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Games as Heterotopias: Realist Games in China

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Abstract

Realism is essential to our understanding of the life and reality of a particular era. This article explores the meanings and feeling of life in contemporary China, through examining three indie games. Inspired by real issues, these games function as heterotopias that provide new perspectives for players to reflect on reality from alternative perspectives.

Keywords: Game studies, realism, heterotopia, indie games

In China in 2020, 665 million people were gamers, and the game market had grown to over 278 billion yuan in annual revenue (Wang, 2020). However, approaches to gaming from wider society and the Chinese authorities are ambivalent. On the one hand, the authorities promote the game industry and e-sports as symbols of technological and economic development. On the other hand, digital games are stigmatised as "electronic drugs" because they are believed to "poison" teens and threaten society (He & Cao, 2018: 76-77). In Nakamura and Wirman's chronicle of the history of the digital game industry in China, they identified the post-2015 period as the 'maturing period', during which "various indie studios emerged and began to flourish" (2021: 287). In this essay, I will examine several indie games through the lens of social realism in gaming (Galloway, 2006) and that of reality-inspired games (Maurin, 2016) to argue that these games, as heterotopias, have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of reality in China.

Games, Realism, and Heterotopia

Alexander Galloway has developed the theory of social realism in gaming, arguing that game scholars should "not turn to a theory of realism in gaming as mere realistic representation but define realist games as those games that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice" (Galloway, 2006: 75). Further, as an "active medium", realist games should provide "a special congruence between the social reality depicted in the game and the social reality known and lived by the player" (Galloway, 2006: 83).

In addition to the theoretical approach to realism in gaming, the game developer and journalist Florent Maurin has proposed the term 'reality-inspired games' to describe a genre of realist games. According to Maurin, a reality-inspired game is "a fiction directly derived from real events" (Maurin, 2017).

The ideas of social realism in gaming and reality-inspired games both propose that digital games have the potential to explore sociological or historical issues through virtual worlds that are relevant but not identical to reality. This reminds us of Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia'. Heterotopia are spaces that disturb and question the fables and discourses that

"hold things together" (Foucault, 2005: 19), as well as "a sort of counter-emplacements in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (2008: 17). A digital game is a kind of heterotopia wherein "fictional characters and plots are mediated through journeys through and interaction with simulated, but three-dimensional spaces modelled on real-life counterparts" (Esser, 2021). Thus, digital games, especially those dealing with real issues, have the potential to offer unusual perspectives, challenge dominant discourses and contribute new understandings of reality.

In the following sections, I will introduce and evaluate three realist games: *Chinese Parents* (*Zhongguoshi jiazhang* 中国式家长, 2018), *Bad Kids* (*Huai xiaohai* 坏小孩, 2021) and *Life Restart* (*Rensheng chongkai moniqi* 人生重开模拟器, 2021) and show how they capture and simulate the heterotopic "realities" of China.

Chinese Parents

Developed by two young male designers and released in 2018, *Chinese Parents* is a life simulation game where the player experiences the journey of a Chinese urban child born in the 90s from toddler to graduation from high school. It has sold over 2 million copies, making it one of the most successful Chinese indie games. China's official newspaper *People's Daily* even wrote a review introducing the game (*Renmin ribao pinglun*, 2018). Its publisher, *Coconut Island Games*, also authorised the development of *Growing Up* (*Meiguoshi jiazhang* 美国式家长, 2021), a 'Western' version of *Chinese Parents*. According to the developers, their motivation is to promote reconciliation between parents and children (Qu, 2018).

Across the 48 turns in a game, the player's perspective swings between the child and parents. As most of the time the player takes on the role of the child, the player needs to manage the daily study schedule, build friendships, take exams, and accomplish different parents' expectations, as in many other life simulation and resources management games. Regardless of the player's plans, players will always be subject to the expectation that the child should enter a key school and pass the college entrance exam, even if fulfilling those expectations does not necessarily lead to a better ending. This design captures the pressures of being a Chinese child.

However, when the perspective shifts to the parents' side, the living process of the child's life becomes a product of parents. The traits (*techang* 特长) that are unlocked as the child grows become a means by which the player-controlled parents can win in 'Face Duels' (*mianzi duijue* 面子对决). This reflects the child's feelings of alienation in the family and education system. However, while somewhat comical and exaggerated, this also helps players to understand the alienation and thus forgive their parents, especially given that the face (*mianzi*) gained from winning the duel can be used to purchase game items for the child's well-being. Finally, its procedural rhetoric restates what Chinese parents often say, "It's all for your own good" (*Zhe dou shi wei ni hao* 这都是为你好). Since players adopt the roles of both child and parents in the gaming experience, it leads not to a one-way forgiveness of parents by the child, but to an ideal parent-child relationship, where the child and parents work together as a unified family in the process of education and growing up.

As most of the childhood events in-game are gleaned from the internet and the experiences of the game developers (Momo, 2018), *Chinese Parents* adds an important but long-ignored voice to discussions about education in China – namely, the voice of the child.

With parents who only care about grades, endless studying and exams, only a handful of friends and existing at a distance from society, an urban child in China would find that the game offers a fairly typical representation and understanding of their lived experience.

There have been some critiques made of the game, including the lack of representation of rural life, the lack of reflection on the structural conflicts within China's education system, and its de-historized narrative (Yang Jing, 2018; Zhou Shiyu, 2019). As perhaps the first realistic game about education in China, *Chinese Parents* has many imperfections. However, we should also be aware of the difficulties of discussing this topic through games in China. Since July 21, 2020, *Chinese Parents* has been removed in mainland China for 'maintenance', while it remains available in the rest of the world (Moyuwan Games, 2020). Meanwhile, the radical reform of China's education system continues to proceed, led by the authorities. The future is unclear.

Bad Kids

Unlike *Chinese Parents*, which provides a homogeneous and de-historized simulation of the growing-up experience in urban China, *Bad Kids*, which was released on 15 Jul 2021, captures a bygone era in a story that combines reality with fiction. As the developer said:

> "那个年代是我亲身经历过的，我也觉得有必要讲一下当时发生的事。我觉得大家应该记住那段日子，一个社会转型的时期。"
>
> "That era was one that I experienced first-hand, and I feel the need to talk about what happened then. I think we should all remember those days, a time of social transformation." (Yuan, 2021)

In an unnamed small town in Southwest China in the 1990s, the local state-owned factory has closed. The adults have lost their jobs in a massive wave of layoffs (*xiagangchao* 下岗潮), while idle teenagers have formed gangs for money. This imaginary unstable small town can be considered the epitome of almost all Chinese towns and cities in that era. Players control an elementary school student, Wang Han 王憨, and experience his change from a "bad kid" to a good one. In terms of theme, *Bad Kids* follows the approach of China's neorealist movement (*xin xieshi zhuyi* 新写实主义), which takes the everyday life of common people as its subject matter and reflects the unevenness of social conditions in post-socialist China (Gong, 2010: 68).

Keith Tester defined the *flâneur* as "the secret spectator of the spectacle of the spaces and places of the city", and *flânerie* as "the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence; replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life" (Tester, 1994: 7). Wang can be considered an adaptive and resilient child *flâneur* who had a bad relationship with his parents, skipped class, and wandered about all day. Wang's identity is, in Tester's terms, "incomplete" (1994:7). In the beginning, Wang tries to find his position in the street gang. But after witnessing shootings and incidents of human trafficking, he decides to turn his back on the dark side. After helping the police catch the gang of hooligans, Wang is admitted to junior high school and reconciles with his family. This is a journey of completing identity in a changing world.

While Wang found the meaning of his existence through *flânerie*, the player, through

the walking movement of the avatar, also subjects the virtual world to his or her critical gaze. The unstable world and meaningless life of the 1990s generate a congruence with the current conditions of this epidemic era. The game provides a heterotopic space for the player, as a *flâneur*, to review the past, understand the present and look to the future.

Life Restart

Life Restart is a free and open-source text game developed by two netizens. After being released on GitHub on 3 September 2021, the official version has been played by more than 40 million players despite the existence of many additional pirated copies. Unlike the nostalgic narrative of *Chinese Parents* and *Bad Kids*, this game is more relevant to the condition of *neijuan* (involution 内卷) in current China.

At the level of its game mechanics, *Life Restart* resembles a "cyborg author", a term for a device which produces literary texts through "a combination of human and mechanical activities" (Aarseth, 1997: 134-135). The player starts by choosing three out of ten randomly given talents (*tianfu* 天赋) and allocating a total of twenty points between the four key attributes of household circumstances (*jiajing* 家境), strength (*tizhi* 体质), intelligence (*zhili* 智力) and charm (*yanzhi* 颜值). The game then will randomly produce a second-person biography of the character in the form of one event per year, from birth to death, based on the chosen talents and attributes. All these events are grabbed from a pool of over a thousand events written by the designer. On average, each round will end in one minute and the player can then restart. During the 'life' of the character, the player can do nothing but watch the events unfold. By challenging the principle of freedom of choice in mainstream game design, the game successfully simulates the sense of instability, exhaustion and powerlessness that characterizes the everyday lives of contemporary Chinese people (Pang, 2022).

At the narrative level, *Life Restart* reflects the class rigidity and gender inequality of China. In the generated biography, the first two events are about gender and birthplace. It reads as follows, "Age 0: You are born a girl/boy. Age 1: You grew up in a rural area/city/the USA" (0 岁：你出生了，是个女孩/男孩。1 岁：你从小生活在农村/城市/美国). The odds of being a boy or a girl are not 50/50, but 110/100, a realistic simulation of China's imbalanced sex ratio at birth (SRB), which stands at 111.3 male births to every 100 female births in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The birthplace of the character is decided by *jiajing*. From 1 to 10, the higher *jiajing* you are allocated at the beginning, the more likely your character is to be born in a city or even the USA. Some events are limited to a specific gender and birthplace. For example, in this game, a girl born in a rural area may be abandoned by her family or forced to leave school and work to earn money for her younger brother. These events would never happen to a boy born in a rural area. US-born characters have the opportunity to get into Harvard, but this event is not available for rural and urban-born characters. This shows how the designer captures and understands the reality of gender and class inequality.

Surprisingly, the Easter egg event 'immortality cultivation' (*xiuxian* 修仙) is recognized to be the 'real ending' by most players, giving this game a spirit of romantic escapism. The tension between realism and romanticism constitutes the "structure of feeling", to adopt Raymond Williams' term, that gives shape and expression to people's feelings, affects, and thoughts of their lived experiences (1978: 132-133). As players turn from an unchangeable reality to an impossible fantasy, this game specifies powerlessness and hopelessness as general conditions in contemporary China.

Conclusion

While the authorities promote the work of "telling China's story" (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事) with a utopian and ideological narrative for policy promotion and implementation (Yang Guobin, 2014), some Chinese indie game developers find their passion to be in telling nontypical stories of China, inspired by their personal experiences and everyday life. I suggest that these realist games are heterotopias, in which naturalized realities can be defamiliarized and players have the potential to reflect on reality from a new perspective.

From the endless loops of growing up to the town experiencing the era of social transformation to the fatalistic biographies of *Life Restart*, these three games approach reality in different ways, rather than just mimicking the reality. They seek to express and communicate ideas and feelings about social reality through narrative, characters, mechanics, and player immersion and interaction in the virtual world.

However, realism is never simply a matter of art, but also of power. Under state regulation, Chinese game developers need to find an appropriate approach to developing a credible 'reality' while also remaining critical without crossing a red line. In a strict regulatory environment, where the famous anti-war realist game *This War of Mine* (2014) was cited as a negative example for its "antihuman and antisocial" design (HKET, 2021), the future of realist games in China is not promising.

Ludography

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