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Mobile Otome Games: Desire and Suspense as Economic Strategy

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Abstract

With the increasing legislations on gacha games, the issue of monetisation of free-to-play games is often addressed considering how game mechanics trick the player using microtransactions. However, some narrative games use a similar economic system linked with the structure of their story. The study of four otome games created by Japanese studios will focus on two narrative strategies: the character gacha, which relies on the player's desire for a character, and the progress gate, which relies on narrative tension. The paper concludes that those devices are not so much a way to coerce players into spending money than an additional possibility for them to enjoy the narrative.

Introduction

Mirroring and relaying the social discourses about video game addiction that emerged at the end of the 90's (Lalu, 2018), the issue of monetization of free-to-play games is often raised in the specialized media and in the general press, especially since legislations on gacha games were passed (Koeder and Takana, 2017). Game designers (i.e Shokrizade, 2013), academics (i.e Hamari, Lehdonvirta, 2010 ; Civelek, Liu, Marston, 2018) and journalists (i.e Cooper, 2017) often argue that game mechanics trick the player into spending money and discuss free-to-play games in regard with health issues and gambling (i.e Kinnunen, Alha and Paavilainen, 2016 ; Dreier and al., 2017). For example, in their close study of the Facebook free-to-play game *FrontierVille*, Heikki Tyni, Olli Sotamaa and Saara Toivonen (2011) argue that “in order to incentivize players to purchase virtual goods, circumstances are created to make players need certain things and to drive the desirability of virtual goods up” (2011: 29). Even if monetization mechanics in mobile games are still sometimes aggressive, Alha et al. have shown that there is an evolution from this model implemented by Zynga (2014, 2018). As far as gacha are concerned, while Koeder and Tanaka (2018) conclude that “the emotional attachment some players have to paid Gacha can be seen as problematic and these attachments are being artificially nurtured and intensified by the game developer for profit optimization” (2018: 24), their interviews and arguments show that there is a growing concern in the industry about

the use of game mechanisms that hurt the player and that allow only short-term profit. Creating an empirical taxonomy of monetized Random Reward Mechanisms, Brückner and Sato (2020) underline the fact that gacha and other RRM are “implemented in games in various ways” (2020: 13) and “a method of monetization [that is] still evolving” (2020: 14). In her review of the free-to-play scientific literature, Kati Alha (2019) calls for close readings of free-to-play games in order to understand how they work, especially since the field is diverse and evolve quickly. She concludes that there is a large predominance of “quantitative studies examining how to predict or improve profitability” (2020: 15) compared to qualitative approaches.

This paper aims to understand the economic system of free-to-play games in relation to the meaningful experiences they give and to build on the former studies by tackling not the game mechanics but rather the narrative experience of games using the framework of post-classical narratology theories that focus on narratives as intellectual and emotional process (Alber and Fludernick, 2010; Baroni, 2016; Patron, 2017). In this way, otome games, which are a video game genre originated in Japan narrating love stories written for a feminine audience, are a very interesting corpus. Often associated with the Visual Novel genre which inherits from literary models (Tyminska, 2014; Andlauer, 2019), otome games are played because they feature tales of a romance. The study of four mobile games will provide insight on how the narrative design is shaped by the business model. *Love Letter From Thief X* is



an otome game developed by Voltage Inc and released in Japanese in 2011 and in English in 2012. It is now available on the platform *Love 365: Find Your Story* which clusters all the products by the studio. The player-character (often called Main Character or MC) is a museum curator who associates with a group of thieves to find her grandfather's masterpiece. *Ikémen Sengoku: romances across time* is the third game of the *Ikémen* series by Cybird and was released in 2015 in Japanese and in 2017 in English. The MC is a fashion designer who is thrown into the past and has to survive three months surrounded by Sengoku warlords after accidentally saving Oda Nobunaga. *Wizardress Heart+* is part of the *Shall We Date* series, created by the Japanese studio NTT Solmare Corp to reach an international market. Published in 2015 in English, this otome game tells the story of a young wizardess who is admitted in a magic academy and uncovers its mysteries with the help of her lover. *Obey Me! One master to rule them all* is the latest game from the same series released in English in 2019. Often described as a romance simulation with an RPG Card Game, the product is known and played by otome games players.

The study of those four works, especially their beginnings which unambiguously exhibit how the game works for the new player, will show that the narrative experience, alongside other features (such as game mechanics but also social elements and avatar customization), is designed according to economic strategies. Specifically, this essay will focus on two narrative devices, emotional attachment to the character and narrative tension, and how they are linked with microtransactions (defined as a payment of a small amount of money in exchange for a limited virtual content): the character gacha and the progress gate. This paper builds a formalist analysis of the games using the figure of a model player (Genvo, 2013; Barnabé, 2017) rather than the study of actual play and thus doesn't tackle the issue of the practices of real players who, for example, build strategies to optimize their actualization of the game or who spend a lot of money (Giard, 2020).

Character gacha and emotional attachment

The importance of characters in Japanese contemporary culture is a well-studied phenomenon and it's not possible to sum up this dynamic field of enquiries here. The work of Ito Go (2005) allowed to establish a difference between character and *kyara*, the second one

being a "proto-character" (2005: 150) ontologically prior to the first. In his work on *otaku* culture (2009), Hiroki Azuma conceptualized the emotional response to a *kyara* using the term *moe*: his analysis underlines how products are created and interpreted as a database constituted of "moe-elements" (2009: 42). Patrick Galbraith's works on *moe* (2012, 2014) focus on the meaning that an affective response to a fictional character has on our understanding of love and reality. The complexity of the relationship to a fictional character is thus particularly true in the context of a romance story. Research on otome games have shown that they allow women to experiment with various fantasies and identities (Hyeshin, 2009) and that they are a safe space to test their sexuality (Hasegawa, 2013). Agnès Giard (2020) focuses on otome players called *yume joshi*, who consider a fictional character as their lover and shows that this relationship allows them to break away from matrimonial system crisis and build a "collective identity of women who enjoy themselves". The pleasure of emotional connection to a male character appears to be a form of empowerment for otome players. If the concept of *moe* is often linked with *otaku* culture and has a particular resonance with otome games, the emotional attachment to a character is not particular to these fields. The narrative experience to be committed to a male character also appeals to Western audiences since romance stories are based on the fascination towards one male protagonist (Belsey, 1994; Morris, 2017). In her study of the game *Amour Sucré* (Beemoov, 2011), Leticia Andlauer (2019a) studies how the ludo-narrative structure tries to build an attachment to the characters and how the players manifest their connection.

Free-to-play otome games capitalize on the player's desire for fictional people by introducing gacha mechanisms which randomly give access to a character. Even if this feature is not a part of the main story, it is described in the tutorials as complementary.

In *Ikémen Sengoku*, one feature of the game is a gacha which rewards parts of an illustration depicting the male character with whom the player has chosen to engage. For example, in Oda Nobunaga's route, the player can study the character's face to discern the evolution of his feelings: his frown is progressively replaced by a grin and a smile in the images. Each picture is divided in twelve pieces among which three offer bonus prizes that can be used elsewhere in the game. The most wanted piece gives the player an extra story written from the point of view of the male character and depicting his love for the MC. For example,

a special episode with Oda Nobunaga reveals to the player the fact that he doesn't feel alive when the MC is not near him, whereas in the main part of the game, he doesn't express his feelings. However, the probability to gain this piece is much lower than the other ones and the player is only allowed one free use of the gacha per day. The economic success of the gacha depends on the player's desire for a character because it relies on the player's eagerness to complete and collect illustrations as well as their craving for the fictional proof of love for the MC.

Obey me! includes a gacha (which is free to use once per day) from which the player obtains cards which depict the male characters in various poses. For example, the player can discover Beelzebub dressing up, being panicked, wearing a uniform, in a chibi version of himself... They are used in a combat system which takes the appearance of dance battles. They each have a level, an active skill, and stats. The player can use items to improve them. Even if the game automatically picks the cards for the player, they can choose to change this setting in order to maximize their chance to win or to play with their favourite characters. Even if there is a clear tactical choice in the selection of a card, the visual representation of characters also prompts the player to consider their appeal for them and their enjoyment of a particular pose when investing resources. Using complex game mechanics that are entangled in the different aspects of the game, *Obey me!* encourages the player to give sense to the chaos by relying on their understanding of the characters.

Studying *Fate/Grand Order* (Delightworks 2015), Gawain Lucien Lax and Madelaine Mackenzie (2019) argue that the result of the gacha is interpreted by the player as the character's opinion toward themselves: "the player who does not pull their desired character must keep spending; because worse than being proven unlucky in gambling, they have been proven unlucky in love" (2019: 3). While I agree that gacha rely on the desire for a character in otome games, the implementation of this feature in *Ikémen Sengoku* and *Obey me!* suggests that it is a means for the player to build their attachment to a character and to experiment *moe* rather than an external evaluation of their relationship. The main difference is that the player is not considered as passive: they are actively engineering the relationship with the character, particularly if they chose to spend money. This interpretation builds on the idea developed by Leticia Andlauer (2019b) that otome games create new romantic aesthetics characterized by the emphasis on feminine desires, pleasure, and agency.

Progress gates and narrative tension

Beside taking into account the emotional attachment to a character in the design of gacha mechanism, otome games rely heavily on another narrative feature to ensure their economic viability. Like plenty of products of popular media culture, such as pulp magazines, TV series, comics or mangas (Letourneux, 2017), they have a serial structure. More precisely, there are several levels of seriality in otome games that each contribute to create a narrative tension which climax is linked with a delaying mechanism.

On a macro-level, the games *Love Letter from Thief X*, *Ikémen Sengoku*, and *Wizardress Heart+* are made of several storylines, each corresponding to the player's initial choice of a male character, and several seasons containing numerous episodes. In her study of *Amour Sucré*, Leticia Andlauer explains that romance stories are historically often distributed under this format and argues that it is particularly coherent with the free-to-play model (2019a). The narrative retention system is based on the player's desire to know the rest of the story. Raphaël Baroni (2007) identifies three affective effects on which this appetite is based: surprise (the events told are not the one suspected by the audience), suspense (the result of events told are uncertain), and curiosity (the events are not fully told at once). Interestingly, those three concepts are also used by Torben Grodal who describes fundamental characteristics of video game practice: curiosity, surprise, suspense, and repetition (2000, 197-214). A very common mean to ensure that the player will keep reading the story (or playing the game) is to create moments of discontinuation, called cliffhangers in other media. Following Baroni's theories, Anaïs Goudmand (2018) studies them in TV series and argues that they occur between two episodes when the narrative is temporarily interrupted as the audience's sense of curiosity or suspense is high, resulting in frustration as well as an activity of prognostics and diagnostics. A sensation of relief then occurs when the narrative resumes. The same conclusions can be drawn for otome games. For example, *Wizardress Heart+* has eleven seasons, each with three different routes containing several chapters. Continuity in the story was not part of the original project, since the player can pick the order of the routes they want to read from season 1 to 5. For example, the player can choose to discover the story of Elias Golstein before the one of Luca Orlem, even if the second one is presented before in the narrative. Afterwards, the game relies heavily on

intrigues that run from one route to another (in season 6, for example, Hiro's story follows Zeus's one).

On a micro-level and compared to other media products, free-to-play otome games rely not only on an overarching episodic structure but also on the breakdown of the narrative in small units. After a few minutes of reading, the narrative is interrupted, the game automatically returns to the main menu and the player is asked to spend a virtual resource to continue their progress in the story. Very often, the discontinuation coincides with a cliffhanger. For example, in *Wizardress Heart+*, in the first season and at the very beginning of Yukiya's route, the breaks happen after a magical object the MC has reacts in an unexpected way or after new characters such as Elias and Luca are introduced, creating a sense of suspense. This interruption of the narrative, sometimes called "progress-gate", is implemented by two principal means.

Firstly, the player must use "scenario tickets" to have access to the following story piece. Usually, those items replenish every few hours or every day but can also be bought. In *Wizardress Heart+*, the player obtains one scenario ticket every four hours within the limit of the free stock (five). The waiting time can be decreased by watching advertisements. Each unit tends to end with a cliffhanger. In *Ikemen Sengoku*, the game allows five free scenario tickets per day and the narrative tension is more paced. The story is crafted so that the use of five tickets end with a romantic moment with the male character, leaving the player with a sense of curiosity about the development of the love relationship. For example, in Oda Nobunaga's route, the narrative breaks just before the first kiss between the MC and the male character. If the player wants to know the rest of the story right ahead, if they want to relieve their frustration, they need to spend money.

Beside this "time-gate" mechanism, the break in the narrative is also associated with the other features of the game: the player-character stats need to have a certain value in the game system, which is facilitated by the microtransactions, for the rest of the story to be accessible. In *Wizardress Heart+*, there are "magic challenges" that verify the obtention of an item or a high enough score. Even if the latest Shall We Date game, *Obey me!*, doesn't use the word "challenge", the design is similar: the game punctuates the story with dance battles that require the player to have obtained and invested in virtual items. In *Ikemen Sengoku*, the "love challenges" are based on the same principles: the player needs "grace" that they obtain

by customizing their avatar and comparing it to another player's one.

Some otome games, like *Wizardress Heart+* and *Ikemen Sengoku*, also include a feature which both relies on the narrative tension and the desire for a character. The objects needed to pass a gate are of two kinds: the normal items, which use the in-game currency, and the premium items, which require the use of real-world money. In line with the freemium economical model, the second ones give access to a small piece of story which is optional but that can't be obtained in any other way. For example, the first premium side story in Oda Nobunaga's route describes a game of go between the two characters and emphasises on the sexual tension and the sensuality of their gestures. The game monetization model here depends on the player's sense of curiosity but also on their desire for the character. Indeed, during the first challenge requiring an item, the game explicitly shows that the premium object buys the description of a romantic moment with the male character.

Ultimately, the player is able to choose if they want to deprive themselves of a part of the narrative content, to spend time acquiring virtual resources and to wait for the scenario tickets to be replenished or if they prefer to spend money. Cliffhangers are used to feed the player's desire to know the rest of the story and the feeling of suspense or curiosity can sometimes lead them to purchase a limited content via a microtransaction. However, the first aim of this narrative tension is to engage the player over a long period of time, to keep them coming back every day. Drawing on the idea of "routinisation of play" (Terminassian & Boutet, 2015), Andlauer (2019a) notices how a daily connexion to the game binds the player in their love relationship. Mobile otome games don't expect their players to be compulsive buyers or that each cliffhanger would be followed by a microtransaction. In free-to-play games in general, Heikki Tyni, Olli Sotamaa et Saara Toivonen (2011) have shown the importance of players who don't spend money inside the economic model. The financial success of an otome game is partly linked to the player's engagement in the story: the more time the player spends on the game, the more likely they will be to spend money. In that sense, Cybird's games, often praised to be pay-to-play, are not very different from the free-to-play games studied so far. Apparently more ethical because the player knows from the start that they need to buy each story, the game relies on the same narrative mechanisms. The player is allowed to read the prologue as well as the first episode of each part of a character's route. Described as a

means of enabling the player to “test” the story before buying it, this feature builds an involvement in the narrative, which is reinforced by the use of cliffhangers. *Love Letter from Thief X* mainly relies on the player’s feeling of curiosity. For example, the main story of Takuto is interrupted after it is revealed he is a hacker and the epilogue after a kiss, when a romantic get-away to the aquarium is planned as well as a new mission for the thieves. Especially in a global culture in which attention span is a currency (Davenport & Beck, 2001), the narrative tension is used as an economic strategy: once the player has spent approximately twenty minutes reading, they are more inclined to spend money to discover the rest of the story.

Otome games use narrative devices that rely on seriality as a mode of reception and the products build a “serial pact” (Letourneux, 2017: 54) between the developers and the audience who is used to this kind of cultural consumption. Indeed, this video game genre is part of the contemporary media culture which is partly defined by the ability of cultural industries to use periodicity and seriality to capture the attention of the audience and retain it (Migozzi, 2005). Focusing on contemporary Japanese products and especially anime, Marc Steinberg uses the term “media mix” to describe the dispersion of content across several media that relies on the incarnation of the characters (2012: viii). Since otome games have a strong historical connection with manga (Hyeshin, 2009) and shōjo culture (Andlauer, 2019) that inspire not only the themes but also the form of the games, the narrative mechanics of seriality in otome games can be interpreted in the light of other media. Anaïs Goudmand’s work on the reception of TV series (2019) offers an interesting angle to understand the question of temporality between the different episodes. She explains that even if there are some forms of broadcasting that, allowing “binge-watching”, question the limits between the parts of a series such as video-on-demand services (like Netflix or Disney+), the modalities of reception remain fundamentally serial: the spectators can conform themselves to the broadcasting schedule or watch the different installments according to the particular rhythm they choose. She argues that the experiences of series are not contained to the moment when the fictions are consumed. On the contrary, they extend to the waiting time between episodes which builds social interactions inside the community and between the audience and the creators. This pleasure of serial reception, even when it’s not imposed, tends to confirm the argument made for otome games: progress gates and cliffhangers

create a desire to know the rest of the story but don’t imply that it must be fulfilled right away by spending money. Even if some studies which focus on actual play and the practices of players conclude that “chapter gates boost revenues at the expense of retention” (Debeauvais & Lopes, 2015: 1), others find only weak correlations between the feature that allows the proceeding of the story and the amount of money the players spend (Teramoto et al., 2014), confirming the hypothesis based on the analysis of the narrative structure of games.

Conclusion

The formalist study of four mobile otome games enabled us to show that the narrative experience, alongside other features (such as game mechanics, social elements, and avatar customization), is designed according to economic strategies. The player’s desire for a character and their appetite for the story are used to incite them to spend money. However, the games don’t necessarily presuppose passive players whose emotions can be easily manipulated. Contrary to this stereotypical and sexist representation of women, narrative design, considering players as rational beings that invest exclusively in products which appeal to them, is used to create a long-term relationship with the game. Like for other serialized fictions, curiosity, suspense, and frustration are inherently part of the narrative experience. In some free-to-play otome games, gacha mechanisms and progress gates are not so much a way to trick players into spending money than an additional possibility for them to enjoy the characters they love and microtransactions can be thus regarded as small indulgences. Further research on a larger corpus of games is needed to evaluate the popularity of this model. Moreover, the formalist approach of the relationship between the narrative structure, the economic system and the creation of meaningful experiences could be completed by studies focusing on the practices of actual players in order to confirm the hypothesis.

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