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Teaching Through the Uncanny: Red Candle Games' *Devotion*

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Abstract

On 19th February 2019, horror game Devotion *(*Huan yuan 還願*) by Red Candle Games (*赤燭遊戲*) was launched on the popular PC platform* Steam*. One week later it was pulled from digital distribution after a satirical message was discovered in one of its graphical assets. In this essay we analyse how the immersive narrative deploys traditional Chinese religious imagery, supernatural literary themes, and sometimes gruesome experiences to explore issues of family, guilt, and redemption. We seek to initiate a conversation about* Devotion *as a significant cultural text that gives players a unique experience of the rich symbolism of Chinese religious culture. Additionally, we highlight how digital game media such as this can productively be used in teaching.*

Keywords: *Devotion*, pedagogy, religious culture

On 19th February 2019, horror game *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還願) by Red Candle Games 赤燭遊戲 was launched on the popular PC platform Steam. One week later it was pulled from digital distribution after a satirical message was discovered in one of its graphical assets. Rather than dwell on the circumstances of its deplatforming, however, in this essay we will examine how a digital work such as this can be constructively used in teaching about an unfamiliar culture. *Devotion*'s immersive narrative deploys traditional Chinese religious imagery, supernatural literary themes, and sometimes gruesomely horrific experiences to explore issues of family, guilt, and redemption. We argue that this text is one example of how games can play a positive and legitimate role in the classroom as a means of immersing students in a shared, real-time experience of a simulated environment that imaginatively reconstructs an unfamiliar cultural world.

In October 2020, as part of an online programme provided to students who were unable to study in China due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Gregory Scott livestreamed a playthrough of *Devotion* on the Twitch streaming service for a group of third-year undergraduate students. Scott provided running commentary on the religious and cultural context of the game, based on his expertise in the field and experience living in Taiwan, while students posted questions and reactions in the Twitch chat. Most students watched both two-hour sessions over two weeks, and verbal feedback on the experience was universally positive. Katherine Alexander, who regularly teaches an undergraduate course on Chinese supernatural literature, watched these streams as well: this essay is a product of the pedagogical discussions that Scott and Alexander had afterwards about the value of the experience for our students in future classes.

Can experiences of digital play translate into teaching and learning about other cultures? Do experiences that focus on the strange and uncanny help or hinder the process of learning about other cultures and peoples? Teaching about an unfamiliar culture through its supernatural tales can be highly effective – who doesn't love a good ghost story? – but if the supernatural is not properly contextualized, students run the risk of confounding the new

culture and the reality-destabilizing narrative into one exoticized package. One of *Devotion*'s strengths is how its narrative structure enables a clear introduction to the Taiwanese context, its spaces, sounds, and sights, before the horror element fully takes over. Furthermore, once it does, students have a sense of what should be normal and homely, understanding how the supernatural elements emerge from twists and perversions of the now somewhat familiar, but still foreign, setting.

Devotion opens in the mundane space of a windowless family room, filled with the ambient noise of a TV and the sounds of cooking from the offscreen kitchen. The calendar prominently tacked next to the TV is turned to October 1987. For players familiar with Taiwan, this setting is immediately recognisable as a flat in one of the thousands of concrete and tile blocks that metastasized across urban landscapes in the postwar years of economic recovery and development (Allen, 2012: 42-43). Simultaneously domestic and dreary, it is a reminder of infrastructure thrown together with no mind to aesthetics, meant to house those displaced by war, reconstruction, or dreams of making it in the big city.

The narrative unfolds mostly from the perspective of Du Feng Yu 杜豐于, a washed-up screenwriter. His wife, Gong Li Fang 鞏莉芳, gave up a successful singing career to marry him and raise their daughter Mei Shin 美心, who wants to become equally famous someday. Aside from a handful of jump-scares early on and a few moments of extreme violence and gore late in the game, triggering fright and disgust respectively, players are mostly drawn into the claustrophobic, broken mind of Du, as represented by this home that is not home. In "The Uncanny", Freud explores this type of horror at which *Devotion* excels: pervasive heavy dread (Freud, 2003[1919]: 123-162). One cannot feel the uncanny without having first felt, however briefly, comfortably at home within a tale. Proving Freud's point that the uncanny (*unheimlich* "un-homely") is linked with the return of what was familiar until it was repressed, the cheerful apartment at the game's opening warps into a representation of Du's unstable mental space, haunted by unspeakable guilt. When the front door unlocks, allowing Du to leave, the same flat reappears at the end of each hallway, forcing him to piece together fragments of events from four distinct moments in time. As he does, it remains difficult to unite the fractured pieces of the game's story into a chronological narrative, as Du seems incapable of reconciling the consequences of his real actions with his revisionist memories. Like Du, players are trapped, without any option to avoid its tragic, paradoxical end.[1] In this sense, *Devotion* plays like a non-linear postmodern novel, open to interpretation and debate, but with an unavoidable and predetermined conclusion.[2] Students are thus invited to experience both the familiarity of a family home and the uncanny experience of being haunted by supernatural beings conjured from Du's sense of guilt and resentment.

In an interview with *USgamer*, one of the studio's co-founders Vincent Yang stated that "[m]aking the game scary by utilizing people's fear towards unknown culture and objects, we figured it may help our contents to stand out from most other games in the market" (Yang, cited in Chan, 2020). We suggest, however, that unfamiliar elements alone do not create a player's fear; rather, players will find much that, although horrifying, taps into what are likely familiar narratives and tropes. This familiarity is what engenders the atmosphere of uncanny horror. The core game narrative of helplessness in the face of illness, and the willingness to go to any ends to save one's child, is clearly evident even though the religious symbols and characters through which the narrative unfolds may be unfamiliar

[1] For more analysis of this narrative approach in horror video games, particularly the impact of limited interactivity, see Ewan Kirkland (2012), "Gothic Videogames, Survival Horror, and the Silent Hill Series," *Gothic Studies* 14(2): 106-122.

[2] Even the authors of this article disagree as to whether the game has a happy ending.

(Sheedy, 2019: 41-46). The narrative leads players into sympathy with an "unknown culture and objects" as Yang put it, thus enhancing the emotional impact of the story, rather than simply creating a sense of fear.

These elements of psychological horror are amplified by religious imagery that relates to traditions and their ritual practice and commonly explored motifs in religious narratives. A wealth of religious content is found throughout this game, the Chinese title of which literally translates as 'to fulfill a vow [to a deity].' Religious themes are a natural match for horror, as each is inextricably connected to the uncanny threats posed by the unknown. European-language horror games commonly include religious specialists fighting demonic foes, such as Father Grigori from *Half-Life 2*.[3] Some important religious elements in *Devotion* have either a strong Vajrayāna Buddhist or Daoist flavour, as with the ritual implements that Du must use to sacrifice his own body, or the talismans that appear throughout the apartment building. Yet much of the religious content does not fit easily into any one denominational category, drawing instead on the rich religious culture of Taiwan, where popular deities and sects flourish alongside more familiar religious institutions. Apart from religious professionals and the especially devoted, most believers in China have long been quite flexible in terms of where they seek out religious services, valuing efficacy over denominational loyalty in the religious marketplace (Yang, 2006).[4] Much of the religious imagery in the game is encountered in the domestic space of the home; the upside-down *fu* (福) posters; the home shrine high up on the living room wall, lit by red electric candles; the poster with phrases from Buddhist scriptures near the main doorway; burning sticks of incense and candles. Religious elements mainly appear as part of quotidian life, woven through the fabric of the game setting, rather than being separated off and distinct. This reflects the mainstream of traditional Chinese religious culture, where everyday spaces include religious elements. The one major exception occurs during Du's journey through the underworld, and here too players will likely find the perilous path through a sea of suffering souls not at all unfamiliar, considering similar settings in many global religious traditions. The game presents players with a lived experience of Chinese religious symbols and beliefs, rather than a rationalised, sanitised version dissected into denominational categories.

Although various forms of the Bodhisattva of compassion Guanyin 觀音 are attested throughout history, the one that appears in the game, Cigu Guanyin 慈孤觀音, is not among them; she was invented specifically for this game. Mentor Hueh 胡老師, the religious professional who guides Du through various practices intended to heal Mei Shin, represents a class of unregulated female spiritual advisors who have flourished throughout Chinese history. Included under the blanket term *sangu liupo* 三姑六婆 ("three aunties, six grannies"), used derogatorily by members of the orthodoxy worried about the direct access to domestic spaces enjoyed by these groups and their negative influence, such women offered solutions to domestic problems with services and knowledge derived from potentially heterodox sources (Leung, 1999). From Du's perspective, however, Mentor Heuh and Cigu Guanyin simply appear as specialists in curing ills beyond the scope of biomedicine. Their orthodoxy is never at issue for Du. We are thus placed into the perspective of one seeking religious services and solutions, not one seeking to impose orthodoxy on the diversity of Chinese religious beliefs.

[3] The Father Grigori NPC is referred to as 'npc_monk' in the game's code. See *Half Life 2*, 2004.

[4] Although Yang here examines the religious marketplace in the PRC, a similar tripartite scheme fits the late-Imperial and Republican-era approaches to religion as well.

With Du resistant to the idea that there is any mental or emotional component to Mei Shin's panic attacks, he falls completely under the cult leader's influence. In a guided trance, Hueh instructs Du as he traverses the underworld where he must swear an oath to the goddess, sealed with sacrifices of his own body, in order to call back Mei Shin's soul. In Chinese religions, as in many others, sacrificial bloodshed is powerful but also contentious. Limitations on which gods could receive animal offerings, and who could offer them, delineated the power and reach of state religion in early China. Yet orthodox religious practitioners of all denominations were concerned by the idea of spirits who ought not consume blood growing powerful on inappropriate devotional acts (Kleeman, 1994). Nonetheless, sacrificing one's own blood was seen as an act of extreme devotion, from filial children cutting their own flesh to feed an ailing parent, to devout Buddhists copying out scriptures in their own blood (Yu, 2012). Tales of the previous lives of buddhas and bodhisattvas are also filled with stories of extreme self-mutilation, even to the point of death, where exemplary figures prove their non-attachment to form through total disregard for pain and life.[5] Perhaps the most famous self-mutilating exemplar in China is Princess Miaoshan, who gives up her eyes and hands to make medicine that will heal her father. This sacrifice is no longer about selflessness and detachment, but specifically related to filial piety and the irrevocability of the parent-child relationship (Dudbridge, 2004: 92-93).

Du's bodily sacrifice for his daughter uncannily reverses this norm. By this point in the game, the extent of his delusion has become clear as have his failings as a husband and father, so he seems an unlikely candidate to be a self-sacrificing hero like those of the past. The form of his sacrifice, which we experience from Du's first-person perspective, highlights this contradiction. First, he gouges out an eye to "lift the haze from [his] daughter's mind". But hasn't it been Du who has refused to see things as they were all along? Then, he pulls out his tongue for the "restoration of [his] daughter's angelic voice", but this brings to mind Tongue Pulling Hell (*bashe diyu* 拔舌地獄), a section of the Buddhist underworld intended to punish liars. Lastly, he stabs scissors through his hand, filling a bowl with blood, so that Mei Shin might "take flight and soar the skies", a sacrifice quite unlike that of Miaoshan: more like the blood spilt for a hungry, heterodox spirit. When he awakens, alone, his physical body remains whole and Heuh instructs him to submerge Mei Shin in a bathtub of snake liquor and leave her there for seven days. This final act of sacrifice takes his daughter's life, and the game ends with Du believing that his devotion has secured freedom for Mei Shin's spirit.

How might students react to this resolution? On the one hand, they have watched Du navigate different episodes in his struggle to cure Mei Shin and likely sympathised with the feeling of helplessness when a loved one falls ill with no discernable cure. Yet they have also been exposed to a range of uncanny sights, sounds, practices, and encounters given life by Du's religious imagination. We experience the entire game world through Du's eyes, but by the end we can step back and try to contextualise his experiences and struggles against our own understanding of religious values and human limitations. By this point, students have likely gained a strong distrust of Du and his motivations for this final and tragic sacrifice, which would hopefully be a productive place for a classroom discussion to begin.

While the developers' intent may have been to create a game that drew upon a culture unfamiliar to many players in order to generate an exciting sense of horror and fear, the end result is an interactive experience rich with Taiwanese and Chinese quotidian culture where the horror stems from the core narrative of loss and sacrifice, not the experience of the

[5] For one example of these tales, see Arya Sùra, *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā*. trans. Peter Khoroche (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32-38.

strange. Teaching China is often a struggle to find ways to have students engage in a serious way with material that is often quite unfamiliar to them, to appreciate the real cultural differences but also to see the threads of common humanity that tie us all together. A game like *Devotion* offers one example of how a digital text might be used to do this in a way that is uniquely attractive to undergraduates, tapping into their excitement for and engagement with digital media and offering opportunities for experiences that are unique to the medium. The aim here is to foster a connection between the everyday life of the students and the complex world of Taiwanese and Chinese culture, a digital encounter that will hopefully lead to a stronger appreciation and understanding of what was once unfamiliar to them.

Ludography

Devotion [*Huanyuan* □ □] (2019), PC [game], Red Candle Games: Taipei, ROC.

Half Life 2 (2004), PC [game], Valve Software: Bellevue, WA.

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