

Beautiful, Sexual, and Unimportant: The Situation of Female Inside and Outside the Game

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Abstract

In recent years, Japanese style animate download type mobile games have been extremely popular in the Chinese market. This paper explores gender dynamics in anime mobile games. Despite a growing presence of female gamers, the depiction of female characters within these games often meets traditional gender stereotypes: female characters are typically sexualized with limited diversity in their appearance, while male characters display a broader range of appearance and age. Using case study of the game *Arknights*, this research studies the male gaze in character design and the overlooked contribution of female players. It also uses discourse analysis to examine the wave of misogyny in the gaming community brought by *Black Myth: Wukong*.

Keywords: gender representation, male gaze, gender stereotypes, gaming culture, female gamers

In recent years, Japanese style animate download type mobile games have been extremely popular in the Chinese market. According to the China Gaming Industry Report 2023, the actual sales revenue of anime mobile games was approximately 31.707 billion CNY (around 4.47 billion USD) in 2023, an increase of 31.01% year-on-year. (Su, 2023). These games are free to download, and profit from in-app purchases. With limited game mechanics, mobile games mainly gain profit through selling items to get characters. As a result, the characters' setting, appearance and background story play an important role in determining the profits.

In a gender-natural-oriented mobile game, *Arknights*, the ratio of male characters to female characters is 81 to 257 as of August 2024. Even with the lower ratio, the male characters tend to present a more diverse appearance with a wider age span. For example, the character *Hellagur* is a soldier with 44 years of combat experience.



The Character *Hellagur* (*Arknights*, 2019)

By contrast, until August 2024, there's no female character with the appearance of an older age. Most of the female characters appear to be teenagers, regardless of their real age. Even the character with 19 years of combat experience and set to be a mercenary soldier, *Ines*, has a young appearance. One female character, *Kal'tsit*, who is set to be over ten thousand years old, also appears too young. At the same time, she is nicknamed "old grandma" by players because of her age.



The Characters *Ines* (left) and *Kal'tsit* (right) (*Arknights*, 2019)

In fact, most female characters in this game dress in high heels and skirts or shorts with bare legs and show their breasts, while the male characters tend to dress in a less revealing fashion. Below are the 6 new female characters' appearances out of 8 in 2024 and the 4 new male characters' illustrations since 2023.



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4



Figure 1.5



Figure 1.6



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4

The illustrations of female characters predominantly focus on emphasizing the chest and legs. In Figure 1.1, the character's thighs are bare, the stomach is exposed, and the top is tight-fitting, highlighting body contours. The character in Figure 1.2 has an exposed chest, an emphasized waistline, and wears black stockings with a body-hugging mini skirt. In Figure 1.3, the character's top accentuates the chest curves, fits tightly at the waist, and reveals part of the midriff. The lower body is dressed in ultra-short shorts and sheer black stockings. The character in Figure 1.4 is the only one wearing long pants. However, the pants are still tight-fitting, emphasizing the chest and leg curves. The character in Figure 1.5 has an exposed chest, waist, and thighs, with an emphasis on the chest and hip curves. The character in Figure 1.6 is wearing a tight, cropped top and shorts, exposing the waist and emphasizing the chest curves. In contrast, the illustrations of male characters show significantly less skin exposure compared to the female characters. Female characters generally appear to look younger, while male characters display a wider range of diversity in their appearances. While female characters place more emphasis on body contours, male character designs focus more on their identity. The character in Figure 2.1 is a hunter battling Abyssal creatures and monsters. In this illustration, he has his face covered by a mask, holds a large scythe, and wears a cloak with fitted pants, emphasizing his muscular thighs. The visual focus in Figure 2.2 is the pen in the character's hand. This character uses the pen to write spells for attacks. He is dressed in standard, straight-cut trousers. The character in Figure 2.3 is the son of a general from the Yan Empire (inspired by China). His attire incorporates many Chinese elements and dragon motifs. His cloak and lower garments emphasize his official status. The character in Figure 2.4 is a mercenary with one eye, emphasizing his extensive combat experience. He wears armor, knee guards, and fitted pants with muscular thighs. His tattered cloak further highlights his many battles.

Although men generally prefer female characters with exposing clothes in anime games, an interesting phenomenon is that in *Honor of Kings*, a popular 5v5 player versus player MOBA mobile game, more male players choose to play male characters, although the male players show a stronger interest in female players in anime games with relatively weak social features. Male characters are associated with bodily actions, while female characters are associated with magic and supernatural ability (Liu et al., 2023). For these games with social elements, male players would prefer to choose male characters to present their masculinity. For these single-player anime mobile games, male players demand more female characters with revealing clothing. Some of these characters are "Master Love" (in love with the protagonist of the game, and the protagonist is designed for the players to substitute the protagonist: the protagonist rarely speaks, and the player can change the protagonist's decision). It seems that the characters are showing love to the protagonist, but in fact, they are pleasing the players beyond the screen. This is very similar to John Berger's theory in *Ways of Seeing* regarding men collecting nude paintings of women. Berger argues that these images often cater to the male gaze, where females are portrayed as objects of desire, looking at the owner of the painting in private spaces. No matter they have a partner in the painting or not, these women exist to cater to the male's desire (Berger, 1990). The women in the images are all trying to please the master outside the frame or the screen, fully aware that they are being watched, displaying their bodies. These digital, modern-day nude paintings are similarly kept by their collectors in the private space of their phones, as part of a game with few social elements.

It seems that this common demand from men has existed throughout history, and developers continue to prioritize it over the demands of female players. This can be inferred from the differences in the appearance of male and female characters and the uneven ratio of male to female characters. People always use the misperception that there are fewer female gamers compared to males, or that female gamers contribute less revenue for the game developers to justify this situation. However, according to the Entertainment Software Association in 2008, female players account for 40% of all players and the number of female players is still increasing due to the introduction of Otome Games, the Japanese translation of “Maiden Game”, a type of story-based romance game targeted toward female players. One of the earliest Otome Games, *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, has been constantly operating since 2017. Figure 1 shows the monthly revenue from 06/01/2023 to 05/31/2024. The average monthly revenue was \$804,231, with the highest monthly revenue of \$1,408,331 and the lowest monthly revenue of \$524,999.

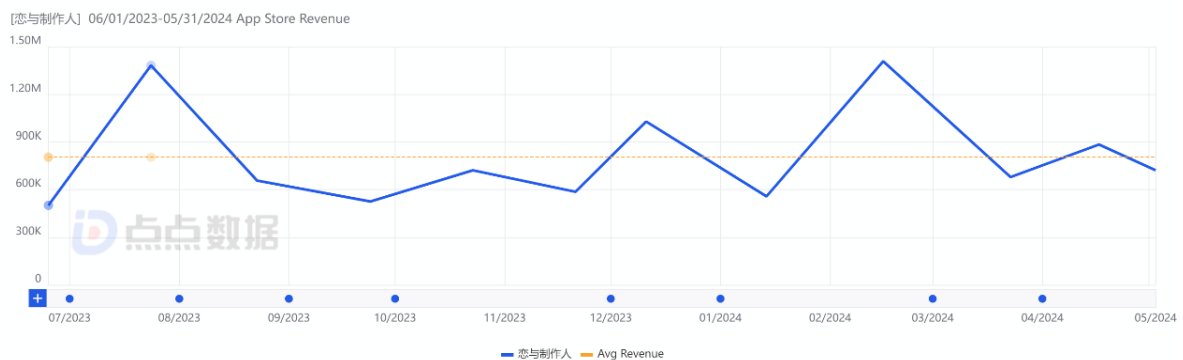


Figure 1.

A new Otome game that starts operating in January 2024, *Love and Deepspace*, has gained revenue of \$87,047,430 till August 31, 2024. Figure 2 shows the monthly revenue from 01/18/2024 to 08/31/2024. *Love and Deepspace* co-branded with Rosen and released a couple of goods on August 12, and sold over 1.7 million in one week.

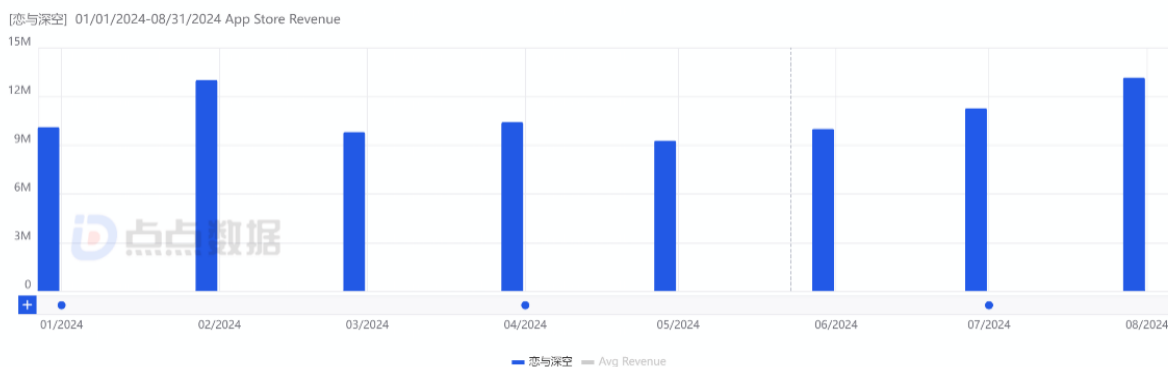


Figure 2.

These two examples prove that female players have purchasing power. However, the idea that “female players don’t buy games” and “women are not suitable for hardcore games” is still in the mainstream in China. A recent Chinese action RPG, *Black Myth: Wukong*, went viral on the Chinese Internet, and the past statements from the game’s creative team have come to light along with the game’s popularity. The lead artist of the game, Yang Qi stated that the “game doesn’t need a reverse drive through the female players”, and “games are for the real guys,” in 2013. These statements quickly sparked a huge debate, and Yang Qi still refused to apologize until September 2, 2024.

After these statements were exposed, a portion of the male players began to rebel. They supported the idea that

hardcore games do not need female players. On one of China's largest gaming forums, National Geography of Azeroth (NGA), a forum established in 2002 with over 700 subforums, most of the thread titles that appear when searching keywords like "feminism," "female players," or "women" contain anti-feminist sentiments. Examples include: "The thing I'm most thankful for now is that *Black Myth* 'disrespected women'," "It feels like quite a few female players do have a bias against this game," and "Because of the established of 'feminism', haven't seen a woman with normal sense a while." A large number of people repeatedly use the term '女拳' (stands for feminazi, a mocking homophone for feminism), expressing disdain for feminism, while at the same time emphasizing that female players' aversion to the game is due to 'bias' or a 'lack of aesthetic appreciation'. They do not acknowledge the controversy surrounding the game, insisting that hardcore games do not need female players, yet they still long for female players to appreciate and praise the game. In two posts that positively discussed the controversial statements made by Yang Qi, titled "I think the *Black Myth* development team should apologize to the female player community" and "Misogynistic behavior of the core team of *Black Myth*," the majority of the replies did not respond to the specific allegations. In the first post, the original content from the poster is as follows:

"First, take a look at the main creator's statements and the company's job advertisements. I won't post the images — honestly, they're disgusting. Just any random article will do, though this one is not complete, as the creator's disgusting remarks go beyond what's mentioned here.
<https://tech.sina.cn/2020-08-24/detail-iivhvpwy2761380.d.html>

It's the 21st century, yet the game's creators still think being rude is genuine personality, and that misogyny is somehow cool or edgy.

This game has a group of misogynistic fans, like those saying 'AAA games don't need women.' This is closely linked to the creators' misogynistic ideas that surface from time to time. The fact that female players bombed the game with one-star reviews on Douban is totally deserved." (*I Think the Black Myth Development Team Should Apologize to the Female Player Community [Online forum post]*, 2002)

The popular replies to the original poster can be categorized into four types: mockery of LGBTQ identities, emphasis on gender opposition, irony and jest, and aggressive language. The mockery of LGBTQ identities includes: "Hello, I am a biological male, psychologically a female lesbian otaku. Your post disgusts me. I hope you can apologize to me and pay 1,500 yuan for emotional damages" (which received 27 likes). Even though the original poster did not mention LGBTQ identities, this comment still uses a tone of ironic exaggeration to mimic and ridicule identity politics, attempting to undermine the seriousness of the original post and divert the focus of the discussion. Aggressive language includes: "Classic, I'm a man (which implies 'I'm a man, and I also think...' (usually supporting feminism). Just looking at your posts, both are aimed at *Black Myth*. I speak very directly: your mom is dead, stupid" (52 likes), "Running into a bitch early in the morning, what a fucking misfortune" (17 likes), and "Fuck your mom" (30 likes). These comments very plainly use aggressive language.

Gendered insults, such as "bitch" and insults directed at the poster's mother, repeatedly appear, reflecting a cultural backdrop of gender inequality. These comments use aggressive language to suppress attention to women's rights. Irony and jest include: "Your post disgusts me... I hope you can apologize to me and pay 1,500 yuan for emotional damages," and "Whatever, just speed up the process. In the past, I would have clicked the link to see the facts behind such posts, but now I just want to say, 'fuck off with your feminazi rhetoric'".

"I'll support anyone who opposes feminazism. You come in and oppose points about female players using typical feminazi talking points, so eager to create a gender divide? Even if the production team does have some vulgar comments in their history, do male players not deserve an apology? Are all men assumed to accept what you call 'disgusting'? When will male players be able to stand up for themselves?" (7 likes)

The replies "When will male players be able to stand up for themselves" and "just speed up the process" use sarcasm and exaggeration, attempting to put male players in a position where they are receiving harm from females, blurring the lines between serious gender discussions and jokes. Through exaggeration of their self-image and demands for compensation, these responses attempt to undermine the original poster's claims of gender injustice. Emphasis on gender opposition includes: "You come in and oppose points about female players using typical feminazi talking points, so eager to create a gender divide?" and "Hot take: feminazism oppresses women no less than men oppress women." These replies repeatedly use the term "feminazi," attempting to convey that radical feminism is the root cause of the oppression of women, far more serious than the derogatory remarks made by the controversial statements of Yangqi. At the same time, they exhibit a strong adversarial attitude towards feminism, even perceiving it as an attack. The hostility of male players towards the label 'feminazi' reflects their belief that discussions about gender issues are a direct threat to men.

In a second post titled *Core Team of Black Myth Engages in Misogynistic Behavior*, the original poster shared a satirical video mocking a female player for speaking out. In the replies to this post, 15 responses mentioned

phrases like “If it doesn’t insult women, I won’t play” and “Now I have to support it.” The top comments received 213 and 124 likes, respectively. In these replies, the vast majority do not provide any substantive response to the specific allegations raised by the original poster. Instead, the responders evade the core issues of the topic through aggressive language, mockery, and jest. This indicates that many male players in the gaming community tend to adopt a dismissive attitude towards discussions involving gender issues, even perceiving them as expressions of “sensitivity” or “overly political correctness.” Additionally, the original poster was banned for six days due to the statements made in this post, while the replies that included personal attacks did not receive any punishment. This indicates that the community rules of the forum may be more biased towards men, and this differential treatment reflects the underlying assumptions about gender issues within the gaming community. Some male players attempt to prevent women from playing AAA games, which they view as a representation of masculinity, through exclusion and insults. By doing so, they aim to continue dominating the gaming community. However, when female players express opinions like “I won’t support *Black Myth*,” these men attack them as biased or lacking in taste. They expect female players to revere the gaming world, idolize the masculinity they hold dear, and beg for entry, giving them a sense of superiority. Yet, when reality doesn’t align with their expectations, they feel their position is threatened.

At the same time, the voices in mainstream media are also more biased towards men. While the co-branded coffee between *Black Myth: Wukong* and Luckin Coffee sold out, a hashtag named “*Black Myth: Wukong* has Proven Male’s Purchasing Power” went into trend on a Chinese social media, Weibo. The catering brands have continued co-branding with many Japanese anime games, including most Otome Games since earlier this year. For example, Heytea, a milk tea brand that has expanded to the US, co-branded with *Light and Night*, an Otome game in March 2024, selling out within 10 minutes. However, unlike the male players of *Black Myth*, the female players’ purchasing power was not acknowledged by the community.

Both in and outside of games, women face suppression. In games, female characters are depicted as weak yet sexualized “vases,” existing merely to display their beauty. Outside of games, the efforts of female players are unrecognized, as they are often perceived as unneeded for hardcore games. However, feminism in the gaming community has also made continuous progress. From the first appearance of a female protagonist in the 1982 game *Wabbit*, to Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, who was the first to portray a strong yet beautiful female lead, and then to major developers creating otome games aimed at female audiences, we have made steady strides. Looking forward, there is still a long way to go to improve women’s rights in the gaming industry.

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