, and restrict certain forms of fan production, such as the distribution of fan-created erotic or slash fiction in these spaces. They argue that around this time, the convergence of industrial and amateur fan practices shaped the evolution of the fan spaces of Ikebukuro and subsequent anime media mix models that eventually lead to the growth of collaboration cafes in these spaces— cafes where fans could purchase character-inspired food that come with collectible character merchandize—that developed around the 2010s.

What stands out to me in these accounts (dit Alban, 2020; Lee, 2018) is that it is around the 2000s that the word "otome" or the word for maiden, started to be used more widely to refer to what was previously known as women's games. While it is difficult to know for sure whether the use of the term "otome" was first used by industry or the game's fans, the name change also marks the disciplining of the category. As player and fan communities around womens' games grew in the late 1990s and the 2000s, a number of other companies, such as Konami, Brocolli and Idea Factory's Otomate, also started producing these types of games. A number of key

scenario writers and artists around this time in these companies are men[23]. A game that possibly represents this period is Konami's *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* released for the PS2, which spawned a number of sequels. Unlike *Angelique* where the focus on the game is becoming queen while romancing characters, the focus of the *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* series is stat-raising to meet the standards of the datable characters and for the player to get a happy ending wherein she ends up with a boy after her school graduation. In this way, the series reproduces the male gaze[24] on the game category. In comparison to early womens' games which had various gameplay mechanics such as stat-raising or turn-based strategy or roleplaying games, a majority of the games produced by these companies are primarily visual novels, and character merchandise around these games tended to gear towards the male characters that player characters can romance in these games. The shift of the term from womens' games to maiden games indicates a disciplining of the game category, especially with the increased focus on maidenhood and romance. The incorporation of otome games in the anime media mix reveal that women are valued for their money. But at the same time, womens' contribution to the growth of otome games via amateur fan practices are being limited and devalued.

Otomate, a subsidiary of Idea Factory, is one company that produces much of the otome games described above. In an interview in the *Dengeki Girl's Style* magazine, Kuwana Shingo talked about how the company changed from creating otome games of well-known media mix

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[23] For example, the main scenario writer and designer of *Tokimeki Memorial Girl*'s side Uchida Akari, and Nishimura Yuu, who writes a number of Otomate's scenarios, including the main scenario for *Code: Realize*, in addition to manual that he wrote on how to write stories for otome games. See Nishimura (2014). Another interesting resource to look at to see this trend is to look at the names of game makers of otome games in vndb.com, and if one looks up games from the early 2000s to the present, one could see that the majority of the designers of otome games in Japan are men.

[24] See Richards (2015) critique of the game.

properties, such as *Fushigi Yuugi*, to developing their own titles, such as *Hakuoki* (Dengeki Girl's Style 2017). Ultimately, Otomate's titles would be some of the first games to break into the English language visual novel game market years later. In the next section, I look at how narrative choices in two of Otomate's bestselling titles reproduce postfeminist sensibilities, particularly the reproduction of emotional labor.

4.3 Emotional Labor and Postfeminist Narrative Choices

    Hakuoki (2008) is a visual novel released on Playstation 2 in Japan, and has received ports to other systems, such as PSP, Nintendo DS, Nintendo 3DS, and Playstation 3. In 2015, a two-part version of the game was released on the PS Vita, with additional character routes and downloadable content. Set during the Bakamatsu[25], the game follows the story of Chizuru Yukimura, a girl who dresses up as a boy to go to Kyoto and find her father who has gone missing. Once in Kyoto, she's attacked by a group of murderous vampire-like men, only to be saved and taken into custody by the Shinsengumi[26]. After finding out that she's the daughter of a man who has developed a serum called the Water of Life that turns people who drink it into mad bloodthirsty vampire-like[27] berjerkers called the Rasetsu, they enlist her aid to find her father. Things get even more complicated when Chizuru discovers that she's an oni or demon, and that there is a group of demons hunting her, led by Chikage Kazama, a demon lord who wants her as his bride. As a game about dating members of the Shinsengumi, such as Shinsengumi captains

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[25] The period in Japanese history that marks the end of the Edo period and the Tokugawa shogunate

[26] Kyoto's elite police force, most of which died fighting in the Boshin War.

[27] In some routes in the game, it is explained that the Water of Life was developed from the blood of "Western Oni" and in Keisuke Sanan's route, which is part of the expanded edition, vampires are named to be the original rasetsu. In a lot of ways, one could surmise that the rasetsu plot in the game borrows heavily from vampire fiction, such as *Twilight* and the shoujo manga *Vampire Knight*.

Toshizo Hijikata[28] and Souji Okita, as well as other historical characters of the Bakamatsu such as Ryouma Sakamoto and Iba Hachirou[29], the narrative choices in the game mostly center around getting a male character's attention on the first half of the game in order to get locked into a character route. If one does not get locked into a route with a character on the first half, one gets the normal ending, wherein one ends up with Chikage Kazama in the original version of the game, and wherein one gets sent away by the Shinsengumi on the two-part edition in order to protect her from getting killed in the war[30].

Once locked on a route, choices on the second half of the game revolves around getting as much affection as possible from that character, usually by picking choices that demonstrate empathy for the character and keeping that character sane by making the choice to offer the player character's blood. The reason for this is that halfway through the game, the character who Chizuru dates mostly[31] ends up becoming a rasetsu (vampire) for varying reasons—the reasons usually revolve around protecting Chizuru[32] or prolonging their existence in the game's narrative longer than the actual historical figures[33] who may have died early in the Boshin War[34] or even

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[28] Hijikata's route is mostly deemed as the "canon" route, as his storyline reveals him to be the titular *Hakuoki* or Demon of the Fleeting Blossom.

[29] The list of datable characters in the original game are: Toshizo Hijikata, Hajime Saito, Souji Okita, Toudou Heisuke, Sanosuke Harada and Chikage Kazama. In the two part version of the game, the list is expanded to include Ryouma Sakamoto, Iba Hachirou, Kazue Souma, Keisuke Sanan, Susumu Yamazaki and Nagakura Shinpachi.

[30] Changes were made in the two-part edition since Chikage Kazama's route was changed to become a character route, so this time one has to make choices to end up with this character, just like the rest of the other datable characters.

[31] Everyone save for Sanosuke Harada practically become rasetsu.

[32] As in the case of Hijikata and Saito's routes.

[33] As in the case of Toudou Heisuke, Souji Okita, Keisuke Sanan and Ryouma Sakamoto. For example, the historical Toudou Heisuke died during the Aburakoji Affair in 1867, and Souji

before that. In a number of the game's storylines, the decision of these characters to become

rasetsu is usually depicted as a heroic act, something akin to a Faustian imperative, especially

when they strive to become more than what they are—men from non-samurai classes rising to

become true samurai by upholding the bushido[35] and defending the doomed shogunate.

However, the consequence for this choice to become rasetsu is a slow descent to madness,

especially as the rasetsu tend to thirst for blood from time to time. For this reason, the correct

choice as imposed by the game to get the good endings for these characters always involves

Chizuru offering her blood to these men. The game also gives Chizuru the option to make the

men endure their bloodlust or give them medicine to suppress it, but continuously choosing both

options always lead to bad endings. Interestingly, these moments wherein Chizuru gives her

blood are one of those rare moments wherein Chizuru is shown to be very intimate with these

men (Fig 4-1). While Chizuru is a oni, one almost never sees her in her oni form. The only

instance wherein one sees her in this form is one moment in Souji Okita's route, wherein she

chooses to share his blood with him (Fig. 4-2). As otome game heroines are rarely depicted

having sex with their love interests[36], moments such as these become the substitute for

intercourse. In this way, monstrosity in the game also implies repressed sexual urges.

Okita dies sometime in the middle of the war because of tuberculosis. The rasetsu plot keeps
them longer in the game's narrative, which roughly ends around 1869 after the fall of the Ezo
Republic.

[34] The Japanese civil war sometime around 1868-1869.

[35] A term describing samurai ideals and codes of honor.

[36] The amount Chizuru gets to have sex varies in both versions of the game. In the original
version, the only time she has sex is in Harada's route. In the two-part version of the game, in
addition to Harada's route, Chizuru also sleeps with Ryouma Sakamoto and Kazue Souma in
their character routes.

Figure 4-1 Sample images of Chizuru giving her blood	**Figure 4-2** Chizuru sharing her blood with Okita

As a player character, despite the dressing up as a man and carrying a short sword, Chizuru has very little agency in the narrative, and she mostly acts as a spectator to the historical events happening around her. None of the game's narrative choices allow her to meddle with history. Despite being a demon and having similar powers[37] - such as the ability to heal quickly - to other powerful demons such as Kazama, she only fights back a number of times, but this is only so her love interest can gain advantage over his opponent. Her value as a mother-figure and life-giver, to all the men in the narrative, is repeated a number of times in the game's narrative. In most of the routes, the narrative places her in dangerous situations so all the men are obligated to save her. In Souji Okita's route, the one route where she drinks the Water of Life (she never makes this choice but her twin brother forces this on her) and gains rasetsu powers, she acquiesces to Okita's request to stand back and let him fight for her, even if she clearly is able to hold her ground at this point. Most storylines and branching narrative arcs wherein she displays

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[37] This is slightly amended in the two-part edition, where the game adds an explanation why Chizuru does not fight: according to the game's lore, male demons always are more powerful than their female counterparts.

the most agency[38] are stories outside the historical narrative. Nonetheless, it is Chizuru's

narrative positioning that is the most interesting in the game. Her purpose mostly revolves

around collecting intimate moments with these men who are about to die. As the narrator,

players see history through Chizuru's eyes, and the implication in this narrative positioning is

that Chizuru outlives these men to tell their story. In this way, it also positions the presumed

female player as a collector of historical narratives. It is in this positioning that some find

potential in the game. Hasegawa (2012) argues that despite the fact that the historical narrative in

the game is nationalistic and masculine, players can "embrace romance as a new way to interact

with history, to imagine their space in the past, as well as to produce alternative narratives" (p.

136). This is especially true with a number of players in Japan, as the game is often mentioned as

one that helped trigger a wave of rekijo tourism (Suguwa-Shimada, 2015). While there is no

denying that players can definitely define their own agency even within a very sexist and

heteronormative game (Hasegawa, 2012; Tosca, 2021), the issue here is that choices in the game

encourage postfeminist self-objectification, and suggest that women's value is measured by the

men around them. It is in this way that the choices are characteristically postfeminist. But player

characters need not be doormats to communicate postfeminist sensibilities.

In comparison to Chizuru in *Hakuoki*, *Code: Realize*'s female protagonist Cardia

Beckford[39] is considered a much more independent character. Released in 2014, *Code: Realize* is

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[38] For example, in Kazama's route, Chizuru can choose to take responsibility for her father's actions and hunt her father down, thus claiming her position as the head of her oni clan, but this is a storyline that exists outside the historical narrative that's usually front and center in this game. Chizuru in Ryouma Sakamoto's route is given a similar choice. But even in those two routes, she almost always needs to partner with these men in hunting her father down.

[39] Similar to Chizuru, her name can be changed, but many players tend to keep it because keeping it means other voiced characters get to say her name out loud.

set in a steampunk alternative version of Victorian Britain. Cardia lives isolated in a mansion in Wales with no memory, and specific instructions from a mysterious absent father to not fall in love with anyone because she is a monster. Because of a mysterious gem planted on her chest, everything she touches literally melts. While she initially resigned herself to her fate, one day Arsene Lupin comes to steal her away and convinces her to work with him to find her father. After a few more literary and historical characters join their team for various reasons--Impey Barbicane, Victor Frankenstein, Saint Germain and Van Helsing[40]—they set out on a quest to find the truth of her origins. Unlike Chizuru, the game narrative gives Cardia more interiority as a narrator and player character. Although she does start out as a passive character, Cardia noticeably grows throughout the narrative, picking up various skills from the men around her and learning to love herself despite the fact that she is a monster. In several instances in the game, narrative choices give the option for Cardia to flee, fight back or rescue other characters in the game, which is considered very rare in an otome game. What's even more noticeable are the powerful women in a number of narrative arcs: for example, Guinevere from the Arthurian legends is transformed here as an immortal knight, Queen Victoria is mostly depicted here as a Machiavellian ruler and it is heavily implied that Omnibus, a mysterious old woman heading a secret society of immortal assassins, is in fact the Biblical Eve, who becomes cursed with infinite knowledge and with the responsibility to police events of human history and keep mankind from destroying itself. Most of these women function as minor villains in the game, most of them

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[40] Also Sherlock Holmes if one includes the fandisk. Dracula also becomes a member of the team but he mostly functions as a side-character, particularly in Van Helsing's route.

finding redemption by the end of each individual character narrative, as they learn the value of love themselves[41].

However, despite the presence of these powerful women in the narrative, and the game's mostly self-rescuing protagonist, the fact remains that much of the way the game is structured still centers around the game's male characters. Like *Hakuoki*, romance still diverts the plot and structures gameplay, so Cardia finds her way in the world and makes decisions depending on which character is being romanced. The romance-able male characters all have issues and have experienced tragedy in ways that desensitized a number of them to the world. Essentially, this presents the player character with the task of performing emotional labor to stir them away from destructive tendencies or encourage them to use their abilities for good. For example, in Van Helsing's route, the correct choices lean towards preventing Van Helsing from killing a mind-controlled Dracula, and in Impey Barbicane's route, the right choices are those that encourage him to use science for discovery not destruction or the acquisition of power. While the narrative does show Cardia as one who is capable to rescue herself and others, the visuals never show this. Instead, most of the CG images show either Cardia comforting others (Fig. 4-3) or being rescued (Fig. 4-4).

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[41] See my criticism of this in Ganzon (2018a). In my extended critique, I point out how one thing these female villains have in common is that they are victims of abuse (Victoria victimized by her father) and tragic love (Guinevere and Omnibus), and how the game presents love as a catch-all solution to oppression and social problems presented in the game. Moreover, *Code: Realize*, as well as *Hakuoki*, is filled with terrible fathers—the main villain is Cardia's father--and father figures (ie. Aliester/Prof. Moriarty who functions as a father figure to Van Helsing and is the main villain in the Van Helsing route), the game pins the blame on individual fathers instead of pointing out how patriarchal oppression is systemic.

| **Figure 4-3** Images of Cardia comforting Saint Germain and Frankenstein | **Figure 4-4** Images of Cardia being rescued |

Essentially, almost all of the correct choices to get good endings in the game demonstrate the performance of emotional labor. Moreover, the existence of locked storylines in otome games tend to structure the order by which players go through these narratives and narrative choices. In the case of *Code: Realize*, Lupin's route, which is considered the true route and the one that reveals Cardia's origins, is locked. Players have to play all the other character stories first in order to unlock it. In these routes, the mystery of Cardia's identity takes a backseat in favor of resolving issues related to these men. This structure reveals an underlying logic that for women to understand themselves and fulfill their own desires, they must prioritize the needs of the men around them first.

Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as that act of managing feelings and certain expressions, pointing out how differences in social situation, gender or race can vary the degrees of which individuals are socialized into performing emotional labor. While Hochschild specifically pointes out that her definition excludes those outside a work context, others have expanded this to include invisible labor and emotion work that women are expected to perform outside workspaces (Chess, 2017; Hartley, 2018). The performance of emotional labor in games is of course nothing new. Shira Chess (2017), in her study of time-management games,

points out how games designed for women often highlight expectations for women to perform emotional labor. A number of otome games such as *Hakuoki* and *Code: Realize* are no exception to this, and romance in these games becomes the reason for the performance of emotional labor.

Notably, both *Hakuoki* and *Code: Realize* also present alternative histories. These constructions of alterative narratives, while seemingly revisionist, demonstrate what Spiegel (2013) describes as a nostalgia for a prefeminist past as a way of imagining a future without feminism. All these women need is love after all. By peppering the world with powerful women and the ability to make choices, they erase histories of oppression, and give a vision of a world wherein feminism is not needed. In these gameworlds, choice constructs postfeminist desire because the choices that are always made available are the choices that postfeminist women would make. In this way, the discourse of love as a choice constructs ideal otome girlhoods. Games such as *Hakuoki* and *Code: Realize* indicate how postfeminist sensibilities can emerge in different contexts, without ever needing to acknowledge postfeminism's history and origins. Instead, postfeminism constructs its own heritage, validating its existence in these games and texts made for women, as a way of erasing advancements that women made for themselves in pursuit of equality.

4.4 The Fujoshi Trophy: Transcreating Otome Games for the West
Otome games, such as *Hakuoki* and *Code: Realize*, contain postfeminist sensibilities unique to the cultural contexts of their places of origin. The challenges of localizing *Hakuoki* for the West, as well as for other English-language players, include players' lack of knowledge on Japanese history and the games' historical characters, and the absence of the anime media mix's infrastructure to allow dedicated spaces for media consumption around otome games. Nonetheless, in 2010, Aksys Games released a two-part survey on otome games. The questions

on the first survey mostly dealt with questions that dealt with people's knowledge about otome games, and interest in dating simulators, while the second set of questions dealt with consumption practices around potential otome game releases (Ishaan 2010). Although the results of the surveys were not published, at *Anime Expo 2011* Aksys announced their release of *Hakuoki* for the PSP. Prior to announcing *Hakuoki*, the publisher and localization company released titles from the *Guilty Gear* and *BlazBlue* franchises, and a release of *999* for Nintendo DS, furthering its reputation among non-Japanese game players for picking up very niche Japanese game titles that many other companies would not localize.

Literature on game localization introduces the concept of transcreation. Carmen Mangiron and Minako O'Hagan (2006) point out that the main goal of localization is "to preserve the gameplay experience for the target players, keeping the 'look and feel' of the original" and to make sure the target players feel as if the game was developed for their own language. For this reason, they point out that fidelity for translators means being loyal to the gameplay experience more than just the language in the game text. Thus, they argue, "in game localisation, transcreation, rather than just translation, takes place."

In the case of *Aksys Games*, in deciding to localize *Hakuoki*, they were not merely commercially localizing one title, but rather the otome game category and types of experiences and forms of consumption that go along with otome games. For this reason, this act of bringing *Hakuoki* outside of Japan also means defining what otome games are outside its country of origin. Apart from the absence of the anime media mix providing the context of narrative consumption, challenges also include bringing a female-coded category of games to geek

cultures and game cultures that is not only male-dominated but also very hostile to women. 2011 was, after all, also the year of the Dickwolves controversy[42] (Salter and Blodgett 2011).

During the announcement of the game and after playing the trailer, the team described *Hakuoki* as an otome game, explaining that otome games are games where one plays a female protagonist dating hot men. Of course, the discussion of hot men in relation to Japanese games is nothing new. Lucy Glasspool (2016), in her analysis of discourses of masculinity in the *Final Fantasy* games and its fandoms, points out how many localized Japanese games tend to provide ample "fragrance" for fans to create images of "Japaneseness" that are linked with gender. Borrowing from Judith Butler, she argues how the idea of "Japaneseness" is performative, and how often fan imaginings of "Japaneseness" can act as promotional tools. She indicates that often "bottom-up" transformations of some Japanese games by fans tend to create Orientalist associations with androgynous masculinity and same sex desire, pointing out how often these associations tend to promote Western masculinity and heteronormativity. As seen in the trailer described in the introduction, the game's "hot men" also become markers of its "Japaneseness."[43] More importantly, by emphasizing its promotional material featuring hot men[44], Aksys touches on particular ideas of masculinity in relation to its games' characters, but also turns the discussion more towards the celebration of non-Western masculinity. While much of Aksys' discussion of otome games and hot men point out that these games were made for female audiences, they also point out that men could play these games as well. No doubt this step is intended to make otome games more accessible compared to its original intended audience.

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[42] An incident involving the Penny Arcade online comic and its perpetuation of rape culture.

[43] Interestingly, the trailer that they showed before Hakuoki was Fate/Extra. While Hakuoki has so much focus on "hot men," there was no mention of "hot women" in the case of Fate/Extra.

[44] See also their two-part interview with Siliconera, Spencer (2011).

Nonetheless, it is still important to examine this shift in the value (Skegg, 2014) of hot men, as the study of shifting values may indicate particular structures of feeling associated with these ideas and images.

The success of Aksys' localization of Hakuoki for the PSP made way for multiple ports, including ones for the Nintendo 3DS, mobile and the PS3. Until the release of Idea Factory International's two-part version, the PS3 version was considered as the definitive edition, as it had the most content, including extra and downloadable content. The PS3 version is also the first of the games that featured trophies, and liberties were taken with the translation of these trophies. (Table 1). The translations include a number of intertextual references to North American

Figure 4-5 Tropies and Aksys' Localization

Japanese Trophy	Literal Translation	Aksys' translation	Description
プラチナトロフィー	Platinum Trophy	Fujoshi	Got all the trophies. Well done! You're a beautiful person with your whole life ahead of you.
鮮烈な記憶	Vivid Memory	Bark Street Boys	Unlocked all movies
藤堂との思いで	Your Memories with Toudou	Toudou Recall	Unlocked all Toudou images
斎藤との思いで	Your Memories with Saito	Out of Saito	Unlocked all Saito images
原田と・・・	Harada…	Ronin in the Streets, Samurai in the Sheets	Finished Harada's route

popular culture references, puns and phrases. The use of these intertextual references reveal much about their target audience, mostly as female fans who grow up with North American

popular culture. Similarly, Idea Factory International's 2-part version also uses similar

intertextual references (Figure 4-6). In some of these examples, humor is used to mask some of

the game's sexist elements. Even in some examples, such as the "Does This Mean I Can Go

Outside Now...?" trophy in the Idea Factory version which acknowledges Chizuru's Stockholm

syndrome, humor is used to both acknowledge sexism and as a way of deflecting criticism.

Figure 4-6 Tropies and Idea Factory International's Localization

Japanese Trophy	Literal Translation	IFI translation	Description
風ノ章を終えて	After the wind…	Does This Mean I Can Go Outside Now...?	Obtained all trophies.
新選組の秘密を知る	Know the Shinsengumi's Secret	Still a Better Love Story than…	Cleared Chapter 3
鬼の副長の進む道	Ogre Deputy Chief's Path	Just a Small Town Boy…	Hijikata route started
雪村の娘として	As a daughter of Yukimura	Kazablanca	Kazama route cleared
記憶の全てがここに	Here are all the memories	George Lucas Would be Proud	CG completed

Out of all the trophies listed, it is Aksys' use of the term "fujoshi" for the platinum

achievement that is the most interesting. "Fujoshi"[45] is a word that literally translate as "rotten

girl" and is used to refer to female otaku in Japan, who are fans of the yaoi or boy's love

category. Studies about fujoshi reveal this to be a self-deprecating yet celebratory term, that later

on got expanded to broadly refer to female fans of anime and manga (Suzuki, 2013; Okabe and

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[45] The male equivalent of the term is "Fudanshi"

Ishida, 2012; Galbraith, 2015). In its original context, previous scholarship points to how the term "fujoshi" harkens to a form of non-normative sexual desire, even more so given that the women referred to are usually not seen as productive members of society, given their relationship to mass media, and their desire for boys' love (Galbraith, 2015). In a lot of cases in its usage in Japanese anime and manga, the term "otome" and "otaku" or "fujoshi" are not synonymous[46]. However, Aksys' translation does make some sense especially if one takes into consideration how one could get the fujoshi trophy in the PS3 version of the game. In order to collect the Fujoshi trophy, one has to finish all the storylines in the game, collect all the lore and collect all the images of Chizuru's love interests. In a lot of ways, to get the Fujoshi trophy, one has to collect a lot of images of hot men, and for the game's English translators, this may be how they perceive how one becomes a fujoshi. By making this into an achievement, the game makes a term originally deemed as unproductive into one that is productive. The act of collection and aestheticization of idealized male bodies underscores masculinity as a form of bodily property that helps create a particular notion of femininity that corresponds to it. By focusing on the act of collection around hot strong heterosexual Japanese historical characters, the transcreated game system enables what Evans and Riley (2017) describe as a "visual economy that turns desire toward hegemonic masculinity" (p. 11). Moreover, the Fujoshi trophy indicates an attempt to popularize and commodify identities seen as other. Rosi Braidotti (2007) points out a particular trend of popularizing queerness in consumerist neo-liberal youth cultures, maintaining that such

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[46] Take for example in the anime *Watashi ga Motete Dōsunda* (Kiss Him, Not Me!) a hilarious scene depicts its protagonist's personality as scale as one that slides from otome to otaku quickly when she gets lured into buying merchandise from her favorite BL anime. Since the protagonist is a fujoshi, she also laments that when she suddenly attracts a lot of boys in her school that her life is suddenly turned into an otome game.

frameworks may encourage exploring otherness, but ones that focus on identities are marketable.

She argues:

> "The other complex feature of these new master-narratives is the ability to take
> 'differences' into a spin, making them proliferate with an aim of ensuring maximum
> profit. Advanced capitalism is a difference engine – a multiplier of de-territorialised
> differences, which are packaged and marketed under the labels of 'new, hybrid and
> multiple or multicultural identities'. It is important to explore how this logic triggers a
> vampiric consumption of 'others', in contemporary social and cultural practice. From
> fusion-cooking to 'world music', the consumption of 'differences' is a dominant cultural
> practice" (p. 2).

While games can provide liminal spaces for the exploration of identity, what the transcreated
game system does is channel these in ways that are most beneficial to capitalism. The
transcreated game system thus underlies the transformation of selves in line with postfeminist
sensibilities. In this way, game localization makes one text produced in one particular
postfeminist context adaptable to another. Additionally, game localization can also be used to
highlight aspects of one particular character, which fans can utilize to steer conversations about
gender.

4.5 "Miss Cardia…so badass!": Cardia and the Praise for Badass Heroines
　　In comparison to Hakuoki's localization, *Code: Realize*'s translation, on the surface,
seems to need less creativity, with many parts of the translation, such as dialogues and
PlayStation trophies, notably sticking fairly close to the original text[47]. Since the game borrows

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[47] For example, *Code: Realize*'s platinum trophy is translated as C:R Master, very close to the
Japanese original which roughly translates as "Code: Realize Mastered."

characters from European literature and history, it is somewhat expected that these characters would need little in the way of explanation for North American and European audiences[48]. However, one scene in the game at least does indicate some creativity, especially in describing the game's heroine.

One early scenario in the game finds Cardia and her newfound friends Arsene Lupin, Impey Barbicane, and Victor Frankenstein, being chased by Van Helsing. Van Helsing is on the hunt for a particular monster, who unbeknownst to him is actually Cardia. Lupin decides to distract the famed monster hunter, while other characters attempt to hide. At this point, the game presents a narrative choice: "Come Out" or "Keep Hiding." If the player decides to choose "Come Out," Cardia reveals herself to Van Helsing to save Lupin. Plotwise, there is not a lot of difference if one chooses the latter choice, as Van Helsing does eventually discover the group in hiding, leading to the same confrontation whatever the player chooses. However, if one picks the option for Cardia to reveal herself, Impey Barbicane would interject in the English translation, "Miss Cardia…so badass!" If one listens to the Japanese audio though, one could hear, "Cardia-chan…kakke!" "Kakke" is Japanese slag for "cool" that is sometimes used as an interjection. The choice to translate this as "badass" indicates an intention to highlight certain elements of the character and her choices. If the player makes the right choices, Cardia can be recognized as badass. This choice is significant given how many English language otome game players tend to be critical of more passive otome game heroines over the years.

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[48] Some players, especially those who read Japanese and listen to the Japanese audio, noticed minor changes in character names and character address. For example, Victor Frankenstein's character is often addressed as "Fran-chan" but this is changed to "Victor" in the translation. But even a those who made these observations tend to indicate that these are minor changes that are not too distracting for them.

Because many fans consider Cardia to be a more proactive character compared to many other otome game heroines, fan reviews and fan discussions mostly contain high praise for the game and its heroine. For example, yssamashii from the otome game site OtomeJikan writes:

> The bachelors aside, the heroine Cardia (name can be changed, but it is suggested to keep it in default because the other characters will call her by her name if left as is), is definitely one of the best characters in the game. She's another excellent example to show Western otome game fans that not every otome game heroine lacks personality or whatnot. At first, Cardia is a passive and emotionless doll, but as the story progresses, her character develops into a very likeable girl who can stand by herself. To describe her best, she's BADASS. She can pick locks, handle any machine, and knock enemies off. Otome game heroines are all damsels in distress? Let Cardia's awesomeness answer that (2015).

Alongside that text, the reviewer also screen-captured the line mentioning Cardia being a badass early in the section. It indicates that some fans do pick up on these character portrayals and localization choices. Other reviewers, such as the one below, praise how the game gives interiority to Cardia as a monstrous girl:

> Which is why she's the most compelling case for playing *Code: Realize*. In media, we don't often see things from the monster's point of view. Following Cardia's exploits almost reminds me of John Gardner's Grendel, which retold the story of Beowulf from the antagonist's perspective. She's a true innocent in possession of an unconscionable power and, while this game is about her finding love in spite of her affliction, it's also about how someone would survive knowing that they are absolutely a monster and can do nothing about it. It's that exploration about Cardia's sense of self, her roots, and her

terrifying ability, that makes *Code: Realize* compelling. With many otome games, it can

end up being about experiencing new things with a virtual man. You're going through the

everyday adventures of falling in love. Here, it's about survival and greater

understanding, with love being something that happens along the way (Lada 2015).

What's most interesting about these reviews is that while they do describe Cardia, they also

simultaneously are about other otome game heroines. Because major review sites seldom pick

up otome games such as *Code: Realize* for review, most of the reviews come from fan blogs and

niche game sites with contributors who write a lot about otome games. English language

bloggers have a tendency to bring up heroines in their reviews[49], with many different definitions

and characterizations of what they see as strong female heroines. These discussions will be

examined in much more detail in Chapter 6. Nonetheless, what these reviews of *Code: Realize*

do indicate is that many otome game players are not blind to the sexist portrayals in otome

games, and how badly a number of titles represent women. When otome games possess player

characters that have some agency, reviewers highlight them, so hopefully otome game makers

would make more characters like them or localization companies would select games with

heroines like them. In a lot of ways, these reviews do confirm what Adrienne Shaw (2015)

argues about player identification—that players can identify with characters who are very much

unlike them, and when representation sometimes gets things right, players point out that it's

"nice when it happens." More importantly, the case of Aksys' highlighting of Cardia as a badass

character also shows how because otome gaming is still niche, companies do listen to fans' and

players' petitions for better representation.

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[49] It also came up a lot in my interviews. See chapter 7.

4.6 Conclusion

By giving this brief history of otome games and analysis of popular titles that helped define the category for English language players, I hoped to trace structures of feeling that helped these games develop and emerge. Examining the history of otome games and some key features in both *Hakuoki* and *Code: Realize* indicate how postfeminist sensibilities are transcultural, adapting in different contexts as ways of channeling discourses of both femininity and masculinity in ways that are productive within neoliberal capitalism. In the next chapter, I extend my analysis of postfeminist sensibilities in otome games, specifically onto mobile devices. Looking at how microtransactions in games are mostly based on time, as well as fashion choices, these games are structured around certain perceptions of womens' time and labor.

V.   Chapter 4: Investing on Time, Farming for Beauty and Grace: Otome Games, Hybridity and Intimate Economies

Hakuoki (2012), *Code: Realize* (2014) and other localizations of popular Otomate titles were not the only otome games that garnered popular appeal among online communities. Aside from these popular Japanese titles on portable devices, companies such as Voltage and NTT Solmare, released games on mobile, like *My Forged Wedding* and the *Shall We Date* series. While many of these games kept to the visual novel genre, many titles assimilated well into mobile app stores and their economies, not only in their use of advertising for monetization or free-to-play models, but also the incorporation of elements of various casual games such as dress-up or time management, making it easy to categorize these games alongside them. Perhaps the most successful among these mobile and independently created otome games available in English is *Mystic Messenger* (2016). With over a million downloads on Android and iOS within months of its release, *Mystic Messenger* is a mobile game, developed by an all-female independent game company in South Korea, that simulates how people fall in love online in real-time. This real-time dating simulation occurs within chat rooms, instant messaging, emails and phone calls in the game's messenger interface. While the game itself has been critiqued for its representation of mental illness and for simulating emotional labor (Ganzon, 2019), its widely diverse player community also utilize the game to discuss mental health, homophobia and various cultural contexts in the way people talk about eating.

The examples above easily contextualize how cultural hybridization (Kraidy, 2005) has shaped the forms and practices around mobile otome games outside Japan. This chapter looks into how cultural hybridization (Kraidy, 2002) situates the forms, discourses and practices around a number of mobile otome games outside Japan, creating intimate economies (Wilson,

2004) that are heavily reliant on managing the gendered discourses around otome games. Firstly, I do an overview of otome games on mobile focusing on free-to-play games, and how companies built on free-to-play models that came from Japan. Secondly, I examine two games—*Ikemen Sengoku* and *Mystic Messenger*, to examine the kind of emotional labor and time investment that these games ask of their players. In doing so, I demonstrate how otome games create intimate economies (Wilson 2004), to be defined below, which structure gendered discourses around many of these games that are ultimately about managing women's bodies and emotions in the service of corporate transculturalism.

5.1 Intimate Economies and Hybridity

Intimacy has been a useful concept in thinking about relationships and sexuality in late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Povinello, 2006) and in thinking about affectively porous forms of sentiment particularly in womens' culture (Berlant, 1988). In game studies, theorizations of affect mostly stemmed from how emotion may shape design perspectives (Swink, 2009), psychology (Karpouzis,& Yannakakis, 2016) and phenomenological processes during gameplay (Shinkle, 2005; Veale, 2015). Perhaps the most notable of these is Aubrey Anable's *Playing with Feelings* (2018). Anable, in characterizing casual games, points out how these are part of "the larger affective economy of the intimate public sphere" (Kindle), further arguing how these games extend the female complaint genre in American mass media. While previous studies have pointed out how games reveal and may rearrange our relationships with devices or characters in games via emotion (Apperley and Heber, 2015; Waern, 2015), Anable also relates emotion to spaces of representation, and to wider discourses, particular gendered discourses in games.

In this way, Anable's analysis supplements the literature on affective economies in fan studies. Jenkins (2006b), in *Convergence Culture* describes affective economics as:

"a new configuration of marketing theory, still somewhat on the fringes but gaining

ground within the media industry, which seeks to understand the emotional

underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and

purchasing decisions […] While they are increasingly interested in the qualities of

audience experience, the media and brand companies still struggle with the economic

side of affective economics – the need to quantify desire, the measure connections, and

the commodify commitments – and perhaps most importantly of all, the need to

transform all of the above into return on investment" (pp. 61-62).

Jenkins further describes the emergence of the term in marketing theory as marketing discourse's

attempt at catching up with cultural studies, albeit for the purpose of seeking to mold consumer

desires rather than seeking to understand fans' points of view. Hills (2015), in analyzing

crowdfunding practices in the Veronica Mars fandom, builds on this by pointing out how

affective economies create agentive dialectics of value wherein producers act as fans and fans act

as media producers. Arguably, this allows for more robust analyses of agency within fandom that

go beyond arguments of fan exploitation.

For this study I seek to combine these theorizations of affect from both game studies and

fan studies to help think of ways games can be systems created to exploit fans by impinging on

bodies and feelings, but at the same time agency can be negotiated also through bodies and

emotions, especially as I will point out in a later section of this chapter as I discuss how many

commercial otome games on mobile devices rely increasingly on players' feelings about certain

characters to monetize a number of these games. However, I also want to link these analyses of

feelings, bodies and technologies to wider processes linked to globalization via intimate

economies and hybridity.

In relation to studies on globalization, perhaps the most useful concept is Ara Wilson's (2004) intimate economies, which she defines as a "rubric for analyzing interactions between economic systems and social life, particularly gender, sexuality and ethnicity" (p. 9). Through this, she challenges the assumption that capitalism is impersonal, and illustrates how "the intersection of market economies and intimate life has undeniably been transformed by capitalist development" (p. 9). In this way, she calls for the examination of "features of daily life that have come to seem noneconomic" (p. 11) as "economic systems are not separate from intimate life" (p. 11). Through this, she locates globalization with areas of life related to feeling and relationships. She also ties intimate life to how globalization produces subjects, thereby illustrating the biopolitical aspect of globalization within everyday life. In my analysis of otome games, I also want to employ this concept particularly because our emotions, our bodies and intimate relationships with games and devices, particularly games that involve private feelings such as otome games, seem to fall under the radar especially often when examining economies related to games. As I demonstrate in this chapter, postfeminist constructions of femininity in a number of commercial otome games reveal how postfeminism is geared to monetize women's choices and time to keep bodies in sync with the rhythms of global neoliberal capitalism. Arguably, as I look to how these games are increasingly platformized, they help create spaces for commercial and cultural exchange.

As previously mentioned in my theory chapter, hybridity is a concept that stemmed from postcolonial theory particularly to describe forms of resistance in colonial contexts. However, as Kraidy (2005) also argues, hybridity also "embraces the logic of neoliberal capitalism" (p. 66). In his book *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, he coins the term corporate transculturalism, which he defines as

"a discourse in which fluid identities and porous cultural borders are depicted as growth engines in the service of a cosmopolitan capitalism. Hybridity is thus placed at the service of a neoliberal economic order that respects no borders and harbors no prejudice toward cultural and ethnic difference that can be harnessed for growth. This constitutes a rhetorical shift from corporate multiculturalism, where difference is tolerated and incorporated into the dominant framework, to corporate transculturalism, a profit-driven strategy that actively and systematically seeks to capitalize on cultural fusion and fluid identities" (p. 90).

In this particular model, diversity is deployed in the service of capitalism. While the case studies that Kraidy used to describe this form of hybridity are mostly US examples, others have pointed out similar trends in K-pop (Shim, 2006; Jin and Ryoo, 2012; Kim, 2017), in some studies of Japanese popular culture (Chao, 2013; McCleod, 2013), and adaptations of Japanese anime (Agcaoili, 2011; Ruh, 2013). More significantly for this study, I argue that it is the same logic that helps many otome games assimilate in app economies, and it has shaped how these games have changed over the years especially on mobile. For this chapter, I deploy these notions of intimacy, intimate economies and hybridity to help frame my analysis of how otome games are continually emerging on mobile and PC, as these may reveal economies, often obscured from the larger analyses of app-economies and connective media ecologies (Nieborg, 2015), larger analyses of global production (Kerr, 2017) or soft power and creative industry policies such as Cool Japan (Allison, 2006). While these studies arguably are very useful, I want to supplement these with analyses of gender and representation to describe how these larger ecologies and cultural policies may operate on the intimate relations. These intimate economies constructed in the commercial spaces, game spaces and fan spaces of otome games, I argue, are heavily reliant

on the management of women's bodies and emotions, and fan spaces operate to negotiate agency

even on spaces that are not outside corporate culture.

5.2 Otome Games on Mobile: an Overview

In 2011, NTT Solmare and Voltage published some of the earliest titles on mobile.

Voltage's first title was *Pirates in Love* (2011) and NTT Solmare published *Shall we Date?:*

Heian Love (2011), the first title in their *Shall We Date* series. While both games are free to

download and playing through the prologue is free, players have to purchase individual character

routes in the game. This is the model that became standard for many mobile otome games for

many years, even for localized game ports of PSP and PS Vita titles[50].

While many subsequent titles were localized versions of Japanese titles, Voltage USA, a

subsidiary of the Japanese company, started releasing exclusive English language titles mostly

geared towards North American players around 2013. Unlike their Japanese counterparts,

inspiration for these games perhaps come less from shoujo manga, and more with popular

Hollywood films and mass market paperback novels. *Speakeasy Tonight* (2013), the company's

first title for iOS, for example, is a game set in Chicago during the Jazz Age, and rides on the

popularity of Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) which was a film released

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[50] A very good example of this is NTT Solmare's mobile localization of Otomate's *Princess Arthur* for mobile which almost completely restructured the flow of the game to accommodate this type of model. While in the original PSP version, the game only divides into individual character routes in the middle of the game depending on narrative choices that players select, NTT Solmare's version immediately assigns the player to the route that she purchased. The original has locked routes that control the flow of the story and to encourage replay, in addition to a true ending which can only be unlocked once one has dated all the characters in the game. NTT Solmare's version, on the other hand, one can unlock all the routes and the true endings even at the beginning of the game as long as one pays for them. Moreover, while the game was fully voiced, all the voices were taken out of the mobile port, and the explorable map was also taken out. For more details, see my previous article about this, Ganzon (2018a).

on the same year. *Queen's Gambit* (2014), Voltage USA's first game for Android, borrows heavily from Ian Fleming's James Bond novels in making a romance game about a female-superspy. What's also very notable about Voltage USA's titles is that these titles featured non-binary and non-white romance options, which is not characteristic of Voltage's Japanese localized titles. *Astoria: Fate's Kiss* (2015), for example, which is a game about dating mythical Greek gods and monsters, features two non-binary love interests, and the game vaguely describes two characters as people of color[51]. While some of Voltage USA's earliest titles did not have non-binary options, the developers added non-binary options to the later editions of these games. For example, a later version of *Speakeasy Tonight* released for the *Lovestruck* app, an app which I will discuss later, adds one female romanceable character to its list of romanceable characters. These changes perhaps indicate that companies such as Voltage, in order to cater to North American players, observed that token diversity makes games much more viable in these contexts, thus adopting its own brand of corporate transculturalism.

Moreover, around 2013, free-to-play models started emerging. Perhaps the biggest influence toward this development were Voltage's and NTT Solmare's titles on Gree[52], a Japanese social game app that made some titles available in English. While these titles eventually became unavailable with the decline of the Gree app for non-Japanese users, NTT Solmare and Voltage took the initiative to develop free-to-play versions on their own. One of the first games that was seen to implement this was NTT Solmare's *Shall We Date: My Sweet Prince+* (2013). While the game is free-to-play, the game adds limits to story chapters that one

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[51] In *Astoria: Fate's Kiss*, Hades, for example, has Asian features, as well as his son Cerberus. Both of which one can romance in the game. Medusa and Alex are listed as the game's non-binary options.

[52] For more information about this, see Steinberg (2019)

can read per day and adds a dress-up-game mini-game in certain parts of the story. These

changes structure the microtransactions in the game. Players can buy dresses for the dress-up

game and can also pay to read beyond the limit of these chapters. Other companies soon

borrowed this game structure and free-to-play models. Voltage's Party games[53], for example,

which are free-to-play versions of their regular localized Voltage titles, adopts the same game

structure and microtransactions.

Many other developers adopted optimized versions of these free-to-play models by

adding character gatchas and limited events to include additional microtransactions. Perhaps one

of the most popular examples of this is Cybird's *Ikemen Sengoku* (2017)[54] released for both

Android and iOS. In the fiction of the game, the player character who is a fashion designer

accidentally time travels to Sengoku era Japan and saves warlord Nobunaga Oda from a burning

building, not knowing who he was at first. The game thus places the player in a position to date

Japanese warlords of the time, such as Nobunaga Oda, Hideoshi Toyotomi and Ikeyasu

Tokugawa.

Similar to *Hakuoki*, the historical characters of this game follow character types from

Japanese anime and manga. Similar to many Voltage and NTT Solmare games, players choose

which characters to pursue at the beginning of the game. While the game is free to play, story

tickets are required for each chapter and this is indicated within the interface. Each day, one is

granted the maximum of five story tickets. Any additional story tickets can be purchased from

the game's store by gold, the in-game's currency. One can acquire gold by paying real world

currency or by messaging other players in the game system. However, the game puts a cap on the

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[53] Some examples include *My Forged Wedding Party* and *Samurai Love Ballad Party*.

[54] The original Japanese title was released in 2015.

number of friends one can have in the system and the messages one can send per day. The content that one acquires in the game is dependent on the clothes that one picks for the dress up minigame. Each piece of clothing is labeled so one could determine which ones unlock premium content and which ones unlock normal content. Dresses that unlock premium content can only be bought with coins, which is another in-game currency that can only be bought by real-world money. While one can acquire the same endings if one only plays to unlock the normal content, the game constantly reminds players that unlocking premium content is the way the game is meant to be played, and that the characters are at their best if one unlocks the premium content.

In my own playthrough of this game, I decided to romance Nobunaga Oda who is the game's token sexy character. I first played through the route determined to not spend anything for the game, but still expecting some steamy content. However, the game quickly alerted me that such content is only available to those who purchase premium items. The game utilized my frustration at feeling like I missed certain parts of the story to push me to unlock the premium content. Notably, the difference between normal and premium content spans dozens of pages, since the premium version of the game gives many more details to these story events, whereas the Normal version merely gives a basic overview of what is happening.

Moreover, the game's premium content dresses also add beauty points to one's avatar which figures into the game's grace system. The game's Love Challenge and grace system also gate progress in the game. Only players with enough Grace points can proceed with the game. Players can acquire more grace by playing a mini-game called Princess Lessons, where player avatars are placed alongside other player avatars and are judged based on beauty points. The player who wins this avatar beauty contest wins more grace. Participating in Princess Lessons requires stamina, which depletes and refreshes with time. Players can also buy additional stamina

in the game's store. In addition to this, the game also features a gatcha, which allows players to acquire additional character content such as additional images of the characters or voice messages. In addition to all these limits, the game also limits game item storage so players have to purchase additional storage with gold. In my case, buying premium content as well as in-game storage, allowed an easier playthrough, as it meant failing less at these games and progressing through the story more easily.

Limited events, which mostly run for about a week, provide more reasons for more microtransactions. *Ikemen Sengoku* features story events almost on a regular basis every few weeks. While there are no chapter tickets required for limited time story events, the game adds a beauty system to gate player progress. The Beauty system runs similarly to grace, and one has to participate in a minigame similar to Princess Lessons to get more beauty points. If one is pressed for time, one can separately buy an in-game item called "makeup" to boost one's beauty statistic and to keep playing. The game also awards special items to the first players who finish the story events and to the players who complete the story events within the first few days. Moreover, keeping some of the content of the story event requires real world currency since storage is limited in the game requiring that players either lose the content or buy storage to save this content.

Microtransactions and in-game currencies often mask real world prices for free to play games. However, to give one a perspective of how much this game could cost to a player, I calculated my spending during my run of this game in early 2018. In my own playthrough of the game, I did a normal playthrough of Nobunaga's route, as well as a complete playthrough with Nobunaga's premium content in the main game. Unlocking Nobunaga's premium content alone

cost over $30 CAD, and the game's English version had 12 characters in total[55]. I never spent anything on gatchas. I constantly played the Princess Lessons minigame when my stamina refreshed every few hours, and I made a number of friends in the game to harvest gold[56]. In addition to this, I also played through the "Nobunaga's B-day Fest" limited time event which ran from the 30th of April to the 14th of May of 2018. This limited time event had three story events that one could play through. I participated as soon as the event started and was able to finish all the story events on the last day. Though I was able to play through the first story event that I picked with no issues, the game system seems to issue more love challenges on the second and third story events that I participated in. With this system, it is arguably almost impossible to finish all three events within the first few days without microtransactions[57]. I utilized all the stamina items and make-up that I acquired from daily login bonuses that I stocked up months prior to make the deadline. This is particularly when buying in-game storage was handy, because if I had not stocked up and simply allowed the game to delete these items, I would not have made the deadline. So in another way, I still paid for the content. Making the deadline meant that I constantly checked my phone every few hours to see if my stamina refreshed to play the mini-game and acquire more grace. Suffice to say, it affected my daily patterns during the time of the event and adjusting my patterns involved a lot of work. Nonetheless, I wanted to unlock more steamy content, but also at this point, the game's version of Nobunaga grew on me even though getting content for him required a lot of work.

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[55] The Japanese version has a total of 14 characters.

[56] Mostly thanks to an otome game players' Discord channel and a couple of Facebook groups that I joined.

[57] Noticeably, the event store sells packages specifically for these events so players can finish the event within days.

Most of these paid and free-to-play models have something in common: they tend to be character-focused, and they hinge on player affection for the said character. This is definitely not new especially in thinking about media related to the anime media mix. Steinberg (2012), for example, explains how character consumption gives way to the consumption of worlds that these characters inhabit, and argues how this points to a post-Fordist mode of consumption. More importantly, otaku research has identified the type of affectionate longing for 2D characters as moe. Hiroki Azuma (2009), in his book *Otaku* wherein he analyzes consumer culture particularly around early bishoujo games[58], argues that moe signifies a shift towards postmodern database consumer practices—a type of consumption wherein readers and players are not interested in the original but its copies. Other research has expanded on this. Galbraith (2009), for instance building from Saitou Tamaki's work, describes how the affective and ontological aspects of moe as a type of response to fantasy characters is key to describing otaku sexuality. He extends this to female fans of boys love or fujoshi. Annett (2014)'s intersectional analysis of the female Hetalia fandom points out the complicated ways fujoshi can act as a counterpublic. Condry (2013) points out how moe is "an extension of collaborative creativity" revealing connections to broader social constructions particularly how the discourse on otaku illustrated alternative forms of masculinity and productivity. Lemarre (2013) stresses the biopolitical aspect of the otaku discourse, illustrating how they merge with governmental policies, predominantly Cool Japan, to produce neoliberal subjects. Particularly tracing the Japanese otaku discourse, especially how it shows a micromanagement of bodies and affect by the nation state indicates an intimate economy at work.

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[58] Games with male characters and female romanceable characters.

While it is important to examine the otaku forms of consumption in analyzing these games, I argue that it is equally important to look into what otaku discourses and consumption are also compatible with, especially when one wishes to look at players who do not live in Japan and may not identify as otaku. In the case of the games that I described above, I contend that these forms of consumption are also compatible with postfeminism. These free-to-play games monetize, refigure and channel womens' fantasy, emotions and choices towards the stereotypically feminine modes of production and consumption. Cybird's game version of Nobunaga, the character I chose to romance, will always demand more beauty and grace from me. Admittedly, after this mini-experiment, putting the game down meant not checking alerts on my phone related to the game to wean myself away from the habits that my body built up around this game.

Other free-to-play mobile otome games monetize games equally via chapter tickets that refresh over time, and ads. One such game is Ciagram's *Chocolate Temptation* (2018). Each day, the game issues players five chapter tickets, but one is always given the opportunity to get extra chapter tickets if one watches the ads that these games recommend without skipping. Thus, in order to speed up gameplay in my own playthrough of this game, I decided to go along with the game and watch the ads. At first, the game started giving me ads for the company's other otome games, which I also downloaded to see if the ads would then go away. After I downloaded these games, the game started recommending a slew of other games and apps. These recommendations included: the *Love Nikki* dress up game, *Webtoon*, interactive story apps like Pixelberry's *Choices* and *Hogwarts Mystery*, which was newly released during the time I was running the game. Of course, the notion that games are part of a connective media ecology (Van Djick 2013) is definitely not new. David Nieborg (2016), in analyzing the business models of a number of

free-to-play games, points out the creation of player commodities via free to play games as a form of targeted user acquisition. The presence of these ads in games such as *Chocolate Temptation* indicate that otome games such as these are all part of building these player commodities. But these ads are also very telling of what types of games that these games categorize themselves with, and what other games they think their players might be interested in. Moreover, they also hint at further developments in free-to-play otome games.

In the middle of 2018, Voltage USA released *Lovestruck*, an app that compiles the company's major titles into one app. Like many other free-to-play interactive story game apps, the game issues chapter tickets each day. Upon launch of the game, players are asked to create an account or login via Facebook or Google and they are asked a series of questions, such as those involving the kinds of story genres that players prefer or if they prefer their game love interests to be straight or non-binary. These all function so the game can recommend stories and game character routes by player preferences. Moreover, choices in this game app are heavily gated. Choices leading to happy endings need to be paid for by microtransactions. Effectively, these new game mechanics mimic other interactive story game apps such as Pixelberry's *Choices* or Koramgame's *Moments*. Since then, many other otome game companies have released similar apps. Voltage released *Love 365*. NTT Solmare released *Dear Otome* for iOS and *Story Jar* for Android. They all more or less follow the same free-to-play mechanics and monetization schemes.

These developments strongly indicate otome games are moving more towards some form of platformization. Many otome game players in forums online have notably characterized these as "Netflix for otome games." Steinberg (2019), in his book *The Platform Economy*, argues that it is important to examine Japanese platform discourse and practice and how they particularly

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helped shape the internet as a commercial space. By examining Japanese platform discourse, he

revisits notions of platform imperialism, a notion which Dal Yong Jin (2015) introduces in

critiquing the global power dynamics of various platforms. In one chapter, Steinberg describes

what he calls the "i-mode effect," wherein he describes how Docomo's i-mode created a space

for content purchases in Japan's mobile internet. While i-mode declined with the rise of the

smartphone, ultimately "platformization of content providers" was a side effect of declining

megaplatforms. This piece of mobile internet history is relevant particularly to the development

of mobile otome games that I described above. Notably, while otome games on Gree did not last

long on the international mobile market, it is quite apparent that these games on Gree allowed

companies such as Voltage, Cybird and NTT Solmare to create their own free-to-play models.

These companies continue to adapt their games and business models as they are most likely

mindful of the competition, and the competition from other otome game developers and content

providers does not only come from within Japan and the US, but also from other neighbors, such

as China[59] and South Korea.

5.3 Cheritz, Mystic Messenger, and the Korean Wave of Otome Games

Cheritz is a small all-female independent game company founded around 2012 in South

Korea focused on developing games with female players in mind (Gamebiz, 2012). Like many

startups in their country, Cheritz received government funding to develop two games for PC,

Dandelion: Wishes Brought to You (2013) and *Nameless: the One You Must Recall* (2014)[60].

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[59] Paper Games' *Love and Producer* comes to mind a Chinese otome game with 7 million downloads within China. However, I will not discuss this in the study as I have no access to the game.

[60] For this chapter, I will not analyze these two games, but if you are curious about them, please read an older piece I wrote on these two games (Ganzon 2018b).

Alongside their games, they developed character merchandise based on their games and events[61], as well as partnerships with other local companies[62]. These decisions indicate an attempt to reproduce something close to the anime media mix in its local scene.

Sources indicate that otome games came to South Korea in 1997 when the ban was lifted on Japanese products. Megapoly's Love series is considered to be the first Korean produced otome game (Game Focus, 2014). VVIC's Japanese localization of *Star Project*, another Korean otome game, was utilized to create an English localization in 2011[63]. More of this history will be discussed on the next chapter, but for now, I will focus my analysis on Cheritz.

Given the context of previous localizations, the idea of localizing for players beyond Korea and Japan was not a novel idea around 2014 when Cheritz released *Dandelion* and *Nameless* in English on Steam. Both games managed to get a good amount of fan following outside its country of origin. The existence of these titles indicates that alongside Japanese titles, Korean produced otome games also contributed to the development of the game category for English language players.

Cheritz released *Mystic Messenger* (2016) as its first mobile game. While *Dandelion* and *Nameless* released several months after the Korean release date, Mystic Messenger's English language release was simultaneous with its Korean release date, signaling a shift in the company in catering to English language players. In an interview, Cheritz representative Lee Soo-jin recalled that while the company did not have a large amount of money to market the game

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[61] For example, they did an event in a café in Seoul, based on *Nameless*, especially since the café for the event, Bajul café, was featured in the game as a place where one of the characters work.

[62] For *Nameless*, Cheritz partnered with Korean doll company Crobidoll to make a game about their dolls.

[63] Notably, this came out even before Aksys Hakuoki localization in 2012.

internationally, international players filled the gap through blog posts, YouTube videos and word-of-mouth recommendations (Donga 2018).

Taking the interface of a messenger app, the game is a real-time mobile dating simulator, through which players can participate in chatrooms to gain the characters' affection within the span of 11 days. In the story of the game, the presumably female player downloads a messenger app on her phone wherein she meets the members of the RFA, an almost defunct charity organization, and ends up being tasked to organize a party for the organization. Players can text, call and email the game's core five romance-able characters—707 a mysterious hacker and secret agent, Zen the musical actor, Jaehee the secretary, Jumin the rich CEO and Yoosung Kim the university student and token gamer--through this fictional messenger app. A number of the romance-able characters in the game borrow heavily from anime character tropes. For example, Jumin Han the game's billionare CEO and Ray/Saeran[64] can easily be characterized as the game's yandere characters. While Yoosung Kim, can easily be characterized as the game's token shota character. However, the game also borrows character types and include references to Korean media. For example, Jumin Han can also be typed as the game's chaebol character, which is a popular character type from Korean dramas, and the game drops references to popular snacks in Korea such as *Honey Butter Chips* and bungeo-ppang. In addition, the game also parodies popular international brands and celebrities, such as KFC, Nintendo and Gordon Ramsey. Similar to a number of their Japanese counterparts analyzed previously, the game also mechanizes emotional labor in its narrative choices contained within chatrooms, text messages and emails. As the scholarship on Hallyu suggests (Shim, 2006), this form of cultural hybridization occurs as local cultural actors and agents interact with global forms, using these

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[64] A route available via the Another Story DLC.

global forms to articulate and create their own cultural spaces. More importantly, Cheritz builds on free-to-play models that came before it.

The core of *Mystic Messenger*'s gameplay is, of course, located in its chat rooms and text messages, wherein the player can participate using selected conversation options in order to get affection points for each character that the player wants to romance. Affection points are counted via color-coded hearts in the game so players can keep track of how much affection one has gained for each character within a chat. The chat rooms open within certain designated periods of time, usually a period of 2 hours, and close to open a new chat room with usually different characters. If one misses a certain chatroom or calls from certain characters, one is given the opportunity to unlock them via hourglasses, which essentially function as the game's currency alongside hearts, which measure character affection and can be convertible to hourglasses. Alternatively, players can also move forward to advance the story outside the designated time slots with the use of hourglasses. Thus, *Mystic Messenger*'s hourglass currency system commodifies womens' time and the notion of investing time for one's relationships. In my multiple playthroughs of this game, I found myself setting aside time just to participate in in-game chats. I constantly checked my phone every few hours, while familiarizing myself with each character's patterns or the time each character would supposedly log on to chat or call, at times in the middle of the night. These parallel a number of arguments about casual games—particularly time-management games—and how these types of games that are mostly designed for women convert womens' time into labor (Anable, 2018; Chess, 2017). What I seek to add to these analyses centers on how this commodification of time and platformized manipulation of intimate relations of bodies, devices, characters and emotions, signal how postfeminist sensibilities continually function to direct the postfeminist subject towards self-surveillance, for

individuals to manage their own emotions, bodies and time in ways that are most productive. These forms of self-surveillance can be reflected not only within games but also in how player communities may talk about these games online.

Because *Mystic Messenger*'s gameplay is centered around emotional labor and time, many player practices revolve around these aspects of the game. Players have heavily memed the infamous 3am chatrooms, and the fact that playing the game resulted in many sleepless nights. Many walkthroughs center around listing the right narrative choices alongside times when chatrooms open, times when certain characters call, and when certain characters can take calls. In my own playthroughs, walkthroughs and lists of call times were indispensable because they helped me manage my time better. Knowing that there will not be a chat or phone call at 3am from this game meant that I could sleep. Significantly, around summer and fall of 2016, I noticed how playing the game made me more conscious of how the game significantly changed my sleeping patterns, and my relationship to my phone as a device. The game made use of my relationship with my phone by mimicking alerts that I got with other messenger apps that I used, and the feelings I had about missing calls or opportunities to talk to characters the game made me care about. Moreover, after days of playing the game, I seemed to have attuned myself to checking my phone every few hours to check for new chatrooms, messages or character calls. Suffice to say, my body ran on *Mystic Messenger* time, and so I could take back some control of my time, I cheated. Cheating got me banned from the game.

Since the game is geared towards monetizing time or the lack of it, in-game practices that the developers branded as cheating mostly revolve around the manipulation of time. A few months after the release of *Mystic Messenger*, Cheritz announced, through a system message, that game abusers will be permanently banned. While many players clearly saw this as a

warning, not many players understood what "game abuse" meant since Cheritz still had not given any set of rules to players. After the release of an update in September 2016, players took to social media reporting that they have been banned from the game. Not long after this, players compiled lists of practices that got them banned in order to warn other players not to do them. Many days after the start of the bans, Cheritz officially released a list of practices, via their Tumblr page, that are considered as game abuse. These include changing the time on one's phone to gain access to a locked chat room and farming hearts and hourglasses using saves to repeat the same chat room over and over again. Prior to the issuing of the bans, a number of players considered these practices as acceptable, with some blogs even listing these as tips to advance through the game.

Consalvo (2007) describes cheating as a way of turning the tables to get ahead in games. Cheating is contingent on the situation and context of play. Focusing on the situation and the context of play itself points to the fact that gaming capital is something that is regulated not only by creators and copyright holders of the game but also among players themselves. Consalvo also discusses how anticheats are used to police players, thus defining acceptable and unacceptable player practices. By using an anticheat to ban players, Cheritz effectively established restrictions on how the game is meant to be played.

Because of the banning, there were tensions around the *Mystic Messenger* player community surrounding these bans. A Malaysian player started a petition on Change.org to lift the then-perma bans and change them into soft bans. The petition maintains that because many of the game's players are students with little money to buy hourglasses, Cheritz should give a second chance to those permanently banned because they could not participate in chat rooms while attending classes and they could not participate in 3 a.m. chats. The petition managed to

garner over 1,500 signatures. However, a large number of the player community expressed their

disdain for the petition, arguing that cheating is stealing from Cheritz and that signees are

entitled children, especially given that hourglasses cost only a few dollars. As a result of the

amount of hate that she received, the original poster reportedly removed the petition within days.

Eventually, Cheritz temporarily lifted the bans so people could recover their accounts, with the

cost of losing all hourglasses associated with the banned account, including the ones that were

purchased. This petition and the resulting backlash indicate inequalities in its international player

base, particularly players in the Global North and the Global South. While it may be true that for

some hourglasses may cost only "a few dollars," notably, these may refer to US or Canadian

dollars. Many players seem to forget that not all currencies are equal, and what may count as a

few dollars for some may be days' worth of lunch money[65] and not to mention constant stable

internet access. Thus, while this is beyond my scope[66], this particular tension echoes the call for

the examination of situated gameplay (Apperley, 2011) particularly to examine how these

postfeminist logics, which are deeply tied to global capitalism, affect women's bodies.

5.4 Mystic Messenger and Transcultural Conversations: A Brief Digression

Outside the backlash on the game bans, the *Mystic Messenger* fan community is an

interesting space for its transcultural conversations. The most common topics of discussion

include the game's depiction of mental health, homophobia and the way characters talk about

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[65] While I could not count the equivalent in Malaysian Ringgit, in Philippine pesos, this is the equivalent. Moreover, my former students in the Philippines who I know played the game told me that they have stopped playing since the bans because the bans made the playing the game unsustainable.

[66] Not that it wasn't attempted. During one visit to the Philippines, I did attempt one playthrough of *Mystic Messenger* but I abandoned it and deemed it impossible at that time as the game requires constant and stable internet access which I did not have during my visit at that time.

eating. Many players have noted how characters have tended to ask each other whether they have eaten their meals at the beginning of each conversation. While some surmised that this is the way the game makes its characters eat in the interest of preserving their mental health, many others have related it to particularities of the ways in which many Asian cultures tend to use this as a way to check up on each other and as a polite way of starting a conversation.

Many players also tend to criticize the game's negative depiction of mental health and therapy particularly in relation to the game's ending and the game's primary villain, Rika, who notably suffers from mental illness and has repeatedly refused therapy. Of course, these criticisms also led to discussions about the discourse of mental illness and the treatment of mental illness in South Korea, which players indicate to be taboo subjects in South Korea.

Players also note the game's occasional homophobia. Players note a series of chats in the game wherein characters make fun of Jumin Han, the rich CEO, who they think is gay because he has never dated women. Perhaps in response to this, players circulated a meme, "Does Jumin Han is Gay?" derivative of the "Does Bruno Mars is Gay?" meme. This meme parodies the rumor mill within in-game discussions of the character's "gayness." At the same time, it functions as an inside joke within the fan community because many of its popular pairings involve the boys with one another. Jumin, in particular, is popularly paired or shipped with Zen, a musical actor and another date-able character in the game, who Jumin initially has an antagonistic relationship to but eventually warms up to in some of the game's storylines. The popularity of this meme made Cheritz include it as an easter egg Christmas DLC.

In contrast to the game, the international *Mystic Messenger* fan community are much more inclusive in their discussions about gender and sexuality. Jaehee Kang, Jumin's female secretary in the game who has a narrative arc of her own that the player can choose to follow

given the correct narrative choices, has noticeably less romantic options in comparison to her male counterparts. In response, one fan created a fan game called *Marry Me Jaehee* (2016) wherein the player character gets to explicitly date and get married to Jaehee. Proceeds from this fan game went to noted LGBTQ+ organizations. Additionally, perhaps in response to player feedback, Cheritz included a small scene in the Christmas DLC where the player can kiss Jaehee on the cheek, and one scenario in the Valentines Day DLC where Jaehee and the player get trapped inside a storage room. While a lot of it is still queerbaiting[67], since the encounter never really amounts to anything if only to tease the possibility of these two characters dating, these small changes in the DLCs do indicate that Cheritz have somewhat listened to fan criticism.

Notably, a number of these conversations happen on sites like Tumblr as well as blogs on Wordpress. Louisa Stein (2016) describes how collective culture in Tumblr operates via the proselytizing aesthetics of a millennial feels culture. She describes millennial fans' touting of emotional responses or "feels culture" as "a driving force behind their creative authorship communities" that "builds a form of an intimate collective one that is bound together by the processes of shared emotional authorship" (p. 156). Similarly, fan studies' enthusiasm for creative authorship in Tumblr point to how the platform allows fandom and queer spaces to overlap (Kohnen, 2018), and how Tumblr allows forms of critique that can be affective and transformatively chaotic, allowing dialogue and playful attitudes (Booth 2018). Yet these analyses may forget how even these constructions of fandom may privilege some identities over others. Kanai (2017), for example, describes how the intersection of remix cultures and social networking on Tumblr mediates intimacy and produces utterings of authenticity mostly based on young female middle-class experiences. Especially given that the otome game fandom operates

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[67] Queerbaiting is a practice in which creators hint at, but then do not actually depict, same-sex romance or other LGBT representation.

through the contexts of these platforms, it is necessary to know the bounds of creative authorship within these platforms, particularly Tumblr where a significant number of otome game blogs operate.

Notably, companies have also used Tumblr as a platform to promote their games and engage with players. In the case of Cheritz, the company had been publishing announcements, development updates, and creating fan events. In one such event in the summer of 2017, Cheritz created a poll to ask players about potential fan merchandise, particularly related to ideas about Mystic Messenger body pillows. In this event, many fans on Tumblr voted for a 707 Butler pillow[68]. These events are also not isolated. In other fan events, Cheritz asks fans to contribute fan art and ideas for "game intro chats." Cheritz, of course is not the only otome game company to occupy Tumblr. Companies such as Cybird and Aksys also have tumblr pages. While one could argue that Tumblr is a site where fannish gift culture thrives, these examples point to how companies may regift (Scott 2009) gift economies that fans have created for themselves. Not only can companies reuse fan labor for promotion, but they can also through occupying these fan spaces become ways of controlling discussions on otome games themselves. As interviews in chapter 7 will indicate, when companies communicate with otome game bloggers who are very willing to help with promotion, players can self-censor to show these companies that they are good players and good consumers willing to play for their games and to comply with company demands, even if this means taking down fan content.

These examples of Tumblr interactions within the *Mystic Messenger* fandom not only show how gift economies function within otome game player communities, but they also demonstrate the possibilities and the limits that game fandoms and online spaces have as cultural

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[68] Noticeably, there is not similar event in the Korean platform Naver for its Korean fans.

contact zones. While the Mystic Messenger fandom in Tumblr can provide an interesting space

for cultural discussions, creative authorship and critique of otome games' heteronormativity,

companies too may have ways of intervening and controlling conversations in these interactions

in ways that could benefit them.

5.5 Conclusion

All of the examples in this chapter provide various forms of intimate economies in otome

games. On mobile devices, otome games occupy spaces in mobile app economies and operate

through the monetization of womens' choices, their love for certain characters and their limited

time. By positioning these economies as front and center in my analysis, I hoped to stress how

these can complement larger industry analyses by illustrating how global capitalism via

corporate transculturalism may channel discourses of diversity into areas that can be beneficial to

capitalist production, mostly through management of women's bodies and emotions.

Figure 5-1 *Ikemen Sengoku* interface	**Figure 5-2** *Mystic Messenger* user interface

VI.   Chapter 5: #OtomeArmada: Otome Games, Networks and Deterritorialization

Among otome games built for particular platforms, otome games on PC have some of the longest and most complex histories. While the very first otome game, *Angelique* was released on 1994 on the Super Famicom, it is its PC release released the following year that has remained the most popular among its fans, especially with its continued popularity among import gamers[69]. The first English localization of an otome game is also on PC. In 2006, Hirameki International released *Yo-Jim-Bo*. While very little is known about its release at that time[70], many otome game players widely blogged about this game mostly around 2012 following Hakuoki's release.

In the late 2000s, English language visual novel fans created communities online and released their own games. These games included titles that otome game fan bloggers would later curate in their lists of early otome games. One such game is Sake Visual's *RE: Alistair* (2010), which was released for free in 2010. In the same year, fan translators released the English patch of *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* (2002). Though *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* is a game made for the Nintendo DS, the English patch allowed some players who used emulators to play this popular Japanese title.

Around the same time period, otome games that originated from Korea were localized into English. VVIC's Star Project got its English release in 2011[71]. Before the release of their more popular game *Mystic Messenger* (2016), Cheritz, an all-female indie game company released their games on PC. The localization of Cheritz's first game--*Dandelion: Wishes Brought*

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[69] Player communities focused on collecting and playing games from other regions. Interviewees for my study who have access to Chinese otome game player communities also note that a Chinese version of the PC port remains popular among Chinese players.

[70] The company also closed down a few years after, and I could hardly find any information as to why this is.

[71] Based on the Japanese localization

to You—was released in late 2012 on Steam. A year later, they also released their second game—*Nameless: the One You Should Recall*—on Steam. Noticeably, among my player interviews and my notes, these titles often came up as some of the first titles that many among my interviewees played. Even if not all these titles are free games, my interviewees have noted how these titles have introduced them to otome games because of their accessibility. Moreover, these examples point out how the PC otome games market has always been the space of indie creators.

Ikebukuro's Otome Road, as studies have pointed out (Steinberg and Ernest Dit Alban 2018; Andlauer 2019), has been central to the marketing and consumption of these games in Japan, primarily because industries and female cultural production are centered in this area. However, in this chapter, I focus my analysis on how certain cultural initiatives such as Hallyu, practices such as rom hacking and fan translations, and online communities of independent creators and players have functioned to deterritorialize otome games away from Ikebukuro's Otome Road. Case studies and interviews that are included here all help illustrate how online communities have deterritorialized otome games away from its country of origin. They also highlight how networks are equally important at reimagining these games.

6.1 Theoretical Framework: Deterritorialization and Networks

Theorization for this study draws heavily upon Manuel Castells (2001; 2004) and Arjun Appadurai (1997) whose works both examine how globalization is a product of capitalist modernity. While they address similar subjects, their analyses tend to differ on what they focus on to explore globalization.

Arjun Appadurai (1997), in *Modernity at Large*, examines the dissolution of imagined communities and "disjunctures" because of the movement of people, technology, ideas, capital and media across borders. Deterritorialization is the result of these, and has become, as he

argues, "one of the central forces of the modern world." Notably, he attributes deterritorialization heavily to the combination of migration and mediatization. In particular, he draws attention to "virtual neighborhoods" allowing the formation of new social links that undermine the logic of nation-states.

In contrast, Castells (2001) describes how networks, though "old forms of human practice" (p. 1), have become key in reorganizing society particularly in the Information Age. Through this, he conceptualizes the Network Society (2004), which he describes as "a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies" (p. 3).

Noticeably, both theorists touch on early ideas of the Internet particularly basing their observation on technologies in the turn of the century. While certainly there have been a lot of studies that expanded on their work, I draw on Appadurai and Castell's central ideas to examine how networks—technologies and online communities together—have allowed otome games to move beyond its country of origin. These I illustrate in my analysis of fan translations, Korean otome games, and independently created English otome games made available via an organization of fan blogs, forums, Twitter accounts, and platforms used by the #OtomeArmada.

6.2 #OtomeArmada: Online Fan Communities and the Promotion of Otome Games

It is almost impossible to trace the origin of the #OtomeArmada as a hashtag on Twitter. However, interviewees for my study tend to attribute it to a certain fan blogger[72] who utilized the hashtag to help some of Aksys' games early in 2016. Ever since its initial usage, #OtomeArmada became the moniker for the larger otome game fan community. While the name and the hashtag

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[72] Not named here as I did not get the permission to use this user's name or username.

is a 2016 creation, organized promotion by these groups of otome game fans can be traced as far back as the early 2010s to a collection of individual fan blogs and visual novel focused forums.

The Lemmasoft forums is one important space for both fans and creators of visual novels alike. These forums allow creators to find co-creators, artists, voice actors, beta testers and the like to help with the creation of their games. Otome games, along with other visual novel-type games, tend to feature heavily in discussions here. A lot of my interviewees point to the importance of this space in the creation and promotion of some of the earliest individually created otome games in English, such as SakeVisual's *RE: Alistair* (2010). Many games promoted here are available to download on the forums for free. Otherwise, some creators provide links to pages in Itch.io or Steam for downloads. Moreover, some of the earliest discussions of official localizations by Aksys Games also happened here in 2011. Thus, the site was also key in promoting some of the first English otome game localizations.

Alongside Lemmasoft, individual fan blogs—a number of which are on *Tumblr* and *Wordpress*—also help channel discussions of English otome games whether they are independently created, translated or officially localized. Fan blogs tend to have a variety of content ranging from basic information about otome games, reviews of otome games, walkthroughs, translations of promotional material, fan fiction, instructions on how to acquire certain titles, promotions of Kickstarter campaigns for certain otome game titles or a combination of several of these.

Operating within these networks indicate that these spaces function via what Paul Booth (2018) describes as a digi-gratis economy, which is a mash-up of market and gift economies present in online fandoms wherein some items are available for free and some are commodified. This type of economy translated into the creation of visual novels, while not completely

egalitarian, allow for spaces for experimentation, forms of participation and interesting entry points in the production of visual novels and games, even to individuals with little experience with game making tools. Notably, a number of these forums and sites do not exclusively cater to the creation of otome games, but also yuri games and boy's love games, which also contribute to the diversity of the games created alongside these spaces, as they not only allow these games to coexist in the same spaces, but also merge elements between them.

The combination of the Lemmasoft forums and individual blogs form what Jose Van Dijck (2013) calls a connective media ecology, or an "ecosystem of connective media" (p. 507). Van Dijck points out how these particular collections of media systems structure and maintain certain communities and their practices. What's notable in the #OtomeArmada's ecosystem is how these collections of sites determine which English language games can be classified as otome games, and how otome games are meant to be accessed and played outside its country of origin. The latter is a subject that I will explore in the next few sections in my discussions of the fan localization of *Starry Sky in Spring* (2005), Korean otome games and *Cute Demon Crashers (2015)*—an independently created otome game.

6.3 *Starry Sky in Spring* and Fan Translated Otome Games
Game studies have long pointed to practices such as ROM hacking as ways of playing Japanese games that have no official localizations of them (Consalvo, 2016). Scholars have also pointed out how such practices are ways players try to preserve games (Newman, 2013; Murphy, 2013). In some cases, these practices have worked to build entire game industries such as Korea's game industry (Jo, 2020). In the case of otome games, ROMS and translation patches have allowed certain games to travel to Japan, and in this section, I describe how I managed to play an unlocalized title through these networks of sites for otome games.

It was one particular blog that led me to a site that allowed me to download a patch of *Starry Sky in Spring* (2005)--a popular PC title in Japan that had its own anime. While the patch is easily available in a number of otome game blogs, it is quite noticeable that none of these sites have the game itself available for download. Instead, these sites encourage its readers to buy the game from Japan, with some sites providing detailed instructions and resources on how to import games from Japan.

When I finally acquired a copy of the game, I installed both the game and the patch. However, when I loaded the game up for the first time, I noticed that there were squares in places where there should have been letters. I realized that I had corrupted my own installation of the game. When I revisited the blogs and the forums where the patch was available, and finally read the installation manual (which I should have done before installing the game), I realized that I missed one key component to the installation--changing my system's locale to Japan. The blog where I downloaded the patch from has instructions on how to change one's system's locale to Japan, which I followed. Afterwards, I was able to install and run the game with no problems.

Learning how to change my locale to Japan and importing games from Japan became only one of the things that I learned from these blogs. After I played through *Starry Sky in Spring*, I decided to delve deeper in this world of fan translated otome games. Forums led me to translation sites and Discord servers dedicated to otome games and fan translated visual novels. Folks in these Discord servers were more than willing to offer help especially for people interested in learning to use certain tools. With some help, I learned to use a fan created app called the *Visual Novel Reader*--one made by fans for translators to create soft subtitles on certain titles. Soft subtitles are titles that are tacked on over the game and the *Visual Novel Reader* allows these artificial subs over the games used with it. I also learned to use a rom to

install and play a patched version of *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side: 1st Love Plus*. The availability of the patch is very similar to *Starry Sky in Spring*--while it is widely distributed via its own website, and via otome game blogs, none of them seem to distribute copies of the game themselves. Translators and bloggers do not distribute copes of the game for copyright reasons. They also do this so people who want to play the game would be encouraged to import the game from Japan. The only place on the Internet where I could find a copy of the game is an eroge or erotic games site--which is ironic because the game does not have any sexual content in it.

This absence of both *Starry Sky in Spring* and *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* from any of the otome game sites loudly proclaim how the wider otome game community encourages players to support the game companies that create these games. They echo the notion that the "right" way to play these games is to buy these games--even if it takes a lot of effort to import games from Japan. Furthermore, this sentiment is echoed by the creators of the patches themselves. OGE--the creators of the English translation patch for *Starry Sky in Spring*-- for example, have the following disclaimer on their patch of the game:

> OGE in no way supports piracy. It is our utmost hope that if you enjoyed our patch and this game that you will purchase a copy of the game, if you do not already own one, and support the company that made it.

Translators of *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side: 1st Love Plus* patch also made similar statements on their website.

These sentiments concerning piracy have also been echoed in much of my interviews with the six fan translators interviewed for this study. Their details here are listed as follows:

Figure 6-1. Basic Demographic Information on Otome Game Translator Interviewees

Elected Study name	Nationality and/or Country of Residence	Race Identification	Pronouns	Age	Occupation
Claire	Canadian	White	She/her	Did not disclose	Did not disclose
Nadia	Malaysian	Asian	She/her	20	Student
Vocaotome	Bangladesh	Asian	She/her	28	University Lecturer
Eleanor	US	White	She/her	26	Museum Curator
Anna	US	Asian	She/her	22	Student
Julia	Russian	White	She/her	Did not disclose	Did not disclose

In these projects, while a number of participants worked in teams, some of the participants worked alone.

The translators interviewed were quite adamant about how they were against piracy. They continually stressed how their work exists to help promote the game they translate, in hopes that these would garner enough fan support to get official localizations in the future. They also point out that their work is also only meant to help those who wish to experience these untranslated Japanese games, which are presented as a labor of love to the wider otome game community. Being able to share a game they love with those who cannot read Japanese seems to be one of the most common motivations for translators in this study for their work.

> Eleanor: [Name of otome game] is my favorite VN, and I'm intimately familiar with the characters and plot; as I don't consider myself to be a master of the Japanese language by any means, I thought it would be a project that I could handle. I also just really love

[Name of otome game] and wanted to share it with my friends who couldn't read Japanese.

Julia: [Name of otome game] is the unique and remarkable otome, I want to let as much as possible people learn about this game and like it as much as I do.

These positions are something I will touch on again in my chapter on otome game fan bloggers[73], as many interviewees on that group are also quite vocal in their opposition to piracy, even if what counts as piracy is hotly debated within the wider otome game community. Nonetheless, the translators interviewed for this project echo this general position against piracy, and they have a tendency to also encourage players to support otome game companies by buying their games. One participant actually mentioned taking down one of their projects when one company released an official localization. In fact, some of them also expressed that they are more than willing to take down their own projects if an official localization is released. The projects that translators in this study worked on have varying degrees of visibility online—some projects are widely promoted among the otome game community in Tumblr, blogs and other places that promote visual novels. Anna, for example, reflects on the advantages of having a project that is visible in the otome game community.

Anna: I enjoyed the public updates and seeing everyone so excited to finally have these games in English. Unfortunately, it also made us easily seen by the official companies which once lead to trouble and once lead to a good opportunity.

While Anna did not specify what that "good opportunity" was, it is safe to say that a project's visibility has pros and cons for these translators. But as always, the goal is to get as many people

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[73] Interestingly, some bloggers are also translators so there could also be a lot of overlap here in the wider otome game community.

interested in the games they love. Thus, such fan translation projects can be fragile and easily rendered invisible with the possibility of official releases, yet these are what a number of these participants actually seem to hope for.

Noticeably perhaps because of these positions on piracy, fan translated projects are also mostly supported by the wider otome game community as they tend to be featured on otome game blogs as well. Interviewees point out how community support for their projects are particularly important. Nadia, for example, runs surveys to determine which titles to translate. Several interviewees have expressed how the lack of manpower and community support are some of the biggest hurdles in some projects--apart from finding time to work on these projects since my interviewees all have full time jobs or schoolwork outside these projects.

What is also recognizable to me is how a number of interviewees were keen on walking me through the more technical aspects of translation and localization, demonstrating their expertise. Interviewees were more than happy to offer detailed explanations of their translated projects:

> Nadia: First, we extract the Japanese scripts of the game with the script tool engine. Then, we divide the script into routes, and note down the number of the scripts. After that, we assign a few scripts to the translators, and after they turn the translations in, we will forward them to the proofreaders/editors to check them, before they are finalized and quality-checked during script-editing (replacing the Japanese lines in the scripts line by line with the edited English translations). When that's done, we pack them up again with the script tool engine, before testing it into the game to see if it works properly.

Vocaotome: In order to start a translation project, three roles are a must (which can all be performed by the same person for small games but not really for big ones): a) admin, b) hacker, c) translator. [...] I performed both the admin and the translator role, and also learned some hacking tips from our hacker. I enjoyed translating and while troubleshooting was terrible (our patch used to crash a lot), it was rewarding.

Julia: It's really difficult to explain each step of the port creation, but I try it in simple terms. First of all, I create a chapter in the Tyranobuilder, then I test it myself and correct all errors. Next step: I give it to my testers and receive tons of typos or other corrects. Then I fixed it. That's all. One chapter is done. Most of all I enjoy the testing part, it's almost like playing the game.

Even if all my interviews with translators were done by email their enthusiasm for both the language and technical aspects of localization clearly shows. Julia's experience is probably one of the most fascinating because much of the interview involved her discussing how she ported the game she was working on from one platform to another using a game engine called Tyranobuilder. She also mentions how she paid artists to create new art for this particular port-- art that would reflect the more adult themes of the game she worked on. Thus in this way, she calls her work a "hybrid version" built from the original platform--one that she worked so hard on so others can enjoy this particular title that she named repeatedly as a "masterpiece."

All these interviews left me with the impression that love can be expressed in both language and code. It's very clear from these that for Julia, Nadia and Vocaotome the games that they have worked so hard to translate are happy objects. Sara Ahmed (2010) defines happy objects as objects that are supposed to deliver happiness to any and all subjects who attach to it. In a lot of ways, affect is attached to certain objects. In Chapter 7, I will discuss otome games as

happy objects in further detail especially in relation to how it maintains work around otome games. Similarly though, upon examining how Julia, Nadia and Vocaotome all discuss their work, the same type of happiness seem to give them motivation for these projects.

Earlier work on fan translations, mostly centered on the anime media mix or popular television, point out how such practices with contentions relationships with industries create new forms of labor, distribution and norms within fan communities (Lee 2009; O'Hagan 2009; and Bold 2012). Scholars have also pointed out how such practices are a result of fans' love for these forms of media. Ian Condry (2012) describes it best when he conceptualizes dark energy as

> a collection of social forces that enlivens the connections between content and desire, which in turn helps drive the circulation of media products […] More broadly, it provides a way to conceptualize fluid links among fans, media content, technology and producers (p. 283).

These fluid links are certainly present in fan translation groups in the otome game fandom. Interviews clearly show how these participants clearly internalized how their work is key to media success, since their work can potentially draw more love towards the games they dedicate their time and efforts to.

To all these analyses of the wider practice of fan translations, while several of these insights are also reflected on my experiences and interview data on otome game fan translators, one thing I will add to this is how in the case of fan translations in the wider otome game fan community, networks seem to normalize how one is supposed to play and to participate in the circulation on otome games. Playing with technology, language or code seems acceptable, at times encouraged even, as long as one expresses support to the companies that make these games

in Japan. Importing is thus normalized. Support is all about paying money to these companies in Japan. Support also sometimes involves taking down one's projects when official localizations are released. They hint at some kind of aspirational invisibility--a possibility that fan translated works will not be needed if only game companies localize the games the communities love. At the same time, translators also rely on the support of their wider player communities for their projects to keep going, and for recognition.

Castells (2001) describe networks as flexible and dynamic infrastructures that allow continuous innovation. Christian Fuchs (2008) builds on this by putting forward the notion of global network capitalism, which he describes as a new regime that is "an antagonistic space that by producing new networks of domination also produces potential networks of liberation that undermine the centralization of wealth and power" (pp. 119-120). Otome game fan translation networks belie this complexity, but they also speak of the compatibility of postfeminist media cultures towards this regime. These networks are also at play in the growth of otome games in certain regions as I will discuss in the following sections.

6.4 Cheritz and Korean Otome Games
The first otome games in Korea became available in 1997 after the country opened up trade with Japan. In the following years, Korean created otome game titles followed, the first one being Megapoly's *Love* series. While more titles would come after this, as I explored in a previous essay[74], what's more important is that a number of Korean made otome games have been localized into English in the early 2010s. These titles were promoted around many otome game blog sites.

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[74] See Ganzon (2019)

VVIC's *Star Project Online* (2011) was the first Korean otome game localized in English. Its English localization is based on the Japanese localization, released months prior. While there is very little information now on the game itself after its publisher, Galaxy Games, went offline, posts on the Lemmasoft forums and various fan blogs do indicate a small but dedicated following.

Nonetheless, it was *Cheritz*'s localized games that became more popular with the larger otome game fandom. *Cheritz* is an all-female team based in Seoul that exclusively makes otome games. In another essay (Ganzon, 2019), I discussed their popular mobile game *Mystic Messenger* and its use of real time to interact with characters. While Mystic Messenger remains their most popular game, it was their previous games on PC—*Dandelion* and *Nameless*—that helped their later games gain a large following even before the release of *Mystic Messenger*. As with most Korean indie and start-up companies, Cheritz's initial projects--*Dandelion* and *Nameless*--received funding from the Korean government as part of its Hallyu initiative to spur the growth of Korea's digital cultures. Jin (2016) points out that this particular initiative allows for a particular contraflow that is appropriated by Western game cultures. One thing that is particularly notable in the case of Cheritz is how an initiative meant to bolster Korea's soft power also helped import a genre with origins in Japan to English language players, especially given that during the time of *Dandelion*'s and *Nameless*' English releases, otome games that were localized in English were still very few.

Like many independent creators, *Cheritz* posted about their then project, *Dandelion: Wishes Brought to You* (2012), on the Lemmasoft forums with links to a demo and a way to purchase the game via the game's online shop. It quickly gained a large following among many otome game fans and bloggers which allowed this game to get released on *Steam* on 2013. A

year after, Cheritz released their second game—*Nameless: the One You Must Recall* (2014).

Nameless, like its predecessor, was released on Steam and was heavily promoted among many

otome game blogs. *Cheritz* also collaborated with a Korean doll company on their game

Nameless to create exclusive merchandise including dolls, fan disks and a number of themed

café events. With these attempts to create merchandize and events, it is clear that Cheritz did

attempt to reproduce something similar to the anime media mix among its Korean fans.

However, since the release of *Mystic Messenger* (2016), the company seems to have shifted their

marketing strategies to prioritize English language players—often promoting polling

merchandize and online events to these players first before its Korean fanbase.

Gameplay-wise, *Cheritz*'s games have very little difference to their Japanese

counterparts. *Dandelion* was a stat-raising game that required players to level certain stats--

femininity, beauty and art skill—to get characters to fall in love with them within the span of a

college school year. In-game items are available such as cosmetics to raise certain stats much

faster. On certain days, player can go on dates with selected characters at certain game locations

such as the local art gallery, park, beach, cafes and shops. These mechanics are highly familiar

especially to players who have played similar games such as *Tokimeki Memorial: Girl's Side*

(2002) or early English otome games like SakeVisual's *RE: Alistair (2010)*. In my extended

analysis of this game (Ganzon, 2018b), I point out how the use of these stats create the

expectation for players to examine themselves via the male gaze, and in doing so, normalizes

traditional gendered expectations of its female players within capitalism. In comparison to

Dandelion, *Nameless* is a pure visual novel based completely on narrative choices. Given that all

male date-able characters in the game have particular character traits that can be "fixed" by the

player character's love, the right narrative choices that lead to the best endings always are the

choices where the player performs emotional labor. This particular mechanic is not too unfamiliar with a number of Aksys' localized English otome games such as *Hakuoki* or *Code Realize*.

What's unique about *Cheritz*'s localized games, however, despite their similarities to their Japanese counterparts, is not only on how they retain their Korean voiced characters but how they also include references to Korean locales and popular culture. *Dandelion* is a game set in Busan, and the game makes several references to its art scene, even more so as the player character is an aspiring artist. One of its date-able characters, Ji-woo, an aspiring romance writer, drama addict and regular book club attender, frequently references tropes in popular Korean dramas. Similarly, *Nameless* makes references to popular Korean snacks, and actual locations in Seoul. Banjul café, a real café in Seoul, is named in the game as the place where one of the male heroes works, and a place where Eri, the player character, and her friends often stay after school. Perhaps not so coincidentally, this is also the café that *Cheritz* utilized for themed cafes to promote the game. Thus, Cheritz' games provide the right balance in that they are generic enough for global audiences, but have enough references that local audiences could recognize to link the game to its country of origin. Noticeably, with Cheritz' examples, there is an attempt to create a form of cultural odor (Iwabuchi 2002) but only with Korean products.

Following Cheritz's success, more Korean indie creators have localized their games in English. Other companies such as Day7 and LucyDream have ported their games onto mobile. While most Korean indie otome game makers after the release of *Mystic Messenger* tend to favor Android and iOS as platforms, VVIC's and Cheritz's early successes helped build a repertoire of officially localized games for players in English. The cases of these companies show how Korean indie companies has also indirectly helped create spaces for otome games online. But

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these indie companies too operate alongside the larger network of the #OtomeArmada where much of the discussions on gender, sexuality and relationships tend to be widespread as fandoms intervene in these discourses. Creators as fans intervene in these discourses especially when they make their own games, as I will elaborate in my case study of *Cute Demon Crashers* in the following section.

6.5 Cute Demon Crashers: Indie Otome Games and the Revision of Otome Game Formula

Cute Demon Crashers (2015) is a game that was brought to my attention via several otome game blogs. As previously mentioned, otome game blogs tend to feature reviews of their favorite otome games to amplify promotions for otome games. But what's also remarkable on a number of these blogs are the critiques several blogs create on otome games, particularly around the subjects of gender, sexuality and consensual relationships. These discussions are echoed throughout the wider otome game fandom. *Cute Demon Crashers* is an interesting case study because its mechanics show how players as fans try to revise familiar scripts and tropes related to gender and sexuality in otome games.

SugarScript, the creators of the game, on their itch.io site pointed out the "need of consent in 18+ VNs for women." Thus, SugarScript utilized NaNoRenO—an annual game jam in the Lemmasoft forums run from 2005 to the present to challenge creators to finish a visual novel within a month—as the space to create this game to address this issue (SugarScript, 2015).

In this short game, the player character is a university student on a spring break who accidentally summons four sex demons—three incubi and one succubus—who all sense that she's lonely. Essentially, the inclusion of both male and female romance options, as well as explicit sex scenes merge three game categories: otome, yuri and eroge games. In the course of the game, the player character can bond with these demons by hanging out with these demons in

the spaces they occupy in the player's house and negotiate her first sexual experience. Choices in the game have very little consequence as the game imagines itself as a safe space to address consent in relationships. Players can choose to have sex or not have sex with any or all these demons, and during the game's explicit sex scenes, these demons always give players choices to stop. In addition, the game also features a stop button in one part of the screen so one could literally stop at any time. All of these are included in the player tutorial at the beginning of the game to make sure players know that these options are available. Players can also choose to censor explicit images in the options menu. None of these choices affect characters' reaction to the player character as they are always accepting no matter what the player character's choices are. The game also has no bad endings to encourage exploration and to avoid the focus of getting a good ending for one character. All of the choices lead to a cuddle or something fun, like all the characters playing video games if they choose to not have sex. In this way, it frees players from the obligation of performing emotional labor and encourages positive feelings about romance and sex. It is through this revisioning of choices and creating this feeling of safety that the game intervenes in discourses of relationships, sex and the problematic emotional labor present in many otome and eroge or erotic games.

Cute Demon Crashers is, of course, not the only game that addresses the problem of consent in otome games. Michaela Law's *Love and Romance – a Study of Intimacy* (2016), which was created for NanoReno 2016 also has similar themes and in-game mechanics to use the game to safely negotiate consent. While of course 18+ games that focus on the negotiation of consent are few and far between, it is particularly noticeable that these interventions occur via these online communities which are noticeably transnational and transcultural. Short games such as *Cute Demon Crashers* barely receive any critical attention, but it is important to examine these

games because they demonstrate how players as fans and creators intervene in conversations such as gender and sexuality. As will be seen in my next section: not everyone thinks of these issues similarly, but makers are aware that they are writing for communities who think about these issues on gender and sexuality a lot. The next section features interview data from independent otome game creators.

6.6 Maker Interviews: Making for a Community

For my study, eleven independent otome game makers responded to my call for interviews. Information about my interviewees are listed as follows.

Figure 6-2. Demographic Information on Otome Games Maker Interviewees.

Elected Study name	Nationality and/or Country of Residence	Race Identification	Pronouns	Age	Occupation
Kooriiko	British Filipino	Asian	She/her	29	Nurse
Jen	US-Hawaii	Asian-Okinawan	She/her	23	Video Editor
Click	Singapore	Asian (Indonesian-Chinese)	She/her	22	Administration
Letitia	France	White	She/her	Did not disclose	Did not disclose
Amanda	US	White	She/her	31	Lawyer
Jane Titor	US	White	She/her	25	Did not Disclose
Chloe	UK	White	She/her	Did not disclose	Full time game writer
Joy Pham	Vietnam	Asian	They/them	18	Graphic designer
Caitlin	South Africa	Did not disclose	She/her	25	IP Engineer
Twix	Australia	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Teacher
Daya	US	Native American	They/them	19	Student

The purpose of these interviews was to get a sense of what indie otome game making is like, and to get an insight on how much these makers think about representation in otome games. Game making experience tend to vary among my participants: some stated that they have made

games before, but a number of participants reported themselves as "self-taught" noting how much they learned from forums such as Lemmasoft. A few participants have launched successful Kickstarter campaigns for their project. Some make games for a living. Some are students. But the majority juggle full time jobs alongside their game making ranging from engineering, graphic design, health care and administration. Among these participants who juggle multiple jobs while making their games, finding time to make their games is always a challenge. Some participants choose to work alone. A majority of my participants though, tend to work with teams—some loving it, and others doing it out of necessity.

What's striking to me among these interviews is the degree of which they think about representation. Notably, interviews show that how interviews describe what they consider as "diverse representation," it tends to fluctuate from person to person. Diverse representation to some can mean several things from simply different character personalities to different representations of race, body types, sexualities and disability. How they think about representation when creating their games tend to differ. Some makers such as Daya[75] point out that they make games to have more Native American representation and to talk about Native American rights. Others like DiceSuki[76] have created games in response to particular tropes that they wish to critique. Still others point out that because their games are set in multinational cities such as Singapore, diversity is always a given. However, there is also quite a number of my participants who indicate that they do not think of certain types of representation much at all as they make characters in their games.

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[75] Participant chose this name for the study and asked to be identified.
[76] Participant elected to use her creator name for this study.

Caitlin: We don't necessarily think about those things in specific so much as the character as a whole. We start with maybe a single word to describe a character and let them develop on their own as we plot the story. We basically throw out ideas and see what sticks. In cases where it would have a big impact on the character and their motivations, these will be mentioned in the narrative. Otherwise, it's simply another part of the character, like their eye or hair colour (and yes, things like blue hair are natural in the world our games exist in). For example, some characters are bisexual, but because it didn't affect the narrative, it wasn't made a big deal of.

Amanda: The male characters in my game are a wide range of races, personalities and social classes. It's still a game about good-looking men being romanced by a woman so their body types, gender and sexual orientation are not as diverse as they could be. But I'm making the game for women interested in romancing good-looking men in a game, so I'm just trying to make characters that I personally would wanna romance and hoping others will also like them.

Click: I try to be diverse as much as possible. The love interests are of different ages (21, 24 and 28)s and they are all pansexual. One of them is a lady while the other two are men. Support characters also differ in races as the fictional place Belong is set in is a multinational country like Singapore.

While these excerpts offer contrasting ideas about writing diverse characters, it is quite clear among these that to some extent, they do provide particular care on how they write considerably diverse characters. In Adrienne Shaw (2015)'s study on how players talk about diversity, her interviewees discuss about diversity being "nice when it matters." The same thing is happening

here especially in this case when players as creators intervene. Nonetheless, how these player-creators intervene tend to vary on what they see as good representation.

Among my interviewees, the importance of romance in otome games tends to shift. While some create titles specifically to romance characters, there were also some interviewees who said that they did not care about romance at all. Some interviewees talked about making games centered around friendship or complex themes such as grief. For these player creators, romance more or less only acts as a template for the discussion of other issues important to them. This is something that I will explore more in the next chapter.

Moreover, in all these discussions, these player creators all touch on the idea of creating games with and for a particular community. Some of the biggest challenges that my interviewees identified were about working with other people. Others indicated the complexities of utilizing certain platforms such as Steam or Itch.io to distribute their games and the challenges of promoting their work within the various spaces occupied by the #OtomeArmada. Those who could use platforms such as Kickstarter stressed the impact of these platforms in acquiring support from the community to make their game. Several expressed concerns on how certain themes and issues they discuss in their games would be received by the larger otome game community, which ultimately comes back to the subject of representation, especially given that these creators are aware that many players in the otome game community tend to like strong female characters, and dislike sexist tropes.

Arguably, these communities demonstrate how intimate publics can help refine and articulate alternative ways that players may choose to navigate discourses particularly about gender and sexuality in the games that are created. Though these games may borrow art styles and occasional character types and tropes from their Japanese counterparts, these borrowings

allow a certain form of cultural hybridity. While not completely outside the capitalist media structures of online platforms, they allow for interrogations of the normative ways corporate transculturalism construct diversity and emotional labor, thus allowing as Radway (1984) calls them "light forms of resistance."

6.7 Conclusion

This overview of otome games on PC and player practices means to demonstrate the intricate networks and online communities that helped deterritorialize otome games from its country of origin. Without the infrastructure of Japan's anime media mix, online communities, particularly the #OtomeArmada, more than compensated for this by structuring how otome games are circulated, produced and promoted within these communities. Notably, indie companies benefiting from Hallyu also helped grow otome games outside its country of origin, especially as these games gained a lot of support from otome game player communities outside Japan and Korea. Independent player creators, particularly on the Lemmasoft forums, also enjoyed similar support from #OtomeArmada, while their titles helped to further refine and revise tropes from this game category. Interviews with player creators show the importance of the online communities in the creation and release of these games. Overall, this case study of otome games on PC demonstrate how player communities and fan communities can help transport games from their country of origin, but also demonstrate how players can refine particular discourses in the games they love.

In my next chapter, I look into all my interviewees responses to how they define otome games. These analyses will further indicate how otome game players have redefined this category of games as a genre to think about and discuss issues that are pertinent to them.

VII.   Chapter 6: What is an Otome Game?: Player Definitions and the Female Complaint

"When it comes to dating Joshua," Naja insisted, "Kidnapping is a theme!"

Laughter echoed in the office of the small game lab where I was conducting the recorded interview over Skype. Normally, I would have been a little concerned about how both of us would have sounded like to onlookers.

Thankfully, it was a Tuesday night, and the lab was empty.

To onlookers, we probably would have sounded like two women in their early thirties gossiping about their terrible ex-boyfriends. But really, Naja, at that moment, was describing *Be My Princess*, a mobile otome game about romancing fictional princes. Naja was half-laughing and half lamenting about the number of times her player character got kidnapped in that game by that fictional prince her character was dating. *Be My Princess* was one of the first games of its kind that Naja played. Though she told me that her tastes in games changed over the years that she had been playing games, there was a certain fondness in the way she talked about this game and that prince that her character dated there. While the conversation revolved mostly around games, in a lot of ways, the conversation was also very much about Naja. After all, Naja spent years playing the games such as that one described above and had since gained quite a following on her blog where she wrote extensively about racial representations in these games and about playing this game as a black woman.

I glanced at the clock on the side of my screen. 9 PM. I realized that we had already been talking for over two hours, and we had barely been able to go through most of the questions in

my questionnaire. I never realized that how time passed quickly. We met each other two hours ago, and we were already talking as if we were old friends.

Naja proceeded to talk more about the other games she had been playing recently, including another game about dating KFC's Colonel Sanders. Three hours later, as I waited for the night bus which I had to take because I missed the last train home, I found myself smiling. A lot of my live interviews on Skype and in-person were a lot like this. There was always a connection—a kind of implicit understanding that we understood what each had to go through playing these games as women.

In this chapter, I explore these forms of understanding and connection via otome games. More specifically, I examine the different ways otome game players outside of Japan describe otome games. Based on player interviews, many use the term to broadly describe games with romance and female player characters. For others, otome games help continue the complicated legacy of pink and purple games in creating games that perceive the interests of girls (Cassell & Jenkins 1998), and game publics where women--and at times by extension non-binary folk-- occupy central positions not too dissimilar from romance book clubs (Radway 1984). In the previous chapter, I illustrated how online fan communities can create infrastructures to distribute games, and to help grow these international predominantly female player communities. This chapter will continue to examine these player communities but focuses more specifically on how player perceptions of games can effectively recast otome games as an extension of Berlant's female complaint genre. The repositioning of otome games as female complaint highlights how its predominantly female players create archives of experiences, position themselves as genre-experts and make affective connections with others via the games they play. However, this appropriation of the female complaint is also not without its flaws, while they do archive

women's experiences and allow women to make connections, they only allow a limited form of critique mostly centered on predominantly white or middle-class women's experiences.

7.1 The Female Complaint and Archives of Women's Culture

In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai (1988) discusses how communities assign values to certain objects or regimes of value as he calls them. This section specifically examines concepts central to how women's cultures create regimes of value in relation to certain texts.

Lauren Berlant, in *The Female Complaint* (2008), analyzes how women read texts and how communities assign regimes of value. Berlant's work specifically examines a genre of novels[77] aimed at women meant to define women's experiences. In an earlier work, Berlant (1988) describes the female complaint genre as a

> a mode of self-expression, it is an admission and a recognition both of privilege and powerlessness: it is a powerful record of patriarchal oppression, circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere. The a priori marking of female discourse as less serious is paradoxically the only condition under which the complaint mode can operate as an effective political tool: the female complaint allows the woman who wants to maintain her alignment with men to speak oppositionally but without fear for her position within the heterosexual economy-because the mode of her discourse concedes the intractability of the (phallocentric) conditions of the complaint's production (p. 243).

This definition concentrates on the genre's self-contained critique—one that allows a critique of female experiences patriarchal societies, but within the confines of romance. Berlant's book

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[77] Berlant's examples include Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Robert James Waller's *The Bridges Of Madison County*, and Edna Ferber's *Show Boat*.

(2008) on the subject of the female complaint published decades later, expands on this, highlighting the role of such texts as archives of women's experiences under patriarchy. Through these texts, she argues that women's culture "grows from such a sense of lateral identification: it sees collective sociality in revelations of what is personal regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy" (p. 10). This collective form of sociality created through female-coded texts is consistent throughout Berlant's work on the female complaint.

In focusing on the female complaint, Berlant also puts a spotlight on women's genres. For Berlant, genres are structure sets of ideals and expectations. In this regard, she describes femininity as a genre because the performance of femininity comes with its own set expectations. Taken together, genres, through identification, become modes through which readers recognize feelings and experiences. Through her analysis of the female complaint as a genre, Berlant frames criticism and women as readers. These forms of identification also help constitute what she calls intimate publics. According to Berlant (2008), intimate publics

> operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires. When this kind of 'culture of circulation' takes hold, participants in the intimate public feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions (p. 5).

In this particular description, it is important to note Berlant's focus on markets, consumption and circulation, because ultimately, the kind of interpellation that she describes occurs within the context of consumer culture. Moreover, she argues how belonging in the cultural formation of an intimate public is often about shared worldviews, common lived histories and emotional

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knowledge packaged in certain texts circulated within communities. In this case, these are worldviews, histories and knowledge mostly shared by women. Berlant identifies women's cultures, ones that were created as a result of sentimental and romantic novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Edna Ferber's *Show Boat* as examples of these. While more contemporary definitions have expanded on intimate publics to include women-in-games initiatives (Vossen, 2014), Berlant builds her characterization of intimate publics based on women's consumption of certain texts and cultures that emerged because of these texts that address women. And central to this is how texts created for women and how women's cultures function as archives of experiences.

De Kosnik (2015), by centering on genre and the compilation of female-centric narratives, builds upon Berlant's notion of womens' culture as an archive. She expands her examination beyond genre fiction to make an argument that women "can strike more than a bargain with femininity" (p. 121) through these archives. She then takes the example of fan fiction pointing out how fan fiction, in its ability to link similar stories together and at the same time connect these stories to other genres. These characteristics of fan fiction, she points out, allow alternative experiences beyond "the circular logic of normative femininity" (p. 122) and new forms of literacies that "open up myriad possibilities for identification, self-definition, and social consciousness that far exceed those repeatedly reinforced by Berlant's 'archive of women's culture'" (p. 124). While much of this view of fan fiction is certainly utopian, as it comments on a critical moment only when fan fiction has suddenly become mainstream and monetizable with EL James' *Fifty Shades of Gray*, these nonetheless describe the potential of women utilizing digital tools for resistance.

What I would then attempt to highlight in these next two chapters are the forms of these resistances and negotiations in framing otome games as an extension of the female complaint. For this chapter specifically, I look into how my interviewees define otome games, and describe their experiences playing otome games. These definitions and descriptions of player experiences highlight experiences as female gameplayers. In this way, the act of playing these games as female or non-binary individuals allows forms of critique that are in many ways, ontologically affective.

7.2 What is an Otome Game?: Female Spaces and Women as Genre Critics

All my 31 interviews with otome game players composed of fan bloggers, translators and game makers garnered a variety of definitions. Some of these varieties are listed in some examples below:

> **Tara**: "I would like to define otome games as a kind of choose your own adventure book that usually has a female protagonist and some sort of focus on romance."

> **Gabriele:** "An otome game is a game that is intended mostly for girls to play, with focus usually on heterosexual romance, but that can have other kind of elements like adventure, drama and comedy, and that, nowadays, can also have homosexual romance. It's common for otome games to have two or more bachelors (options of romance), but some can have only one. They are usually very fun and can give us unreal expectations of men and romance."

> **Joy:** "Visual novels with romance elements targeting female audiences, usually includes male love interests as the pursuable targets."

Amanda: "A game intended for girls and women that's focused on story and dialogue, where your player character can romance the other characters in the game. You put yourself into your main character--usually a lady—'s shoes and follow their adventures where their heart leads to."

Yona: "They're Japanese based dating simulation games."

Zenri: "Otome game is a dating simulation game in Japan that consist of you as the main character in the game trying to woo the guy of your choice to a happily ever after with you. It's an RPG game that requires answering question which depending on your choices can affect the ending to the story."

Charlee: "I just call them romance video games. Games that foreground relationships. Often with friends which is something I like about these games. Sometimes it's relationships with significant others, and at times it's relationships with themselves. But it is all about human interaction. In action I mean that such as the things that drive the narrative forward are focused on relationships. But just by calling it otome I feel like it orients it as Japanese. Sometimes it takes priorities and remixes these types of things. Calling it otome is ok and I don't really dispute that as a definition. But to the uninitiated, it's coming out of Japan, there are certain tropes that go with those things."

The most common aspects of these descriptive definitions tend to focus on the notion that it is a game for girls or women with some or a possible element of romance. While respondents mention that there is often romance involved, the frequency with which they talked about romance varied. Charlee's description, as seen above for example, centers on the relational

aspects of these games. But examining her framing of relationships in these games, she defines

them more broadly to include friendships as well as "relationships with significant others."

Romance, in Gabrielle's definition, also include "homosexual romance," thus making the

definition broader to include non-heterosexual relationships. Tara, in contrast, highlights

adventure, and similarly Gabrielle and Amanda mention adventure. A lot of the descriptions also

focus on story and choices. Others, such as Yona, Zenri and Joy's descriptions, try to define it

based on mechanics and pair them with other game types, such as visual novels, roleplaying

games or dating simulators. While almost everyone definitely does mention romance and/or the

dating simulation elements, a common aspect of these descriptions seems to be an

acknowledgement that it's not all romance. Jeanine, for example, points out, "Romance is

usually involved, but I don't think it's necessary." Similarly, Alyssa argues, "Many people

would think that otome games are mainly about romancing specific male characters in different

character routes, but I prefer to say that most otome games have deeper stories apart from

romance." This shifting importance of romance in a lot of these definitions indicate that romance

can act as a frame or as a form of containment to help include a lot of other elements mentioned,

such as adventures and the ability to play female player characters.

Noticeably, some participants acknowledge the performativity of defining otome games

for others, and this is particularly notable especially for those who maintain fan blogs. Tara, for

example, when asked to define otome games, replied, "Do you want the weeb definition or the

non-weeb definition?" Expanding on this further, she explains:

> "For non-weeb people, it's a dating sim. And they're like, 'Oh my God it's the naked
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> ones!' And I'm like, "No, no, no! There are R-rated ones, but usually it is a visual novel
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> or dating sim where it's one girl…and I say it's like a book that you can choose what

outcome you want for the non-Japanese people. When I talk to gamers, they're like 'Oh it's a maiden game. What does a maiden mean?' [raises eyebrow] And I go, 'it means female!" And they're like 'oh it's a dirty game…' [shakes head] 'It's not dirty!' But then the first dating sims are dirty so everybody pictures lonely dudes who play dating sims to get naked girls. That's what everybody pictures. Explaining otome games is hard if you get backlash. […] Otome games are classier. But the reaction I get is that it's always porn. Seriously, if I want porn I'll just watch actual porn."

Though she never really gave me the "weeb" definition, her acknowledgement of the performative aspect of defining otome games shows here. She expresses much annoyance at the fact that many "gamers" tend to dismiss games that she loves as porn. Though she points to the history of otome games and their connection to early bishoujo games, she claims that otome games are much more "classy." Her attempt to defend otome games to distinguish them from porn is to compare them to books, indirectly highlighting their literary aspect. Similarly, Tara, who is a game maker defines it as a "choose your own adventure book" as mentioned previously, explaining, "because your average person doesn't know what I'm talking about." Moreover, she expresses some apprehension about the growing popularity of otome games as similar to the popularity of fan fiction:

"It's good that it's becoming more popular. But it's like fan fiction. Because the bar for entry is so low, I can understand why some people can be like, 'Eww otome games. They're all rubbish'."

These examples emphasise respondents' awareness of how many people tend to link otome games with low culture. Thus, there's always a performative aspect to defining otome games.

Moreover, many descriptions, particularly those that attempt to isolate certain characteristics in otome games, indicate how a lot of these participants somehow construct otome games as a genre instead of a game category. Koorikko, a game maker, when asked about how she thinks about otome games as a label for the games she helped create such as *Cinderella Phenomenon*, mentioned that the games that she has created are otome games, and that she preferred to focus on this "genre." This reference to otome games as a "genre" than category is quite consistent among interviewees because one could read it as an act of positioning. Jeanine, for example, similarly describes otome games as, "a genre that I enjoy, that focuses on the heroine and her story, and those are the stories I want to tell." Noticeably, many others seem to also refer to otome games as genre in other conversations. This particular distinction is quite telling, particularly given that previously some have referred to otome games as a category not a genre. Thus, this makes participants' act of constructing otome games as a genre significant, because in doing so, position themselves as "experts."

Lauren Berlant (2008) mostly describes genre as an organizational device:

"a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. It mediates what is singular, in the details, and general about the subject. It is a form of aesthetic expectation with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications: it locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated" (p. 4).

Genres, by this definition, help structure feelings and a set of patterned expectations that organize a dialectical relationship between subjects who interpret these conventions, their feelings and their own experiences. In a lot of ways, they are placeholders of feelings and experiences, and they help establish a mode of interpretation. Notably, Berlant argues "femininity is a genre with deep affinities to the genres associated with femininity" (p. 3). Thus, for Berlant, women occupy positions as experts in the genres of romance and sentiment.

In relation to this study, what interests me is how participants recognize how the focus on romance in the genre position them as dominant audiences and indirectly as critics of genre. It highlights a form of positioning of women's culture, which sets these spaces coded as feminine as intimate publics. Berlant (2008) describes women's culture as a kind of intimate public. Intimate publics, she points out, operate via certain cultures of circulation:

> An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires. When this kind of culture of circulation takes hold, participants in the intimate public feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions. Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails: varieties of suffering and fantasies of transcendence; longing for reciprocity with other humans and the world; irrational and rational attachments to the way things are; special styles of ferocity and refusal; and a creative will to survive that attends to everyday situations while imagining conditions of flourishing within and beyond them.

This description illustrates the modes of connection of such communities, and these modes of connection are often personal and affective, even though some may not categorize these as overly political.

The notion of a feminine space in otome game play is present in the interviews. Various interviewees elaborate on them in different ways, some noting that romance helps code otome games as "women's media." Others point out how these create "feminine spaces." Charlee in her interview points out:

> "One of the things I like about these games is that is that it establishes a space—a feminine space. It doesn't necessarily have to be a woman's space but a space that foregrounds the relationships, the romantic experience, the building of relationships that doesn't necessarily just have to be for women, but having a female space is nice. I like being pandered to once in a while. There's space for men definitely, but it's nice to feel that you're not excluded."

What's interesting about this reflection is the notion that Charlee expects to be "pandered to." Through this, she also implies that in most forms of media women are often excluded. Interviewees seem to recognize the importance of these "feminine spaces" to varying degrees. The focus on feminine spaces foreground a key characteristic of intimate publics as "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection" (Berlant, xi). While participants have different experiences of otome games and otome game communities, notably people seem to share an expectation of belonging through these spaces.

A lot of participants also tend to insert critiques of certain games they play and highlight positive forms of representation. For example, when Chloe discusses *Nameless*, one of her favorite games, she notes the importance of female friendship and family in the game, and how oftentimes these stories about female friendship are often not featured in games that are mostly about heterosexual relationships with men. In another example, Charlee discusses the game *Collar x Malice*, which is a mystery otome game about a female police officer solving a series of murder cases in Shinjuku and about falling in love with other cops and detectives. She describes how the game proposes relationship building as an alternative approach to violence. In this discussion, she makes connections to gun control, mass shootings and police related violence in the US. She also argues that police work should also be about building relationships and communities. While the reference to social justice is rare in these interviews, the fact that they sometimes come up in discussions can indicate how some players may use otome games and the genre of romance as a space to discuss other matters that are important to them. Thus, it is also important to point out that otome game players do not experience otome games in isolation.

7.3 Otome Games as Continuations of Various Experiences

At the beginning of this study, I expected many of my participants to identify as otakus, gamers, romance readers, or fujoshis. Participants, when asked about these terms usually picked one or two of these labels, and some identified as none of these at all. While some would discuss growing up with anime or Japanese games, not everyone had this experience.

Some participants found otome games while playing Japanese games and these experiences are usually common with participants who indicate that they play in both Japanese and English:

Kookiro: "My first encounter with this genre was when I played P3P (Persona 3 Portable). It's not really considered an otome game but it has otome elements in it. I was so fascinated at the fact that you can date guys in a game so I made my research and found out that such a genre exists. I can't remember what my first otome game was since I binged played a lot of them after discovering the genre. Since then I've been playing otome games."

Jill: "I started importing videogames because I wanted to play Final Fantasy as soon as possible, and wanted to try the games that we didn't get in the West. I've always like romance novels and shoujo manga, and when I was on an import game site, I saw a game with a girl in the middle of several guys and tried it. The plot and writing was pretty basic, but it had a fun rhythm game built into it, and I got hooked on being able to choose who to romance (I often liked the 'wrong' guy in shoujo manga). After that I started ordering pretty much any otome game I could find, and then I found otome game magazines which I ordered because they had guides, and I wouldn't miss any releases."

Others found their first otome games while looking to find games with romance, often through previously playing games with romance or dating sim elements:

Zenri: "My first otome game was *Contract Marriage* by Arithmetic. I've always had an interest to games that had a relationship option in it like *Harvest Moon* series. So I was drawn into the otome game world from there I started playing other otome games and now I'm here posting walkthroughs for them with my team members."

Two Happy Cats: "I had played games with some dating sim elements such as *Fire Emblem Awakening*, but my first 'true' otome game was actually only in 2016 when I played *Mystic Messenger*, a Korean otome game. I downloaded the game as I had heard about it through my blog, and was going through a tough time in my personal life. In a bit of a strange (and maybe sad) way I didn't feel so lonely talking to this virtual 2D boys, it gave me a much needed escapism from real life and from then on I was hooked."

Nadia: "I was surprised to find that there is actually a fanbase for otome games, even back in the day. Before that I was just searching for 'dating games' and the like, and then I stumbled upon titles such as *Star Project*, *My Candy Love* and games by Pacthesis."

One participant linked her first otome game to her experiences playing girl games as a child.

Tara: "When I was little, there was this franchise called *Imagine Games* by Ubisoft back in the day. So when I was little the first otome game that I experienced was *Imagine Makeup Artist* and *Imagine Ice Championships*. So basically, it was like an otome game because you can do all these activities and you can romance a character. And those were always my favorite bit. So that was my first otome game experience. […] With the *Imagine* series, I can pretend who I wanted to be and it wasn't like…here was a boy. They just throw it in."

Upon looking up these games, I found that these titles were a series of games aimed at girls created in the mid 2000s. Thus, for Tara, one could surmise that this continues the experience of playing earlier examples of girl games.

Some simply wanted to play games with good stories:

Jane: "I think it was probably *Magical Diary*. I had read and enjoyed a few other visual novels, and then happened to come across that one on steam and thought it looked fun. I really liked how it had some puzzles and simulation elements as well as a good story."

Letitia: "My very first otome game is rather recent, and I think one of my first was *RE: Alistair ++*, an english otome game. I think I was searching for a short story driven game with romance and then stumble upon this."

Daya: "My first encounter was *My Candy Love*, I would say my first experience though was an otome game called *Contract Marriage*, to my knowledge it is no longer available to play, but I really loved how I was able to engage with the reading and make my own ending/choices. Make me feel very involved and as if I was really there. The story was different to what I was use to and made me interested to read everyday after. [...] Even if it is not real, nor really involves us, It actually kinda does. It's like a role play that you follow along to. I am glad I found otome games and that I can be involved. It's like making friends along the way and get to meet new people after you finished one adventure."

While these interviewees did not indicate which narrative-centric games they played prior to otome games, the connection on otome games as narrative games is interesting because they demonstrate how these interviewees see these as extensions of these experiences with narrative games.

A number of participants encountered their first otome games through interests in anime and manga, particularly female targeted:

Claire: "While I knew harem games for men were popular in Japan, I encountered the otome concept through manga and anime first (*Alice in the Country of Hearts*, from Yen Press, or *Diabolik Lovers* for anime). By researching them over the web and reading blogs, I became aware that the genre (''reverse harem'') was in fact a well-established niche in Japan called otome. From there on I hunted down games available (*Hakuouki* and *Sweet Fuse: At Your Side* from Aksys, Voltage games on mobile such as *Pirates in Love, My Sweet Bodyguard or My Forged Wedding*); though those first games were not my favorite, the concept of them (a game with simple controls where the focus and goal is to romance a guy) had me hooked for more. I had finally found my type of game and I knew that I'd never tire of it."

Alyssa: "I learned about otome games after I watched *La Corda d'Oro* and was told that it actually started as a 'game for girls' I wanted to play the game back then but I didn't know enough Japanese to be able to understand the game. Years later, a friend introduced me to indie otome games made with Renpy. I already forgot the first Renpy otome game I ever played, but I do remember that the first full Japanese otome game I ever played was *Hakuouki* (in English). When I was self-studying Japanese, I first tried playing *Hiiro no Kakera* (in Japanese)."

Anne: "I study Japanese since middle school and I've always been into video games and my primary goal originally was to play video games in Japanese and watch anime that hasn't been translated in English. I was really very nerdy already. And I think I just read magazines and things, sort of saw these games and just got really interested in them and started buying *Dengeki Girl's Style* and magazines when I studied abroad in Japan. And then through that seeing it in media or posters in Japan."

Notably too, Tara, describes another early encounter with otome games with DVDs of anime adaptations of *Angelique*, which introduce game-like elements in the DVD special features, such as reproducing situations with otome game characters and being able to watch parts of the anime with these characters.

Still others were thrilled to find dating games that target female players:

Joy: One of the first I played that I vividly remembered was *Wonderland Day Sim Dates*. I didn't think much about it back then beyond the excitement that there was dating sim targeting female players too, since I got to know the genre first from Love Hina bootleg dating sim.

Charlee: I think I bought *Hakuoki* because it is really easy to get. And I wanted one because I know there were smooching video games out there but I didn't want one that was porn. Those weren't my favorites, those things are made for dudes anyway. So I said, smooching samurai sounds alright. I picked up the recent one that was split into two things but does not have the guys breathing creepily. I liked it because it was not super romancy but it was mostly historical stuff.

For these players above, otome games continue a lot of media created with women in mind. Notably, in those descriptions, romance seem to be at the center of those women-centered media. This understanding of being addressed as women will be something I will discuss further, as I discuss my interviewees discussions on representation on these games.

Regardless, the variety of these first encounters with otome games point to the fact that otome games are parts of various assemblages whether that it is part of the anime media mix

(Steinberg 2012) or game culture (Taylor, 2009). But they also speak volumes of how we perceive games. In *A Play of Bodies* (2018), Brendan Keogh illustrates how games are "conduits between a broader spectrum of media and forms" (p. 195). In a lot of ways, several of my interviewees discussing their experiences of otome games alongside various media forms show games' messy relationships with other media forms. Thus, playing otome games should be examined alongside these other media and practices related to those media forms, because in a lot of ways, otome games continue people's experiences with other media, especially female-centric media as seen in several examples.

7.4 Interim: A Reflection on Player Interviews

Through all my interviews above, I observed that my interviewees were all enthusiastic coming into the interviews. In live interviews particularly, in the lab and via Skype, interviewees brought games to show me. Tara, for example, walked me through her entire collection via Skype. Charlee showed me a number of games she played in her phone. Anne showed me several character merchandize[78] from Japan that she bought in relation to some game titles that we were discussing. Panda brought snacks and drinks[79] that featured in some of the games that we were discussing that we ate while discussing these games.

A lot of these interviews, including the one I described in my introduction ran for hours. With some completely deviating from the question list in favor of interviewees demonstrating some of their experiences in some of these games, and long discussions of their experiences— both the parts they find enjoyable and annoying about these games and playing these as women.

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[78] These included posters, books, audio material and other merchandize that featured some of her favorite games and favorite characters in these games.
[79] These snacks included *Honey Butter Chips* and *Dr. Pepper* that featured in the game Mystic Messenger which we were both playing at the time.

My interview with Naja as described in the introduction of this chapter is probably the best example of that. Observably, I found myself laughing with them on tropes that are ridiculous in these games, but also squirming alongside them when discussing some problematic tropes that will be discussed in the following section.

Regardless, in a lot of these interactions, my interviewees expressed that it is not everyday that they could directly talk about otome games to another female identifying person who also played them. Thus, in all these interactions there was camaraderie in the sense that as a woman who played through these games, I could understand all the narrative conventions they discussed in detail--that could identify with these experiences and sympathize with all their joys and frustrations with these games.

In a lot of ways, the tone of my interviews reflects the politics of sentimentality that Berlant (2008) argues about in *The Female Complaint*, especially in how women's texts create modes of identification. Otome games created this mode of identification for my interviewees and myself. As Berlant argues:

> "the turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal. In this imaginary world the sentimental subject is connected to others who share the same sense that the world is out of joint, without necessarily having the same view of the reasons or solutions" (p. 21).

As women and marginalized folks interpellated by otome games, these interactions with my interviewees underscore a wish for less conflicted gameworlds—for games that would address us all better as players. Though these modes of identification can help create connections and

communities, in some ways too, they are limited because they have a tendency to universalize emotions and experiences.

Conversations on topics such as race, for example, were very limited and mostly occurred with other women I talked to such as Naja. Naja, for example, brings up the subject of how black and brown people are barely represented in otome games. Daya discusses making games as an indigenous person as a way of creating representation of themselves. Yona argues about how important it is for her to talk about Native rights in her own blog because these are important to her. But these discussions seem to be exceptions, because most participants did not bring up the subject of race. The universalization of feelings and experiences at times ignores intersections such as race, class or physical ability. While my interviewees and I share in these joys and frustrations, how one views the sense of structural inequalities in these games may vary from person to person. These ideas are what I will continue to analyze in the following sections.

7.5 "Self-Inserted": Players Discuss Representation

My respondents offer different reasons for liking otome games. Some indicate that they like certain games for the art, story or gameplay mechanics. The interviewees' preferences in terms of date-able characters also varied, with some liking cartoonish yanderes or megane characters. Others indicated that they preferred games that offered them non-binary romance options. Many players also play differently—some are completionists, and some only play certain routes. Finding commonalities on game preferences and how people play them is near impossible given the diverse ways people play these games on various platforms, contexts and experiences with games. However, what stands out from my conversations with these individuals is how many tend to criticize many games in the category for their use of sexist tropes, and how they vocalize the need for better female player characters.

A number of interviewees expressed strong opinions about otome game heroines and sexist otome game tropes. Zenri indicates:

> "I'm not too fond of how the protagonist in most otome games are portrayed, be it female or male. They tend to always be weak and needing help. Otome game protagonists are damsels in distress and I hate that that's a common theme in these games. I'd like to actually see a strong protagonist that can take care of themselves without needing help from their significant other."

Also commenting on heroines, Two Happy Cats points out the portrayal of heroines as blushing maidens, and enumerates some depictions of abuse in otome games and how that is often written as acceptable behavior. Pandora confesses that gendered interactions caused her to stop playing otome games at some point:

> "One of the reasons why I have fallen out of playing these games is because I found the romantic and social interactions to be too gendered. I have trouble relating to it personally because it's what I like in my own romance. I feel like I get bored when I'm playing them. It's like, Ok I've heard this before, please think of me as a person."

At times, there's a certain cultural relativism in a lot of these discussions especially when discussing particular tropes, these I will discuss in a later section, especially to reflect about how some of my interviewees create certain discourses on the "Japaneseness" of some of these games. Regardless, they also come up when some interviewees discuss female characters, especially female player characters. Elsewhere in the interview, she also reflects on how this may relate to how different cultures might privilege certain forms of femininity:

"I mean, for sure. I don't want to speak too much on it because it is like outside my culture a bit, so I feel that it is not totally my place to say it, but like I feel like there's a lot of women putting up with a lot of abusive behavior from men. The women characters are not really people very much of the time. Sometimes they're just very feminine. Sometimes that's just their personally, but often they're self-inserted. And I feel really powerless. And I'm like, 'Oh my God! Please do something! This is not how I would react in this situation!' I think there's also a strong reinforcement of a certain kind of femininity is which is nice in comparison to American media, which is kind of dismissive of femininity and kind of hypermasculine, but I think it can also be problematic when it's kind of the norm. There's always that guy who's like, 'Don't walk home alone. You're a girl. You should be better at cooking. You're a girl.' It seems something far removed from my reality."

Self-insert characters tend to be mentioned in several interviews such as these as a type of player character people do not like. Self-insert characters tend to broadly defined in the larger otome game community as those types of characters who have little in the way of personality. They are characters intentionally written to be bland so players can supposedly project more into them. But these also tend to get a lot of criticism from my interviewees especially given that these characters also have a tendency to tolerate behavior from male characters that many find to be abusive. Likewise, Myxprint also comments that self-insert heroines just do what their suitors want them to do, "It's not as fun to play an MC [main character] who's wanting to do that." These criticisms of self-insert heroines tend to indicate that problematic gender tropes break any kind of narrative immersion and can give one a feeling of powerlessness.

What's interesting through these interactions is how almost many of my participants approached these discussions with humor. Panda, Anne, Charlee and Naja notably all invoked humor in these discussions. In Naja's interview, for example, she joked about how kidnapping and non-consensual things tend to be a theme in many games. She also points out how one could almost take pleasure in how ridiculous the tropes are. These interactions demonstrate how the use of humor is a form of critique and resistance. Numerous scholars have pointed out humor's affective functions. Berlant and Ngai (2017) both argue about how comedy, in its use of carnival[80], has ways of dispelling social anxieties, and disrupting social hierarchies while also enabling contradictions. Feminist scholars also note these as forms of resistance (Bilger, 1998; Sunden & Passonen, 2019).

The preference for stronger heroines was common in these interviews. However, the definition of what is considered a strong heroine varied from player to player. While some players define strong characters as those who can "take care of themselves" or characters who "kick ass," some also point out that vulnerability can at times make a strong female character. Chloe points out a certain dichotomy between doormat characters and kickass heroines and that strong characters can be found in between these two extremes in her discussion of the *Nameless*' player character:

> "There is so much in between those two. In *Nameless*, she had a spunk about her but not sassing everyone or punching anyone in the face, and she had some vulnerability in her once in a while."

In this particular description, it is notable that she also illustrates that vulnerability is important in what she sees as a strong female character. Many other extended discussions point to the

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[80] Berlant and Ngai (2017) uses Banktin's carnival to theorize humor.

complexity in how many players define the characteristics of strong female characters. Others point out that they do not always expect their heroines to be strong, a number of interviewees admitted to selecting games where the heroine has a distinct personality and some agency.

These indicate how many otome game players do desire to identify with characters-- because they want to see themselves and their choices reflected in those games, even if they do not always expect them to be fulfilled. Adrienne Shaw (2015), in writing about identification, indicates that it is not always a driving force for media consumption, so when representation is done right, it is always "nice when it happens." In the case of otome game players, while a number of players may still continue playing games that may have problematic content, representation becomes more important especially if the category was meant to represent them and their desires in the first place. Notably, there's a sense of cruel optimism in the discussion of these expectations. Berlant (2011) defines cruel optimism as an attachment to things that may be impossible to obtain. In this case, this comes in the almost impossible hope of someday, games will represent marginalized players better. Nonetheless, player expectations on good representation hearkens back to the expectation of an intimate public (Berlant 2008) to find their experiences and desires well-represented. The notion of representation also becomes much more complicated when players link these problematic tropes to Japan.

7.6 How Otome Game Players Talk about Japaneseness
Most interviewees can trace otome games' origins from Japan. A lot of interviewees can name *Angelique* (1994) as the first otome game and cite other otome games in the 90s alongside it, such as *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side*. This is hardly surprising, since many otome game focused blogs focus on relating this type of information. While interviewees' interactions with these blogs varies, many interviewees said that they are aware of these first otome games from

Japan either from these blogs or having heard it from other communities online. However, despite this, interviewees rarely talk about the "Japaneseness" of these games.

The times that the games' Japaneseness does come up is when they notice tropes in these games that they don't often find in North American media. For example, Charlee, in her extended definition of otome games, points to their orientation towards Japan and tropes she finds within Japanese media:

"But just by calling it otome I feel like it orients it as Japanese. Sometimes it takes priorities and remixes these types of things. Calling it otome is ok and I don't really dispute that as a definition. But to the uninitiated, it's coming out of Japan, there are certain tropes that go with those things. I feel like romance video games does not have to be beholden to the Japanese trope but there are definitely tropes that go with the otome game. Things that you can expect. By tropes I don't necessarily mean a cliche or a bad thing. Certainly, certain types of things are covered over and over But I have not read many romance novels that have a childhood friend. Seriously, there's hell of a lot of childhood friends in otome games. And they're like, 'we fell in love from five and I haven't seen you in twenty years and I like you.' And they're like they've 'forgotten but now I remember we saw each other in a field of flowers'…This is not something that shows up in Western romance novels. But come on, that happens over and over again. Those kinds of tropes appear in otome games and they don't exist in other places."

Most references to Japan tend to link problematic tropes to ideas about women in Japan. In reflecting about these problematic tropes in otome games, Ashly reflects:

"I think what we see in otome games is a reflection of the culture of those who made the game. Since I play mostly Japanese otome games, what I see is a representation of the Japanese culture. Thus, I don't think that there is a need to question the tropes we see in otome games; what we need to question is why the Japanese culture tolerates those tropes."

Similarly, Cecilia notes:

"There's tons of problematic stuff in most otome games. It's no secret that Japan as a culture is less interested in women being self-sufficient or interesting in terms of equality in jobs, pay, and family duties. […] That's why I believe there are mostly games about high school age girls, and not many about college-aged or older women. Though to get philosophical, it may be a general bias towards youth in Japan – there aren't many videogame or manga protagonists older than 25. In terms of sexuality and gender, yes again there's lots of problematic stuff. One of my most popular posts (and my only troll!) was on a post where I said 18+ otome games suck. My view was that the restrictive view on women's sexuality and the existing male gaze of hentai came through in 18+ otome games way too much. Also, homosexuality/gender issues are still not dealt with well usually, though I'm not an expert."

In all of these mentions, one thing that's notable is that these participants tend to try to resist essentializing these games as Japanese, but somehow fall back on them when it comes to discussing tropes. Often what counts as "Japanese" are things that they rarely experience outside Japanese media. This particular notion on falling back to particular tropes and discussions of "Japaneseness" certainly parallel studies that show how some players may essentialize

Japaneseness (Consalvo, 2015). They echo the role of interpretative communities in creating discourses of "Japaneseness" (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011).

However, in this case, I do wish to focus on the gendered nature of these discussions of Japaneseness, especially given that these do come up in player critiques of what they note as sexist tropes in the games that they play. Oftentimes, these answers come alongside discussions of how they want more nuanced representations of women in otome games. Consalvo (2015), in *Atari to Zelda*, notes how Japanese games can become gateways to experience Japanese culture. In this case, though, Japanese games seem to occupy one segment in a wider discussion of diversity and representation in games. Thus, these discussions point to a form of, what Mica Nava (2007) calls as visceral cosmopolitanism—which is a type of cosmopolitanism that is linked to "structures of feeling" and everyday life. Nava's case studies of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century urban life point to how gender factors into how women may engage with and appropriate cultures deemed as "other" oftentimes as a form of resistance. This kind of appropriation and resistance is present in these critiques of otome games, and they point to how it is important to consider ways certain discourses of Japaneseness can also develop to archive women's disappointment with gendered representations. At the same time, it is important to note how this kind of resistance is much more heavily linked to white womanhood. Saraswati (2013) discusses how cosmopolitanism is ultimately compatible with various constructions of whiteness because whiteness is almost always readily transnationalized. Thus, this form of appropriation and resistance, in some ways can be limited because they center white womanhood's forms of resistances. By shifting the blame on Japanese culture, it limits its critique on how patriarchy can operate in various cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the discourses above also illustrate the limits of this form of archiving of women's experiences as resistances because they assume a universality of experiences. Berlant (2008) argues:

> "when sentimentality meets politics, it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically. Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy" (p. 41).

Universality ignores intersections, and in this way, limits its critique. These passive forms of empathy usually do little work in dismantling the structures its attempts to critique.

7.7 Conclusion: Appropriating the Female Complaint

The female complaint is not without its problems. As a way of containing discourses of womens' disappointments, Berlant points out how it does have its strengths in archiving womens' experiences and envisioning women as experts of genre. However, this form of archiving has its own problems in the way it universalizes women's experiences and ignores intersections. In this way, this points to a form of negotiated agency.

My interviewees certainly demonstrated all of these in their ways of positioning themselves as genre critics, in their use of humor in critiques and various ways they discussed the games' "Japanenseness." The appropriation of otome games within the female complain genre illustrates forms of resistance as women create spaces for themselves to discuss issues that matter to them personally, and as a way of contributing towards the argument for better

representation for women in games. What may count as better representation though, may vary from person to person. Discourses of "Japaneseness," and the near lack of discussions on race in these discussions complicate these critiques. In my next chapter, I analyze bloggers and fan translation groups as interpretative communities and expand on the notion of negotiated agency as bloggers and fan translators talk about their own labor.

VIII.   Chapter 7: Growing the Otome Game Market: Fan Labor, Circulation and Otome Game Communities Online

This chapter looks into the practices of fan blogging in the distribution of otome games outside of Japan. I explore motivations, norms and expectations around otome games as discussed by fan bloggers and fan translators within the otome game community. Examining the practice of fan blogging can offer insights on the complex negotiations between fans and game industries to allow the entry of certain niche titles into global markets. In the case of otome game fan blogging, the ability to shape discourses surrounding the games that one loves also hinges upon being good consumers.

8.1 Notes on Methodology

While the larger project collects interview data from a larger number of interviews that include bloggers, fan translators, and indie game makers, this chapter presents the data from fan bloggers. Their demographic data is listed below (Figure 8-1):

Figure 8-1. Basic Demographic Information on Otome Games Blogger Participants.

Participant	Country of Residence	Racial Identification	Age	Occupation
Anne	Australia	White	31	Student
Pandora	Canada	White	27	Student
Claire	Canada	White	Not specified	Not specified
Giselle	Brazil	White	24	Student
Jane	Canada	White	25	Not specified

Tara	USA	White	21	Student
Charlee	Canada	White	37	Writing specialist (higher education)
Yona	USA	White and Native American	25	Fraud detection
Myxprint	USA	White	23	Cat groomer, baker, pet specialist
Zenri	Philippines	Asian	24	Student
Two Happy Cats	Australia	White	23	Student
Cecilia	White	White	27	Student
Alyssa	Asian	Asian	24	Student
Jill	Canada	White	40	Finance manager
Naja	USA	Black	29	Pharmaceuticals

Although the larger study is racially and geographically much more diverse[81] most bloggers from this sample come from predominantly Anglophone regions or areas where English is at least a strong second language. Moreover, the predominance of white women in this data set reflects how this demographic tend to be the most vocal in voicing issues about otome games and cultures around otome games outside Japan.

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[81] While the bloggers interviewed mostly come from USA, Canada and Australia, game creators and translators interviewed for the other chapters come from Bangladesh, South Africa, Vietnam, Singapore and Russia.

Interviews involved two sections[82]. Questions in the first part primarily addressed the interviewees as otome game players. Most questions dwelt on how they define and describe otome games, their game preferences, and how they play these games. The second set of questions dealt with how they define the practice of blogging and about creating material for their blog. More specifically, I asked them questions about how they started their blogs, what their favorite posts are like, who they think their readers are and how they position themselves in the wider otome game community. While in live interviews I was able to immediately ask follow-up questions, written interviews relied on email correspondence for clarification and additional questions. Interview data was transcribed and matched with my interview notes. I coded and classified patterns in interview responses. Interestingly, answers to both sets of questions, as will be noted later in this chapter, are not mutually exclusive, as both player and blogger identities tend to blur the boundaries between work and play.

8.2 Interpretative Communities and Labor

Audience studies and fan studies have both tackled ways of characterizing how readers collaboratively read texts in the form of interpretative communities (Ang, 1985; Bennet & Woollacott, 1987; Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984). Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance* is the most pertinent to this study. Radway begins with a critical feminist examination of the romance novel industry and romance literature. However, it is her interviews with a specific romance novel reading group that show how these readers find multiple points to resist patriarchy, despite having more or less conservative beliefs about romance and relationships. Focusing on interpretative communities foregrounds the social aspect of interpretation and possible resistance, one that also is observed in ethnographic work mostly in player communities

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[82] See Appendix B for the questionnaire I used.

composed of "non-gamers" (Shaw, 2013) or predominantly female player communities (Consalvo & Begy, 2015). During this phase of my study, I continually noticed the similarities in otome game player communities' resemblance to Radway's book clubs, particularly in how the members of both groups participated in circulating these texts via recommendations and the way they attempted to shape discourses surrounding their beloved texts.

Literature in fan studies also points to the commercialization of fan spaces, describing "an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 1). Studies on fan labor point out particular gendered hierarchies, especially as gift economies and fan labor are continually being co-opted (Busse, 2013; De Kosnik, 2009; Hellekson, 2009; S. Scott, 2015). In this way, fan labor can be framed as a feminist concern and should be tied to analyses of the gendering of digital labor (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Duffy, 2015; Jarrett, 2014).

Game studies also have long explored immaterial labor. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009), for example, included a generalized history of how gender plays into the professionalization of video game labor—not only by limiting the participation and representation of women within games and game industries, but also by rendering invisible certain forms of work, such as emotion work. Many other studies provide analyses of specific cases of gendered game labor in production, promotion, spectatorship, and cocreation (Harvey & Fisher, 2015; Huntemann, 2013; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009). Echoing McRobbie's (2004) and Gill's (2008) critiques of the postfeminist media culture, which recenters women's agency toward heteronormativity and consumer culture, game scholars have pointed out the existence of postfeminist ethos in games designed with female players in mind (Anable, 2013;

Chess, 2012, 2017; Harvey, 2018; Vanderhoef, 2013), as well as in digital game production (Harvey and Fisher, 2015). Moreover, studies have noted how player communities have shaped discourses around "Japanese games" (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011) and how players themselves have contributed to bringing Japanese games to the West, at times through nonofficial channels (Consalvo, 2016).

For my contribution to these bodies of work, I seek to realign the work of predominantly female interpretative communities with studies on game labor and fan labor in order to think about how players and fans position themselves. Taking an intersectional feminist lens (Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991), I also consider how gender, race, nationality, and/or class may factor into how players talk about otome games and their work around otome games. If taken together in analyzing how fans talk about their own work, perhaps one could find ways of seeing forms of negotiated agency in the way female fans may talk about their own work.

8.3 Sharing Otome Games to the World: Why Otome Game Players Start Blogs

The earliest known otome game-focused blogs date to the late 2000s. Even so, most bloggers interviewed for this project can trace the history of otome games to Japan in the 1990s, with a number being able to name *Angelique* as the very first otome game created. However, this is not too surprising considering that some of the first fan blogs were created for the specific purpose of telling the world about otome games.

Cecilia started her blog in 2008. She wrote English-language reviews of Japanese otome games. She narrates,

Cecilia: "I wanted to talk about all the games that I was playing that no one else was playing, or I wanted to talk more, and I wanted to talk about the characters that I loved, which were often not the most popular."

Notably, her compiled list of reviews and games on multiple platforms was one of the most comprehensive lists of otome games from 2000 to the mid-2010s. She is also one of the few reviewers to date who writes on games rated 18+.

Similarly, Pandora began EnglishOtomeGames.net around 2011, pointing out how little information about otome games in English existed online at that time. She started her site to help people know more about otome games. For this, she started compiling lists of otome games, as well as games that she though were similar to otome games, including games with dating-sim elements, such as the *Persona series* and *Dragon Age*. As the list grew, she also started posting specifically about otome games, new otome game releases, as well as kick-starter campaigns to garner support for the groups creating otome games. Further, she began conducting surveys on her site, posing questions such as players' age groups, game preferences, preferred playing platform, and other questions related to otome games and player practices. This information is still available on her site and is accessible to player communities and developers alike. After some time, companies and otome game makers started contacting her to provide information about their games that she could post on her site. Eventually, her site became a revenue source for her.

Other respondents indicated they started blogs to write about otome games for specific reader communities. Charlee, for example, reports starting her blog for her friends who love reading about romance:

Charlee: "My friends were constantly asking me about these games: what do you play? How do I play? And I would also post jokes about them on my Facebook. And my friends were like: we would really like for you to start a blog…I was like: that sounds like a lot of effort and they were like, please? So I started a blog. …My friends are like, what should I play? I'm into wizards. Right now I am working on an entry about guys with eye patches. And romanceable cats. Do you like cats? If you're interested in cats, I have a lot of cats. [Proceeds to name all the dateable cats in otome games.] A lot of the work I do in my blog is finding stuff for my friends. But also putting it out there that in some of these…there's most likely going to be a guy who's going to push you off the wall. And oh, pay attention to the parts that are rapey, so others can just pass that…"

From this comment, one could gather that Charlee primarily writes about otome games in the vein of other forms of romance reading. In comparison to many of the other blogs listed here, her blog has a smaller readership of friends of friends of friends, as she called it, in comparison to many other blogs described previously. Similar to Pandora's site, Charlee's blog maintains a community and, to a smaller extent, archives of humorous content from otome games. Because she is writing for her friends, she also posts content warnings on her blog to alert readers to content some may want to avoid. Such recommendations denote a sense of intimacy within this form of exchange.

The content on otome game-focused blogs, or blogs with sections or numerous posts about otome games, tend to vary from reviews, translated promotional material from Japanese game magazines with otome game content, or drama CD content particularly related to otome gaming, and walkthroughs to individual reflections about otome games and industries around otome

games. While many of my respondents write about otome games that are localized to English or created originally in English, a number of bloggers also write about Japanese exclusives in the hope that those games they write about could be selected for future localization. Claire, who writes walkthroughs and translations on her site, argues about how translations can work as promotional material for games:

> **Claire:** "Translations help [the] audience become aware of a game/drama CD and verify if they might want to support it by reading its content. My translations project in particular helps my audience discover products that cater to tastes similar to my own. Since those tend to be less popular, I received messages thanking me for picking X project since they lost hope of ever knowing what it was about."

She also translates this content and creates polls on translation projects.

Because very few game sites pick up otome games for review, the work of these respondent bloggers helps provide otome games visibility. Cecilia, for example, translates otome game news from Japan and writes reviews of otome games in both Japanese and English. In her interview, she argues that through her reviews and translations, "I can get other people excited about games I'm interested." While reviews definitely help promote otome games, some bloggers also tend to think about writing reviews as a way of keeping a personal record of the games they have played. Alyssa reflects, "I started blogging about otome games so I can properly log my thoughts about the games I played." Some interviewees indicated that they started their blogs to amplify other people's content. Claire, for example, writes blogs for this reason but also stated that she started her blog as a way of keeping track of otome game news.

Some sites focus on walkthroughs. Blah-Bidy-Blah, for example, is primarily a walkthrough site maintained by a team of bloggers. Zenri notes that she initially wrote walkthroughs for another site until she started her own. Currently, Blah-Bidy-Blah is maintained by a team of five members, with each member focusing on designated game titles or specific game categories.[83] Regarding how walkthroughs help other otome game players, particularly those who play on mobile, she writes,

> "It's really hard for some people to play these games on their own the first time and get a good ending, especially since most games these days require people to buy with real money and is very time consuming. So, I'd like to think that our site and all other sites similar to ours that post up walkthrough guides encourage viewers to play more of the otome games. Our walkthrough guide help people achieve a good play through without having to waste time re doing a character route again for the better ending and it helps save money for those that cannot afford to spend money on otome games."

Myxprint, who also writes for Blah-Bidy-Blah, similarly discusses how writing walkthroughs becomes a means of sharing with the wider community a means of information to help other players achieve satisfying endings. At the same time, she indicates how walkthroughs are ways of promoting games, pointing out how some gaming companies publish their own walkthroughs to help players. Notably, the majority those interviewed for this project indicated that they themselves use walkthroughs to varying degrees.

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[83] Zenri, for example, is the site's designated *yaoi* writer in addition to creating the walkthroughs on specific games.

Some otome game blogs circulate fan fiction written around otome games as well as other fan work. Tara's and Giselle's blogs, for example, contain fan fiction on otome games. Tara narrates that one of the things that motivated her decision to post fan fiction on her blog is the notion of revising relationships in otome games, particularly those that she deemed problematic. As a result, she has rewritten heroines in otome games to give them more agency and occasionally adding lesbian relationships, which are often lacking in otome games. She argued, "Fan fiction writers are here for the fantasy and I write something that I want to read." Although this notion of the fix fic is not new (Lee 2011), what is notable about the way Tara spoke about her fan fiction and her readers is her desire for changing gendered discourses in otome games.

Not all otome game bloggers write exclusively about otome games, and not all their content on otome games is published on their own blogs and sites. Zenri, for example, also writes about *yaoi* games (i.e., games on boys' love or romances between male characters) on *Blah-Bidy-Blah*. Anne, who writes about otome games outside her blog, posts frequently about Japanese popular culture in general. Similarly, Two Happy Cats, maintains her site primarily for otome game reviews, walkthroughs, and news, but also blogs about other anime and manga categories. Yona, whose blog contains her own art, fan art, and fan fiction on otome games (mostly on the game *Ikemen Sengoku*), notes that the site is a good venue to discuss other things that matter to them. They point out:

> "On my main blog, I'll talk about whatever is pertinent to my life--especially Native rights. I think this fits along fine with otome gaming because there are real people playing these games, and they should also be informed."

The discussion of racial representations in otome games is exceedingly rare in otome games or even among otome game players. While many tend to point out problematic gendered

representations within otome game communities and in these interviews, Yona and Naja are some of the few who brought race into the discussion.[84] Naja started her blog in 2015. While her blog mostly has game reviews, some of her most popular posts are those that discuss race and representation in otome games, addressing issues such as tokenism and racial coding in otome games. She also writes extensively on how she sees otome games as a woman of color, and how to design characters of color for otome games based on conversations she's had with game designers. While there are otome game bloggers who talk about race in otome games, most other mentions of race in otome games and otome game blogging tend to be passing mentions. The silence of most interviewees on the subject of race not only indicates white privilege, but also indicate particular fandom rules and truisms (Pande 2019) especially when discussing sensitive subjects such as race. These are points I will further expand on my discussion of how interviewees discuss piracy.

Some bloggers indicate personal reasons for starting their blogs. Two Happy Cats recounts how she started her blog:

> "I started my blog on the 31 August 2015, I had just come back from a 6 months exchange to the UK and pretty much came back home to no friends, and nothing to do. I was feeling pretty miserable and one of my friends in the UK was talking about her own blog, so I figured I might as well make one."

Anne similarly indicates how moving geographically for her PhD studies factored into how the blog was started:

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[84] Interestingly, the two nonwhite women did not mention race during the interview, but some tension was noticed when they discussed the politics of playing games and writing in English.

"I started it in 2010 or 2011. Long ago. I can't remember. After I moved to Australia because I was a bit bored and lonely, and I thought that I could start writing about the things I like, and I can hopefully make some friends in the internet. I really like writing so I wanted an outlet. And I quickly decided that I didn't just want to write about whatever, because it was too broad, so I narrowed it to Japanese media, nerdy media basically, and now I like to think about it as a site, where I target a niche fan or niche media, and make it more welcoming to women in particular. So I want to talk about media that would appeal to women like me hopefully."

In many ways, these stories indicate how fan communities allow intimate forms of connection, especially for people who migrate and relocate. This demonstrates not only how fandoms are cultural contact zones, as Chin and Morimoto (2017) described them, but also how these contact zones can create support for individuals. In the case of the otome game community, these spaces are where women can find other women—oftentimes outside their country of residence—who also play otome games. Although this is not always the case, as some players have noted some experiences where some of their discussions online turned toxic,[85] the expectation exists that one can find safe spaces to discuss games in their own blogs with other women.

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[85] For instance, some participants noted that the easiest ways for conversations to turn toxic is to bring up piracy or the game *Diabolic Lovers*, which tended to trigger reactions from fans and anti-fans alike. Numerous fans disapprove of many non-consensual interactions in the game. These fans consider romances in this game to be highly problematic. Some fans take the criticism a step further and criticize people who like such problematic romances implying that there's something wrong about people who love playing romances that are problematic. In reality, some interviewees who claim to like *Diabolik Lovers* and similar romances considered to be problematic actually understand that much of the content is problematic, and that they love those romances because they are problematic. Discussions on liking romances in *Diabolik Lovers* mirror larger discussions on "problematic ships" other fandoms such as *Star Wars*' Reylo (Rey and Kylo Ren) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Anastasia and Christian Grey). See Mason (2019)

8.4 Issues Related to the Localization of Otome Games, Fans, and Communities

Contact with localization companies tend to vary among bloggers. Some bloggers operate independently, while others discussed working with companies. Otome game companies tend to contact blogs with a large number of followers. For example, Pandora receives requests from companies to post their games on her site. Two Happy Cats indicated that one company contacted her once to correct information about its game. Others, such as the writers of Blah-Bidy-Blah, have contacted companies on their own, offering their support in promoting game titles. Noticeably, a number of bloggers, particularly those who work with otome game companies, tend to blur the dichotomies of work and play when discussing their own playing and the content writing for the blog. For example, Myxprint indicated how she often selects games and character routes to play, depending on walkthroughs that she will write and the availability of walkthroughs online for each game. Those activities also are related to forming relationships with developers. Myxprint elaborates on this practice:

> "I'll play games from any developer from any plotline, mainly because I want to be the first to write the walkthrough for it and I want to experience with the developer as they grow in community and have that opportunity to introduce it to those that I already speak to in my community, or our community as I probably should say. Because it's fun to grow with the company."

Similarly, Pandora describes blogging as work, noting how her site provides a source of income for her.

Regarding fan following, the practices among these blogs tend to vary, with many interviewees agreeing on how their activities and their blogs are vital to the survival of otome games for English language players and the English language market. Claire argues,

"Fan blogs contribute to the growth of the otome market the same way Gothic Lolita blogs contributed to the Japanese brands offering international shipping a few years ago. By blogging about it, you create awareness; more awareness brings more fans; more fans means more customers, and more customers means more money for the industry, enough that companies take notice (be it as localizations or indie teams trying their hands at it). If the demand is high enough, companies take fan's responses into account."

Some interviewees point out that they would not have played otome games if not for other otome game bloggers. Alyssa reflects,

"I think fan blogs help people learn more about otome games and ultimately nudge them to try playing the genre. I myself wouldn't delve deeper into this hobby if not for Hinano's otome game reviews which I loved reading 7 or 6 years ago."

Pandora discusses how fan blogs help create public opinion, "I think fan blogs in general, particularly ones that are more personal or review oriented—definitely help create a particular atmosphere for the community, and help cultivate general opinion." Giselle notes that blogs also are useful in circulating warnings:

"I think fan blogs, including mine, contribute in the market and culture in a kind of person-to-person advertising alongside with a feeling of 'quality control', warning people about trigger elements, and helping people keep track of new releases."

These comments point to how otome game blogs tend to create a form of circulation that relies on individual recommendations in a way similar to how Radway (1984) describes how romance reading benefits from book clubs.

What also is notable among these interviews is how many participants seem to express their work as a way of sharing to the wider otome game community. Studies in fan cultures point to how fandoms are gift economies (see, e.g., see Hellekson, 2009; S. Scott, 2009; Turk, 2014). Gifting becomes a way of creating communities and defining status and distinction within these communities. Although much of the content discussed are paratexts around otome games, these texts are an important means of distributing gaming capital (Consalvo, 2009) among otome game players. Much of the literature on fandoms as gift economies tends to describe these as alternative regimes to capitalism. Yet a number of interviewees also note that their activities also benefit game companies. Although much of the content, particularly translation work, tends to fall within the grey areas of copyrights, many interviewees did not frame their practices of sharing as mutually exclusive from capitalism.

When asked if they could identify certain issues within the communities they participate in, a few respondents mention a level of tension between the players who play both unlocalized Japanese otome games alongside localized otome games and otome games originally made in English, and the players who play only localized titles and games originally made in English. The tension lies in the fact some English-only players tend to think that players who can play Japan-only games are arrogant. Noticeably, the two Filipinas in this study expressed the various ways that cultural politics of playing in English and blogging in English come to the fore. Zenri laments her challenges with English grammar. She indicates that this is the reason why she limits the scope of what she writes about, preferring to leave certain content she is not comfortable with, with her North American colleagues on the same blog. Alyssa mentions certain tensions with some players who only play games in English:

"I usually tend to stay away from a group of "English otoge[10] only gamers" that think of people who can play Japanese otome games as elitists. My friends and I have had really bad experience with them talking bad about us just because we told some not so good things about a game that was just localized to English when we actually only wanted to help people decide whether to get that game or not. They say that not buying all localized otome games hurts the Western otome game market, but our argument is that we are only saying what we think about the games to help people on a limited budget decide which is the best otome game to play. In any case, I now tend to keep my circle only within trusted friends because otome gaming is a hobby that should help you enjoy and not make you be stressed out."

On the extract above, Alyssa describes one particular tension between some players who only play in English and players who can play in both English and Japanese. While I have not encountered English-only players with such sentiments for these interviews as Alyssa describes, I have come across such discussions on Tumblr and in forums. What's interesting in this is how Alyssa specifically calls the English otome game market "the Western otome game market," thus implying certain hierarchies where English-language marketing is almost equated with Western marketing. In these discussions, it is implied that it is mostly white players or players from more privileged countries that have a tendency to throw money at companies and push others—even less privileged folk—to do the same. Moreover, even though these two are not the only respondents to mention these particular issues with certain English-only players (i.e., Pandora and Anne commented on this issue in passing), it is interesting that these discussions about English as a barrier to participation or English-only players tending to champion the "Western otome game market" are more pronounced in my interviews with Zenri and Alyssa. Mastery of a

language—English or Japanese—in this context denotes power. Given that English language use in the Philippines has its own neocolonial moorings (Bolton & Bautista, 2004; Ruanni & Tupas, 2004), and given the history of both American and Japanese colonization in the Philippines, writing in English and playing in English or Japanese is a way of positioning one's self as a subject within neocolonial gaming contexts. At times, such positioning becomes an underhanded critique of subtle forms of racism as seen in these tensions with certain players, and media cultures that privilege the voices of white North American or European women.

It is also notable that it tends to be the women of color in this study who highlight accessibility as a factor in playing otome games. Naja talks at length about accessibility. When suggesting games to her friends, she told me that she only recommends otome games that these friends could have access to, noting that accessibility could vary from person to person. She points out how accessibility tends to be an important factor especially for women of color. When I asked her, "Do otome games at times feel a bit too white sometimes?" She laughed it off and answered, "This is one of the reasons why I avoid Twitter." Similar to Zenri and Alyssa, one could get a sense of how the predominance of white womens' voices in the otome game player community somewhat limits participation. Consequently, the discussion regarding sharing and participation in the wider otome game community becomes even more complicated, especially given that many bloggers have strong views against piracy. As I will argue in the next section, these discourses on piracy denote subtle forms of racism and exclusion.

8.5 Arguments about Piracy and Censorship

Piracy is notably a sore subject among otome game players. Though what counts as piracy may vary from player to player—definitions could vary from illegal downloads to cheating in real-time based otome games like *Mystic Messenger*—the majority of interviewees

for this project tended to bring it up, principally because these discourses shape images of otome game players. Pandora observed, "The otoge community is really strongly anti-piracy compared to other sectors of the visual novel community from what I've noticed, which was definitely started by a few bloggers." This perspective was noticeable in my interview data, as a number of interviewees commented on piracy even if the question was not on piracy. Two Happy Cats, for example, on a question about her general opinion about the wider otome game community responded,

> "Generally, I think the otome fan community is pretty fantastic, everyone is very friendly and we're all fighting the good fight of bringing stuff over to the west. However, I know there are some major issues with piracy in the otome community, most recently I know backers for *The Bell Chimes for Gold* had issues accessing their rewards because one or two backers were exploiting the download link. I believe I even read somewhere that one otome game company in Japan has refused for any of their games to be translated as they think that all Western fans pirate - so yeah it kinda sucks and it gives us all a bad name."

The opinions of some interviewees regarding freemium games appeared to be shaped by notions of piracy, especially if players find ways to keep playing these for free. Claire, for example, indicated she is not fond of the increased numbers of freemium games for this very reason:

> "I understand it is easier to reach a customer this way, it creates this sense of entitlement that otome games should always be free, which in turns feed the mindset of pirates and undermine promising games not subscribing to that format."

Cecilia also commented on how she thinks some players in the community tend to have entitlement:

> "I say this as an old fogie who has a full-time job, but it's a little depressing to see how much people expect for free. Artists, actors, programmers, and writers spend their time on producing these games, and if it's good enough that you want to spend time playing it, I think it's good enough to spend some money on."

Observably, people who tend to express strong anti-piracy sentiments and dislike free games in interviews tend to be white women or women from first world countries. These discussions hint at the white and/or middle class privilege of many who express these sentiments.

Not all participants in the study, however, felt this way about freemium games. Zenri, for example, called herself a "free player" and confessed to staying away from mobile games that she has to pay for. Pandora also remarked that while many in the community are "anti-free" otome games, she would not have been able to discover otome games for herself if not for Sake Visual's free game *RE: Alistair* (2010).

Piracy, in some ways, affects how some people think about certain forms of cultural production. Cecilia remarked, "I don't like when people post 'Let's Play' videos (where they upload video of themselves playing games) because in my opinion it's not that different from pirating the game." Thus, these notions of piracy assign regimes of value (Appadurai 1996) in particular forms of cultural production within otome game player communities.

Although many bloggers seldom mention censorship, some bloggers in this study mentioned an instance where a company asked people to take down walkthroughs with certain elements. Myxprint recounted,

"What really irks me about it all is that we cannot have written walkthroughs that say which point requirements give you the most on the love meter or affection meter for their games. So this means we can't write walkthroughs so you can get the best ending. We get around that a little bit. I keep my walkthroughs now on Google docs. I give them out privately. Because I don't want to replay a game 500 times just to get a good ending."

She does indicate that, when privately sharing content, she tends to warn people to not post it "so no one would get in trouble." What these takedowns indicate, particularly as bloggers try to also form relationships with developers, is that often players must police themselves and self-censor to avoid getting into trouble.

From all these comments, one could observe how negative opinions about piracy are linked to the idea of showing otome game companies that English-language otome game players are good consumers. Piracy, as a result, is seen as a deterrent for Japanese titles to gain English-language localization. In relation to piracy, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas (2015) discussed the existence of informal media economies, which they described as "a range of activities and processes occurring outside the official, authorized processes of the economy" (p. 7). They specifically noted how, on occasion, informal media economies can be formalized. Arguably, this is the case of otome games, as more titles receive localizations into English. As otome games move toward official releases and as some practices around otome games become formalized and professionalized, copyright regimes tend to become stricter. Thus, the implication of these

copyright regimes on female game players in this case is clear: Either become good consumers of these games or do not expect access to desired games and, by extension, their own predominantly female game spaces. In this way, copyright regimes can echo certain postfeminist ethos in disciplining its players.

A lot of these discussions on piracy also demonstrate subtle forms of racism, especially because they also imply that it is mostly women of color from lesser privileged countries that pirate games. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2017), in *Racism without Race*, points out that new forms of racism in the post Civil rights era have a tendency to erase discussions on race and render itself invisible thereby reproducing a colorblind ideology which produces subtler forms of racism. This particular erasure of discussions on race and the reproduction of a colorblind ideology defines postracism. Various scholarship in fan studies have built upon these studies on post-racism to demonstrate how these work within fandoms. Rebecca Wanzo (2015) points out that far too often, people who bring up the subject of race within fandoms tend to be branded as "killjoys." Similarly, Rukmini Pande (2019) points out how fandoms rules and truisms have a tendency to silence discussions on race, and these silences indicate how whiteness becomes a structuring force within fandoms. In my interviewees' discussions on piracy, one could see these forms of erasure, but it is these silences that hint that white and middle-class players' experiences tend to be constructed as the unspoken default.

8.6 Aspirational Labor and Otome Games as Happy Objects

One notable aspect in my discussions with otome game bloggers is how many participants speak for the interests of companies that make otome games or the companies that localize them, so they could get more games from these companies. While this is certainly not new, what stood out to be was how they seem to be aware of the value of the work that they do

for these companies, knowing that without their work and support for these companies, otome games would not receive as much attention from players outside Japan. Responses from these interviewees indicate how they take public relations tasks and community management. In some ways, these sentiments indicate aspirational labor, which Duffy (2016, p. 6) has described as "a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production ... individuals performing social roles through aspirational consumption." Often, the kind of cultural and creative work that she characterized can be explained by the ethos of being able to do what one loves. Duffy also pointed out that, within these contexts of creative production, aspirational labor "ensures that female participants remain immersed in the highly feminized consumption of branded goods" (p. 3). Moreover, although aspirational labor, as Duffy described it, often works on the promise of future work, in the case of labor by otome game players, the promise hinges on the continued releases of the games they love. Thus, to encourage game companies to localize more otome games, bloggers have to do the work of reviewing, producing walkthroughs and at times upholding copyright through self-censorship to show continued fan support.

Nonetheless, within these sites these women also help rewrite discourses on otome games. These are spaces where female and nonbinary game players connect with other female and nonbinary game players to talk about games that were supposedly created specifically for them. It is evidenced in the way bloggers do the work to signpost content that could potentially be triggering. To some extent, this criticism is also evidenced in blogs that contain fix-fics, since fix-fics noticeably fix gendered tropes in otome games. These all indicate interventions on part of these individuals to change gendered discourses within otome games. In this way, they

function similarly to Radway's book clubs (1986) in the way that they create publics and spaces of their own.

However, as seen in some of the interviews with participants outside North America, Europe, and Australia, the ability to participate in these discourses also depends on one's ability to write well in English and engage with the politics of these postfeminist and post-racial spaces. Similarly, in discussions on piracy and free games, one could surmise how white and middle class womens' experiences largely tend to be seen as the default. These subtle forms of exclusion create tensions in these spaces.

Additionally, apart from circulating promotional content or humorous content around otome games, the respondents' statements also seemed to focus on keeping otome games as happy objects (Ahmed 2010). A common theme in many of these interviews is about happiness. Some bloggers talk about playing otome games and starting blogs after feeling miserable after a big move. At times, it is to keep personal records of their feelings and experiences in these games whether good or bad. Walkthrough writers make walkthroughs so other players can get happy endings in these games with the least amount of money and effort. Some players make fix-fics to rewrite unhappy experiences in these games. Others mention avoiding parts of the community altogether to keep themselves happy. In a lot of these accounts, these describe how bloggers find ways to keep otome games and their communities "happy." In her work on affect, Sara Ahmed (2010) pointed out how "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (p. 29). Moreover, given how many respondents expressed various forms of dissatisfaction whether with representations in otome games or disappointment in some form with a part of the otome game community, much of the work—whether in reviewing games, making walkthroughs to help other players, or writing fan fiction to

adapt the stories in these games—is about keeping otome games "happy" and thus valuable for circulation. These individual cases indicate how women must work to keep themselves and their own games happy. For some of the women of color in this study, the amount of work invested in keeping these games happy for themselves is sometimes doubled, especially with exclusion.

8.7 Conclusion

Much of the fan labor centering on otome games relies on the visibility of advocacy blogs and smaller game sites, yet ironically, many of these gendered forms of aspirational labor often are rendered unpaid and invisible. Notably, much of the labor that focuses on growing the English-language otome game community is affective, particularly the emotional work associated with forming relationships with companies and the performance of being good consumers. It carries the notion that women have to work for their own games, and to keep these games as happy onjects.

Thus, the practice of otome game fan blogging becomes imbricated with postfeminist sensibilities, which celebrate individual choice, independence, and self-expression mostly rooted in consumer cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). Gill (2008) points to how postfeminism envisions "individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (p. 436). Moreover, postfeminism goes hand-in-hand with post-racism in producing neoliberal subjects (Joseph, 2009). In the case of otome game fan blogging, postfeminism and post-racism is evidenced in the way these women have to continually show that they are good consumers. These "good" consumers tend to be white and middle class. Postfeminism ensures that white womens' voices and interests—primarily those with money—are heard and addressed first before those of other marginalized women. Evidence of

postfeminist sensibilities as shown echoes Dosekun's (2015) characterization of postfeminism as one that is "readily transnationalized …because it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and a set of material practices" (p. 961). The existence of this form of gendered labor within this niche, predominantly female, game community hints how postfeminism and postracism mediates discourses within the community and create subtle forms of exclusion. As I argue in my conclusion, it is important to celebrate these spaces created by women, but also at the same time understand their limits.

IX.   Conclusion: The State of Otome Play

In July 2020, twenty-one writers at Voltage USA went on strike in protest of low pay and harsh working conditions. They called themselves VOW or Voltage Organized Workers. On a Tumblr post, they wrote the following statement:

> "All of the Lovestruck writers are members of marginalized genders and/or sexualities. We have been given an invaluable foot in the door to the industry and a platform to tell stories that represent our voices, our passion, and our experiences. We are also all fans of the app, and we care deeply about the stories we tell.
>
> However, not only are we paid less than half the industry-standard rate, we are asked to meet extremely tight deadlines and produce enormous amounts of content without protections or benefits.
>
> We want to see our hard work and commitment to authentic storytelling given the value it deserves" (@vowtogether 2020).

On the same statement, which had thousands of reblogs, VOW also discouraged players to boycott *Lovestruck*. Instead, they encouraged *Lovestruck*'s players to send messages to Voltage USA to recognize them as an organized group. A month later, Voltage USA agreed to raise the writers' pay from an average of 3.5 cents (USD) per word to an average of 6.5 cents (Handrahan, 2020). This pay increase was a battle that was hard-won, and it was a battle that many otome game players participated in.

However, fast forward to December 2021, Voltage shuts down its US division. In a statement by Voltage Japan, the company attributes this closure to the following factors: the

stagnation of the US mobile otome game market and the decline of studio production since 2020, alongside rising labor costs in San Francisco (Mateo, 2021). Voltage USA's closure communicates volumes about how despite little victories, women and marginalized folks' work are some of the most expendable.

I write this account to demonstrate the work on otome games. Throughout this thesis, I explored what otome games are to various industries and to people who play them. When women are addressed in certain game genres, moments of resistance like these happen, echoing previous ethnographic work done (Radway, 1984; Consalvo and Begy, 2015). In a lot of ways, otome games highlight various forms of invisible labor within game studies–from its beginnings by a group of Japanese women in Koei to ways players outside Japan used otome games to make spaces for themselves outside predominantly white male game cultures. It is important to acknowledge these moments as they have a tendency to disappear in various game histories (Nooney 2013). Nonetheless, while it is important to celebrate these moments of resistance and remember them, it is also important to also understand the limits of many of these social formations, especially in the context of uneven developments within capitalist modernity.

9.1 Understanding the Limits of Intimate Publics and the Postfeminist Fantasies of Otome Games

Since the writing of my previous chapters, I've been playing Paper Games' *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice* (2019) on mobile. Otherwise known as *Love and Producer* in China (its country of origin), the game has garnered seven million downloads within months of its release in China (Liang 2020). Its localization, while less popular than its Chinese version, acquired over a million downloads on Android at the time of writing this.

In this game, one plays as a woman TV producer who encounters four superpowered men who she can develop relationships with. Similar to many otome games I've played through this study, a significant amount of the gameplay involves the managing of men's emotions. This game plays into the postfeminist fantasy of becoming a successful superpowered career woman as long as one manages one's time, in-game resources, and the affections of these superpowered men well.

But what interested me the most was the sense of mobility that the player character had as she investigates cases surrounding mysterious labs and superpowered people in the game's city space. During my playthrough of the game, the game has a feature called city walks where players can go on mini-quests to acquire items that evolve cards and advance through the game. Card collection is central to this game because progressing through the game involves collecting and evolving cards primarily with the player character's love interests. The process of collecting and evolving these cards revolve around the game's gatcha system and in-game currencies such as gold, gems, stamina, film, heart keys, medals, and karma--all of which slowly refresh through time and are purchasable with microtransactions. Character-based situations or dates are all contained in the collected cards. A majority of the game's strongest cards can only be acquired by participating in limited-time events. In a lot of ways, the game implies that women can be mobile through the men around them.

In their analysis of the game, Wagner and Liang (2021) point out that the card collection system thus implies a "sexless polyamory" which in a lot of ways reflect neoliberal female subjectivity in the region. They argue:

> Otome games are, on the one hand, a reflection of the social reality for Asian female
>
> players who are modern, sometimes cosmopolitan, and full of new sexual self-expression

while holding a degree of choice in the partners they decide to enter into relationships

with. […] In many ways, Otome games and particularly *Love and Producer* also function

as newer fantasies to older generation's obsessive television watching: both provide

asexual mediatic encounters with a more loving and sensitive male partner on small

screens (140).

This analysis highlights the kind of negotiated subject positions that players can occupy within

particular East Asian cultural contexts. To these arguments, I add how *Mr. Love Queen's

Choice*'s hybrid adaptation of narrative consumption constitutes a postfeminist form of corporate

transculturalism that capitalize on womens' small acts of resistance.

The game's use of card collection and a gatcha system also point to one growing trend in

mobile otome games–gamblification. Gamblification refers to a trend in games to create

gambling-like experiences (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2010). Examinations of this trend in

game studies range from studies on free-to-play-pay-to-win models (Neiborg, 2015) to lootboxes

(Griffiths, 2018; Zanescu, French and Lajeunnese, 2021) and gatcha games (Woods, 2022). *Mr.

Love Queen's Choice* merely follows this trend, but its success also meant that several other

games followed suit, such as MiHoYo's *Tears of Themis* (2021).

In response to these gamblified elements, several players have resorted to theorycrafting.

Christopher Paul (2011) describes theorycrafting or the practice of mathematical analysis of

procedural rhetorics as ways that players make themselves better players as the practice helps

them understand the underlying features of games. Many otome game players have resorted to

similar analyses, publishing tables of costs and probability rates for players to acquire rare cards

in *Mr. Love Queen's Choice* on Reddit threads, Facebook groups, and Discord servers. In my

playthrough of the game, these spaces have been invaluable for these sources of information.

Thus, in this case of players theorycrafting, the intimate publics of the #OtomeArmada continue to demonstrate what Radway calls light forms of resistance. These practices show how players continually negotiate agency within systems that continually milk their bodies and emotions for money and labor.

However, while it is important to celebrate agency and these light resistances, it is also equally essential to consider the limits of otome games' intimate publics. In previous chapters, I point out that despite the larger fandom's more inclusive attitudes toward gender and sexuality, some may resort to stereotyping in their characterizations of Japanese games. Moreover, many players need to navigate through neoliberal regimes wherein they always need to demonstrate themselves as good consumers in the hopes of getting more games localized and produced for them. Discourses of piracy described in previous chapters noticeably have classist and racist implications about how mostly black and brown women in non-First World countries or contexts may not be able to pay for their games. Accessibility remains a common issue among players of color.

I've experienced accessibility issues in my own playthroughs of *Mr. Love Queen's Choice*. During one visit back home to the Philippines, I could not connect to the game's servers because the servers deemed my internet connection too slow. The only times I could connect to their servers were always around 3 AM. At first, I tried to simply work around the issue by simply playing in these early morning hours. Even as I could connect, the game frequently disconnected from the servers, and reset my progress. Eventually, because of exhaustion and the lack of sleep, I eventually gave up and stopped playing. As wonderful as otome games and their intimate publics were to me, no guide, no walkthrough, or no probability chart could fix my connectivity issues.

9.2 Towards Transculturality

Stories such as mine and some of my interviewees of color in previous chapters indicate the need for scholars to situate understandings of women's cultures and light forms of resistance in the contexts of uneven developments brought about by capitalist modernity and globalization. As scholars point out how capitalist modernity is unevenly experienced within the context of globalization (Appadurai, 1997), it should also be noted how uneven the developments are for women in various socio-cultural contexts.

The call for intersectional analyses has been echoed throughout game studies (Shaw 2015; Kafai, Richard, & Tynes, 2016; Malkowshi and Russworm, 2017; Gray, 2020). Studies on transcultural fandoms not only point out how fans' orientations are not only dependent on national origin (Chin and Morimoto, 2017), but they also indicate how race and marginalized cultures can complicate one's relationship to fan communities (Pande, 2019). In this way, transcultural analysis can triangulate feminist analyses to highlight these aspects of fandom and women's cultures, and in the specific case of otome games and its players–women's cultures in gaming. In thinking about women's cultures in games, transcultural analyses can demonstrate what intimate publics can do for women and marginalized folks, but at the same time, trouble their limits.

9.3 Last Words on Studying Otome Games and Women's Cultures within Game Cultures

In concluding this study, I do want to stress the importance of continually studying games and game cultures that address women such as otome games. Firstly, it continues conversations within game studies about unusual games (Consalvo and Begy, 2015; Consalvo and Paul, 2020). Because of the gendered nature of game cultures, categories such as casual games and otome

games are not often considered "real" games (Consalvo and Paul, 2020). Within game studies, these analyses still remain few and far between.

Secondly, otome games and similar non-North American categorizes help de-Westernize game studies. While there have been a lot of studies that center on non-Western games and player cultures (Chan, 2006; Chee, 2006; Yoon & Cheon, 2013; Penix-Tadsen, 2019), these still remain on the margins of game studies. Because larger game cultures construct narrow ideas of their own imagined communities of players, game studies continue to do their work to decenter this.

Lastly, otome games and their players continually highlight the work and achievements of women in games as they build spaces and games for themselves–work that barely gets the attention they deserve in games history (Nooney, 2013). As I have continually pointed out, it is important to celebrate these milestones, but also at the same time understand their limitations. When we understand both how important these milestones are and how limited they are at the same time, it is then that we could move forward.

Appendix A: Call for Participants

Call for Participants: #Otome Armada

I am looking for more participants for my study on otome games released in English.

If you love otome games, and

a. Maintain a blog and write a lot about otome games

b. Participated in a fan translation project

c. Or Made or helped make an otome game / if you're currently making your game that's fine too

I would really love to have you in an interview about some of your favorite games, favorite characters, etc, and then talk about your blog, your fan translation project or your game usually on Skype or via email (or your preferred method) where I could send the questions to you.

If you are interested, please email me at scvganzon@gmail.com or PM me here. I could tell you more about the project and explain the rest of the interview process to you.

Also, please do share or reblog this if you know people who might be interested.

Hope to hear from you soon!

Cheers,

Sarah the Otome Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B: Questionaire

Introductory questions

1. What's your country of residence?
2. Age?
3. Racial identification?
4. Occupation?
5. Gender identification and preferred pronouns?
6. What game are you playing right now?
7. Do you play other types of games apart from otome games? If yes, please identify.
8. Would you label yourself as any one of the following: geek, otaku, fujoshi, gamer?

On Otome games

1. How would you define otome games? [imagine that you are defining this to the un-initiated]
2. Do you have any favorite titles? What do you love the most about them?
3. Could you name some of your favorite characters and/or character types?
4. How far can you trace otome games and its origins?
   [Note to interviewee: it's ok if you don't know. This is mostly so I would know how people remember the history and origins of otome games.].

5. Which language do you play otome games in? If you play in more than one language, which language do you prefer to play your games in?
6. Describe how you first encountered otome games. What is the first otome game that you've ever played? How did this experience make you think about otome games?
7. If you were to recommend a game to introduce someone who cannot read Japanese (but can read English) to otome gaming, what game would that be? Why this game?
8. How do you decide on the otome games that you pick up? (ie. Character types, plot, good game reviews, Kickstarter, Steam suggestions, etc)
9. Are there any Japan-only titles that you wish were available to audiences worldwide? If so, please name them.
10. What platform do you usually play on? (PS Vita, PC, PSP, Steam, mobile, etc)
11. How do you usually play otome games? Do you tend to prioritize certain routes over others? Are you a completionist?
12. Do you use walkthroughs (Japanese or English)? If yes, do you go to specific sites for these walkthroughs or find game guides?
13. Where do you usually check for otome game related news and reviews?
14. Do you play other game categories that are sometimes associated with the term "otome" (ie. Yaoi games, renai, etc)? Why or why not?
15. Do you consume other products alongside otome games (ie. Drama CDs, otome game magazines, anime, etc)? Why or why not?
16. Do you use other apps with otome games (ie. Visual Novel Reader)? If yes, for what specific use?

17. What do you think about representation in otome games? Can you think of tropes, gameplay logics, etc that need to be changed or addressed?
18. Would you play games that include queer content? Why or why not?
19. Many people would argue that there is no market for otome games in the West. How would you respond to this?
20. Have you ever had the experience of supporting otome games on Kickstarter or buying localized games in English even if it is a title that you are not particularly fond of? If yes, why did you support/buy this game?
21. What is your opinion about the otome game fan communities that you participate in? Feel free to discuss any positive or negative experiences in these communities.
22. If you think that there should be something that should be changed within otome game culture (Japan and worldwide) and the industry around otome games, what do you think should it be?

For bloggers

1. When and why did you start your blog?
2. What do your favorite posts usually consist of?
3. What kind of people do you think are your readers like? Do you have any specific audience in mind in writing your posts?
4. Do you read other otome game related blogs? Why these blogs?
5. Do you write about other things apart from otome games? If yes, please discuss these.
6. In addition to your blog, do you use any other platforms in talking about otome games (ie. Twitter, Discord servers, etc)? What do you use these platforms for specifically? What manner of engagement is possible in these platforms that are not available through your blog?
7. How do you think does your involvement via otome game fan blogging, place you within the market and culture around otome games? Or How do you think fan blogs contribute towards creating audiences for otome games or towards building fan communities?

For fan translators

1. Could you discuss some of your translation projects? Any favorites?
2. Do you prefer to work alone or in a group?
3. How do you or your group decide on the games that you translate?
4. What difficulties do you usually encounter in a translation project, if any? What do you usually do to overcome them?
5. Do you use any specific tools for fan translations?
6. Walk me through the process of creating a patch / soft subs / etc? What are the steps involved? What aspect of it did you least enjoy? What part of it did you enjoy the most?
7. Apart from otome games, what other material do you translate?
8. How do you operate on the publicity around your work? Is visibility important to you? What are the pros and cons of bring visible online? Why or why not?
9. How do you think your translation projects help in expanding audiences for otome games? If you've received feedback about your work from other players, please do feel free to share some of the most interesting ones. ☺

10. How would you define piracy? Would you categorize some of your work as a form of piracy? Why or why not? [Note: I added this question because piracy is a huge topic within the community and is a gray area that will need to be discussed in the study.]
11. Have you ever received cease and desist letters? If it is okay with you, would you discuss some experiences?
12. If there is anything that you could change about copyright laws (Japanese and international), especially those that prevent otome games being localized (either by fans or by companies), what would that be? Why?

For otome game creators / Nanoreno participants:

1. Do you think otome games is a good label for the games that you are creating? Why or why not?
2. Could you discuss some of your favorite projects? How about your current projects?
3. Is there any game in particular that helped inspire your idea for any of the games that you created/collaborated on?
4. What do you think has been your biggest challenge in creating some of your games?
5. How much do you think about representation (gender, race, sexual orientation, class, etc) in creating your characters?
6. (if applicable) How did you find your team? Please describe the collaboration process in creating the game.
7. (if applicable) What was it like creating the game for NanoReno? How different was it if you were not doing it for a game jam? Have you joined other game jams before? How different or how similar is NanoReno from these other experiences?
8. Were there any challenges in making the game?
9. (if applicable) What was the process like in creating and managing a Kickstarter campaign? What made you decide on creating it? What do you think made the campaign successful or not successful? Do you think Kickstarter shaped some of your creative decisions in the game?
10. Is there a difference between putting your game up on itch.io vs. putting it up on Steam? Which platform do you prefer? Or, if you have no preference, please state the affordances that these platforms can bring to your game.

Last question:

Those were all my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add or share that you think will benefit the study?

Glossary

Bad ending – a term that refers to a failure state in otome games.

Baka – a Japanese term that translates as "idiot." This is also a character type in otome games, equivalent to a "himbo" or an adorable hunk who is not exactly the smartest person in the room.

Boy's love – manga or anime that feature male-male romances

CG – short for "computer graphic" or images collected in otome games through narrative progression

DLC – short for "downloadable content." These are additional game content made available after the game the game's release. Some of these could be paid content while some are available for free.

Fan disk - additional content released after a successful release of the original game. Fan disks are usually considered separate releases from the original game coming in disks or separate purchasable content. Examples of these include: *Code Realize: Future Blessings* (2018), and *Collar x Malice Unlimited* (2020).

Fujoshi – a derogatory term referring to female fans of boy's love comics.

Fudanshi – a term referring to male fans of boy's love comics.

Kuudere - a character type who has a tendency to play it cool when the player character is around but actually hides very deep feelings towards the player character.

Megane – a character type who wears glasses

Nemuidere – a character type who spends a lot of time sleeping, but ultimately finds motivation upon falling in love with the player character

Oresama – a character type who is usually defined by his arrogance

Patch – broadly defined, these are changes one makes to a game. In the case of otome games fan translations, many fan translations come as patches to an existing game.

Route – refers to a branching narrative path in visual novels. In otome games, most routes are defined by the character one chooses to romance

Self-insert character – player characters that are created so players can easily project themselves into them. This gets a lot of criticism from many otome game players because these characters are often seen as bland and are considered pushovers.

Shota - a character type often younger than the player character, and whose character arc is often about growing up as a result of falling in love with the player character.

Tsundere – a character type who's romantically interested in the player character but has a tendency to be hot-and-cold towards the player character.

Weeb – a derogatory term for anime or manga fans.

Yandere – a character type romantically interested in the player character but has a tendency to be possessive towards the player character.

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