Analyzing Female-Oriented Games From the Perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory—A Case Study of *Love and Deep Space*

Shuangkun Fu

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

With the expansion of the female player base and the increase in their purchasing power, the female-oriented game market has gradually risen. This paper employs the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a framework, using the successful case of *Love and Deep Space* to explore how female players satisfy their specific social and psychological needs through gaming. The study finds that female-oriented games effectively meet the diverse needs of female players in terms of content design, interactive experiences, and community building, further promoting the prosperity and development of the female-oriented game market.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory, female-oriented games, *Love and Deep Space*

Introduction

The term "female-oriented" first appeared in Japan in the 1950s. In Japanese, "向" (muke) is a suffix indicating a target audience, and thus "female-oriented" refers to cultural consumption specifically designed for women as the target audience. Consequently, "female-oriented games" are games designed and developed for female players, catering to their preferences and needs (Han & Wang, 2020).

Otome games, a subgenre of female-oriented games, primarily focus on romance, aiming to fulfill female players' desires for love and romantic fantasies. In these games, female players interact with characters in a virtualized reality, where romantic scenarios and beautiful storylines attract players (Yin & Zhang, 2023). Among these, *Love and Deep Space* launched its public beta on January 18, 2024. Unlike typical otome games in the domestic market, *Love and Deep Space* uniquely incorporates 3D modeling and an Action Combat (ACT) mode. In the game, male characters have their own 3D models, with appearances that change based on angles and lighting, and they can express emotions and interact with players in real-time. Additionally, *Love and Deep Space* introduces a combat system, a significant departure from conventional otome games. The combat system features a "main control" (the player) + "assist" (male character) duo, allowing players to switch weapons and use skills.

On December 30, 2023, the official *Love and Deep Space* account announced that the game had reached 10 million global pre-registrations. According to data from the app analytics website DIANDIAN, as of January 24, *Love and Deep Space* peaked at No. 5 on the iOS bestseller chart (Xu & Wu, 2024). Based on data from Sensor

Shuangkun Fu, College of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Tower and other analytics firms, the game's revenue in its first month after launch was 253 million RMB, and by November 2024, it had reached 618 million RMB. The game also enjoys high popularity on social media, with numerous fan-created videos garnering over 100,000 likes on various platforms.

Why do otome games garner such high popularity in today's consumer market? What motivates female players to engage with these games, and what effects do they experience? This paper will use the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a framework to analyze *Love and Deep Space* and explore the motivations of female players in engaging with this game.

Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Early communication theories viewed audiences as passive, such as the "Magic Bullet Theory" or "Hypodermic Needle Theory", which posited that media had an irresistible and powerful influence. These theories suggested that media messages could directly and immediately affect audiences, much like a bullet hitting a target or a drug being injected into the bloodstream, thereby directly influencing people's attitudes, opinions, and even actions. In these theories, audiences were seen as passive recipients of information, unconditionally accepting media messages (Liu, 2008).

In the 1940s, during the U.S. presidential election, Paul Lazarsfeld conducted an empirical study on the influence of mass media on voters' intentions. Lazarsfeld found that mass media did not directly influence voters' decisions but was merely one of many factors, and not the primary one. Later, American scholars Katz and Lazarsfeld conducted multiple studies in areas such as shopping, fashion, and current affairs, finding similar phenomena. These studies showed that the effects of mass communication were part of a complex social process, with numerous mediating factors and constraints. Media messages intended to persuade audiences often only reinforced pre-existing attitudes (Guo, 2001).

During this period, Katz proposed the "basic model" of media use in his work *The Uses of Mass Communications*, which can be summarized as "social factors + psychological factors → media expectations → media use → need satisfaction", forming the early foundation of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Fan, 2011). This theory posits that the social and psychological attributes of individuals and groups determine how they use mass media, emphasizing that audience media engagement is based on specific needs. These needs include information, entertainment, social relationships, and spiritual or informational needs. Through media engagement, audiences satisfy these needs and may experience other unintended consequences (Hu, 2003).

After revisions by various scholars, the current Uses and Gratifications Theory includes the following aspects:

(1) Audience intentionality: The selection and use of media by audiences are intentional, purposeful, and motivated. People are active participants in communication, choosing media or content to satisfy their needs and desires, which include information, entertainment, social relationships, and spiritual needs.

(2) Social and psychological factors: Numerous social and psychological factors influence people's communication behaviors.

(3) Influence: People often have more influence than media, though this is not always the case.

As seen above, in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the audience holds a prominent position, using media intentionally to satisfy personal needs (Cai & Liu, 2004). Below, the author will analyze female players' identities from three dimensions of needs.

Analysis of Female Players' Needs in *Love and Deep Space* From the Perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Aesthetic Needs

Female players engage with otome games to obtain a unique, non-"violent aesthetic" experience provided by the games themselves. Museum studies scholar Lin Yujie once discussed the concept of "ugly aesthetics" in games during a forum, referring to the pursuit of bloody violence and grotesque character designs as a form of game aesthetics among contemporary youth (Y. L. Lin, H. L. Lin, & Y. J. Lin, 2011). The author argues that in the context of female-oriented games, defining this as "ugly aesthetics" is no longer appropriate, and it might be more fitting to refer to it as "violent aesthetics". In contrast, female-oriented games emphasize "non-violent aesthetics", focusing on visual refinement and auditory experiences.

In terms of art style, *Love and Deep Space* employs a 3D realistic style. The exquisite 3D modeling and detailed lighting effects offer a more immersive and realistic experience compared to the common 2D cartoon style. From the accurate portrayal of characters' micro-expressions to the near-realistic lighting effects in the game environment, the game strives to provide players with a visually stunning experience, satisfying female players' pursuit of beauty. Additionally, the game's character design is meticulous, with five male characters, each with distinct backgrounds and personalities, offering players a rich selection (He & Ge, 2020), catering to different players' preferences for their ideal types. Moreover, *Love and Deep Space* features a "photo-taking" function, allowing players to dress up the male characters, choose photo scenes, and adjust lighting, offering high freedom to take individual or group photos, satisfying various female players' aesthetic needs.

Furthermore, *Love and Deep Space* excels in its musical score. The game's theme song is performed by Sarah Brightman, who collaborated with Liu Huan on the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony. Her ethereal voice, combined with the grand and fateful melody, successfully immerses players in the game's universe-spanning narrative. Additionally, the game releases monthly themed card pools, each accompanied by unique music, allowing players to choose their favorite tracks for the login screen.

In summary, *Love and Deep Space* demonstrates high aesthetic standards in character design, scene arrangement, game features, and sound effects, satisfying female players' pursuit and appreciation of beauty (Huang & Lai, 2017).

Emotional Needs

Love and Deep Space sets its narrative against the vast backdrop of the universe, spanning several centuries. The expansive narrative, combined with the male characters' deep and nuanced emotions, along with diverse storylines, satisfies female players' needs for emotional resonance and personal expression. The male characters in the game each have unique personalities and backstories, establishing profound emotional connections with players. Through interactions and story progression, players experience various emotional journeys, fulfilling their emotional needs (Chen & Zhang, 2024).

Moreover, renowned game designer Chris Crawford emphasized that the core of any video game design lies in interaction. Defining interaction is the first step toward successful game design. Salen and Zimmerman, from the perspective of game developers, identify four levels of interaction in video games: (1) cognitive interaction, referring to the psychological, emotional, and intellectual engagement with the game; (2) functional interaction, involving physical interactions with the system, such as using a keyboard or mouse; (3) detailed interaction,

referring to specific in-game actions like participation and selection; and (4) external interaction, encompassing social exchanges and game culture surrounding the game. Among these, the first and fourth levels are the most important (Liu, 2014).

Love and Deep Space not only offers in-game interactions, such as clicking on different parts of a male character's body (e.g., head or hand) to elicit different responses, but also features a mobile chat interface where players can communicate with male characters via "WeChat" and view their "moments". The game also includes a "companion mode", with options like "exercise companion", "study companion", and "work companion", deepening the emotional bond between players and the male characters (Zhang & Chen, 2022). With the 3.0 update, *Love and Deep Space* introduced a "period reminder" feature, allowing players to set their menstrual cycle and receive reminders from the male characters, adding a human touch to the characters and breaking the code's rigidity. This update received positive feedback from the player community. Additionally, the game's external community building aligns with the fourth level of interaction, where players create dedicated Super Topic Community for each male character on platforms like Weibo, sharing experiences and forming a positive community atmosphere. Players also organize offline events on special occasions, such as a character's birthday.

This combination of in-game and external interactions enriches the gaming experience, enhances user retention, and satisfies female players' needs for social interaction and a sense of belonging (Chen, 2020).

Self-Actualization Needs

Upon downloading *Love and Deep Space*, players are greeted with a character customization feature after the introductory animation. This personalized design not only increases the game's fun and playability but also enhances immersion, making players feel as though they are part of the game world, growing and facing challenges alongside the characters, thereby achieving self-actualization (Wen & Zhou, 2018). Additionally, based on the different professions and personalities of the male characters, many players have expressed that these characters inspire them to improve themselves in real life, fostering a mindset of "he is so outstanding, I should strive to be as outstanding as him".

As a combat-oriented otome game, *Love and Deep Space* does not portray the player as a helpless damsel but as a "Deep Space Hunter" who protects the city's peace, standing on equal footing with the male characters and assisting each other. The storyline and romantic progression are gradual, allowing female players to feel respected and valued, thereby affirming their identity as women (Zou, 2019).

Outside the game, we also see expressions of female players' subconscious desire for self-empowerment. For instance, on social media, many players have urged the game developers to design the female protagonist with more pronounced muscle lines rather than adhering to the "pale, young, and thin" aesthetic. Through continuous self-improvement, players further affirm their identity as women, satisfying their self-actualization needs (Wan, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper analyzes *Love and Deep Space* from the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The study finds that through technological innovation, a combination of online and offline interactions, and personalized customization, *Love and Deep Space* successfully satisfies female players' emotional, aesthetic, and self-actualization needs. These innovative practices not only enhance the game's overall quality and cultural depth but also promote the prosperity and development of the female-oriented game market. As the female player

base continues to grow and the female-oriented game market expands, successful cases like *Love and Deep Space* will provide valuable insights for more game developers, driving the female-oriented game market toward a more prosperous and diverse future.

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