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Love for a handsome man requires a lot of friends: Sociability practices related to romance games (*Otome Games*) in Japan

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Abstract

Japan is the world's largest producer of love simulation games, revealing a curious feature: these games, in theory, assign female players to the unique task of seducing a male character, but, in reality, they promote the establishment of a network of friendship between women. Love cannot be achieved if this network is not carefully woven both in play and in real life. Based on the analysis of this double dynamics, outwardly contradictory, I would like to advance the following hypothesis: that such games enable their users to 'outsmart' gender expectations. These games, called *otome* games, became popular in the context of a national panic related to the declining birthrate: they target the market of women who – living alone or with their parents – are held responsible for the future shortfall of the system. These new generations of women don't start a family. They have no children. How do they manage to ward off exclusion and stigma? The study will focus on the strategies collectively devised to turn *otome* games into an identity-building tool, promoting friendship between players as a means of resistance against social norms.

Keywords: Japan; fandom; gender norms; games; network; marriage; love

Japan is currently the world's leading producer of romance video games.¹ Dubbed 'love simulation games' (*rabu shimurēshon gēmu* 恋愛シミュレーションゲーム) or, alternatively, 'games for young women' (*otome gēmu* 乙女ゲーム), such games feature a variety of computer-generated 'handsome men' (*ikemen* イケメン). The aim is for the

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female player to pick her favorite *ikemen* and then experience a love story set up as a pre-written dialogue, with multiple endings. She is entitled to five complimentary episodes every day. She must make decisions while reading. If the male character hugs her, for example, should she 1. Push him away 2. Resist him 3. Give in to him? Depending on the decisions made during the game, the story may end in failure or a declaration of love, followed by passionate kisses. It's important to note, though, that pleasing the male character isn't enough to win him over; a friendship network with other female players is also required. It is this network – built both within the game (online) and in real life (offline) – that can make or break a love story. It may appear strange that such games require that a player wins the friendship of other women (potentially rivals) to win the heart of a man. But it is precisely the collusion between these two systems of values, *a priori* antagonistic, which has led to the success of *otome* games in Japan, as much as their ambivalence with regard to the norms. These games, which both convey and challenge the traditional division of male-female roles, use friendship between players as a way of resolving the contradictions that run through society. To put it in other words: not only do these games stage conflicts between players, torn between contradictory feelings and ideals, but they use them as a lever to make the love story – even the most mawkish – a tool of emancipation in the hands of women bound by friendship.

Through the study of *otome* games as sites of tension between the values of love and friendship, we will seek to illuminate the logic of social dynamics that these games simultaneously reproduce, construct and deconstruct. In essence, 'love games' (*ren'ai gēmu* 恋愛ゲーム) are inextricably linked to the unique circumstances in which they arose: an increasing dissatisfaction with marriage, accompanied by a decrease in births (Furuichi 2017). The fertility rate in Japan is 1.44 children per woman in 2018, resulting in public concern. The country's future is threatened by the continued demographic collapse, and the authorities readily aim the finger of blame at 'those who live alone' (*o-hitori-sama* おひとりさま), held responsible for the declining birth rate (Galan & Heinrich 2018: 6). Why do they claim that imaginary partners are preferable to actual men? The purpose of this study will be, among other things, to question the preconceived idea that emotional commodities are designed to meet the needs of hedonistic people, preferring, for comfort, to live with a digital partner. Building on the concept of 'stigma reversal' (Goffman 1963), I plan to explore the recreational practice of *otome* games as an expression of a feeling of inadequacy to matrimonial norms. In this light, I will examine the market of romance games, hypothesizing that they can be used to express anguish while challenging the social order, as well as to reestablish a positive image of oneself in the protective case of a fake love... a love shared by thousands of 'friends.'

As a first step, the consumers profile will be determined: who are the *otome* games fans and according to what classification system do they define the relationships between players? How do they manage being all together 'in love' with the same character? As a second step, Love simulation games will be discussed in terms of how they integrate and shape players' strategies to circumvent the problem of jealousy. What mechanisms are implemented in these games to create friendship networks? For what purposes? This study, which began in 2016, is based on an analysis of the narrative structures of games, on *in situ* observation of playing practices, and on a cross-sectional survey carried out among major *otome* game manufacturers and a

dozen female players over the course of four years in Japan. The data for our survey comes primarily from this immersion in the world of *otome* games, and from fifty semi-directive interviews conducted both upstream – with game designers (scriptwriters, producers, graphic designers, marketing managers, etc.) – and downstream, with women who ‘like fictional men,’ (*kaku no dansei o ai suru* 架空の男性を愛する) in their own words.

Consumer profile: ‘dream girls’

Can one be friends with a woman who loves the same character?

Otome game players are commonly called ‘dream girls’ or ‘girls who dream’ (*yume-joshi* 夢女子), in reference to their ability to ‘project’ themselves (*toei suru* 投影する) in the dream world of simulation. *Yume-joshi* are said to be of three varieties. ‘There are those who are ‘extreme’, which means possessive, explains Chika, a 29 years-old game fan living in Tokyo. They assume that their favorite character belongs to them alone, and they reject all women who happened to fall in love with him. They refer to themselves as ‘opponents of sharing’ (*dōtan kyohi* 同担拒否). Some even write on their Twitter profiles ‘I refuse to share,’ in order to deter other lovers from friending them. When they identify a rival among their followers, they immediately cut off contact and block all exchanges. When they see, in game stores or in the streets, women wearing badges featuring their favorite character, their face hardens and they run away. They even avoid going to events where game fans gather, because they cannot stand running into female competitors. On social networks, some of them claim to be ‘resolute opponents of sharing’ (*dōtan ganko kyohi* 同担頑固拒否) or ‘completely radical opponents of sharing’ (*dōtan zettai mechakucha kyohi* 同担絶対めっちゃくっちゃ拒否). They emphasize, not without complacency, their image as sectarian extremists by making ‘refusal’ (*kyohi* 拒否) the hallmark of their commitment to the character. It has to be exclusive and uncompromising.

In contrast to these intolerant players, Chika asserts that the majority of *yume-joshi* are ‘supporters of sharing’ (*dōtan kangei* 同担歓迎). ‘For example, I enjoy discussing about my favorite character (*oshi* 推し) with other female fans. ‘Do you love ○○?’ I ask. ‘I feel the same way! Let’s get to know each other! We are sisters.’ These women feel the same way and sympathize with me. To a certain extent, the character serves as a connection between us.’ Consistent with Chika’s statement, the term *oshi* – used to refer to a favorite character – is very meaningful: *oshi* is derived from the verb ‘to recommend’ (*susume* 薦め), which is frequently used in restaurants to ask recommendations from the waiter or the chef. *O-susume wa dore desu ka?* (お薦めはどれですか?) ‘Which is your recommendation?’ When a player says: ‘My favorite is ○○’ (*watashi no oshi wa ○○ desu* 私の推しは○○です), it should be translated as: ‘I recommend ○○.’ It is also quite meaningful that *otome* game characters are frequently depicted as ‘beautiful boys on a sushi train’ (*ikemen kaiten-sushi* イケメン回転寿司). Sushi trains are restaurants where plates with freshly made sushi and moats are placed on a miniature locomotive car (or on a rotating conveyor belt) that moves past every table or seat, enabling customers to grab whatever dish that catch their eye. In the opening credits of *otome* games, the characters often follow one another like dishes passing by, as if on a turntable. The food metaphor exemplifies the commensal aspect of these games which put the characters into circulation and enable players to share love, all together.

Although they assertively enjoy ‘sharing lovers,’ most *yume-joshi* consider themselves to be lovers of the third category: the ‘intermediate’ category of women who view their favorite (*oshi* 推し) as a unique individual. ‘The character they love has taken on a life of its own (*betsu betsu no sonzai* 別々の存在),’ Chika explains. ‘At least, that’s how they put it: ‘The ○○ I love is not like yours. Even if the character is the same, with the same name and look.’ This is why several women can fall in love with the same character without getting into conflict. Speaking figuratively, the character could be compared to a dog breed. A poodle, for example. If you go to a pet store with friends to buy a poodle, each one of you will get her own poodle. A different poodle for each woman...’. Sachi (35 years old, Osaka), a fan of the *King of Prism* franchise, confirms: ‘I am in love with Taiga Kogami. I wish I could talk about him with other female lovers, to share viewpoints and experiences. I believe that there is a Taiga for every fan, and that each Taiga is unique.’ Sachi believes the character is not a finished product. When he is marketed – evolving from video games to anime, manga, and derivatives such as toys, coffee mugs, pins, dolls, cell-phone straps or figurines – the character multiplies and turns into a plethora of ‘presences’ (*sonzai* 存在). Each media platform and merchandise manufacturing create its own version of the character, which is then filtered through subjective interpretations. Each woman sees the character through her own lenses.

‘The character resembles the moon. A single star, but millions of reflections,’ Sachi recounts, referring to the Buddhist-based trope of the ‘moon’s reflection on lakes and pounds,’ (*suigetsu* 水月). Often compared to an illusion, the character is no less real for every woman who takes ownership of him (Giard 2019: 127). Game designers are well aware of this, and do not hesitate to stage fictitious weddings during which dozens of fans take turns marrying the same character under the scrutiny of the other ‘brides.’ Chon (23 years old, Tokyo) describes her experience: ‘On June 25, 2017, a ceremony was held at Almalien [a rental chapel in the Ikebukuro district] for fans of the game *Tokimeki Restaurant*, which features six male characters. Since I’m in love with the one known as Kento Fuwa, I chose a blue wedding gown. Kento’s favorite color is blue. There was a total of twenty Kento fans. It was a fun event, a moment of complicity. We ate cakes in the waiting room for an hour. The chapel was then opened. Wearing a tuxedo and a bow tie, holding a bouquet of blue flowers, Kento was waiting for us in front of the altar (it was a life-size cut-out panel). One by one, we were allowed to stay with him for less than one minute, just enough time to snap two wedding photos. We started asking each other: ‘Could you take a picture?’ The cost of the ceremony was 7,000 yen. Chon was delighted. She claims she was not jealous that day, but she does mention that a ‘premium’ wedding, reserved for one and only customer, was also held for the price of 100,000 yen (covering all the costs of a typical wedding such as the rental of a luxurious dress, hair care, make-up, and a professional photographer...). A woman could celebrate a marriage all alone with Kento. Chon murmurs: ‘Perhaps an opponent of sharing.’

Jealousy avoidance strategies

Despite the fact that marrying a character can be considered as a form of unfair practice, most *yume-joshi* insist that there is no harm in it. Sachi, for instance: ‘The character belongs to everyone. Mine is the one I marry.’ Sachi happily identifies herself as Taiga’s

wife. 'In 2017, Vinclu company, which developed the famous Gatebox [a holographic device enabling users to interact with a character], offered limited-edition fake marriage licenses to anyone who wished to marry their favorite character. It was priced at 7,000 yen. I was one of the 3,708 people who received the certificate after filling out the form and indicating the reasons why I loved Taiga Kogami. Of course, it's not official but my new name is Sachi Kogami.' Over the last three years, an increasing number of women, like her, have married their favorite character. There are various ways to express commitment to a character. Some women purchase engagement rings engraved with hearts and names. Others organize private wedding ceremonies: they rent a chapel, invite some friends, and exchange vows with a character materialized as a doll or a cut-out panel. 'There's a cake, music, and photos to preserve memories of the bridal party... When you marry your favorite characters, you want to share this moment, but this can only be done with other *yume-joshi*. Only they can understand.' Sachi emphasizes how important is a strong network: 'What's the point of having a wedding ceremony all alone?' Without guests, without audience, there would be no one to authenticate and recognize the pair bond. The presence of observers, acting as witnesses, validate the bride commitment to her favorite character.

Since it is not a culturally sanctioned relationship, friends – members of the *otome* games community – are the only ones who can legitimize love for a character. This is why getting rid of jealousy is such an important issue. This is also why players frequently use the expression 'my ○○' (*watashi no* ○○ 私の○○). The goal is to maintain friendship by implying that 'their' favorite is just a personal version, a homemade offshoot from the character. Female players have to ensure that their passionate feelings will not hurt other fans. When talking about their favorite, they use familiar words, such as the abbreviation 'chara' (*kyara* キャラ), to make their bond look harmless. 'Chara' is the shorter version of 'character' (*kyarakutā* キャラクター), from which it differs like a kitten from a cat (Galbraith 2009: 125). Some players refer to their favorite as a 'different darling' (*betsu-kare* ベツカレ) or a 'different friend' (*betsu-fure* ベツフレ), to underscore that he is not only different from a real human, but also distinct from the character loved by the other players. Interestingly, many *otome* games enable users to customize the character's avatar and, as a result, to make him unique and defuse any potential conflict. Some videogames titles even feature 'deformed' or 'mini me' (*chibi-kyara* ちびキャラ) versions of the character that are reduced to the size of a child and can be obtained as items. Such items make it possible for players to safely claim they love a character because he looks like a cute immature boy to be nurtured and raised. This strategy is popular in the world of pop idols: fans sometimes refer to their favorite singer as 'the little ○○ from my home' (*uchi no ko* ○○ うちの子○○).

The parallels between the (mostly male) idols' fan circles and the (primarily female) game characters' fan circles are numerous, and they highlight the issues related to fans' sociability. In both communities, the concept of 'sharing' (*dōtan* 同担) is central. As fans point out, their chosen one (idol or *kyara* キャラ) can only be loved on a collaborative basis and this implies a sacrifice which is considered as proof of love. Sharing means you give up possessiveness and exclusivity. It requires fans to create all together support networks in order to promote the 'joint love interest' (*tan-oshi* 単推し). The very act of sharing turns them into proselytizers. Coined by fans, the word *dōtan* (同担) can be literally translated 'to bear the same burden' (*onaji tanto* 同じ担当).

The underlying message is that loving the idol (or *kyara* キャラ) entails actively seeking converts – i.e. looking for and attracting new players – in order to contribute to the idol's (or *kyara*'s) glory. Fans who desire to 'keep a monopoly' have a bad reputation, especially as they are prone to pick fights: '○○ is MY husband' (○○ *wa watashi no dan'na* ○○は私の旦那), 'Don't speak of MY wife without my permission' (*ore no yome no koto o katte ni kataruna* 俺の嫁のことを勝手に語るな). The most jealous ones are known as 'warmongers' (*butōha* 武闘派). They have such a bad reputation that fans cautiously avoid contacts with them. To give an example: in March 2018, when Kondō Akihiko publicly married virtual pop idol Hatsune Miku, he openly announced that he was simply marrying the 'little Miku from my home' (his own, personal, version of Miku). Despite his precautions, he was attacked on Twitter: 'How dare you marry MY Miku?'

Jealousy as a feminine 'trait'?

As was pointed out above, jealousy is a phenomenon that is not specific to women. But – for reasons I would like to discuss before developing the second part of my demonstration –, this boundary is more difficult to overcome in the (female) community of *kyara* fans than it is in the (male) community of idol fans. Jealousy is seen as a female trait and this gender stereotype – grounded on the assumption that women are innately more emotional than men – shapes social perceptions of women (weaker, dependent, in need of protection, and perpetually threatened by the loss of their partner). It conveys the idea that a woman can only view other women as possible rivals. In Japan, like in many cultures, it is given for granted that marriage and motherhood are the key steps in the construction of female identity. In compliance with this ideology of ideal gender roles, many women expect their husband to sustain the household with their income. In Japan, this division of labor is still deeply rooted, and although many married couples are now dual income (Ikeda 2019: 49), cultural norms have not yet caught up: Japanese wives and mothers are still typically supposed to bear the brunt of the housework, child care and help for their aging relatives. With the social expectation that men should be the primary breadwinners, Japanese women continue to highly value men's income-earning capacity. According to a survey conducted by the journal *Nippon*, in November 2021, regarding their ideal marriage partner's minimum annual income, the most common response by women (with 62.9%) was 'over ¥5 million' upward (nearly 44,000 US dollars). However, the ideal husband is becoming increasingly difficult to find, and this 'shortage of marriageable men' (Brinton *et al.* 2021) fuels mate competition. The cultural image of female singles striving to attract a wealthy bachelor is so prevalent in Japan that it gave birth to the term *fure-nemi* (フレネミー), composed of *furendo* (フレンド), 'friend', and 'enemy'. The *fure-nemi* is someone who pretends to be your friend in order to steal your love interest.

Female friend betrayal is a common topic in Japanese popular culture, most especially in the romance fictions which often feature villainess stealing their friend's boyfriend. Simulation games themselves contribute to the widespread dissemination of such plot tropes and clichés. Smartphone games, in particular, encourage this logic of rivalry through RPG (Role Playing Game) mechanics and with rankings that are constantly updated in order to intensify competitions. At the start of the game, the player must choose a name for their own character, which appears in a ranking system along

with a profile that the other players can see. This profile usually goes with a standard avatar, supplied with a basic outfit and an empty background. The player can customize how their character looks and select new clothes, or physical attributes within a wide array of available eyes, hairstyles, accessories, etc. The player can also personalize their background by purchasing furniture, and sometimes even a whole scenery (the background can be turned into a luxury New York loft terrace, a holiday resort or an English garden). To increase their score, the player has to gain personal prestige and make their in-game image more visible. The game constantly requires to level up different parameters such as ‘seduction’ (*miriyoku* 魅力), ‘appeal’ (*ninki* 人気) or ‘elegance’ (*kihin* 気品).

The modes of self-presentation are limited to appearance – it is all about showing off sexual charms –, which may seem terribly sexist since it stems from the notion that women’s value lies only in their looks. In heteronormative cultures, women have to be handsome, or well-groomed, to get a man who will provide material resources. It can be surprising that female players may enjoy games which deny them the ability to display desirable qualities such as intelligence, creativity, artistic talent or humor. But there is no alternative. To date a male character, the player has to complete ‘avatar missions.’ The goal of an ‘avatar mission’ is to buy expensive dresses, eye-catching makeups, bags and jewelry which enhance their character’s attractiveness (Richards 2015). To exert pressure on players, the three best competitors, standing up on a podium, are entitled to a crown (gold, silver, and bronze, respectively): they are the Beauty queens. The players listed below these three leaders are split between two groups: the head of the peloton and the chasing packs, divided along cutting lines. ‘Because you always know what’s your position in the rankings, it adds to the tension,’ Chika explains. ‘You compete for the top title in each category, and once you have it, you try to move up to the next level, where the same fight begins all over again.’ The levels are divided by what Chika refers to as ‘borders’ (*bōdā* ボーダー), to be crossed in quick succession. The players who are completely immersed in the competition are said to ‘run’ (*hashiru* 走る) as if getting through an obstacle course.

To fuel the competitive spirit, the games also feature ephemeral rankings: every two weeks, romantic short stories known as ‘events’ (*ibento* イベント) are launched for a limited time, during which players can raise their statistics and get special clothes or accessories as a reward. Because such items are in limited edition, players desperately try to increase their amount of ‘charm’ (*karen* 可憐) points. The events could be compared to battlegrounds where securing rare items leads to victory. The most dedicated players can be recognized by their unique outfits. ‘They wear them like trophies,’ Chika says. Some of these garments are indeed worth a huge amount of money: ‘It can cost as much as a hundred thousand yen [eight hundred and seventy US dollars].’ The figure she provides is on a quite exceptional scale, but it is not uncommon for players to spend eight thousand yen (seventy US dollars) to improve their stats during an event. The game’s monetization system is almost entirely based on rivalry between players, a rivalry which appears to be built into the game’s architecture in compliance with hegemonic social representations of gender. From this, it would be easy to conclude that *otome* games should be considered fundamentally conservative if not highly toxic. It seems indeed obvious that such games disseminate and reinforce stereotypes (Ganzon 2018). The narrative and game mechanics induce female players to act as if the only way to get value was to please a male character, as if the only way

to please him was to be pretty, and even worse: as if the only way to be pretty was to fight against rivals over consuming goods. As Tina Richards puts it, *otome* games 'produce heteronormative perspectives on how women should enact femininity.' Relevant as it may be, such an analysis cannot however account for the whole reality of the phenomenon. You cannot understand a game without studying the way it is played. When using ethnography as a research method, it turns out that the ranking system drives players to compete but also to cooperate. This is the discrepancy I would like now to explore, raising the following question: why do love simulation games perpetuate the stereotype of the jealous woman while encouraging players to create friendship networks with rivals?

Female friendship as a generator of love for a man

Friendship in the game

It may seem contradictory that games foster friendship between *yume-joshi* while compelling them to compete for a male character. Pursuing conflicting goals (making friends, outshining them) is, in fact, what makes the game so interesting. As I would like to demonstrate, players enjoy fictitious worlds where it becomes possible to both satisfy and defy social norms. Because, in real life, compliance is impossible to achieve when you want romance AND a good job, such games help women reconcile their desires, fantasies, expectations and colliding needs for achievement. *Otome* games are ambiguous, in exactly the same way as the Harlequin-type novels studied by Janice Radway (1984), a pioneer in 'Chick Lit' studies. On the one hand, they reinforce injunctive norms, which are norms 'that specify how individuals *should* behave' (Delacollette et al. 2010). On the other hand, they 'operate as a kind of cultural release valve' (Radway, 1984: 158) for a whole category of women united around a stigmatized practice. Friendship in the *otome* fans community is a form of solidarity that extends far beyond the jealousy issue. Creating bonds between players is not just a way to prevent negative feelings while sharing a favorite (*oshi* 推し). It is an ingenious solution to escape from the cultural standards linking femininity to attractiveness and grounding women's value on their ability to be recognized by men. Such standards are based on the premises that a woman must seek validation as a desirable partner. When women cannot get validation from a man, they have to get it from other people. This is precisely why the players create friendship networks, using the *oshi* as a tool to build their female identity outside the bonds of marriage. Thanks to a male character, they can share the same dreams and create strong ties in the context of a playful activity. Interestingly, it should here be noted that *otome* games for smartphone are commonly referred to as 'social games' (*soshage* ソシヤゲ for short, *sosharu gēmu* ソーシャルゲーム). The expression 'love app' (*ren'ai appu* 恋愛App) is undeniably less popular amongst players, as if the romance aspect was just a minor detail compared to the collaborative engagement.

After signing in to a romance game, it is necessary to network. The majority of 'love apps' work with a messaging system connecting all users. Each user has an avatar, a nickname, and a profile page displaying their list of friends, limited to about fifty contacts. Every day, when the player logs in, she receives gifts (energy points) from friends. To thank them, one by one, she has to click on the 'Do Sweet look' (*suteki suru* ステキする) button. Every time she clicks, she receives a reward – a fictitious

sum of money – without which it would be impossible to progress in the story. This is at least how the game *Wolf Toxic* (*Urufu Tokishikku* ウルフトキシック), for instance, works: by forcing users to repeatedly click until operation is over. It takes time – seven minutes for fifty friends – but yields up to five hundred ‘*man*’ (the game’s currency), allowing the player to buy either a pink beret or a cocktail bag within four days (since it costs four thousand *man*). The beret or the bag, in turn, allow you to earn fifty ‘seduction points’. The seduction points are highly sought after because they ensure victory during the mandatory tests known as ‘Bridal training’ (*hanayome shūgyō* 花嫁修業), which, in turn, make it possible to earn ‘elegance points’. These elegance points are essential: they allow player to read the last episodes, which, crowning the love story, lead to a marriage proposal or a passionate embrace. In *Wolf Toxic*, thirty thousand elegance points are required to read the emotionally-packed ‘normal’ ending (*Beast moon end*) and forty thousand elegance points to achieve romantic climax with the ‘good’ ending (*Sweet moon end*). Reading these two epilogues enable players who got enough ‘affection points’ to taste even greater joys: when the character’s route has been cleared, it unlocks a ‘secret’ ending supposed to drive the player mad with pleasure.

Embedded in a complex system of rewards or gains (Turk 2014), friendship between players is framed as an essential part of the game mechanism. Without the help of friends, it proves nearly impossible to obtain the most coveted episodes and to successfully complete the goal of the game: hearing the male character’s most intimate confession. The game’s design makes love conditional on friendship. Significantly, a wide range of tools are made available to foster friendship. Some of the most popular romance games – modeled after dating websites – operate as connecting services. Some even go so far as to provide an instant messaging system to facilitate communication between players. This is probably the reason why such games are classified as ‘social games’ in the data annual book *Famitsu White Paper* which summarizes the mobile game markets. Officially, the categories ‘love’ and ‘romance’ do not exist in market studies devoted to the Japanese digital industry. Despite the fact that the sales of *otome* games have been booming since the early 2000s (Enterbrain 2020; Yano Research Institute 2020), games designed to ‘make the heart beat every day’ (*nichijō no tokimeki o teikyō* 日常のときめきを提供) are not listed as such but are hidden under this ambiguous label of ‘social games,’ which refers to entertainment apps ‘more focused on the fun of communicating with friends than the fun of playing games at all.’ (*Wikipedia Japan* 2019). In fact, many *otome* games place equal or even greater emphasis on networking activities, which become part of the gameplay experience, blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and making it also difficult to know if other users are friends or enemies.

Every day – once a player has finished reading the free episodes she is entitled to –, the game prompts her to complete battle missions variously called ‘training’ or ‘duel’. The goal is to challenge skills against another player referred to as ‘rival’ (*raibaru* ライバル). This competition may seem contradictory with the game’s operating method, based on friendship networks. However, such battles are so easy to win (since players just need to select a weaker opponent) that it reveals to be fake. The artificiality of the *mise-en-scène* – conveying a kind of ironic comment on mate competition – allows for incentivisation of competitors who view themselves as allies: every battle, even failed ones, grants them a reward. In *Wolf Toxic*, for example,

if you complete a duel mission, you get fifty elegance points. If you fail, twenty-five. Completed or failed, this mission allows you to earn approximately eight hundred elegance points per day. The battle's outcome depends on a dual choice: not only can the player select her opponent, but also a friend to team up with. Teaming up with someone who has a lot of points ensures victory. In the game environment, all players are prompted to help themselves by strengthening community partnership... Even fighting against so-called 'rivals' is considered as a kind of partnership since it increases stats. The enjoyment fosters strong bonds between female players, and motivates them to join forces, even with their opponents. In real life also, standing all together, they find strength through unity.

Friendship in real life

Game designers do more than just provide romantic content: they turn male characters into merchandise – dolls, posters, badges, postcards, figurines, keychains or perfume – so that female fans can carry their favorite (*oshi* 推し) around with them and stay connected to him while going to work, strolling, shopping or sightseeing. Interestingly enough, the movement of digital characters crossing into 'reality,' and coming closer to humans, is governed by rules which also foster friendship networks. Again, as I would like to showcase, it appears that the gaming practice require players to forge relationships of trust and cooperation in order to materialize what they desire. Wanting to express their love for their *oshi*, players seek products featuring the character (character goods) with a particular focus on the rarest items, those released in limited edition. *Media Mix* strategies (Steinberg 2012) – aimed at dispersing content across multiple platforms to stimulate their consumption – often use scarcity product tactic to create urgency but also to promote exchange networks between fans. The strategy is as follow: some products are marketed as unique *seasonal* offers or, worse, as one-day offers. They become sold out very fast, making fans develop a fear of missing out. When these items are no longer available for purchase, the only way to obtain them is through networking. As Chika summarizes: 'Either you buy, either you trade. The most sought-after characters end up being available only through the exchange network.' Such exchanges frequently occur in Ikebukuro, a district of Tōkyō 'known as a mecca for female fandom' (Steinberg & Ernest dit Alban 2018) where *yume-joshi* meet every weekend to shop and have fun. Ikebukuro hosts several hundred stores, game centers, karaoke clubs, cafes and restaurants displaying characters from *otome* games, and has become the favorite meeting place for fans, easily recognizable by the large and colorful bags called 'painful bags' (*ita-baggu* 痛バッグ) they carry around to express devotion to a character. Equipped with a transparent plastic window, painful bags are used to show off their collection of character goods (pins, badges, plushies), making it easy to connect with people who play the same game. Since each bag is dedicated to a favorite character, it acts as a visit card and facilitates exchanges: 'I have stuff featuring your *oshi*. Do you have any featuring mine?' Such exchanges frequently take place in the small park of Naka-Ikebukuro, an iconic place of gathering and trade, where fans meet, engage in bartering, take pictures of each other, and discuss about their beloved characters.

By creating scarcity, the game companies knowingly encourage players to develop mutual-aid networks. But they have an even more efficient way to

foster strong community links between female fans: ‘blind goods’ (*buraindo guzzu* ブラインドグッズ). Blind goods are surprise packages with an unknown item inside, related to a character. Cybird – one of the most important *otome* game companies in Japan – relies on such product tie-ins to achieve its stated aim: bringing fans together as friends ‘both online and through events’ (Tsuruda 2021). Blind goods operate as an incentive to initiate contacts and exchanges. As Cybird’s marketing manager Kenta Fujiwara explains (I interviewed him in November 9, 2018): ‘It’s the same principle as *gachapon* (ガチャポン):’ *Gachapon* are coin-operated capsule vending machines that dispense random collectible figures, badges or keychains. As all capsules are released in sets, with a number of items to collect in each series, there are times when you have to buy fifteen capsules before you get the one you want. ‘It’s an unstoppable way for the producer to increase sales, asserts Kenta Fujiwara. The collectors can often get frustrated by getting the same item repeatedly. But the frustration drives them for further *gachapon* action.’ It turns out that *gachapon* and blind goods are very popular among women. ‘Compared to men who want to know exactly what they buy, women enjoy the thrill of unpredictability. It’s like playing lottery.’ Kenta Fujiwara takes his analysis a step further: ‘Female players also enjoy getting random character merchandise because it compels them to create exchange systems. When they buy blind goods, they end up getting many items featuring characters they are not fond of. Trying to find players who are looking for these items (in exchange for the ones they themselves are looking for) is part of the fun.’ Like gamblers, female fans try their luck. When they fail to win the highly coveted item (as is often the case), they get it through trade matching, adding a dash of adventure into the excitement: immediately after buying blind goods, players can often be seen in the nearby Naka-Ikebukuro park, using the merchandises as icebreakers to talk to strangers and make new friends. Spurred on by game companies which carefully restrict availability of character goods and implement a gambling impulse into the merchandising (Giard 2022: 205), female fans strive to create bonds, deriving pleasure from their participation in a collective struggle for victory.

Somehow, the thrill of the *oshi*-hunt stems from the fact that it urges players to discover people around them... Is it a backdoor way to make friends? Interestingly enough, *Animate Girl Festival* (AGF) – Japan’s largest event celebrating *otome* games, attracting up to one hundred thousand visitors twice a year –, provides them with a ‘trading area’ which alone accounts for 25% of the event space. Held at Sunshine City in Ikebukuro, the site of AGF comprises four halls arranged over three floors. In the first three halls, over one hundred exhibitors sell merchandises – mainly *blind goods* and limited series of stickers, bags, cases, straps, cards, mugs, coasters, or collectibles featuring characters – while creating panic: some items are sold for only two hours and are available on first-come first-serve basis which makes it necessary to queue. To get a rare item, fans have to wait, but slot sales frequently overlap, making it impossible to acquire all the goodies they crave for. Caught in the frenzy, fans race across the venue, and line up for a precious item while nervously checking their watches, knowing they can’t have it all. Once they made their purchases, AGF attendees move in search for people with similar interests. In the huge hall hosting the ‘trading area’ – crowded just like a subway station at rush hour –, some of them stand in front of all the goodies to be exchanged, artfully displayed on cloth sheets. Some others walk around carrying a tray full of prized merchandises. Outside the venue, the large terrace of Sunshine City offers

the same spectacle: everywhere, throngs of female fans congregate to deal character goods – trying to get the ones they could not buy in exchange for the ones they want to barter – calling each other with delight, exchanging phone numbers, celebrating all together their shared passion for handsome and sexy characters.

Friendship as a strategy of resistance

The adrenaline-filled atmosphere of such events is frequently greeted with public disapproval. In Japan, *yume-joshi* are criticized as selfish and pleasure-seeking consumers who refuse to assume any social responsibility. In line with the ‘domino theory of sexual peril’ (Rubin 2011: 151), dating a fictitious creature is not considered as an appropriate activity since it might endanger the future of the country. Those who engage in such romantic relationships, especially if they are single, are often berated for withdrawing from reality through escapist entertainment. The threat they pose to social order is perceived as real ‘because the number of children in Japan – along with birth and marriage rates, and even the number of people having sex – continues to decline’, as Patrick Galbraith puts it (2021: 45). According to the most recent estimates, people living alone will make up nearly 40 percent of all households in Japan by 2040 (IPSS 2018: 9). One-third of people aged 20–35 will remain single for the rest of their lives (IPSS 2013: 9). Births outside marriage will remain very low (below 2%) because out-of-wedlock children are being segregated. All these factors contributing to the lowering birthrate are causing concern among Japanese authorities. The social welfare system threatens to go bankrupt as a result of the demographic collapse. These issues lead to outbursts of moral panic. During a political rally in 2018, Kanji Katō, a government member, stated that single women ‘will end up in a nursing home funded by other people’s children’ (*Asahi News* 2018). A few months later, Mio Sugita, a politician, claimed that childless people were ‘not productive’ (*seisansei ga nai* 生産性がない) (Tanaka 2018). In Japanese media, single people are regularly found guilty and referred to as ‘loads for society’ (*shakai no nimotsu* 社会の荷物), ‘burdens on the nation’ (*kokka no futan* 国家の負担), or ‘social security’s free-riders’ (*shakai-hoshō ni tadanori* 社会保障にただ乗り) (Togetter 2017). The stigma is much heavier on those who indulge in games, which is probably why they devote so much time and energy to building their friendship networks. ‘Dream girls’ need one another to tackle this negative image, and to avoid exclusion. *Otome games*’ producers are well aware of this.

There are, of course, many different ways to cope with prejudice. As Sato Mizuno (public relations officer at Cybird) explains, the easiest strategy is to keep something secret. Until 2017, *yume-joshi* had to hide in order to play. They purchased privacy filters that made the screen blank when viewed from the side so that no one could peek at their smartphones in the bus, elevator or metro. Such filters are no longer used. Most *yume-joshi* now openly go on a ‘date’ (*deai* 出会い/デート) with their favorite character. Concerning painful bags, the policy is as follows: it is still considered appropriate to conceal such accessories in public transport, but as they get close to Ikebukuro station, many women disclose them, proudly ‘outing’ themselves as fans, and making their love interest visible. ‘They communicate their true identities, more and more,’ observes Sato Mizuno. Some of them even voice their ‘preference’ for fictional men, arguing that flesh and blood ones are less affectionate.

Others label their feelings as ‘true love’ (*ria-ko, gachi-koi* リアコ, ガチ恋), using coined words that only fans can understand. Pretending to be ashamed of themselves, some ironically refer to their ‘sinful engagement’ (*tsumibukai yakusoku* 罪深い約束) as a way to both acknowledge and challenge the prevailing opinion. Conversely, others make fun of the so-called ‘normal’ people, calling them ‘happy-with-reality’ (*ria-jū* リア充). Within a hostile environment, fans take pride in mocking the hegemonic norms. The goal is to turn the ‘shameful difference’ (Goffman 1963: 156) into a source of self-esteem.

Struggling to gain acceptance, female fans mobilize themselves around the shared passion for characters. Making friends is the key strategy. To be efficient, such strategy does not necessarily rely on deep or long-lasting friendship: eye-contact, and a nod of mutual recognition are enough for two strangers to feel less lonely. Hence the importance of plushies and badges acting as membership markers: only those who ‘know’ can identify each other and feel part of a subculture. To enhance their sense of belonging to the community, *yume-joshi* form groups bound together by common experience and expertise. They also participate to highly codified rituals requiring cooperation of all players. The most iconic ritual involves the equivalent of a sacrifice: dream-girls are regularly invited to consume character-based drink and food. This custom is known as ‘collabo cafe’ (*korabo kafe* コラボカフェ), which means that a cafe collaborates for a limited time with an *otome* game company to serve only original recipes inspired by the characters from a game. Fans never miss the opportunity to enjoy a taste of their beloved *oshi*’s, while symbolically ‘sharing’ with him his favorite dish (adorned with hearts) or a drink (reflecting the color of his eyes). In collabo cafes, each time customers place an order, they receive a complimentary limited-edition gift (*tokuten* 特典), such as a portrait printed on glossy photopaper. To get the portrait of their *oshi*, customers have to communicate with women sitting next to them, or start a conversation with other participants: ‘I got a gift featuring this character. Is he your favorite? Did you receive a gift featuring mine?’ The ritual leaves no choice: it appears necessary to make friends and get along with peers in order to successfully obtain the merchandises embodying the male character.

At first glance, one might think that *yume-joshi* are just compulsive collectors obsessed with rare items, willing to spend money galore on *blind goods* for the sake of a character they became infatuated with... But their hectic quest makes sense only in light of the oblique strategies they use to make a charming character their own. As Chika points out: ‘It’s not just about purchasing. Money is but one means. To achieve your goals, you must also strive to increase contacts with peers, commit yourself, invest time and resources, go out and communicate with other players. You have to create a network.’ Unlike most consumer products, digital characters are not for sale. At least, not entirely. To secure a privileged access to them (to earn the goodies, voice messages, matching pair rings or rare images), fans need to forge ties of friendship within the community. The mechanism underlying *otome* games prompts players to build bonds, and even if the game makes it also possible to short-circuit this mechanism (by buying affection points for example, in order to skip team trainings), this technique is regarded by Japanese fans as an unfair and counterproductive approach leading to fake victory. In order for an *otome* game to be effective (by activating powerful reaction of love for a character), time and collective energy must be devoted to the game. If you bypass the everyday trials, stay alone, and manage somehow to

avoid any personal sacrifice or any interactive event, the character ends up being less valuable than expected. 'The more hardships, the stronger feelings,' Chika concludes, emphasizing the importance of 'playing the game for real' (meeting the requirements of 'social' activities woven into the love story).

Sending friend requests, congratulating another fan, participating to battles, exchanging merchandises... On the surface, such networking activities seem to be disconnected from the love relationship that players are encouraged to 'physically experience' (*taiken* 体験). But without people to feel connected to, loving a character would neither be intense, desirable, gratifying, rewarding, nor legitimate. It would be a shameful and solitary passion.

Conclusion: one for all and all for one

In the subculture of dream-girls, love (for a fictitious man) is dependent on friendship (with women). As *otome* gamers repeatedly point out, they have to build assistance networks in order to make love 'possible,' in other words: to unlock the most romantic endings and get the rarest items featuring their favorite character. Networking also proves crucial in a social context of discrimination against women who date fictitious men: all together, female fans can give meaning and purpose to this type of attachment. Loving the same characters, sharing preferences for digital partners create bonds between dream girls and enable them to form a community based on positive goals: enjoyment, exchanges... Because they fail to meet normative expectations regarding what an adult responsible woman should do, many *otome* gamers in Japan feel different and somehow disqualified. They are blamed for indulging into anti-social activities. In reaction to devaluation, they promote mutual support and understanding, drawing strength from their collective ability to have fun.

In contrast to women who struggle to monopolize a mate (find a husband) and create in 'real life' a reproductive unit (monogamous family), dream girls willingly claim to be united in the joint celebration of an ideal darling to be shared in a spirit of solidarity. The benefits of this strategy are threefold. On the one hand, it helps them counter negative comments about singles (perceived as self-centered, isolated people) and about gamers (allegedly lacking social skills). On the other hand, they demonstrate that being a fan involves being culturally aligned around praised values (friendship, interdependence). Finally, this strategy enables them to challenge the normative idea that, for a woman, marriage equals happiness. Is it really possible to get happy when – following the breadwinner-caregiving traditional model – a woman stays at home to take care of the domestic part and the household? Isn't it more satisfying to marry a fictitious man while enjoying being single, financially independent, autonomous, able to spend free time on networking activities and leisure?

Reversing the mainstream assumptions, *yume-joshi* playfully position themselves as privileged people. To deter judgments, they provide compelling evidence that they 'enjoy themselves' (*tanoshimi* 楽しみ). Because their lifestyle spark criticism, they heavily rely on circles of friends referred to as *kurasuta* (クラスタ, from the English word 'cluster'). *Kurasuta* are groups of communion and support. By gathering peers around shared worldviews and co-constructing a system of words, codes, symbols, or practices, such groups enable fans to turn entertainment into an act of resistance.

The very nature of their entertainment is, of course, closely related to the issues faced by fans: *otome* games feature an attractive and young heroine (played by the user) being chased by several handsome aristocrats, mafia bosses or warriors. The majority of plot settings – inspired by prince charming fairytales – lead to a marriage proposal. It may appear contradictory that such games provide pleasure to women who often reject the traditional path of marriage. Even though, in real life, *yume-joshi* willingly claim they don't need a man to feel complete, they derive obvious pleasure from conventional (if not excessively conservative) fictions. Half serious, half playful, some argue that fantasy, running counter to reality, should help them compensate. In reality, they will never go to the ball nor wear a princess dress. Why not in dreams?

The main interest of *otome* games probably lies in this equivocal paradox: they can be used as tools to step outside hegemonic gender roles while delivering prescriptive content filled with stereotypes. Blurring the lines between conformity and protest, they help women to opt out of the patriarchal system, while perpetuating the existing norms. Fundamentally ambivalent, *otome* games provide fans both a 'room of their own' and a space where they can be protected and cherished by an alpha male. Love apps also provide users with the opportunity to form a community, where they can develop a sense of identity and the power to challenge negative opinion. Most significantly, *otome* games allow users to refrain from making a choice. Since dream girls equally enjoy being a damsel-in-distress and a woman who collects sexy sweethearts, games are designed to offer everything: the advantages of singlehood as well as the joys of marriage. Because 'You have to catch them all' (*getto daze!* ゲットだぜ!) – as they say, in reference to *Pokemon* – *otome* gamers don't want to choose. Friends and lovers. They want them all.

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