

Women spend on virtual heartthrobs

Digital boyfriends and captivating storylines keep cashed-up female gamers enthralled

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Chinese women are changing the “game”, literally. And giving rise to a potential multibillion-dollar business in female-oriented gaming.

The 30 billion yuan (\$4.78 billion) gaming market in China has long targeted male consumers — with content full of hardcore action, weapons, violence, macho muscular superheroes and shapely girls. Sorry, no cute animals. Why, even the color scheme of most games was gray and brown.

The tide is turning, though.

An interactive dating game entitled *Love and the Producer*, developed by Paper Studio, based in Suzhou, East China’s Jiangsu province, allows women players, or gamers, to date four lifelike digital characters or e-boyfriends — potential heartthrobs with enviable qualities and desirable qualifications (a tough CEO, a powerful policeman, a genius scientist, and a charming entertainment superstar).

The game, whose predominant color scheme is purple and pink, has emerged an unlikely hit, a runaway commercial success. Monthly sales revenue so far from the launch date of Dec 20, 2017, is over 200 million yuan, according to data tracking firm Jiguang, and it is likely to rake in up to 300 million yuan by year-end.

In the process, *Love and the Producer* is not only rewriting the rules of the gaming market but shaping a new socioeconomic dynamic.

In addition to the four heartthrobs, *Love and the Producer* boasts an immersive setting and well-crafted graphics, which have impressed millions of Chinese female gamers.

In a sense, *Love and the Producer* is akin to Western dystopian stories. Only, the protagonist (that is, the person playing the game) is female, an ambitious executive who has to revive a troubled TV production company by launching a riveting reality show.

According to data tracking firm Jiguang, over 7 million downloads of the game have been recorded so far. There are 2 million daily active users, and 94 percent of them are women.

While downloads are free, the players have so far parted with some 600 million yuan more to keep progressing to higher levels of the game, just so that they could experience the thrills of winning the best of the four virtual boyfriends.

However, the gamer is under no pressure to choose one of the four e-guys. This aspect has impressed

Shen Xuanxuan, 33, a marketing executive at a global information technology firm in Beijing.

For Shen, checking “messages” sent by her beloved e-dates has become a morning ritual. “Currently, I don’t have a boyfriend. The virtual characters effectively fill that void, and they are so good at their job.”

Shen is not alone in her praise for the game. Female players welcome the freedom of developing the storyline, said Neil Wang, president of the Chinese operations of consulting firm Frost & Sullivan.

Love and the Producer unfolds several intertwined storylines but does not quite delve deep into any tale. This allows players to interact with the four male characters via phone calls and social media apps.

Social interaction, even though digitalized, is a key element in attracting women to gaming. A survey on gamer habits conducted by consultancy Newzoo showed that women have a strikingly higher tendency than men to go to friends, family or social networking sites to discover new games.

“The interactive game genre where players tap the screen to move the narrative forward is popular among women,” said Li Songlin, analyst at consultancy iiMedia.

In moving the story forward, gamers need to make choices that would lead the story in different directions, which adds to the fun, he said.

Wang Wenyan, a player in Shanghai, agreed, and she admitted being drawn to the “tender voices” of the male characters as well as the game’s delicate drawings.

“They are easy to operate, relaxing to play, and potentially have a love storyline as the plot unfolds. These contribute to their massive popularity, and appeal to women,” she said.

Gamers need to perform various tasks and collect points in order to trade for more dates with their virtual boyfriends.

A player can certainly gain rewards on completing a mission, but paying real cash normally gets her there much faster.

Wang spent three days winning virtual cards to reach the next phase as the plot thickened. Shen ended up paying roughly 1,000 yuan in the first two weeks for a fast-forward.

“Based on rough calculations, I will need to fork out 10,000 yuan to advance through the levels and get to the end. It’s tempting but too costly,” Shen said.

The various add-ons helped game developer Paper Studio rake in more than 200 million yuan in January, as female gamers splurged to receive a



digital hug here or an intimate kiss there from their virtual boyfriends, according to Chinese gaming specialist Gamelook.

Compared with their male counterparts, female gamers are more prone to in-game purchases for dedicated settings, compelling plots and heartwarming roles, Li from iiMedia said.

Wang of Frost & Sullivan said: “Our research showed that women are on average 30 percent more

likely than men in virtual-asset purchasing, because they have this emotional attachment and the need for self-expression through the in-game avatar.

“Why don’t women play more games? Perhaps it’s because the games are not being sold to this demographic.”

Love and the Producer’s popularity shows female gamers are likely to drive an industry traditionally dominated by men. Their number

is now more than male gamers who were obsessed with battle arena game *King of Glory* not very long ago, according to developer Tencent Holdings.

Women also account for half of the 310 million users among WeChat’s mini games, a popular in-app mobile gaming feature, the company said in January.

“Unlike console-based games that boast big development budgets and require long hours of player participation, mobile games are notably appealing to women because they are light, fun, and, most importantly, address their emotional needs,” said Zhang Guowei, senior customer manager at mobile analytics firm App Annie in China.

Like *Love and the Producer*, another interactive game that has caught the fancy of Chinese women is *Tabikaeru*, or *Travel Frog*, a mobile-based animation drama featuring a wandering frog character.

It has been downloaded 3.9 million times from Apple’s App Store in China since December, with players splurging \$2 million on in-app purchases to experience parenting in a digital medium. “The game is highly relaxing, very simple to play, but as you progress through the levels, there’s always something new to discover,” said Zhang.

Now, Wang’s fellow girlfriends are busy taking care of their “frog babies” and dating virtual boyfriends at the same time. “It couldn’t feel better,” she said.

Yet, the stereotype that games are a pastime for adolescent boys endures, as evidenced by the aggressive marketing for many big-budget male-oriented games.

“The old stereotype will probably be cast aside sooner or later. Women are seen as more loyal users and have a higher propensity toward impulse spending,” said Wang.

Loyal and impulsive some female gamers are, to be sure. A group of avid fans spent big money to set up an LED-lit banner on a skyscraper in South China’s Shenzhen to convey birthday wishes to their common virtual boyfriend Li Zeyan, the CEO character in *Love and the Producer*.

The female gamers’ postscript on the banner read: “Don’t be surprised. We bought it with your black card.” (Black card refers to Li’s bank card in the game, which he often gives to the protagonist to show his generosity toward his lover.)

All this surreal indulgence makes Wang of Frost & Sullivan think that the gaming sector’s potential may be worth way more than its current 30 billion yuan valuation.

Ouyang Shijia contributed to this story.