Articles

The *British Journal of Chinese Studies* is a biannual, peer-reviewed, fully open access e-journal published by the British Association for Chinese Studies. We publish research on China, broadly defined, spanning the disciplines of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. We are interested in work on all time periods but encourage contributors to establish contemporary relevance in their arguments. Engagement with Chinese language sources is essential to all research published in the journal. We are particularly committed to supporting gender and ethnic equality in Chinese studies and welcome submissions from PhD students and early career researchers. Until issue 9.1(2019) we published under the name *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*.

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Articles

Towards Sinophone Game Studies

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Abstract

The editor's introduction discusses progress so far and possible future directions in the emerging field of Sinophone game studies, taken to mean the study of games – in this case, specifically video, computer, digital, or electronic games – in a Sinophone context, including mainland China and the broader Chinese-speaking world. Recent industry figures and news stories related to video gaming in the People's Republic of China (PRC) paint a picture of continued expansion and growing global ambitions, albeit tempered by the regular introduction of fresh government regulations surrounding game content, gaming permissions for under-18s, game streaming, and game license approval. The eleven contributions to this issue, however, reflect the diversity of possible approaches to the study of Sinophone gaming, focusing not just on the often-conflicting politics and economics of the PRC games industry, but also exploring Taiwan's flourishing indie game scene, political uses of games in Hong Kong, game-based representations of online and offline realities, issues in the transnational adaptation and localisation of games, and more besides. Sinophone game studies is a highly fruitful area of academic research that is intrinsically inter- and cross-disciplinary in nature and well placed to respond to some of the most pressing issues of our time, whether they be international conflict, ecological crisis, identity politics, minority rights, or even the development of disparate virtual worlds into a cross-platform 'metaverse' in which many of us may one day live our lives.

Keywords: Gaming in China, digital games, computer games, video games, online games, Taiwanese games, gaming in Hong Kong, Sinophone studies, Sinophone game studies, ludology, PRC games industry

We are excited to present this special issue on Games and Gaming in China and the Sinophone World, featuring seven original research articles alongside four short essays, all submitted in response to our Call for Papers of March 2021. The field of game studies has been interested in China and Sinophone gaming for some time: the Chinese chapter of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), for instance, has held regular conferences since 2014,[1] and the first English-language special issue on gaming in a Chinese context was published in *Games and Culture* in 2016, edited by Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin.[2] English-language scholarship on Sinophone gaming culture has mostly taken the form of journal articles or chapters in edited books, with two academic monographs appearing so far (Fung, 2018; Szablewicz, 2020). Game studies or ludology (*youxi yanjiu* 游戏研究) has been expanding in the Chinese-speaking world, too, with a notable increase in the number of journal articles and academic books published over the last five years or so. We believe that this, however, is the first time a Chinese studies journal has dedicated a whole issue to the topic of video games. As

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[1] The Chinese DiGRA website can be found here: http://www.chinesedigra.org/.

[2] This special issue of *Games and Culture* can be accessed here: https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/gac/11/3.

such, we aim to contribute to a young and highly dynamic field of research, the full contours of which are only slowly coming into view.

What exactly is game studies and how might it be beneficial for Chinese studies and game studies to be in closer communication with each other? To define game studies as the study of games is about as helpful as describing Chinese studies as the study of China, as 'games' and 'China' can mean many different things to many different people. While game studies and Chinese studies are usually situated as sub-disciplines of larger fields (media and cultural studies and area studies, respectively), both are intrinsically inter- or cross-disciplinary in nature. To research games could mean analysing player behaviours within or outside a game-world; delineating game genres and the connections between forms of gaming and other media past and present; carrying out a close reading or 'close playing' (Chang, 2008) of an individual title and examining its themes or gameplay mechanics; conducting a sociological enquiry of the people who play certain kinds of games; studying the macro- and micro-economics of gaming and its involvement in the broader cultural economy and creative industries; making sense of gaming spaces and environments within games and in the physical world where games are played; probing the links between game design, gaming practices, and gender identities; tracing modes and patterns of adaptation, translation, and localisation as games and gamers cross regional and linguistic boundaries; and much, much more besides.

As regular readers of this journal are keenly aware, to study China is similarly to embark on a series of cross-disciplinary enquiries that may start in one field – art and literature, for example – but invariably come into contact with countless others, from politics and economics to anthropology, sociology, geography, and historiography. It is fitting, then, that the essays featured in this issue represent a range of disciplines, even as they fall within the arts, humanities, and social sciences with which our journal is most concerned. More than anything, our authors make clear the significance of gaming to the present-day Sinophone world, with special attention paid to mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Rather than leaning on the headline figures and stories that dominate news reports on gaming in the region, they demonstrate the variety of uses to which games are put and the myriad ways in which games – in this case what are variously known as computer, digital, electronic, or video games – interact with contemporary life, from cult religious practices and protest politics to the construction of a Chinese metaverse.

But before I say more about the contributions themselves, a quick visit to some recent headline stories about gaming in China may still come in handy. Video gaming, as we stated in our initial Call for Papers, is big business in China: in 2021, the value of the PRC's mobile and PC game markets alone stood at $45.49 billion US dollars, up 5.5% on the previous year, with a PC and mobile gaming population in the mainland of 706 million players (Businesswire, 2022). China's overall video gaming population of 740 million players is bigger than the populations of the US, Japan, Germany, France, and the UK combined (Holmes, 2021). China is also home to the world's most developed e-sports (*dianzi jingji* 电子竞技) market, with an audience of 434 million fans. The world's three highest-earning mobile games – *Honour of Kings* (*Wangzhe rongyao* 王者荣耀; 2015), *Player-Unknown's Battlegrounds Mobile* (*Juedi qiusheng M* 绝地求生 M; 2018), and *Genshin Impact* (*Yuanshen* 原神; 2020) – are produced by two Chinese companies, Tencent Holdings 腾讯 and miHoYo 米哈游, reflecting the growing successes of China's gaming industry. *Genshin Impact*, an open-world fantasy role-playing game released internationally in 2020, made $986.2 million US dollars in the first half of 2021 alone (Cao, 2022) and has an average daily player base of 9 million gamers (Che, 2022).

Genshin Impact is a good example of how substantial investment in China's gaming sector can pay off, aided by a cross-platform release strategy that made the game simultaneously available as a mobile and PC game as well as for consoles (*dianzi youxiji* 电子游戏机 or *zhuji youxi* 主机游戏) including Sony's PlayStation 4 (PS4) and, the following year, PS5 – China's infamous 'console gaming ban' having been officially lifted in 2015. The global ambitions of mainland China's video game industry are also evident in several recent buying sprees that Chinese game companies have embarked on. Tencent Holdings, for example, purchased over one hundred game companies in 2021 alone, of which a third were based outside of China (Che, 2022). Tencent also licenses hit titles such as the American-produced *Call of Duty* (*Shiming zhaohuan* 使命召唤; 2003) and South Korea's *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and has formed partnerships with major international gaming corporations including Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, and Nintendo, the latter of whose popular Switch console is only officially available in mainland China in a locked-down Tencent-licensed version.

The success story of mainland China's game industry has, however, been tempered in the last year or so by several developments. The first and most widely reported of these is the latest iteration of China's 'online gaming crackdown', referring to the introduction in late August 2021 of stringent new restrictions which limit the amount of time minors can spend playing online games (*wangluo youxi* 网络游戏) to one hour between 8 and 9pm on Fridays and weekends, a tightening of what were already very strict rules about the amount of time under-18s in China could spend in collective game-worlds.[3] While these regulations have been welcomed by many parents and teachers, they are far from watertight: young gamers can circumvent them by, for example, accessing overseas gaming servers or 'accelerators' (*jiasuqi* 加速器) that are not affected by the new restrictions (Liang, 2021). Another development was a pause in the approval of new game licenses (ISBNs or *youxi banhao* 游戏版号) in China between July 2021 and April 2022. This negatively impacted domestic video gaming revenue, already affected by the latest regulations announced by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA; *Guojia xinwen chubanshu* 国家新闻出版署), and contributed to a noticeable reduction of the market growth rate in 2021.

Developments such as these play into an image of gaming in China as being shaped overwhelmingly by state-led, ideologically motivated monitoring and regulation, a consequence of the government's long-held view of computer games as being conducive to addictive and morally suspect behaviours. Such a perception seemed to be borne out again in August 2021 when *Economic Information Daily*, a sub-outlet of the state-run Xinhua News Agency, published an article that referred to online gaming as 'spiritual opium' (*jingshen yapian* 精神鸦片) in the title, a long-standing accusation reflecting the moral panic surrounding digital gaming in China (Szablewicz, 2020: 66-75). This immediately wiped $60 billion US dollars off the stock value of Tencent Holdings, before the article in question was swiftly edited to remove all references to gaming as a drug, presumably to minimise further financial damage (Juanshang Zhongguo, 2021). Clearly, economics, politics, and morality are closely intertwined – and often in conflict – when it comes to both the regulation and commonly held impressions of gaming in the PRC.

Judging by the submissions we received for this issue of *BJoCS*, however, these regulatory drives and their economic and social ramifications are far from being the most interesting thing about games and gaming cultures in China and the broader Sinophone world. Indeed, one of the most popular topics in submissions to this special issue is not specific to the

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[3] The announcement can be found here: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-09/01/content_5634661.htm.

PRC at all but reflects the successes of the neighbouring game industry in Taiwan. Taiwan's gaming industry is, as you would expect, far smaller than that of the PRC, with a population of around 15 million players and a market output of $2.454 billion US dollars in 2021 (Yen, 2022). Yet Taiwan is also home to a particularly vibrant indie games scene, which has already put out a number of games that have achieved considerable domestic success and made a splash around the world (Bailes, 2022).

Two games produced by the Taiwanese developer Red Candle Games (*Chizhu youxi* 赤燭遊戲), *Detention* (*Fanxiao* 返校; 2017) and *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還原; 2019), are the focus of four contributions to this issue, having been widely celebrated by gamers and critics for their reflections on Taiwanese history and innovations in genre. Taiwanese indie games that have yet to receive as much academic attention include *The Legend of Tianding* (*Liao Tianding: xidai xiongzei zhi zui qi* 廖添丁：稀代凶賊の最期; 2021), a side-scrolling role-playing action game set during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan that was developed by CGCG (Creative Games and Computer Graphics Corporation) and released by Neon Doctrine, as well as the OPUS trilogy of futuristic sci-fi games produced by game studio SIGONO, consisting of *OPUS: The Day We Found Earth* (*OPUS: diqiu jihua* OPUS 地球計畫; 2016), *OPUS: Rocket of Whispers* (*OPUS: linghun zhi qiao* OPUS：靈魂之橋; 2017), and *OPUS: Echo of Starsong* (*OPUS: longmai changge* OPUS：龍脈長歌; 2021). Taiwanese indie games are notable not only for their artwork, often featuring a combination of Taiwanese, Japanese, or Hong Kong manga-style aesthetics, but also for their music. The OPUS soundtrack, composed by the Taiwanese musician Triodust, has been so popular that it was released as an album on music streaming platforms including Spotify, Bandcamp, and Apple Music.

There is a sense in which indie games, no matter where they are produced, represent the avant-garde of video game culture, a space in which more creative risks can be taken and less money is at stake. Yet researchers would do well not to limit their more difficult questions to the kinds of games that seem to have been made with more difficult questions in mind. There is a temptation to consider mass market games through a mass culture lens, focusing on a rather predictable and well-rehearsed struggle between top-down forms of ideological hegemony and bottom-up strategies of player resistance. This is especially so when mainstream games produced in the PRC often carry or encourage overtly nationalistic in-game narratives and modes of gameplay, or when players find ways to express political views even within the confines of 'escapist' and fun-focused games. One notorious example of the latter occurred during the first Coronavirus lockdown of Spring 2020, when Hong Kong players of Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*Jihe la! Dongwu senyouhui* 集合啦！动物森友会; 2020) personalised the game's cartoon environment to show support for the 2019 protest movement, displaying banners with slogans such as 'Free Hong Kong: Revolution Now' (BBC, 2020). It was little surprise, then, when *Animal Crossing* was removed from the Chinese market, where it had been on sale unofficially despite not having been formally approved by China's gaming regulators.

But big budget, mass market games – often referred to as AAA or Triple A games (3A *dazuo* 3A 大作) – lend themselves just as well to more nuanced questions of aesthetics, philosophy, sociology, historiography, and so on as do the more thought-provoking indie games like those described in several contributions to this issue. How do certain games contribute to shifts in the norms and forms of game-based art, agency, or genre? What kinds of virtual mobility do video games afford or constrict? How do identity or taste groups develop within and around games, and what are the community-building functions of game-adjacent spaces and practices such as live streaming, online reviews, cosplay conventions, and digital

game distribution sites, such as China's region-specific version of Steam, Zhengqi pingtai 蒸汽平台, launched in early 2021? How does players' subjective identification with their in-game avatars vary across titles, genres, and gaming contexts, and what accounts for differences in gamer-avatar identification? How do games participate in the construction of local, national, and global histories as well as the shaping of cultural memory, and what forms of historical representation can be observed in games across the AAA/indie spectrum? These kinds of questions have already been discussed in game studies scholarship for years, but are only just starting to be broached in relation to games produced and played in the Chinese-speaking world.

So, I see a bright future for Sinophone game studies and expect that the authors featured in this special issue, many of whom are currently early career academics, will have their own role to play in the progress of this field. Some developments in Sinophone gaming – the introduction of even more restrictions in the PRC, for example, or the efforts of Chinese game developers to construct a cross-platform 'metaverse' to rival those of overseas media giants – can be anticipated, even if their precise ramifications will not be clear for years to come. Some are less a question of crystal ball-gazing than of observing trends underway in related areas of culture, such as shifts in popular attitudes towards gender identity and sexuality evident in the content and reception of Chinese internet fiction (*wangluo xiaoshuo* 网络小说). And yet other developments are entirely unpredictable, dependent on news events and the responses of players and regulators around the world to games that have not yet been released and technologies that have yet to be developed or refined. One question weighing on my mind as I write in the midst of an unprecedented heatwave here in the UK is to what extent video games and their virtual realities can offer respite – or unhelpful distraction – from the hazards of climate change and rapidly degrading environments in the Anthropocene, and to what extent video gaming technologies and the resources they consume are contributing to the problem. Is it possible, as Alenda Y. Chang suggests (Chang, 2019), that games may offer something more hopeful when it comes to confronting the ecological crisis before us, not standing in opposition to nature, but instead enabling forms of agency, reflection, and intervention that may lead to positive collective action to help heal our planet?

The diversity of this special issue is embodied in the backgrounds of our contributors as well as the topics they cover, with authors based in the UK, US, Australia, Malta, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. Many do not hail from Chinese or East Asian studies backgrounds, but are instead located in game studies, modern languages, comparative literature, and anthropology departments; some also have experience as game designers. For many in Chinese studies, myself included, gaming is currently more a side interest than a main area of research, due in part to the nature of the training we have received and in part, I suspect, to a concern that researching something as apparently 'frivolous' as video games may not be looked kindly upon by those responsible for assessing the quality and impact of research plans and outputs. For academics of any age who have never played or even read much about video games before, gaming may be a complete enigma, and a rather off-putting one at that. One of the challenges for future researchers of Sinophone video games, therefore, will be making its academic and real-world significance loud and clear while engaging closely with colleagues in more established areas of Chinese studies. In doing so, it will be essential to draw on the technical and material expertise of game studies as well as the linguistic, cultural, and historical sensitivity of area studies, including research already underway in the Chinese-speaking world.

I have grouped the contributions into four loose categories: history and horror; activism and ideology; adaptation and localisation; and reality and virtual reality. The first of these is the largest, containing two research articles and two short essays all focusing on one or both above-mentioned Taiwanese indie games *Detention* and *Devotion*. We open with a rich

anthropological study from **Joseph J. L. Beadle** of the ways in which the experience of playing *Devotion* spills out into the 'real' world of Taiwanese temples and other religious spaces. This leads to what Beadle calls "religious gamification", "a sociocultural and economic process whereby religion is re-imagined, designed, and marketed as a game to be played both within and beyond designated game spaces, and with numerous agendas and effects". Beadle's article makes several important contributions to the study of religion and games, perhaps the most thought-provoking of which is the idea that religion can, itself, be a "gaming experience", affecting the ways that people "(re)-make" and "do" religion, to varying effects. Like other essays in this issue, Beadle highlights the porosity of the boundaries between the gaming world and the physical world beyond, as players seek to experience *guanluoyin* 觀落陰 rituals outside the game and observe eery similarities between elements of the game and their own lived environments. Games, it is clear from Beadle's research, extend far beyond the fictional or semi-fictional world in which they are set and the technologies that enable the temporary adoption of certain forms of in-game agency.

The second article to consider *Devotion* and *Detention*, from **Chia-rong Wu**, explores the broader cultural impact of the two games in a Taiwanese context and focuses on the theme of horror and the historical setting of Taiwan during its Martial Law era. The horrific effects of these games, Wu finds, lie in the collective trauma of Taiwanese history and in the highly immersive mode of gameplay. By solving puzzles and interacting with in-game characters (NPCs or Non-Player Characters), players become what Adam Chapman has called 'player-historians', engaging in historical practices in a "structured story space" (Chapman, 2016: 232). Wu also finds, similarly to Beadle, that the effects of *Devotion* and *Detention* are not limited to the gaming world, expanding instead to a wider appreciation of Taiwanese history and politics that has ramifications far beyond the boundaries of the games. We can thus see how gaming, as Wu puts it, "extends the political domain of popular culture and contributes to the everyday conversation in the actual world".

Following these articles, we have two short essays that also focus on the same two games. **Jamie Wing Tung Tse** considers how *Detention* and *Devotion* offer a "modernized, restorative gaze" upon elements of Taiwan's past that have often been forgotten by or caused distress for the Taiwanese people. Her essay points the way to future research while offering a hopeful glimpse of some of the ways that gaming can provide a healing experience for players, even if they have not directly experienced the historical events in question. What is important, according to Tse, is the sense of authenticity with which these events and settings are portrayed within the game. And finally, in a co-authored essay on cultural encounters in *Devotion*, **Gregory Scott** and **Katherine Alexander** present a run-down of the religious imagery, literary themes, and horrific experiences offered by the game while also pondering the potential pedagogical uses of playing – and streaming – a game of this sort for students of Chinese or Taiwanese studies. Might playing and watching games in class be a fruitful way of bridging cultural and historical gaps between students and their academic subjects – and even help bring the Sinophone world closer to the UK, especially at times when on-site research or studying abroad may not be possible for a variety of reasons?

Our second loose grouping of papers on activism and ideology opens with an article by **Hugh Davies** that presents a comprehensive literature review of existing scholarship on digital gaming activism and "playful resistance" in a Sinophone context as well as elsewhere across the world, connecting this substantial body of research to more recent cases of gaming activism in response to Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition bill protest movement. Davies traces a rich lineage of video game activism and gamified politics that have taken place largely within the worlds of MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), exploring some of the range of

"playful tactics" with which gamers can assert their agency in relation to the dominant ideologies of the time. Importantly, Chinese gamers can be targets as well as instigators of in-game activism, as when subjected to anti-Chinese rhetoric and antagonism due to the common assumption among gamers outside of the PRC that, in popular MMOGs like *World of Warcraft*, "all gold farmers were Chinese players, and by extension, that all Chinese players were gold farmers". It is precisely the popularity and cultural gravity of video games, Davies argues, that lead to their employment in such a wide variety of contexts, both everyday and global, including the large-scale political protests of the kind that erupted in Hong Kong in 2019.

Like Davies, **Christopher J. H. Ho** focuses in his short essay on some of the uses of video games during the 2019 Hong Kong protest movement, illustrating the variety of ways that players employed games and gaming discourse to organise violent acts of political dissent. Ho's essay is structured around the categories of 'play', i.e. the use of games to educate and inform protestors, and 'metas', i.e. the systematic methods by which players "discuss, improve, rate, and share gaming strategies". Although he suggests that the benefits of his research might lie in the possibility of predicting the form and likelihood of future game-based protest, Ho's and Davies' pieces also serve to document and preserve the diversity of game-based activism or playful resistance that has already occurred, even if its outcomes were not what the Hong Kong protestors were hoping for.

The third piece to examine the nexus of activism and ideology is a research article by **Johnathan Harrington** and **Zimu Zhang**, who further develop Harrington's concept of "play methods" to explore the ways mainland Chinese gamers "perform" patriotism in digital games. Play methods are ways of playing that diverge from designer intentions and are created through community interactions, serving as a way for players "to learn, reflect, and even challenge latent meaning within games". For young gamers, this can be a way of rejecting the original political intentions of certain games, as well as a means of negotiating forms of patriotism in differing and occasionally hostile environments. Harrington and Zhang's research serves as a useful counterpoint to the previous two pieces on Hong Kong-based gaming activism, showing how young players within the PRC use alternative play methods to express what are ultimately mainstream, or at least pro-establishment, political views.

Moving on to the third theme of adaptation and localisation, we have two articles that focus on the consequences of games and game-related activities crossing national and linguistic borders. First, **Hailey Austin** and **Robin Sloan** examine the phenomenon of *shanzhai* 山寨 or 'copycat' games in mainland China, considering Chinese games that bear an uncanny resemblance to games produced elsewhere in light of transmedial game copies in non-Chinese game industries. Austin and Sloan give several examples of creativity within Western gaming contexts that bear similarity with *shanzhai* games produced in China, such as remakes, remasters, and neo-retro or nostalgia games. By bringing Intellectual Property (IP), transmedial production, and gaming fandom into conversation, Austin and Sloan further complicate the still widely held impression that *shanzhai* culture is mostly a case of copying or copyright infringement. Instead, Chinese-produced versions of Western games highlight processes of localisation, culturalization, and even subversion, as game producers adopt gaming templates to meet the needs of local audiences.

In her research article, **Dody M. H. Chen** also pursues the theme of localisation, offering an in-depth study of the hitherto unexplored phenomenon of game streaming localisation. Game streaming is a hugely popular activity in China as elsewhere in the world, with audiences tuning in in their millions to watch and interact with gamers as they play games, live or pre-recorded, over the internet. Chen focuses on the Mandarin Chinese streaming of *Overwatch* league (OWL), an e-sports tournament centred on Blizzard's popular MMOG

Overwatch (*Shouwang xianfeng* 守望先锋; 2016), providing a detailed overview of four areas of localisation: ads, gaming slang, pop-up statistics or 'notes', and game-streaming programmes. Her research does not just reveal the diversity of disciplines that come into play when studying game cultures (in her case, "linguistics, lexicology, translation studies, communication studies, and advertising"), but also serves as a reminder of the ways in which gaming, even as it depends on written and spoken language for in-game and social interaction, is a language in itself, encountering occasional obstacles as it brings people together across the boundaries of nations and cultures.

Our final mini grouping of contributions on the themes of reality and virtual reality consists of a short essay on realist games from mainland China and a research article on *Genshin Impact* and its surrounding activities. First, **Haoxi Luo** considers the three Chinese indie 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) as examples of realistic or reality-inspired games, suggesting that they create a Foucauldian heterotopia in which sociological and historical issues can be explored in a virtual world that is similar but not identical to the reality beyond the game. Games like these revel in telling "nontypical stories of China" yet find themselves bumping up against a regulatory environment that has little patience for stories that do not hew closely enough to the government's own vision of 'reality'.

And last but not least, **Matthew James Adams** wraps up the issue with a theoretical, if not a little speculative research article on the cybernetic implications of *Genshin Impact* as it is played by gamers based in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Drawing on extensive in-person and virtual participant-observation, Adams argues that the in-game monetisation system known as 'gacha' helps players form a sense of personhood and "cyber sociality" at the same time as players become a component in the gacha characters or avatars as they exist within the game and surrounding contexts (social media, for example, or 'v-tubing'/live streaming). This results in a wholeness or coherence across people and systems that he terms "cybernesis", consisting of horizontal, i.e. multiple people across one network, and vertical, i.e. multiple networks within one person, variations.

The other aspect of Adams' discussion concerns *Genshin Impact* parent company miHoYo's slogan "tech otakus save the world". What is this 'world' and who will determine how it works and what – and who – it revolves around? One answer might lie in the concept of the metaverse, which miHoYo themselves have slated as a part of their commercial ambitions. If miHoYo are successful in their goal of "creating immersive virtual world experiences for players around the world", or what they are calling the HoYoverse, then the outcome might be multiple metaverses competing for attention from gamers and internet users across the globe, with this one inevitably subject to the ideological interests of regulators in the PRC. Adams' article does not delve into the darker implications of metaverse technology, nor does he consider the experiences of those subject to PRC governance who do not have the same freedom of access to online spaces, gaming-specific or otherwise, like the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. Still, his article raises interesting questions about the ways in which video games and associated forms of cyber sociality will shape human subjectivity in years to come, for better or for worse.

This is far from being an exhaustive overview of video games in China and the Sinophone world today; instead, our special issue offers a series of snapshots of gaming and gaming-related practices in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as trends in the localisation and transnational adaptation of games. There are many important topics that do not appear in this special issue, not least the experiences of marginalised and minority communities

within the PRC and broader Sinophone region, and – of course! – many questions remain unasked and unanswered. One major area of research that is not covered in the present issue is the development of video games as part of a larger history of gaming and cultures of play in China and the Sinophone world. While it is true that games can produce new or adjusted forms of historical consciousness, as can be seen in the case of the Taiwanese indie games *Detention* and *Devotion*, they are also subject to historical consciousness in themselves. Contemporary digital gaming practices and discourses, moreover, are the result of developments that have occurred over many years, through the participation of many different people, in differing contexts and with differing aims. These processes, along with other topics alluded to in my series of questions above, await future exploration.

Finally, I would like to say a huge thank you to all the peer reviewers who contributed to this issue, many of whom can be considered pioneers in the nascent field of Sinophone game studies and who dedicated considerable time to reviewing the seven research articles we are publishing here. I am also grateful for the help and support of my co-editor, Gerda Wielander, and outgoing co-editor Gregory Scott, who has served the journal for the past two years, and for the herculean efforts of our meticulous copyeditor, Hannah Theaker, in preparing these articles and short essays for publication. My gratitude also goes to the fourteen authors whose hard work has created this issue, as well as the other scholars whose submissions were not ultimately selected for inclusion. I trust and hope that Sinophone game studies will attract growing academic attention over the coming years and decades, and that this special issue will stand as just one landmark in the development of an exciting field that is full of challenges and rich in possibilities.

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Of Horror Games and Temples: Religious Gamification in Contemporary Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Taiwanese horror videogame Devotion *(2019) and folk religious ritual* guanluoyin 觀落陰 *(descent into the netherworld) as a new window into the symbiotic evolution of religion and gaming technology. It traces the curious trend whereby Taiwanese gamers, after encountering* guanluoyin *while playing* Devotion*, went to offline, physical* guanluoyin *temples to 'play' the ritual for themselves, and playfully invoked* Devotion*'s intra-game religious narrative in their extra-game lives.* Devotion *thus activated a dynamic community of gamers who, hungry for horror, produced novel forms of engagement with the world(s) beyond their consoles. This anthropological study reconfigures the popular framework in existing scholarship of 'gaming as a religious experience', instead investigating 'religion as a gaming experience', and proposes the concept of 'religious gamification' to capture religion's re-imagination, marketing, and operation as a gaming experience by a surprising ensemble of social actors and institutions. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analyses of game design, temple advertisements, gaming chatrooms, a television show, songs, viral videos, and social media trends, this article explores the unexpected convergence and mutual articulation of Taiwan's gaming and religious cultures, and the wider implications thereof for understanding religion in our rapidly gaming-mediated world.*

Keywords: *Devotion*, *guanluoyin*, gaming, religious gamification, popular religion, popular culture, religious commodification, virtual reality, Taiwan

Only the play of the world permits us to think the essence of God.

— Jacques Derrida, 1978.[1]

以後想玩VR恐怖遊戲，不用去買VR眼鏡了，直接去神廟給幾十塊錢就能體驗了 XD

If you ever fancy playing a VR [virtual reality] horror game, don't bother buying a VR headset – just go straight to the temple, pay a few bucks, and you'll get the full experience XD.

— Taiwanese netizen 0105lim, 2019.[2]

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[1] Derrida, 1978: 107.
[2] Commented on Wanggou, 2019. All Chinese translations in this article are my own. Transliterations are given using pinyin, except for names with pre-existing Wade-Giles romanisations.

Introduction

You awake in the darkness and look up to find the shrine of Cigu Guanyin 慈孤觀音, the evil goddess you worship. You look down to discover a red blindfold in your hands. With no control over your actions, you put it on, and soon find yourself journeying through hell. As you recite incantations and obey the orders of your spirit medium, Master Hueh 何老師, you pass the ghosts of sinners who groan as they are crushed by rocks, some drowning in the fiery pits below, others swarming towards you. At the end of your path, you enter your Tree of Life (*Benmingshu* 本命樹), which leads you into the Palace of your Primordial Soul (*Yuanchengong* 元辰宮). Spectres of your alternate self and possessed daughter torment you as you walk towards the sanctuary of Cigu Guanyin, where you must make three agonising sacrifices. First, you take a vajra-tipped spoon and slowly scoop out your eye. Second, you use a hook to remove your tongue. Third, you impale scissors into your palm to spill your blood. Choking and weeping, you then present these offerings by prostrating yourself on the stone platform and kowtowing, each time slamming your forehead harder and harder onto the ground until all your vision goes black. Suddenly, you regain consciousness at the shrine, only then to pick up a scrap of paper revealing that you have just completed a folk religious ritual called *guanlingshu* 觀靈術 (spirit-seeing rite) – more popularly known as *guanluoyin* 觀落陰 (descent into the netherworld) – with information about how it is performed in temples.

This scene was the climax of the 2019 single-player, first-person psychological horror computer game *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還願; literally 'redeeming a vow') by Taiwanese indie developer Red Candle Games (赤燭遊戲; hereafter RCG).[3] Following the success of RCG's 2017 début *Detention* (*Fanxiao* 返校; see Wu, 2021), *Devotion* was a sensation both in Taiwan and globally, selling a million copies within one week of its launch.[4] Set in 1980s Taipei, players take on the character of Du Fengyu 杜豐于, a father who is lured into the cult of Cigu Guanyin out of desperation to save his daughter Mei-shin 美心 from her mysterious ailment.[5] There are no points to score, battles to fight, competitions with other players or non-player characters, nor decisions that players can make to influence the game's outcomes. Rather, all players follow this same avatar through *Devotion*'s pre-determined narrative, piecing together personal items they find around Fengyu's flat, reading sutras, attending divinations, listening to telephone conversations, and uncovering his dark family history. Eventually, the cult deceives Fengyu into drowning Mei-shin in a bath of bloody snake wine. The story ends as players chase after her in heaven.

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[3] Trailer available at: https://youtu.be/IbQlBGniUQQ (accessed 12.03.2022).
[4] Despite critical and public acclaim, *Devotion* was removed from the online gaming marketplace Steam one week after its release, due to scandalous in-game content that mocked Chinese President Xi Jinping. RCG independently re-released the game on its website in March 2021.
[5] According to local news reports following *Devotion*'s release (e.g. Taiwan dadaizhi, 2019), the fictional deity Cigu Guanyin is a manifestation of the little-known, potentially dangerous folk toilet goddess Zigu 紫姑 (see Kolb, 2006). Guanyin is the bodhisattva of compassion and the most common Buddhist figure in Asia (see Palmer *et al.*, 2019). 'Cigu' could be translated as 'mercy upon the orphaned'.
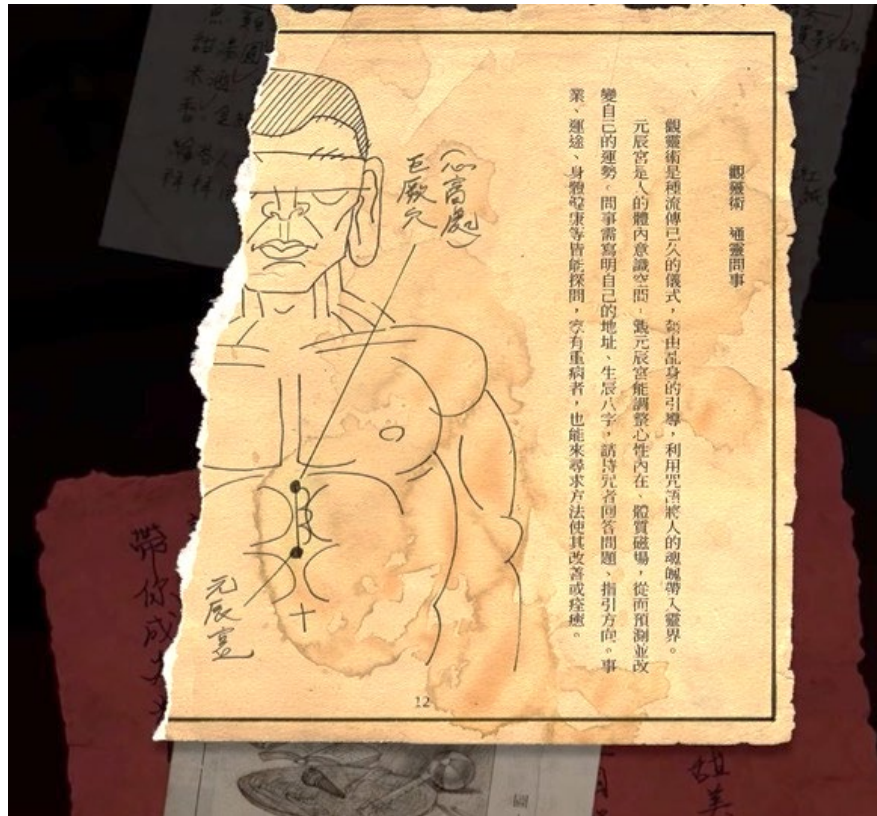
Figure 1: Following the sacrifice, a scrap of paper retrospectively introduces players to guanluoyin. *Screenshots from* Devotion *(Figures 1, 3-8) are used with RCG's permission*

Players were indeed horrified by their encounter with *guanluoyin*. However, as they logged off from *Devotion*, a curious '*guanluoyin* fever' began to develop in Taiwan's gaming circles. Having been largely unfamiliar with *guanluoyin* before *Devotion*'s release, many gamers took this scrap of paper as an invitation to play the ritual for themselves, with urban, offline *guanluoyin* temples as their play spaces.[6] Videos and livestreams of these attempts – commonly presented as 'challenges' (*tiaozhan* 挑戰) – went viral in Taiwanese cyberspace and even reached broadcast television. This phenomenon raises numerous questions. What were the motivations and implications of this 'gaming pilgrimage', whereby players expanded the virtual *Devotion* gameworld into their offline, extra-game lives?[7] How are religious spaces – both physical (temples) and metaphysical (the netherworld) – being re-imagined and experienced as play spaces? And, most broadly, what is at stake in the transfer of gaming mentalities and logics into offline, non-gaming domains?

In response to such questions, this paper challenges the still pervasive prejudice that games are passively consumed as low-brow entertainment by escapist individuals, and isolated from (or even harmful to) wider society. Rather, it will reveal how *Devotion* activated a

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[6] To clarify, this paper's discussion of 'playing' religious rituals does not participate in the methodological and theoretical debates as to whether rituals *inherently* constitute acts of 'play' (e.g. Puett et al., 2008: 69-102) or leisure (Weller, 2019). *Devotion* fans were inspired to play *guanluoyin* in temples as if it were a game, primarily out of curiosity (rather than pre-existing faith or belief) as to whether they could descend into the netherworld for themselves.

[7] 'Gaming pilgrimage' recalls the Japanese phenomenon of 'anime sacred pilgrimages' (Japanese *anime seichi junrei* アニメ聖地巡礼; Okamoto, 2015).

dynamic community of gamers who, hungry for horror, produced novel forms of engagement with the world(s) beyond their consoles. With this case study, therefore, I will argue that constructions of religion within digital gameworlds can meaningfully shape the imagination, experience, and operation of religion beyond them, offline and on the ground.

Though widely practised in Taiwan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Lin, 2016: 159-161), it was *Devotion* that transformed *guanluoyin* from a little-known tradition into a hot topic and gave Taiwan's few surviving *guanluoyin* temples unprecedented media coverage.[8] *Guanluoyin* belongs to Taiwan's rich landscape of popular religion – that is, the ever-evolving religious beliefs and practices of the common people, irreducible to exclusivist categories such as 'Buddhism', 'Daoism', etc. (see Chau, 2006: 7-8). Unlike its fictional portrayal in *Devotion*, *guanluoyin* practice on the ground is by no means restricted to secret cults, nor does it involve any bodily mutilations or sacrifices. Rather, participants' intentions are essentially twofold. Firstly, in 'visiting the souls of the dead' (*tan wanghun* 探亡魂), participants enter into the spirit realm (*lingjie* 靈界) to be reunited with a late relative in the hope of saying goodbye after their abrupt passing, thereby resolving conflicts, asking questions unanswered during their lifetime, or rendering assistance to them.[9] Secondly, participants seek to visit the Palace of their Primordial Soul (*Yuanchengong* 元辰宮) – that is, their soul's dwelling in the spirit realm, the appearance, doors, and rooms of which reflect the current state of their life, including physical and mental health, career, fortune, and interpersonal relationships. By visiting the Palace of their Primordial Soul, the *guanluoyin* participant can foresee and better their fate, for example, by watering its plants and tidying its rooms. To initiate their netherworldly descent, the *guanluoyin* participant first bows, prays, and burns incense, then sits in a row of chairs amongst others, facing the altar. After removing their shoes, they apply a red blindfold containing a protective talisman, place their hands on their knees or together in prayer, and empty themselves of worldly attachments. By chanting and beating small, fish-shaped wooden drums, the temple ritualists attempt to compel one of the participant's three immortal souls (*hun* 魂) to depart their body and descend into the netherworld.[10] Should they sense the beginnings of a vision, the participant raises their hand, such that a ritualist stands by their side to guide the way. In real time, they describe their visions, simultaneously prompted and interpreted by the ritualist (one must not navigate the spirit realm unsupervised, lest one's soul be led astray by malevolent spirits and become unable to return to the body). Along the way, participants commonly see iridescent scenery, childhood memories, and divine figures.

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[8] The information in this paragraph derives from my fieldwork at a *guanluoyin* temple in suburban Taipei (2021-22), upon which I expand later in this article. One of the temple officers told me that there remain as few as five *guanluoyin* temples in Taiwan, located in the northern cities of Taipei, Taoyuan, and New Taipei City. *Guanluoyin* practice today has largely escaped discussion in both Anglophone and Sinophone scholarship, exceptions being studies on its functions as an abortion ritual (Lin, 2016) and in the supernatural aesthetics of Taiwanese photography and videography (Liang, 2019). For *guanluoyin* during Taiwan's colonial period, see Huang, 2022.

[9] For the *guanluoyin* participants and ritualists I met, the 'netherworld' (*yinjian* 陰間) into which they descend is located within the all-encompassing 'spirit realm' (*lingjie* 靈界), hence my use of these terms interchangeably in this paper.

[10] For the Daoist doctrine of the three *hun* 魂 ('immortal souls') and seven *po* 魄 ('mortal forms'), see Harrell, 1979.

Figure 2: A small roadside guanluoyin *temple in suburban Taipei.*
Photographs by the author, used with permission

Devotion's in-game *guanluoyin* narrative and the subsequent trend of Taiwanese gamers playing it for themselves in temples illustrate a phenomenon that I propose to term 'religious gamification' – a sociocultural and economic process whereby religion is re-imagined, designed, and marketed as a game to be played both within and beyond designated game spaces, and with numerous agendas and effects. The neologism 'gamification' – "the application of game systems…into non-game domains" – has enjoyed much academic interest, predominantly amongst sociologists of marketing, pedagogy, health, and labour, and is frequently characterised as a sinister, neoliberal force to be resisted (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017: 542). Chinese scholars have discussed, sometimes disparagingly and misleadingly, the gamification of cultural forms including cinema and internet fiction (see Inwood, 2014: 9-10,

21). Though the term has previously been mentioned in passing (Mukherjee, 2020), I am developing 'religious gamification' as a new theoretical concept (which I would formulate in Mandarin as *zongjiao youxihua* 宗教遊戲化), with the wider ambition of challenging constructed notions of 'proper' religious activity.

This article will present the *Devotion*-centred gamification of *guanluoyin* in four parts. The first situates this project within existing research on gaming and religion. The second examines *Devotion*'s design in the RCG studios, drawing on analytical tools from game studies (e.g. Nitsche, 2008; Işığan, 2013; Isbister, 2016) to show how *Devotion*'s creators encouraged fans to 'play religion' as a game, even before the game was released. The third follows *guanluoyin*'s journey from *Devotion* into temples and wider popular culture. It engages content analysis of viral videos and a television show, alongside my interviews with Doy Chiang 江東昱 (RCG co-founder and producer of *Devotion*) and a celebrity *guanluoyin* player, to question how and why players felt compelled to 'replay' *guanluoyin* offline. The fourth investigates a *guanluoyin* temple's marketing strategies, paired with my fieldwork at another temple in Taipei, to demonstrate how they re-branded their services towards this new, play-oriented clientele. This leads into a brief analysis of the commercial reproduction of *guanluoyin*. Finally, I contemplate the wider implications of this unexpected interplay between the social lives of gaming and religion in Taiwan.

Playing/Gaming Religion

Before proceeding to *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* gameplay, it is worth critiquing the existing scholarship that intersects play, religion, and games. As both realise the human desire for transcendence of the spatio-temporal limits of the physical world and interaction with non-human presences, theorists have long proposed play as a theological paradigm for religion (e.g. Miller, 1970; van Harskamp *et al.*, 2006; Droogers, 2014; Fink, 2016; Vondey, 2018). Play has particularly been conceptualised vis-à-vis religious rituals, as both operate in subjunctive 'as if' spaces, in which humans can safely suspend their sense of reality (Puett *et al.*, 2008: 69-102). Moving from theory to practice, scholars have re-approached these intersections in a literal sense by exploring the playing of analogue games as a religious practice, such as ceremonial games in indigenous South American mortuary rites (Corr, 2008), karmic didacticism in the ancient Indian dice game *Gyan Chaupar* (Mukherjee, 2020), and the "blur[red] boundaries between ritual and play" in seventeenth-century Chinese boardgame *Selection of Buddhas* (Xuanfo tu 選佛圖; McGuire, 2014: 18).

Over the last decade, these intersections have also inspired a surge in research on videogaming and religion (e.g. Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Heidbrink & Knoll, 2014; Grieve, Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, 2015), a significant portion of which concerns to what extent the very act of gaming can give rise to, or even itself be, a 'religious experience' (e.g. Plate, 2010; Wagner, 2012; Leibovitz, 2014; Geraci, 2014; Banasik, 2019). These studies have identified commonalities between religion and gaming in order to prompt a rethinking of what religion *is*. For example, both defy biological reality (such as the possibility of resurrection and multiple lives), potentiate encounters with otherworldly beings, and involve matters of determinism, submission to a greater cosmic order despite uncertainty about its objective truth, and existence in a world conceived by 'intelligent design'. Consequently, some scholars have posited that religions within gameworlds are not any less 'real' than the religions outside of them (Tuckett

& Robertson, 2014). Even many religious bodies, such as the American Catholic ministry Word on Fire (2022), now advocate for gaming as a conduit towards spiritual cultivation.[11]

However, this article addresses three limitations in the current gaming and religion literature. Firstly, research to date has overwhelmingly studied games as they are created and played in the West, and Judeo-Christianity as the normative religion. Now that East Asia is becoming the global nucleus of gaming, we need more investigations into gaming and its diverse, native conceptualisations in East Asian societies. Positioned at the intersection of the Chinese and Japanese markets, Taiwan has a burgeoning gaming culture, even nicknamed by some as "the Mecca of gaming" (Kapasi, 2018). Taiwan has 14.5 million active gamers amongst its population of 23.5 million, and the world's tenth largest videogame and eSports industry, with an annual revenue forecast to exceed US$3.0bn by 2025 (PwC, 2021: 18). Taiwanese gamers' average play time surged by 31% to 12.4 hours a week between 2020-21 (Google for Games, 2021). This necessitates research into the implications of increasing time spent inside gameworlds for Taiwanese society at large.

Secondly, by reading games' religious content only as a narrative or aesthetic feature, existing works have risked separating intra-game worlds and characters from the offline, extra-game social actors, institutions, and forces that they shape. For instance, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge dismisses the possibility that religions in games could "really influence the average gamer" (Bainbridge, 2013: 185), and instead presumes that games, by supposedly satisfying humans' desires for fantasy, "play a role in the further erosion of faith" (Bainbridge, 2013: 24). As anthropologist Beth Singler (2020: 945) has argued, there is an interdisciplinary need to counter this pervasive "secularisation thesis", which posits that technological advancements serve to supplant 'real religion'. For game studies, this imperative demands a focus on players' interactions with religion *after* they log off from the games themselves.

Thirdly, by comparing the qualities and feelings of gaming with those of 'religious/spiritual experiences', scholars have privileged the abstract, ontological question of 'what *is* religion/spirituality?', leaving unexplored how games shape players' religious conceptions and practices beyond them, both online and offline. For example, cognitive anthropologist Ryan Hornbeck (2017) has analysed the "spiritual experiences" felt by atheist mainland Chinese gamers while playing the American fantasy videogame *World of Warcraft*. Hornbeck asks us to rethink religiosity by arguing that, as deliverance from their individualistic sociopolitical climate, *World of Warcraft* afforded Chinese gamers spiritual value and positive moral affect (i.e., opportunities to exercise compassion, altruism, stewardship, etc.). These findings, though intriguing, are implicitly predicated upon the dominant, operative assumption in game studies of 'religious/spiritual' as an identity that people *are and feel*, as opposed to 'religion/spirituality' as a fundamentally social practice that people *make and do* (see Chau, 2006). Consequently, my analysis of *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* moves beyond this conventional model of 'gaming as a religious experience' – using games to question what religion *is* – and instead towards an alternative that I call 'religion as a gaming experience', so as to question how games change the ways in which people (re)make and do religion, with a multiplicity of outcomes.

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[11] Contrary to the pervasive dichotomy between games and 'real life', I would argue that virtual realities need not be regarded any less 'real' or 'actual' than physical, offline realities. Gamers' experiences of digital worlds are biochemically real, emotively real, monetarily real, energetically real, etc.. I am most grateful to Tom Mullaney for discussing these ideas with me.

From 'Playing House' to 'Playing Hell'

Many Taiwanese gamers' interaction with *Devotion*'s religious narrative began offline in urban public space, a month before *Devotion*'s release. As a publicity stunt, RCG organised an 'alternate reality game' (*linglei shijing youxi* 另類實境遊戲) – an unannounced, seemingly unorganised mass event, whereby RCG left various clues on social media that, pieced together, led a crowd of gamers to congregate outside a café in Taipei, tasked with locating an abducted woman. Accepting this mission, players initiated themselves into a (fictional) cult called the Luxin Assistance Dharma Assembly (*Luxin zhu fahui* 陸心助法會). Upon playing *Devotion*, they would later discover that this was the cult of Cigu Guanyin to which Master Hueh and Fengyu belonged. Staged by RCG personnel who acted as ritual leaders, players underwent a ceremony called the Heart-Mind Purification Rite (*qingxinfa* 清心法), which entailed saying prayers, performing mudras, painting sigils on their hands, and dipping karma-cleansing cards in blessed water. These self-proclaimed "brothers and sisters of Luxin" (*Luxin shixiongjiemen* 陸心師兄姐們) then orienteered around Taipei, solving puzzles, scanning QR codes, and decrypting files (for a Taiwanese player's first-hand account, see Hsu, 2020). Hailed by participants as the largest and best in Taiwanese history, the *Devotion* alternate reality game tantalised gamers with the sensation of playing religion as part of a game – possibilities that were further explored when they later logged onto *Devotion* and inhabited Fengyu's religious experiences as a horror game.

Devotion's narrative unfolds almost entirely within Fengyu's home, until the aforementioned climax, which takes place in hell. Both settings are permeated by supernatural forces. To simulate the sensation of spirit-realm encounters, *Devotion*'s designers employed four main spatial techniques. Firstly, motion: players' experiences of inhabiting, traversing, and transgressing various spaces within the game. In *Devotion*, however, it is stasis and confinement that serve to conjure players' feelings of awe and fear as they meet in-game spirits. A notable example is when players are trapped inside a lift, on the wall of which hangs a large, imposing painting of Cigu Guanyin (Figure 3). She is characterised by a bricolage of religious symbols, including four arms, ox horns, claws, lotus flowers and a dragon-engraved bell in her hands, and a pair of golden fish (Sanskrit *gaurmatsya*) on her forehead – one of the eight auspicious signs (*ashtamangala*) in religions including Buddhism and Hinduism. Players' prolonged inability to leave this claustrophobic space renders them vulnerable in their proximity to the goddess, despite her only ever appearing in portrait and statue forms. Conversely, players are frequently pressured to rush through spaces. To escape the restless ghosts crawling towards them in hell, Master Hueh repeatedly orders players: "Hurry through" (趕快走過去) and "do not stop" (不要停下來) (Figure 4). However, despite this imperative to move quickly for survival, players' walking speed is heavily constricted, provoking feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. Unlike the majority of mainstream videogames that aggrandise their players by granting them weapons and/or superpowers (Isbister, 2016: 120), these scenes exemplify *Devotion*'s fundamental game mechanic, whereby players' agency is restricted to simulate the feeling of being at the mercy of a higher power.

Figure 3: Cigu Guanyin in the lift

Figure 4: Tortured sinners

Secondly, perspective and proportion inject fear into players' experience of the in-game spirit realm. The designers' sustained use of a low-angle ('worm's eye') perspective acts to visualise players' subservience to Cigu Guanyin. For instance, players must gaze upwards to her statue on the shrine mentioned in this article's opening, and in the sacrifice scene, her figure towers above them, often too large to fit within the screen in her entirety (Figure 5). This repeated necessity to look up, both literally with the controller as well as reverentially, provokes players' sense of inferiority to her. Moreover, when players walk the sandbanks of hell – "the embodiment of Cigu Guanyin" (*Cigu Guanyin de huashen* 慈孤觀音的化身), in Master Hueh's words – they must ascend the Stairway to Heaven (*Tongtianti* 通天梯), which creates a similar effect (Figure 6).
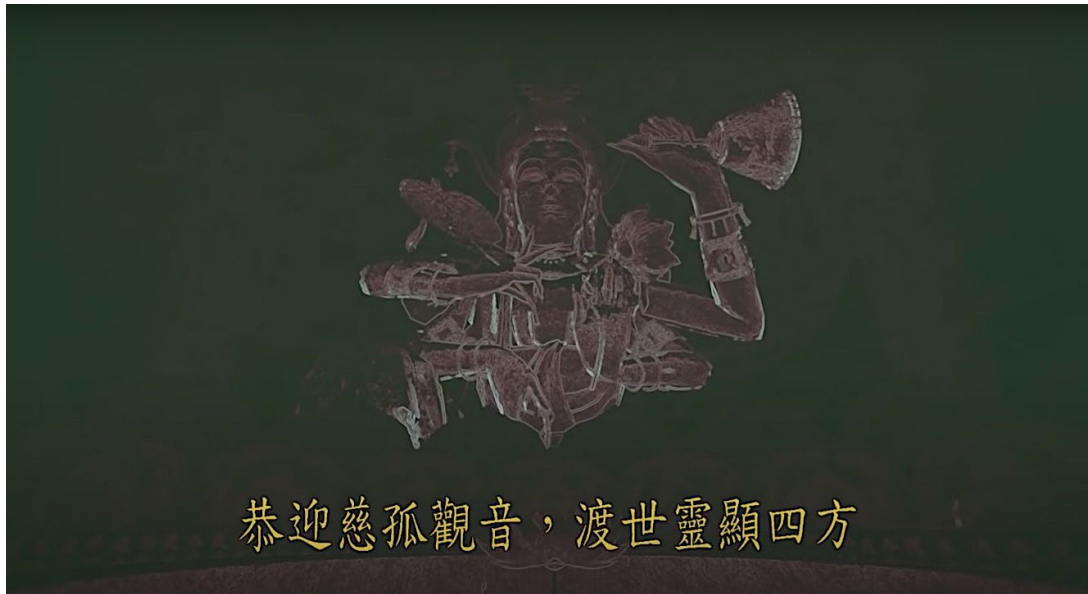
Figure 5: Cigu Guanyin's sanctuary

Figure 6: Stairway to Heaven in hell

Thirdly, light, darkness, and colour intensify players' chthonic voyage. In several scenes, such as when players apply the *guanluoyin* blindfold and commence their netherworld descent, the screen is almost completely black and out of focus, forcing players to navigate by following sounds, such as ritual bells, chants, and the cries of ghosts. Contrastingly, in the final scene, when players are transported into heaven after realising that they have killed Mei-shin, the colours are blindingly bright and oversaturated, and players float freely in a dimensionless, kaleidoscopic expanse of origami windmills and tulips, flying books, trees, and stars (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Chasing Mei-shin in paradise

Fourthly, *Devotion*'s spaces and dimensions are in a constant state of flux and displacement, throwing players disorientingly between the domestic (Fengyu's flat), textual (in one scene, players inhabit the 2D illustrations of a children's book), televisual/intra-digital (players piece much of the plot together by watching Mei-shin on television), and the spirit realm (afterlives, Palace of the Primordial Soul, sanctuary). Players' diegetic position in the narrative also morphs, conjuring the sensation of an out-of-body experience. For example, in one scene, players walk through a narrow cellar, with yellow lanterns hanging above them, talismans plastering the walls, and an enormous many-banded krait stretched along the ground. At the end of the path, players reach a boiling pool of snake wine and blood (Figure 8) and look up to watch themselves (Fengyu) push Mei-shin into the pool, indicating that their position in the narrative has suddenly shifted from first-person, intradiegetic protagonist to third-person, extradiegetic spectator.[12]

Figure 8: Bloody pool of snake wine

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[12] 'Intradiegetic' refers to that which exists within the narrative action, as opposed to 'extradiegetic': external to the narrative.

The rapid, unpredictable shifts between these porous spatial layers throughout *Devotion*'s non-linear narrative, such that players are unable to flow through or feel fully immersed in one environment, time, dimension, or persona, are *Devotion*'s defining design feature – one I propose to term 'spatial entropy'.[13] Spatial entropy gives players the paralysing sense of being subject to a volatile cosmic order, hence rendering their eventual confrontation with Cigu Guanyin at the sacrifice all the more terrifying. Intriguingly, many Taiwanese gamers continued to experience these sensations even after logging off from the game. They took to online forums and posted screenshots of Fengyu's flat next to photographs of their own or grandparents' homes, noting that features such as the flooring, bathtubs, shrines, and doors appeared horrifically alike, consequently nicknaming the game "granny's house simulator" (*ama jia moniqi* 阿嬤家模擬器; cited in UDN Game, 2019). Due to the spirits that haunt *Devotion*'s otherwise familiar domestic setting, threads such as one entitled "Thanks to *Devotion*, I don't dare shower in my grandma's house anymore" (因為還願，我不敢在外婆家洗澡了; anon., 2019) multiplied in Taiwanese chatrooms. Thus, with the line between online and offline thoroughly warped, players began to re-frame their daily realities through the lens of the game – a fearful re-perception that paradoxically led some to continue playing *guanluoyin* beyond the game itself.

Game Over: Do you want to continue playing?

The interplay between closed eyes and vision is a curious motif in *Devotion*. When players walk through the corridor that leads from Fengyu's flat in 1980 back to the same flat in 1986, they see Chinese characters menacingly graffitied on the wall, reading: "Why won't you open your eyes?" (你為什麼不肯睜開眼?). In the *guanluoyin* scene, players must be blindfolded to see the netherworld. And as players chase Mei-shin in heaven, they hear a rock song with the lyric: "In this chaos of lights, I close my eyes to see" (紛亂的光線裏 我閉上眼去看).[14] Are the most vivid, even horrific visions seen not with our eyes, but, like Fengyu, with our spirit and mind?

Actively drawn in by the horrors of *Devotion* gameplay, Taiwanese gamers descended upon *guanluoyin* temples, applied blindfolds, and 'closed their eyes to see' their in-game experiences of *guanluoyin* come to life. Taiwanese internet celebrities' videos of '*guanluoyin*, as seen in *Devotion*' catalysed this trend. One such video, released a month after *Devotion*, was by Wanggou 王狗 ("King Dog"). At the beginning of his video entitled "Real-life Experiment: Doing the *Devotion Guanluoyin* Challenge" (真實考驗：挑戰「還願」觀落陰情節), Wanggou hypes up his audience by introducing *guanluoyin* as "super-hot" (*feichang de huohong* 非常地火紅). The video then alternates between clips of his own *guanluoyin* attempt at the Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence 桃園無極慈善堂 and corresponding snippets from *Devotion*'s *guanluoyin* scene (Figure 9). It ends with an interview with the temple's ritual master, in which Wanggou asks *guanluoyin*-related questions on behalf of the *Devotion* fanbase. He concludes his comparison of in-game and in-temple *guanluoyin*: "The whole process was *extremely similar* to the game, the only difference being that not everybody can see as clearly as Du Fengyu" (整個過程都跟遊戲上非常地相似，只是差在不是每個人都能像杜先生一樣那麼清楚地看到而已; Wanggou, 2019). Popular news media lauded Wanggou for this discovery (e.g. Taiwan darenxiu, 2019), and online fans responded

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[13] For the concepts of flow, immersion, and presence in gaming theory, see Michailidis et al., 2018.
[14] Watch this scene at: https://youtu.be/3vU3TV7mRWQ (accessed 13.11.2021).

enthusiastically in the comments section, admiring his bravery, announcing their plans to play *guanluoyin* for themselves, requesting the prices and addresses of temples, and sharing who they have met or would like to meet in the spirit realm. As one comment reads:

> 其實我有妄想過觀落陰因為還願而流行，結果旅行社一直規劃觀落陰的行程，外國人來臺灣都想體驗觀落陰之類的......

> Actually, I made a vain attempt at *guanluoyin*, too, since it's become popular thanks to *Devotion*. It turned out that the travel agency [*lüxingshe* 旅行社, i.e., temple] had the *guanluoyin* itinerary all mapped out from start to finish. Foreigners coming to Taiwan have all been wanting to experience stuff like *guanluoyin*.

Figure 9: Thumbnails of "real-life Devotion*" guanluoyin gaming videos, with the in-game figures of Cigu Guanyin in the backgrounds (top: Wanggou, 2019; bottom: Aming, 2021)*

How could a site of religious practice become one of gaming fantasy? 'Coming back for more' and the urge to repeat in media consumption is well-researched. For example, Heather Inwood argues, by way of Baudrillard, that readers of Chinese internet literature are often left with "a sense of lack (*manque*) that can only be ameliorated through repeated consumption of the text" (Inwood, 2018: 214). Similarly, many gamers confessed on online forums that *Devotion* had induced their insomnia, causing them to become "addicted" (*chengyin* 成癮) and to replay the game, despite already knowing how the story ends. However, the trend of gamers extending their *guanluoyin* play offline demonstrates not simply "repeated consumption", as if the game were some static text, but rather a desire to transcend the digital confines of gaming spaces, to close the subjective distance between virtual avatar and human player, and, rather than embodying a worshipper in mimetic form, to inhabit their own spirit realms.[15]

In my interview with RCG co-founder and *Devotion* producer Doy Chiang, he suggested that "by adding the unexpected to the familiar" (熟悉加意外) and inviting (or forcing) them to interact with *guanluoyin* during gameplay, *Devotion* gave gamers "the opportunity to fall into the sweet spot of novelty and curiosity" (有機會落入新奇的甜蜜區內), eventually compelling some of them to seek out *guanluoyin* in temples for the sakes of "pure curiosity, *en masse* tests of courage, or understanding folk culture" (單純好奇、試膽大會、瞭解民俗).[16] He added: "If another of these reasons were because [*Devotion*'s] setting and story moved gamers' hearts, I think our team would be thrilled" (如果其中有一項是因為環境和故事激動人心，我想團隊會非常高興的).[17] The following two examples of *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play exemplify combinations of such motives.

In April 2021, hosts of the popular Taiwanese YouTube channel Mimosa Diaries (Hanxiucao riji 含羞草日記) headed to the Temple of Infinite Perfection and Benevolence 無極圓善堂 in Taipei and filmed their *guanluoyin* attempts for their viewers. They nicknamed *guanluoyin* "Taiwanese VR technology" (*Taiwan de VR jishu* 臺灣的 VR 技術), and selectively remixed the ritual into a multiplayer game to be played competitively (i.e., 'progressing through the levels' and 'winning' by successfully entering the netherworld) and performatively (as of July 2022, the video had over 420,000 hits, which would have generated healthy revenue for the channel). They compared spirit-realm visions to watching a computer screen, and when they burned incense and bowed to deity statues to mark the beginning of the ritual, they commented: "This is the equivalent of logging onto a VR game" (這就等於是 VR 登入遊戲的那種概念; Hanxiucao riji, 2021; Figure 10). Thus, they interacted with the ritual objects of *guanluoyin* as what play theorist Miguel Sicart might call "an ecology of playthings" (Sicart, 2014: 25), whereby gaming mentalities prompted the secular resignification of religious materials, and the appropriation of religious space as one for play and entertainment.

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[15] There is a similar distinction to be made between the online-to-offline, digital-to-physical movements of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* players and well-known phenomena such as fans of the viral Korean drama *Squid Game* (2021) who organised physical, murder-free re-enactments of the show, or cosplay conventions like Comic-Con. Whereas these cases are fan reproductions of fictional narratives originating from the media themselves, *Devotion* gamers' *guanluoyin* play was a gaming-induced revitalisation of a pre-existing religious tradition.

[16] 'Testing one's guts' (*shidan* 試膽) is a popular activity in Taiwanese gaming culture, inspired by the Japanese craze of *kimodameshi* 肝試し ('liver tests'), whereby players explore frightening locations such as abandoned cemeteries to push and exhibit their abilities to endure fear.

[17] Interview with Doy Chiang, online, 01.10.2021.

Figure 10: 'Logging on' to the spirit realm by burning incense. Screenshot from Mimosa Diaries' video (Hanxiucao riji, 2021), used with permission

A contrasting case is the 2020 television series *Jiang Play* (Jiangzi 匠紫), broadcast on channels including MTV Taiwan, in which Taiwanese and German celebrity hosts Hsieh Chin-ching 謝金晶 and Sascha Heusermann 賀少俠 played various 'challenges' all over Taiwan – from building a DIY shrine in a temple factory to performing 'exotic' rituals – to encourage viewers' play-oriented participation in Taiwanese religious culture. One episode was dedicated to their visit to a *guanluoyin* temple where, to some viewers' amusement, one of the featured ritualists was called Master Hueh, just like Fengyu's medium in *Devotion*. To promote their show on social media, the producers directly appealed to the *Devotion* fanbase by quoting the game's final and most famous line: "If there is a next life, are you still willing?" (若有來世，你還願意嗎？). This line comes from the song *Lady of the Pier* (Matou guniang 碼頭姑娘), sung in the game by Mei-shin, and is generally interpreted by players as Mei-shin asking Fengyu whether he would still be her father, despite having killed her.[18] From my observations, *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* gamers often quoted this line, eagerly asking "who's still willing?" (誰還願意, i.e., 'who fancies trying *guanluoyin* in a temple?') and announcing "I'm still willing!" (我還願意) in online forums. Tapping into this trend, *Jiang Play* uploaded a post reading: "*Jiang Play*, are you still willing?" (Figure 11):

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[18] This lyric plays on 還 as a polyphonic character. Pronounced *huan*, 還 means 'return', such that 還願 *huanyuan* (*Devotion*'s original Mandarin title) means 'redeeming a vow'. However, pronounced *hai*, 還 means 'still/nonetheless', such that 還願 *haiyuan* means 'still willing'. Watch this scene at: https://youtu.be/GwPJ_a6pHrY (accessed 13.11.2021).

Figure 11: Jiang Play *advertisement adapting a line from* Devotion. *It features the same yellow font as* Devotion*'s in-game subtitles and Fengyu's hand holding a lighter in the bottom left-hand corner. The image is captioned with the hashtags:*
"#Didn'tPullOutOurTongues" (#沒有拔舌頭), "#Didn'tScoopOutOurEyes" (#沒有挖眼
睛*), "#DuMei-shin" (#杜美心), and "#CiguGuanyin" (#慈孤觀音). Instagram post (Jiangzi,*
2020a), used with permission

Figure 12: *"Shaoxia and Chin-ching take on the* guanluoyin *challenge". Screenshot from the television show (Jiangzi, 2020b), used with permission*

However, unlike the Mimosa Diaries gamers, who played *guanluoyin* in explicitly secular terms, *Jiang Play* foregrounded *guanluoyin*'s potential to generate transformative religious experiences, thereby piquing the interest of hundreds of thousands of viewers and of popular news media (e.g. Xiao, 2020). The cameras filmed Sascha as he narrated his visions of the Palace of his Primordial Soul and future wife while inside the netherworld, and Chin-ching as she reunited with her childhood pet dog, affirming her connection with her late father.

In my interview with him, Sascha emphasised: "Unlike Westerners like me, all the Taiwanese players I know went in[to *guanluoyin* temples] completely believing it is possible [to enter the spirit realm] – with no doubt that it *could* be true."[19] He noted that videogames are artificially designed, with an objective beginning and end, the implicit knowledge of which affords players a sense of security, however horrific the content may be (indeed, as previously shown, *Devotion* players have limited agency as they vicariously follow through the game's prescribed narrative). In contrast, for Sascha, the power of in-temple *guanluoyin* play lay in the elimination of this protective layer and "the possibility of a *true* religious experience" (Sascha, 2021), which he suspected was one possible reason as to why Taiwanese fans approached him on the street after the show to ask where they could play *guanluoyin* for themselves. Rather than remaining within the limits of the virtual, these players sought spirit-realm encounters for themselves in an unmediated form. Therefore, not merely the antithetical gimmick of 'serious religion', this case of "meaningful play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003: 29-37) suggests an intriguing liminality in the subjecthood of these temple visitors between '*guanluoyin* players' and '*guanluoyin* participants'. In other words, the identities of the *Devotion*-inspired ritual players were not necessarily clearly distinct from those who arrived with the more conventional motivations outlined in this article's introduction.

Another attraction of *guanluoyin* play was the intense multisensory experience it provides. Predominantly performed collectively, *guanluoyin* epitomises anthropologist Robert Weller's description of Taiwanese popular religion as "*hot and noisy* religion", as a literal translation of the term *re'nao* 熱鬧 ("red-hot sociality"): "Any successful large event in Taiwan, from a market to a ritual, provides plenty of heat and noise. It should be packed with people, chaotically boisterous, loud with different voices, and clashingly colourful" (Weller, 1994: 118).[20] Sascha commented that, unlike hypnoses or psychedelic trips, which synthetically induce mental images, one retains all one's consciousness and bodily senses throughout the *guanluoyin* process, including while inside the netherworld. Contrary to the inherent sensorial confines of videogames, he told me, "being blindfolded was thrilling" (Sascha, 2021).

No longer avatars within virtual settings, players were drawn to the temples as physical, sensing bodies. By drawing on my own *guanluoyin* experience at the temple featured in *Jiang Play*, upon the invitation of the temple boss, the following ethnographic vignette conveys some of the visual, sonic, vocal, olfactory, kinaesthetic, and other sensations definitive of *guanluoyin* in the second-person 'ethnographic present tense'.[21]

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[19] Interview with Sascha Heusermann, online, 27.09.2022.

[20] So intense are these stimulations that the temple featured in *Jiang Play* forbids those over sixty and/or with medical conditions from participating in *guanluoyin*. For "red-hot sociality" as the conceptual translation of *re'nao*, see Chau, 2008: 488.

[21] This narration of my fieldwork takes stylistic inspiration from Adam Yuet Chau's description of a Shaanbei temple festival (ibid.: 495-496). For a participant observation of *guanluoyin* as an abortion ritual, see Lin, 2016: 162-165.

Imagine yourself blindfolded in a small, wooden chair. It is pitch-black. In front of you, deity icons and statues crowd the altar, beside which tower hundreds of bright golden beacon lamps (*guangmingdeng* 光明燈), which light the way for your journey into the netherworld. You are surrounded by around ten other participants, talismans, candles, inscriptions, calligraphy, instruction panels, colourful lanterns and banners, and more. The ritualists positioned around the temple open your path into the spirit realm by chanting and singing constantly. Meanwhile, they loudly drum the 'wooden fish' in their hands, some far away from you with a steady beat, others rapid and staccato, piercingly by your ear. You hear others' voices, music from the radio, the noise of traffic from outside. Incense smoke fills the air. Your blindfold presses hard against your eyes and forehead. Despite the whirring of fans, the air is hot and sweat drips down your face as you (if you have entered the spirit realm) focus hard on communicating your visions to the ritualists and obeying their instructions. You feel their breath on your face as they hurriedly ask you questions and interpret your visions, and the presence of others crowded around you. You bow reverentially, raise your hands by your chest in prayer, feel the droplets of blessed water splashed upon you, and have your forehead and shoulders frequently touched as blessing gestures throughout. Your heart is racing, and others around you, if not you yourself, may be mumbling, shaking, and crying, overcome by rapture, grief, awe, fear, even frustration and confusion (unlike logging into a videogame, descent into the netherworld is not guaranteed and can require several attempts). Added to these bodily sensations are your psychosensory sensations of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching your deceased loved ones, various spirits and deities, and the expansive landscapes inside the spirit realm.

The *re'nao*-ness of *guanluoyin* was engrossingly depicted in *Jiang Play*, hence encouraging viewers to play the ritual for themselves. After the show, the producers shared the location of the featured temple and instructions regarding the "essential equipment" (*jiben peibei* 基本配備) to bring along (Figure 13). While some netizens commented that they would be too scared to play *guanluoyin*, others enthusiastically shared their aspirations to, like the hosts, meet the spirits of their past and future. Thus, *Devotion* activated new desires for interaction with popular religion, enabling what American sociologist Wade Clark Roof has termed "spiritual omnivores", whereby popular media "create[s]…people hungry for new experiences…with the hope that some encounter or revelation lying ahead will bring greater meaning to them" (Roof, 1999: 69).

Figure 13: Jiang Play*'s instructions for playing* guanluoyin*, reading: "Essential* guanluoyin *equipment: 1) sincerity; 2) Four Pillars of Destiny; 3) socks; 4) priestess; 5) blindfold; 6) wooden fish; 7) talisman". Instagram post (Jiangzi, 2020c), used with permission*

Such spiritual omnivorousness led to the proliferation of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin*-inspired stories beyond what was originally conceived by the game's creators. A transmedia rhizome of new narratives germinated from individuals' experiences of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* gameplay in the forms of fanfictions, blog posts, and podcasts, such as popular horror podcast *Talking Story* (Touting shiduoli 偷聽史多利). Inspired by *Devotion*, one episode narrated and discussed a *guanluoyin* tale, thereby encouraging listeners to join "netherworld group tours" (*yinjian lüxingtuan* 陰間旅行團) and check out their netherworldly "real estate" (*fangdichan* 房地產, i.e., Palace of the Primordial Soul; Touting shiduoli, 2021).

However, *Devotion*-centred religious gamification was not without controversy. *Devotion*'s in-game mantras – particularly "I humbly invoke Cigu Guanyin: save humanity and manifest your spirit throughout the world!" (恭迎慈孤觀音 渡世靈顯四方！) – circulated as buzzwords on Taiwanese social media, such as in Figure 14:

Figure 14: Playful praise to Cigu Guanyin in Taiwanese gaming chatrooms (top: justin0622, 2019; bottom: Discord, 2022)

This trend provoked tensions within a week of *Devotion*'s release. Despite Cigu Guanyin supposedly being fictitious, various people online intervened to warn gamers that their reckless recitations had summoned evil spirits, due to the powers that dwell in incantatory language (*yanling* 言靈). On Taiwanese microblogging platform Plurk 噗浪, one user pleaded: "If you care for the safety of your friends and family, please stop worshipping these illegitimate gods #CiguGuanyin" (如果在乎朋友家人安全，請停止私神崇拜 #慈孤觀音) (Shuyu, 2019). Religious authorities, too, voiced their condemnation, notably prominent Buddhist Master Shih Chao-hwei 釋昭慧法師, who posted on Facebook: "Let this be a warning to those who misappropriate the bodhisattva's holy name to agitate the spirits of the netherworld!" (盜用菩薩聖號以招惹陰神者，宜應徵誡; cited in Ye, 2019). Thus, in what we could conceptualise as an oppositional force in the process of religious gamification, both civilian and official devotees resisted attempts by *Devotion* gamers to play fast and loose with the gods.

Playing Religion is a Serious Business

Thus far, this study has illustrated three iterations of religious gamification. Firstly, *guanluoyin* was transplanted from religious space and re-fashioned into a videogame. Secondly, popular media figures promoted *guanluoyin* as a physical gaming experience. Thirdly, gamers then re-localised and re-engaged with *guanluoyin* inside temples. But how did the temples themselves react and even contribute to this process?

Playing religion in Taiwan is a 'serious business', both figuratively and literally – that is, it is not only a phenomenon worthy of academic discussion, but also one with financial implications both for and beyond religious institutions. Scholarship's traditional overemphasis of the immaterial (i.e., cosmological, theological, etc.) aspects of religion has overshadowed discussions of how religious institutions, as fundamentally social institutions, have long operated by innovating entrepreneurial initiatives to attract clients and revenue, according to broader societal transformations (see Chau, 2016). A topical example is the ritual package of model Covid-19 vaccines, masks, and disinfectant as ancestral paper offerings in Malaysia (see Zhang, 2021). Of course, religious venues are not merely enterprises, nor are their activities merely products. However, Taiwanese gamers' desire for *guanluoyin* play brings to light the oft-neglected importance of 'religious commodification' – how religious institutions market their services for survival and development.

Devotion increased demand for *guanluoyin* in Taiwan's competitive ritual marketplace, as gamers became intrigued to play *guanluoyin* and encouraged others to follow suit. *Guanluoyin* temples did not, as one might reasonably expect, disassociate themselves from, but rather pragmatically endorsed their new, play-seeking visitors, and eagerly participated in and publicised the media coverage that featured them. They did not regard high-profile players such as those discussed in the previous section simply as regular participants, but rather gave them special treatment due to the potential economic and symbolic capital they might bring. The Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence advertised itself by "welcoming" (*huanying* 歡迎) and "thanking" (*gan'en* 感恩) Wanggou's *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* challenge on their Facebook page (Wuji cishantang, 2019a), and the separate temple with the same name in Taipei responded similarly to *Jiang Play*'s visit (Taibei Wuji cishantang, 2020a) and to that of Taiwanese entertainment platform ETtoday (Taibei Wuji cishantang, 2020b; Cujiangcao de chaonengli, 2020). Moreover, as its primary "commodifying tactic" (Kitiarsa,

2007), the former has attempted to appeal to the aesthetic palette of this emergent play-oriented clientele by adopting gaming imagery in its promotional materials (Figure 15):

Figure 15: Gaming imagery in the online branding of the Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence (2019-21). Images collated from the temple's website http://wugin.com/, used with permission

As suggested by the aforementioned Mimosa Diaries video and the comment by Taiwanese netizen 0105lim quoted in this article's second epigraph, the growing trend of *guanluoyin* play inspired gamers to parallel the blindfold of the *guanluoyin* ritual with the digital headsets worn to play VR games, as the applications of both proclaim to wield beyond-human powers that transport their wearers into another dimension. One of the top-rated comments on Wanggou's video reads: "We [Taiwanese] invented VR centuries ago; all today's VR technologies are merely plagiarism" (我們早就在幾百年前發明 VR，現在的 VR 都是抄襲的). In countless other *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* play-related forums, *guanluoyin* was variously expressed as the "folk version" (*minsuban* 民俗版), "Daoist version" (*daojiaoban* 道教版), "wireless version" (*wuxianban* 無線版), etc. of VR (e.g. Fankexue, 2020), and as one blogger ruminates: "One day, perhaps we won't have to take such great pains to perform *guanluoyin*; VR technology will enable everyone to see their deceased relatives and experience another world" (或許有一天，我們不必大費周章去觀落陰，也能用虛擬實境的技術，讓每個人都能看見過世的親人、體驗另一個世界) (cited in Lin, 2019). This popular trope of '*guanluoyin* as VR' suggests the shifting frames through which the spiritual is being re-conceptualised at large vis-à-vis gaming technologies. It is thus noteworthy that the Taoyuan temple actively tapped into this discourse by producing "virtual reality videos" (*xuni shijingpian* 虛擬實境篇), in which a narrator recounts previous clients' spirit-realm visions alongside animated visuals akin to those seen when wearing VR goggles (Wuji cishantang, 2019b, 2019c).

Similarly, the Taipei Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence 臺北無極慈善堂 has optimistically embraced features in popular media and collaborations with the gaming community. For instance, during one of my visits there, one ritualist enthusiastically informed me that his recitations and drumming at the temple were recorded and featured on the soundtrack for the 2020 *guanluoyin*-themed Taiwanese thriller film *49 Days* (*Jingmeng 49 tian* 驚夢 49 天). The temple management shared with me the struggles of raising funds for rent and maintenance, and protecting their ritual from extinction, given that as few as five *guanluoyin* temples survive in Taiwan today.[22] Consequently, they welcomed *guanluoyin*'s gamification in popular culture – despite such extreme misrepresentations as the graphic body horror in *Devotion* – and the subsequent influx of play-minded visitors. They did not pass judgements on these visits' intentions or outcomes, which spanned from entertaining pure curiosity to entering the spirit realm and having powerful experiences therein. Money aside, they told me, these visits serve to affirm their ritual's place in Taiwanese religious culture and the continued relevance of offline, folk religion in an increasingly technologised world. Thus, borrowing from anthropologist Adam Yuet Chau's (2021) work on temple tree-planting projects, we can conceptualise this interfacing as a case of "mutual capture", whereby gamers captured the activities and aesthetics of the temples to feed their hunger for *guanluoyin* play, while the temples captured the gamers to promote their ritual and boost their fame and funds.

Beyond the temples, growing demand amongst Taiwanese *Devotion* fans for *guanluoyin* play was swiftly capitalised upon with the invention of a new game: the *guanluoyin* escape room. A kind of participatory, live-action theatre, escape rooms are non-digital games whereby small teams are locked in a themed series of spaces and race against the clock to decipher clues to escape. Characterised by atmospheric lighting, special effects, and elaborate sets, they are popular amongst Taiwanese players seeking intimate encounters with horror. *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* became the flagship product of escape room company Miss GAME 密思小姐, publicised by Taiwanese YouTubers and on broadcast television alike, and "voted Taiwan's scariest escape room of 2020" (2020 年票選最恐怖的密室逃脫; U2M2, 2021). Players apply red blindfolds and are guided by bells into a haunted residence, replete with talismans, shrines, and divine iconography, in which they confront malicious spirits in search of their possessed daughter.

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[22] This temple's standard *guanluoyin* fee is NT$300 [£8.01], plus NT$500 [£13.35] for those who successfully enter the netherworld.
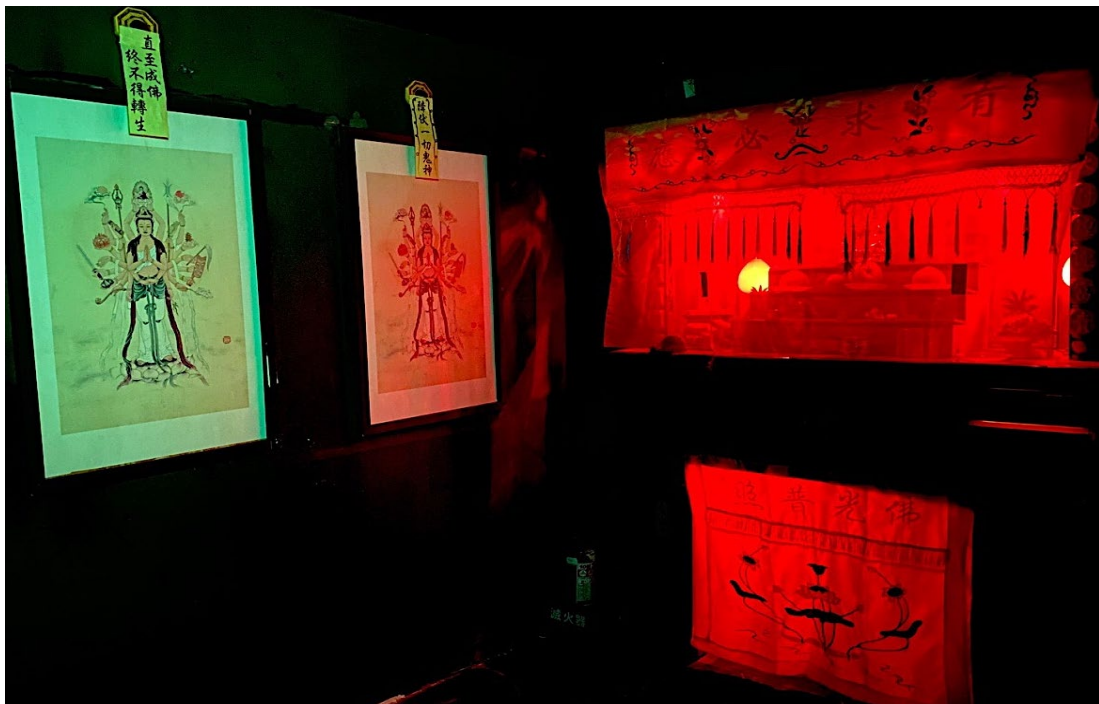
Figure 16: Guanluoyin *escape room in Ximending* 西門町*, Taipei's leisure district.*
Photographs by the author, used with permission

The escape room business thus cashed in on gamers' desires for playing religion by branding itself – as opposed to temples as '*guanluoyin* ritual service providers' – as a specialist '*guanluoyin* play provider'. By merchandising talismans and blindfolds as gaming accessories and repackaging *guanluoyin* as a physical, multiplayer game, it successfully enticed customers

to purchase and consume religion as a trendy commercial product. This suggests the emergence of a 'pop religion' (*liuxing zongjiao* 流行宗教, akin to 'pop music' and 'popstars') that stands alongside 'popular religion' (*minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教, i.e. the religious practices of the common people) in Taiwan.[23]

Still Loading: On the Afterlife of a Game

While conducting fieldwork in Taiwan during the 2022 Spring Festival, I stumbled across a Toyota car gift-wrapped in grand, red ribbons, parked outside a temple. This temple turned out to be one of the hundreds throughout the island that host annual, quasi-gambling competitions, whereby visitors pay (frequently large sums of) money to toss divination blocks (Hokkien *poah-poe* 跋栖) in a bid to win prizes including cars, motorbikes, iPhones, and rice cookers. Ordinarily, divination blocks are ritual instruments for communicating with deities. However, during these events, their spiritual potency is paused and competitors' sole objective is to get them to land curved side-up as many times in a row as possible (the more you pay, the more turns you get). In the exuberantly festive atmosphere of the temple, competitors burn incense, crawl under the temple deity's palanquin, and bind themselves into the temple community, even if only temporarily (for an example video, see Wuya, 2021). Resonant with the *guanluoyin* temples welcoming *Devotion* gamers to play their ritual, the lasting popularity of temple-run divination block-tossing contests indicates that religious gamification is not new in Taiwan. What demands ongoing attention is how more videogaming phenomena, like *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play, embed themselves into these dynamics and shape Taiwanese people's religious conceptions and practices in the future.[24]

Having traced *guanluoyin* as it was transplanted from temples into a horror videogame and its subsequent journey beyond it, this article has probed how Taiwanese gamers 'played religion' beyond the boundaries of demarcated play spaces. For many players, completing the *Devotion* game did not mark the game's completion, as they extended their play on their own terms and in various directions, most notably towards the temples. More broadly, this case study instantiates the conceptual schema of religious gamification – an energetic, multi-vectorial process that entails an often unexpected nexus of social actors and institutions, each with their own agendas. Following *guanluoyin*'s gamification into the *Devotion* narrative by the RCG designers, ordinary and celebrity gamers alike sought out *guanluoyin* beyond their consoles, with outcomes ranging from explicitly secular entertainment to meaningful spirit-realm experiences. Furthermore, whilst some devotees resisted *Devotion*-centred religious gamification out of godly concerns – notably gamers' playful prayers to Cigu Guanyin online – the two *guanluoyin* temples discussed here adopted the strategy of *self-gamification*, partially as a mode of religious commodification (i.e., to attract these play-seeking visitors and generate funds), but also to sustain their ritual's relevance and vitality. An escape room business then tapped into the gamification of *guanluoyin* as a pop commercial product, further fuelling

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[23] Here, I am playing on the semantic difference between the Mandarin terms *minjian* – 'popular', as in 'of the folk/people' – and *liuxing*: 'popular', as in 'fashionable/trendy'. Numerous pop religious phenomena have emerged in Taiwan, such as the "cute-ification" of Buddhist and Daoist deities into cartoons (Silvio, 2019: 88-120).

[24] The future interplay between religion and gaming in Taiwan is exciting. I read in local gaming chatrooms that RCG has developed a new fantasy game, *Nine Sols* (*Jiu ri* 九日), in which players adventure to the land of an ancient alien race and discover sacred rituals, blow up enemies with talismans, and combat with godly weapons. RCG describes its genre as "Taopunk" (*daopangke* 道龐克) – a fusion of Taoism (Daoism) and cyberpunk (a techno-dystopian subgenre of sci-fi).

gamers' experiments with new notions of the 'playable' and religious participation in a rapidly gaming-mediated world.

By developing the concept of religious gamification, I have sought to make two wider contributions. Firstly, by forging a new encounter between game studies and Taiwan studies, this project provides insight into how the seemingly disparate entities of religion and gaming technology are symbiotically evolving. Whilst *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play is a local trend in Taiwan, everyday religious practice in the future will have growing and sustained "entanglements" (Singler, 2020: 945) with gaming on larger, even global or metaverse scales. For instance, games are now increasingly common features of mobile apps for religious worship (e.g. Vekemans, 2019: 62) and, since the pandemic, Muslim gamers worldwide have built virtual mosques and celebrated Ramadan in Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* (Bevan, 2021). In response, we need to continue searching for religion in places beyond the 'temples', even if this leads us back to the temples.

Secondly, this article offers fresh input into the ongoing debates in game studies regarding 'metagames' – that is, the games that emerge from and extend beyond the videogames themselves (see Boluk and LeMieux, 2017). As videogames in the future spark not only more religious gamifications, but perhaps also environmental gamifications, political gamifications, military gamifications, culinary gamifications, philanthropic gamifications, and others that may remain inconceivable for now, more research on gamification will be vital to better understand how people's transitory experiences in digital *gameworlds* merge into and re-configure their extra-game *lifeworlds*.

Lastly, I return to my interview with RCG co-founder Doy Chiang, who told me that gamers' desires to play *guanluoyin* suggested the beginnings of a larger phenomenon unfolding on Taiwan's gaming scene:

> 「還願」只是短短幾個小時的遊戲體驗⋯但即使只有在玩家心裏留下一點點對於宗教民俗的思考或理解，也是一件相當值得開心的事情⋯假以時日，只要環境適合，這樣的種子自然會成長的。

> *Devotion* is just a short gaming experience, lasting only a few hours…That said, if it left even a trace of reflection or understanding about folk religious culture in gamers' hearts, then that is indeed something worth celebrating…When the time is ripe, and in the right environment, naturally these seeds shall grow (Doy, 2021).

This study of *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* has served to problematise the persistent, universalising assumptions of technology's displacement of religion in the secularised twenty-first century, of games as inconsequential, escapist entertainment, and of gamers as their passive consumers. In conceiving the *Devotion* gameworld, Red Candle Games planted the seeds for Taiwanese gamers to draw nearer the potential worlds beyond their screens. From sharing accounts of supernatural apparitions in their everyday surroundings, to reciting mantras and (inadvertently) mobilising evil spirits, and to playing *guanluoyin* and watching *guanluoyin* played in temples, these seeds germinated into gamers' fertile re-imaginations of popular religion and the infinite realms and beings encompassed therein. As Doy Chiang predicts, more such phenomena may surface with time, as more and more gods enter the games of the future. For now, however, *Devotion* and gamers' diverse interactions with it are a sign that these

infinite realms and beings may not – or, dare one suggest, need not – be as distant as we might think.

Acknowledgements

Ludography

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From *Detention* to *Devotion*: Historical Horror and Gaming Politics in Taiwan[1]

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretical review of Detention *(Fanxiao* 返校*) and* Devotion *(Huanyuan* 還願*) by Red Candle Games.*[2] *The international recognition received by these two horror video games is unprecedented in the history of Taiwan. The first part of the article surveys the design and production of the two horror-themed games, both set in the Martial Law period of the island-state. While* Detention *combines individual and collective memories of the White Terror and the dreadful atrocities committed by the Kuomingtang (KMT) government during the 1960s,* Devotion *is centred on the parent-child relationship and religious frenzy on the island in the early 1980s, with a focus on a small Taiwanese family. Both games insightfully capture the representation of horror in response to socio-political turmoil and cult culture in the specific historical contexts of the local community. In the second part, the article addresses the issue of how the two video games subtly speak to local and cross-Strait politics via the horror genre. Through a Sinophone lens, this article brings into focus the complex representation of gaming politics and examines how Red Candle Games repackages and revitalizes the horror genre in the videoludic world.*

Keywords: *Detention*, *Devotion*, horror video game, gaming politics, Taiwan, White Terror, Martial Law

Introduction

Independently developed by Red Candle Games, *Detention* and *Devotion* have earned critical acclaim and accolades through the rendition of historical horror since they were released in 2017 and 2019 respectively. While *Detention* offers a powerful political critique of the Kuomintang (KMT) in the past and present by urging the youth of Taiwan to revisit and remember historical traumas of the White Terror in the 1960s, *Devotion* focuses on how a small Taiwanese family is devastated by the father's blind belief in a cult religion in 1980s Taiwan. Red Candle Games' recent success is reminiscent of the bygone glory of Taiwan's video game industry. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, a great number of locally developed games hit the Taiwanese market. Many of these games were based on Chinese history and fantasy. Notable examples include *Shenzhou ba jian* 神州八劍 (*Eight Swords of China*; 1990), *Chu Han zhi zheng* 楚漢之爭 (*The Chu-Han Contention*; 1990), *Xuan Yuan jian* 軒轅劍 (*Xuan-Yuan Sword*; 1990), *San guo yanyi* 三國演義 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; 1991),[3] *Xiake yingxiong zhuan* 俠客英雄傳 (*The Legend of Chinese Chivalrous Knights and Heroes*; 1991), *Sui Tang qun*

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[2] While *Detention* runs on PC, macOS, iOS, and Linux, *Devotion* is only playable on PC and macOS.
[3] This refers to the video game developed by Taiwanese company Soft-World, not the world-famous video game series with the same title developed by Japan's Koei.

xiong zhuan 隋唐群雄傳 (*Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasties*; 1992), *Chunqiu zheng ba zhuan* 春秋爭霸傳 (The Spring and Autumn period and the Supremacy; 1992), *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (*Strategies of the Warring States*; 1993), *Xiaoao jianghu* 笑傲江湖 (*The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*;1993), *Feng shen bang* 封神榜 (*The Creation of the Gods*; 1994), and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*; 1994). Taiwan's video game industry made even bigger waves with the 1995 release of *Xianjian qixia zhuan* 仙劍奇俠傳 (*The Legend of Sword and Fairy/Chinese Paladin*), which initiated the long-standing game series alongside its associated adaptations into TV series, comic books, novels, and other forms in China. The abovementioned games were accompanied by hundreds of video games developed and distributed by local companies in the golden era. As Ken Cheng observes, the production of local games happened alongside the localisation of foreign games in Taiwan in reaction to the widespread popularity of PC games before 2000, thus helping Taiwan earn "third place in the world" (*shijie disan* 世界第三) in terms of the annual output value of its games market from 1996 to 1998 (Cheng, 2013). Unfortunately, in recent years Taiwan has been falling behind when it comes to video game development and output value in the global market.

Thanks to the phenomenal success of *Detention* and *Devotion*, Red Candle Games has been standing tall as an independent video game developer in the videoludic arena of Taiwan. It is worthy of note that the previous production of Chinese-bound video games in Taiwan points to a collective emotional link with Chinese cultural heritage in the 1990s. Unlike their forerunners from previous decades, *Detention* and *Devotion* are known to players and critics for their close engagement with Taiwan's unique history and culture. Red Candle Games' vision and ambition have successfully added diversity and depth to Taiwan's local video game industry.

Detention, Red Candle Games' debut release, has become the most successful intellectual property (IP) in the history of video games in Taiwan. Released in 2017, *Detention* was adapted into a feature film in 2019 and a TV series in 2020. The film version of *Detention* was nominated at the Golden Horse Awards in twelve categories and received five awards in the end. Outside of Taiwan, the worldwide attention received by these two games is also unprecedented. In addition to the enthusiastic support from gamers around the world, *Detention* and *Devotion* are the first two video games to be added to the Chinese collection of the prestigious Harvard-Yenching Library. In response to the exciting news, the Red Candle Games team expressed their appreciation on Facebook: "While we truly appreciate the recognition, we have also taken this opportunity to rethink the possibilities that our games could achieve" (Red Candle Games, cited in Carpenter, 2020b). Following this self-reflection, this article aims to emphasise the digital representation of the paranormal in *Detention* and *Devotion* and their connection with ideologically constructed realities. Specifically, these two video games can be further examined in light of historical horror and gaming politics. Both games lead players to rethink the potential dangers drawn from a blind dedication to alleged authorities, be it the KMT regime or any Taiwanese cult religion. In this sense, these two games not only reflect a specific context of historical trauma, but also reproduce Taiwanese history via interactive narratives and first-person subjective involvement in the game world through the avatars of the main characters. Red Candle Games' ground-breaking production has greatly impacted the Taiwanese video game industry as a whole with respect to the changing political environment of the island-state in recent years.

Historical Horror in *Detention* and *Devotion*: A Theoretical Review

It is important to emphasise that *Detention* and *Devotion* straddle the two genres of historical narrative and horror in the video gaming world. Currently popular historical game series include *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Dynasty Warriors*. These historical games cater to different interests and genres, such as turn-based strategy, action-adventure, and fighting. While players of *Civilization* are tasked with developing a civilisation of their choice to compete against others from prehistory to the future, players of *Assassin's Creed* can freely explore an open world across various historical timelines. In *Dynasty Warriors*, gamers are able to choose from dozens of playable fighters/characters and battlefields around the Three Kingdoms period of premodern China. One can easily tell that *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Dynasty Warriors* are centred on wild fantasies set within historical settings. When it comes to horror games, representative titles include the *Resident Evil* series, *The Evil Within*, and *Outlast*. These games share the same theme of survival in brutal and gruesome conditions.

Compared with the historical and horror games listed above, *Detention* and *Devotion* showcase an innovative design in leading gamers to review the socio-political turmoil of Taiwan in the second half of the twentieth century, thus parting ways with previously dominant China-centric fantasies. The basic mechanism of both *Detention* and *Devotion* is centred around puzzles and adventures located in and around a series of gruesome scenarios. These two games contain no physical combat, but focus instead on how to escape from demonic creatures and/or spectral memories. The compelling storyline of each game is the focal point that pushes players forward. Driven by the narrative, players are guided to piece together all the clues, including flashbacks scattered in various cut-scenes to unravel mysteries and confront the final dreadful truth. In terms of gameplay, players are guided to develop an emotional connection with and experience the feelings of the major characters in both games. This game mechanism helps players remain engaged and enthralled, while exploring the uncharted depths of ghostly encounters and human sentiments. More importantly, these two video games aptly engage with such issues as the personal and collective trauma of Taiwanese subjects via the form of horror. Thanks to Red Candle Games, the mix of history and horror has created a potent hybrid, now proven to be successful in the Taiwanese video game market and beyond. Being both local and boundary-crossing simultaneously, *Detention* and *Devotion* bring together gamers across generations and nations to experience the historical horror of Taiwan during its period of Martial Law (1949-1987).

The topic of historical horror can be widely observed in world literature and film in relation to the wounded landscape and ethnoscape of a nation or community. As Linnie Blake brilliantly argues while commenting on the intersection of Trauma Studies and horror film criticism: "[T]he generic and sub-generic conventions of horror allow for a decoding of traumatic memories already encoded within the cultural, social, psychic and political life of the nation's inhabitants by shocking historical events" (Blake, 2008: 5). Blake's statement further points to how dissenting subjects, though constantly stifled and subdued, can oppose and contest the political hegemony of a fractured and traumatised nation through the cinematic representation of horror. In the arena of Taiwan literature and cinema, historical horror also plays a pivotal role in representing and restoring the historical trauma drawn from the White Terror. Notable White Terror-themed films include *Beiqing chengshi* 悲情城市 (*A City of Sadness*; 1989), *Guling jie shaonian sharen shijian* 牯嶺街少年殺人事件 (*A Brighter Summer*

Day; 1991), *Chaoji daguomin* 超級大國民 (*Super Citizen Ko*; 1994), and *Haonan haonü* 好男好女 (*Good Men, Good Women*; 1995). There are even more literary works on the topic, such as "Lai Suo" 賴索 (Lai Suo; 1979) by Huang Fan 黃凡, "Yueyin" 月印 (Moon Seal; 1984) by Guo Songfen 郭松棻, "Shan lu" 山路 (The Mountain Road; 1984) by Chen Yingzhen 陳映真, and "Taobing erge" 逃兵二哥 (My Second Elder Brother as a Deserter; 1991) by Wu He 舞鶴. As observed, historical horror has long been a predominant shared theme in the above titles and more. What makes *Detention* and *Devotion* outstanding is Red Candle Games' scrupulous attention to design in recreating the virtual space of historical horror in a spectral light. Through both video games, horror and terror are turned into a perfect duo in the Taiwanese context.

To further unpack how the mechanism of historical horror operates in *Detention* and *Devotion*, this section explores the players' gaming experience in response to individual and collective traumas and the effects of horror. To maximise the experience of immersion, most gameplay requires each player's undivided attention in interacting with in-game characters and/or solving problems within the game. A historical video game further extends its own content in dialogue with the outside world, as seen in the other genres of games. While taking into account the historical components embedded in video games, players may be intrigued by the potential representation, if not reconstruction, of history through gaming. In his analysis of *Civilization* and *Brothers in Arms*, Adam Chapman argues that "the aim of the developers of historical videogames […] is to create history", in opposition to "historical narrative constructed and received in book form, which is often problematically understood as the only form capable of producing 'proper' history" (Chapman, 2012). This critical argument helps to challenge the privileged status of book form and thus brings into focus the potentiality of video games in regard to historical realities. Chapman's take is further echoed by Erik Champion's observation as follows:

> [G]aming can touch on and investigate the wider spectrum of issues and research questions in the humanities that are relevant both to scholars and to the general public. That said, I am not convinced that the ideological aspects of computer games have been fully developed, and these issues need further clarification in order for us to grasp the value, promise and problematic natures of game-based learning applied to interactive history and digital heritage. (Champion, 2015: 18)

In this regard, players are given the opportunity of "becoming player-*historians*, experiencing freedom to engage in historical practices and yet doing so in a structured story space" (Chapman, 2016: 232). Jeremiah McCall puts it like this: "[A]ll historical games present the past in terms of player agents with roles and goals that are contextualized within a virtual gameworld whose features enable and constrain player action" (McCall, 2020). There is indeed a profound connection between players and history within and beyond the game being played, thereby elevating the status of historical video games in response to the development of digital humanities. The interactive functions of video gaming are often highlighted in ongoing discussions in the academic world. According to Trent Hergenrader, it is the "aspect of interactivity that distinguishes games as a unique medium," and "games can and should be critiqued both at the level of language as well as for their representations of people, places and things," thus making each game a "multivalent text capable of sustaining many different types of readings" (Tergenrader, 2016: 30-31). The interactivity realised in gameplay is thus twofold, taking place within the game and beyond because the outcome of the virtual historical learning

from the gameplay would be extended when gamers return to the actual world. This special characteristic of video gaming can be applied to games' identity as a historical medium. As Jeremiah McCall points out, "[A]ll historical games present the past in terms of player agents with roles and goals that are contextualized within a virtual gameworld whose features enable and constrain player action" (McCall, 2020). "[H]istorical games," McCall continues, "are increasingly being studied as history, as media communicating selected aspects of the past. To appreciate games in this way requires a deeper understanding of the medium of historical games and how they portray and represent the past" (2020). By playing *Detention* and *Devotion*, gamers are given the opportunity to re-imagine and re-connect with the historical past of Taiwan while contemplating the political realities of the present time.

Horror and Politics in *Detention*

While carrying historical weight, both *Detention* and *Devotion* rely heavily on psychological horror, rather than blood and gore, and create heightened reactions of fear and disgust in their players within a paranormal framework. Under the developers' careful design, these two games win gamers over through an unusual immersive experience with horror, as the contemporary historical narratives of postwar Taiwan are contested and rewritten. *Detention* has attracted a large gamership and received very positive reviews far and wide. Set in the 1960s, the game unfolds from a first-person perspective and step by step reveals the plight of Taiwanese subjects under the rule of the KMT government in the Martial Law period. Inspired by literary works like George Orwell's *1984*, Yao Shun-Ting, the creator of *Detention*, "wanted to create a dystopian game which was particularly Taiwanese" (Yao, 2017b). Yao has explained how "the fear of religious or political persecution during that period was used as a subtext to the gameplay" (Yao, cited in Chin, 2017). The horror game follows the paranormal journey of a schoolgirl named Fang Ray Shin, who roams through gloomy scenes in search of an escape from a nightmarish school. The inclusion of Taiwanese folk beliefs intriguingly speaks to the complex cultural phenomena of the local community. The development team added such religious elements as the Shrine (save point in the game), the Temple of Justice Cheng Huang, poe divination (Yin-Yang Crescent Moon Blocks), and the food offerings for "the lingered," the name for the ghosts that wander around the campus and attack Fang to *Detention* (Yao, 2017a). The graphic scenes of the dead are intensified by the appearance of the long-haired Lantern Spectre which causes the instant death of Fang upon direct contact in the game. The supernatural and historical features of the game are grounded in "magical realism" (*mohuan xieshi* 魔幻寫實) and "thrilling daily routines" (*jingsu richang* 驚悚日常) (Kuo, 2017). The supernatural horror in *Detention* is further complicated by the political atmosphere of authoritarianism, thus enabling the game to channel individual and collective unease in the face of life-threatening conditions.

As the game advances with Fang Ray Shin's discovery of clues and recovery of her lost memories, gamers are granted access to the political atrocities imposed on Taiwanese people in light of the White Terror under Martial Law, a time notorious for the KMT's ruthless persecution of dissidents and political surveillance of all islanders. It turns out that Fang is a loitering ghost trapped in the limbo of guilt and shame. When Fang was alive, she had fallen in love with her teacher, Mr Chang Ming Hui, who had co-founded an underground book club with Ms Yin Tsui Han for daring young minds at school. After mistaking Ms Yin for Mr Chang's new lover, Fang reported the illegal club to the authorities, thus leading to the interrogation and execution of Mr Chang and other club members. The only two survivors are

Ms Yin, who leaves Taiwan and lives in exile for half a century, and Wei Chung Ting, who is sentenced to 15 years in prison after he pleads guilty to affiliation with Communist radicals and reading materials banned by the government. Disillusioned following her lover's death, Fang jumps off the rooftop from a school building to end her life, but her soul lingers in an endless cycle. This then forms the main gameplay of *Detention*.

The historical horror represented in *Detention* has inspired heated discussions on gaming politics in Taiwan. The political message of the game is doubly confirmed when Fang receives a mysterious phone call: "Miss Fang, your country appreciates your assistance" (*Detention*, 2017). It is a thought-provoking line that reckons with the suffocating social environment of the time wherein home and school are made into an extension of the authoritarian regime. Under these circumstances, Fang can also be identified as a victim of historical tragedy at a higher level, as she has become an accomplice of a political monster that denies everyone of their basic human rights, such as freedom of speech. This is why Fang is troubled by the following questions in the game: "Have you forgotten…? Or do you not want to remember?" and "Forgotten? Or just too afraid to remember???" (*Detention*, 2017). Fang's agonising pain is appropriately demonstrated in her own words:

> Again I'm left in abject solitude.
>
> In a house that I call home.
>
> In a space that I call school.
>
> A walking corpse
>
> whose mind's without,
>
> A sense of loss
>
> that's drowned with doubt. (*Detention*, 2017)

On a larger scale, Fang's individual trauma is intimately connected to a striking picture of the taboos around historical trauma experienced by older generations of Taiwanese people. As Ashley Oh argues, "The historical context is what makes *Detention* so haunting — these are stories and memories that could've come from anyone in the White Terror era" (Oh, 2018). Viewed from a modern angle, Fang is a lost soul who has been denied access to the rising awareness of localism and the changing political culture of the island-state in the post-Martial Law era. Only through gamers' active play can Fang be liberated from the limbo of suffering. To trigger the so-called 'good ending' of the game, players have to make sensible choices on behalf of Fang when prompted by Fang's shadow or alter-ego. "Losing myself" is the right answer to the multiple choice question, "What do you fear the most?" Then Fang needs to choose "to escape" and "to take hold of your destiny" respectively in order to escape from her never-ending misery (*Detention*, 2017). In doing so, the ghost of Fang will be able to set herself free and go on to meet the middle-aged Wei Chung Ting at school, an encounter that happens in the post-Martial Law present.

Although Wei and Fang respectively occupy the two opposite ends of the male/female and alive/dead spectrums, both finally embrace their long-awaited freedom in post-Martial Law Taiwan. The majority of gamers who play *Detention* are from the younger generations of the local Taiwanese community, and their engagement with the game creates a profound mix of the historical past, the virtual gameworld, and present-day reality. Importantly, each individual

player forms an overlap with the I-subject in the game. Daniel Vella has provided an illuminating account of this topic: "the subjective 'I-in-the-gameworld'" represents "the 'I' to whom the player ascribes experiences of the gameworld and actions within the gameworld" (2016: 3). It would be problematic to assume the player's spontaneous identification with the ludic subject in the game because the I-as-the-player and the I-in-the-gameworld are not equivalent and belong to two diverse realities. Nevertheless, the player and the I-subject in the game do not negate but rather complement each other in completing their ultimate mission, as observed in the gameplay of *Detention*. Adapting oneself to the I-subject in the game is the only way to escape the nightmarish loop and come to terms with the past, moving towards a strong sense of closure. It is a well-designed cognitive journey for players of *Detention*. While walking Fang Ray Shin through mysteries, gamers of *Detention* are simultaneously tasked with recovering the haunting past and participating in the process of historical learning connected to the White Terror. As indicated in Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella's statement on subjectivities in digital gameworlds, "users must be situated as subjects" so as to "experience a digital environment," through which "the emergence of a virtual world into one's consciousness" is made possible (Gualeni & Vella, 2020: 4). Gualeni and Vella illustrate how players can be "situated" in the digital environment and co-ordinate a two-way traffic between the actual and virtual worlds. In this sense, the in-game effects and historically striking messages from *Detention* are also brought back to the actual world by players. As *Detention* virtually projects "the intense interpersonal relationship and social atmosphere" (緊迫的人際關係與社會氛圍) of Taiwan under Martial Law, players across ages are thus given the agency to actively participate in troubling historical events and even change the fate of the leading character in the game (Hsiao, 2020: 22). Therefore, *Detention* as a historical horror game undoubtedly helps bring to the surface the forgotten trauma of the White Terror and shape the public perception of the taboo past in a profound way.

In addition to the backwards-looking historical setting of *Detention*, it can also be argued that its success in the local community lies partly in its link to the current politics of the island-state. While spectralising the haunting past of the White Terror period, *Detention* presents an extended critique of the KMT of our time. According to Ketty Chen, "the KMT was successful in dominating and assimilating the civil society of Taiwan to the Party's Chinese origin by methods of (1) coercion, (2) education, (3) restructuring the social status and (4) creating of a new 'pro-Chinese' identity for the indigenous population" (Chen, Ketty, 2008: 188). Politically savvy, *Detention* transforms the KMT's methods into unsettling spectralities as players embark on a supernatural journey to promote an anti-authoritarian rhetoric via vigorous gameplay. For instance, Instructor Bai's identity as someone serving the KMT regime in *Detention* is provocatively suggested by his physical appearance as a doppelgänger of Ma Ying-jeou, former President of the Republic of China (2008–2016) and iconic leader of the KMT. This deliberate design encourages local gamers to rethink the heavy political baggage carried by the KMT in the twenty-first century. As Alison Brysk astutely observes,

> The history of authoritarian abuses was incorporated in Taiwan's public education and an official annual state commemoration established on February 28th—the date of the massacre that marked the opening salvo of decades of dictatorship. In tandem, civic organizations have established their own memorial and cultural projects, with continuing traction among Taiwan's youth a full generation past the transition. (Brysk, 2020: 11)

Brysk continues with a recognition of the popularity of *Detention*, which functions as "graphic novel-like simulation" (2020: 11). Although Brysk does not elaborate on the historical and political fabric of the video game, the hidden messages about the ghastly realities of life and death within and beyond *Detention* can be recovered in the contemporary era. Since 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen has led the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), winning two consecutive presidential elections in Taiwan. With the rise of local consciousness, the DPP's campaign has had a massive impact on the political environment of Taiwan, while the KMT's share of media coverage has decreased courtesy of its continued partnership with Mainland China in recent years. Under President Tsai's leadership, many people believe that Taiwan has officially entered a critical stage of the transitional justice process, that goes "beyond the politics of blame and toward reconciliation" and thus leads to "the end of fear" (Hartnett, Dodge & Keränen, 2020: 252). It is crucial to consider that *Detention* echoes the rampant political movement celebrated by the ruling party, thereby making authoritarianism "the real monster" and corresponding with "stages of transitional justice" (Kao, 2019). From this perspective, *Detention* can be regarded as "a far-reaching political allegory of contemporary Taiwan" that helps re-engage with both individual and historical traumas about the White Terror (Wu Chia-rong, 2021: 83). Through an attentive walkthrough of *Detention*, gamers can investigate the discomfiting aspect of the White Terror as a once-taboo subject and the lingering pain it has created in the subsequent decades. It offers a new way for gamers to detox from a traumatising past through active and interactive role-play in video gaming.

From *Detention* to *Devotion*

Two years after the release of *Detention*, Red Candle Games' second product, *Devotion*, was also made available on Steam, which is a global platform for digital video game distribution created by Valve. Following the success of *Detention*, the development team instilled in *Devotion* local elements with a focus on cult-like belief systems in Taiwan. In the Taiwanese context, "devotion" (*huanyuan* 還願) generally refers to a religious practice in which devotees express deep gratitude to Taoist and Buddhist divinities that have provided guidance and/or granted wishes. Like *Detention*, *Devotion* is set during the Martial Law period, but its gameplay is centred around a series of tragic incidents in the lives of a small Taiwanese family, including the father Du Feng Yu, the mother Gong Li Fang, and their young daughter Du Mei Shin. Ditching the 2D design and the White Terror narrative observed in *Detention*, *Devotion* provides the simulated first-person perspective of Mr Du, who takes its players on a disheartening journey that navigates through an outdated, dark apartment building in Taipei. By controlling Mr Du, gamers can shuffle between different haunting scenes to collect information to solve problems in order to reach the game's final revelation. Little by little, players piece together the perplexing puzzle about the tragedy of the Du family. Mr Du and Mrs Du got married at the peak of their careers. While Mr Du was an award-winning screenwriter, Mrs Du was a superstar pop singer and actress. In response to the socio-cultural expectations of Taiwan, Mrs Du left show business behind to be a full-time housewife and mother of a young girl. Unfortunately, Mr Du's career went downhill over time. Despite his family's financial crisis, Mr Du squanders money on social gatherings and fancy products. Worse still, Mr Du becomes devoted to a cult religion that leads to the downfall of the entire family. To support the family, Mrs Du decides to resume her career in entertainment, which causes even more heated bickering with her husband.

As the gap between Mr Du and Mrs Du widens, they still share the same vision in training and developing their beloved daughter into a young star, just like her mother had been. In the game, the television of the Du residence plays video clips showing Mei Shin's participation in a singing competition entitled "The Rainbow Star Stage" (*Qicai xing wutai* 七彩星舞台). The competition resembles Five Lights Award, which was an extremely popular show which aired in Taiwan for thirty-three years from 1965 to 1998. Additionally, the song performed by Mei Shin is called "Lady of the Pier". This is actually an original song produced for the game but it sounds like Taiwan pop music of the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, Mei Shin repeatedly loses her singing competitions and is simultaneously distressed by her parents' imploding marriage. Gradually, Mei Shin develops breathing difficulties, but the medical report issued by the doctor recommends that Mei Shin be referred to the psychiatric department. Mr Du refuses to accept the diagnosis of Mei Shin's mental problems and thus resorts to praying to Cigu Guanyin (慈孤觀音), a fictional bodhisattva from the cult religion in the game. In order to save his daughter from being possessed by evil spirits and trapped in the cycle of karma, Mr Du follows Mentor Heuh's advice to perform the rite of *guanluoyin* (觀落陰), translated in the game as "Guan Ling Rite and Spiritual Linking" (*Detention*, 2017).[4] The rite enables Mr Du to enter the underworld and make a deal with the divinity (Chiang, 2019). The psychological horror in the game is intensified at this point in the game, as players control the I-subject Mr Du in gouging out his eyes, pulling out his tongue, and cutting open his hand for blood sacrifice. Mr Du's blind devotion to Cigu Guanyin does not bring peace and love back to the family; instead, it results in the couple's separation and finally takes the life of the poor little girl. *Devotion* provides a first-person angle and manual control mechanism for its players, not only to witness but also to virtually experience an extreme horror that arouses disgust and exploits fear. In terms of the ludic experience, *Devotion* reaches high levels of "engrossment" and "empathy" that are made possible through players' "emotional investment" and "attachment to the game" (Hook, 2015: 317). It is unsettling for most players, if not all, to walk a path of gradual downfall as Mr Du and directly cause the very unfortunate death of his daughter.

Compared with the White Terror-themed *Detention*, *Devotion* deals with the issues of historical horror and gaming politics in a more subtle way. At face value, the main setting of *Devotion* fixates on the religious frenzy that occurred in Taiwan as the island was approaching the lifting of the Martial Law. However, the political message hidden behind the storyline of the video game has fuelled raging controversies over cross-Strait relations. On 19 February 2019, *Devotion* was released to positive reviews. Yet just two days later, the video game was accused of featuring a Taoist charm that intentionally mocks Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was discovered that the charm combined two written parts: "Xi Jinping Winnie the Pooh" (*Xi Jinping xiao xiong Weini* 習近平小熊維尼) in Chinese cursive writing and "Ni ma ba qi" (呢嘛叭唭) in Chinese, which sounds like "Your mom is an idiot" in Taiwanese dialect. Cultural memes featuring Xi and Pooh went viral on Chinese social media back in 2013, but this comical parallel has been censored by the Chinese government for years, probably because Pooh self-describes as a "bear of very little brain" (AFP, 2017). As Nick Aspinwall critically comments, "Xi is notoriously sensitive to memes highlighting his likeness to the cartoon bear" (Aspinwall, 2020). Even though this hidden Easter egg may appear to be a darkly humorous joke in the

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[4] The video game provides the definition of *guanluoyin* as follows: "The guan ling rite is a ritual that has been passed down for centuries. With the guidance of a sprit medium, it is possible to chant an incantation and enter the spirit realm."

eyes of Taiwanese players, from the perspective of the Chinese authorities it crossed the line and *Devotion* was thereby labelled a "Taiwanese independence game" (*Taipei Times*, 2019a). This political contention was further escalated after Red Candle Games' Chinese sponsor Winking Entertainment decided to terminate their partnership with the developer (Wu, Kuan-hui, 2019). In the official apology on its Facebook page, Red Candle Games claims that the charm was a mistaken artistic design and that the team has removed it from the latest update of the game. However, this response was far from satisfying to Chinese netizens, who observed that *Devotion*'s political agenda is also suggested by its inclusion of thought-provoking news headlines, such as "Baozi sentenced for three years or above in prison or death penalty" (包子被判三年以上最高死刑) and "School child assaulted. Baozi arrested. The suspect self-identified as lolicon" (襲擊小學童　包子被逮捕　犯人自稱蘿莉控) (Chiang, 2019). These fictional news headlines have undoubtedly intensified the political issue encountered by Red Candle Games. On Chinese social media, President Xi is often nicknamed Baozi (包子; steamed buns),[5] but this nickname has been censored as with the meme of Xi and Winnie the Pooh (Chen Kuan, 2017). In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping was reported as having had to wait in line to buy baozi, or steamed buns, himself. This incident was officially interpreted as a down-to-earth act to shape his image in a positive light. However, the use of Xi Baozi in the Chinese social network has been censored due to some intentional mockery. In 2017, a Chinese netizen named Wang Jiangfeng addressed Xi as Xi Baozi (Steamed Bun Xi) on WeChat and QQ and was subsequently sentenced to two years in prison. Moreover, the photo of 'Baozi' in the in-game newspaper strongly resembles a younger version of Xi, which further alludes to the mockery of the highest political leader of China and the Chinese Communist Party he represents.

In response to the harsh criticism of *Devotion* from Chinese players, Red Candle Games made an English-language statement on Facebook: "Due to technical issues that cause unexpected crashes and among other reasons, we are pulling *Devotion* off from Steam store to have another complete QA [quality assurance] check" (Red Candle Games, cited in *Taipei Times*, 2019c). It was a hard decision for the Taiwanese video game developer to take given that Steam is an industry-leading platform for video game digital distribution. The predicament faced by Red Candle Games is the exact projection of the political situation endured by Taiwan for decades. While the PRC disapproves of any attempts to promote Taiwan's independence, the DPP is keenly supportive of any endeavours to underscore local elements in opposition to the overarching China-centric discourse. A notable example was reported by *Taipei Times* regarding the strong support of "Taiwanese-made video games" and "freedom of creation" by Taiwan's then-Vice Premier Chen Chi-mai 陳其邁 (*Taipei Times*, 2019a). The tug-of-war between the two political entities was even instantiated in the commentary on Taiwan's different attitude towards freedom of speech. In a news article published right after the *Devotion* incident erupted, *Taipei Times* distinguished the Taiwanese President from the Chinese President through a comparable case of political mockery in Taiwan:

> Earlier, in Taiwan, a controversy erupted over an English-language exam designed by a teacher at National Chiayi Senior High School asking students to answer a question about a "President Tsai-englishit" doing "silly" things. While the incident has stirred up public debate over whether it was appropriate, President Tsai Ing-

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[5] Baozi is also the nickname of Henry Wang, one of the co-founders of Red Candle Games (Wang n.d.).

wen (蔡英文) has said that she does not mind, with Presidential Office spokesman Sidney Lin (林鶴明) adding that the school and the teacher have nothing to worry about.

The reactions from people in Taiwan and China show their distinctive differences. (*Taipei Times*, 2019b)

By highlighting how expressions like "Xi Baozi" and "Tsai-engli-shit" can be handled in strikingly different ways, this news passage is a typical example of media coverage that demonstrates the political and ideological divide between China and Taiwan. With the official support of Taiwan, Red Candle Games has been seeking collaborations with alternative platforms to better distribute *Devotion* to overseas players. In 2020, Red Candle Games made a public announcement that *Devotion* had found a new home on GOG, another well-known digital distribution platform for video games and films. Nevertheless, Red Candle Games' plan to re-release the game was scrapped by GOG in hours under the unrelenting pressure from China (Carpenter, 2020a). As of today, *Devotion* is only available for download on the official website of Red Candle Games.

Reviewing Gaming Politics in *Detention* and *Devotion*

Reviewing *Detention* and *Devotion*, one may find gaming politics an essential topic in addition to historical horror. As explained by Doy Chiang, one of the co-founders of Red Candle Games:

> 然而在《返校》與《還願》中最恐怖的，是處於極端精神狀態的人。無論是方芮欣決定要告發讀書會，還是杜豐于把自己奉獻出去的執著，都是發生在我們身邊，有一天你我都可能陷入的處境。

> The more terrifying element of *Detention* and *Devotion* is the people in the extreme mental disturbance. While Fang Ray Shin decides to write up the book club, Du Feng Yu is obsessed with religious devotion. These stories happen around us. Both you and I may be in the same situations one day. (Doy, cited in Jen, 2021).

As Red Candle Games' adoption of the horror genre facilitates the representation of Taiwan's historical disturbances, the two video games in focus in this article capture penetrating insights into the multi-layered political arena of Taiwan. The ghosts that haunt these games profoundly exude the frustration that plagues the Taiwanese characters in the two major settings of home and school, both of which are under the close surveillance of higher existence—be it a nation-state, a cult religion, or both. In *Detention*, Fang Ray Shin's betrayal of her lover is mistakenly interpreted as a noble act of patriotism by the KMT regime. However, Fang and her schoolmate Wei, along with other deeply troubled minds of the time, now serve as virtual agents who reveal the sinister aspects of the Martial Law period, a time when any commoner's normal wish to live a peaceful life could be thwarted by politics. While Fang's family is falling apart, the school has become a subdivision of the authoritarian government. Under this circumstance, home and school are both dictated by the monstrous political machine and lose their original purpose of protecting and educating youth. The overlap of historical horror and the White Terror is thus reconfirmed in the game. In *Devotion*, the importance of school is greatly reduced, as the game stands out for its haunted home setting which serves as the central stage for the characters. Although *Devotion* revolves around the concept of home for family, it can also be connected with the island-state as 'home' for citizens, thus reflecting upon "the epitome of

Taiwan" in the contemporary era (Hsiao, 2020: 25). As a matter of fact, the government seems omnipresent in the game. Its propaganda can even be seen in Mei Shin's miniature playhouse theatre, which is presented as part of her fragmented memories of home in the game. As the screen of the miniature TV reveals, "Disease prevention is a civil duty. The Department of Health, Caring for the public" (Chiang, 2019). At this point, moments of playful innocence are forcefully interrupted by the constant reminders of the oppressive KMT regime. Such dynamic interpretations of gaming politics are worthy of further exploration within the framework of popular culture.

In his influential work on popular culture and ideological struggle, John Fiske has identified popular culture as "a culture of conflict" that "involves the struggle to make social meanings" accepted by "the subordinate," rather than "the dominant ideology" (Fiske, 2011: 1–2). As Fiske makes clear, popular culture is created, circulated, and propagated by the subordinate in defiance of the dominant ideology from the socio-political angle. Fiske's broad concept of popular culture encompasses such cultural commodities as television, music, fashion, video games, and more. As his discussion of video games involves both arcades and the digital rendition of gaming, Fiske offers an illuminating insight about where the act of gaming is taking place. While "home and work (together with school)" have become "the places where social control is exercised most nakedly" for "the young and subordinate," video game arcades function as a favourable venue to temporarily free oneself from the constraints of real society (Fiske, 2011: 74). It is crucial to highlight the fact that the cultural significance of video game arcades has been greatly reduced due to the rapid development of digital gaming. However, contemporary digital video games like *Detention* and *Devotion* certainly create a boundless virtual space separated from 'home,' 'work,' and 'school' and accordingly can be said to maximise the effects produced by video games in arcades. Under Red Candle Games' clever design, *Detention* and *Devotion* engage in dialogue with current social and political trends in Taiwanese popular culture. On this matter, we may benefit from Leandro Augusto Borges Lima's research on gaming politics. In Borges Lima's view, videogames are "a highly political medium" not only for "the exposition of political content," but also for "questioning hegemonic thought through its stories and mechanics" and for "being capable of mobilizing publics towards action" (2019:342–43). Borges Lima explicates that both online and offline video gaming occupy a special position as regards their engagement with dominant social ideology. Hence, gaming extends the political domain of popular culture and contributes to the everyday conversation in the actual world.

Detention and *Devotion* can be examined in a similar vein. Although the modern KMT is no longer the majority party or the ruling party in Taiwan, it still carries burdens from the traumatic past of the island-state. As observed in these two games, loyalty to the KMT and devotion to the cult religion are the major causes of the tragedies in two interconnected historical times, during which two controversial idols are brought to the fore and questioned. In *Detention*, Fang Ray Shin encounters a copper statue of the president that "can be seen from almost anywhere in the school" while loitering on campus looking for clues (Yao, 2017a). Although the statue is not named, it is directly linked with late President Chiang Kai-shek, who is believed to be responsible for the implementation of the notorious Martial Law in Taiwan. Despite his resting in Cihu Mausoleum 慈湖陵寢 or the Mausoleum of Late President Chiang 先總統蔣公陵寢 in Taoyuan City since 1975, Chiang Kai-shek remains to be a political figure of immense historical significance in Taiwan. Under the banner of transitional justice, the DPP

government has been working arduously to push forward the removal of all the bronze statues of Chiang Kai-shek, which are regarded as "authoritarian symbols," around the island (Chen and Madjar, 2021: 50). Compared with Chiang Kai-shek as a political leader, Cigu Guanyin is falsely believed to be an omnipotent religious saviour by followers like Du Feng Yu in *Devotion*. Players and critics may suspect that Cigu Guanyin, though fabricated by Red Candle Games, is based on the religious belief in Zigu Guanyin—a toilet deity from Tang dynasty. The death of Du Mei Shin in the toilet also contributes to this assumption (Tseng, 2020: 125). By examining the symbolic leader in Cihu and the fictional bodhisattva named Cigu, players are led to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the political and religious fanaticism in Taiwan in the past and present. In *Detention* and *Devotion*, gaming politics straddle the virtual space and the physical environment, thus making historical horror a free-floating form of political asset to be digested and circulated by players outside of the gameworld.

Conclusion

For decades, Taiwanese video game developers have received limited international attention, as China had long been their major targeted market. To many gamers' excitement, *Detention* and *Devotion* by Red Candle Games have not only earned immediate recognition from the local community, but also brought Taiwan into the limelight in the global gaming scene. As Yao Shun-Ting expresses, "We hope that, by virtue of this same principle, through our game, Taiwanese culture can be noticed by places around the world" (2017b). The unprecedented success achieved by Red Candle Games hinges on their early decision to localise *Detention* and *Devotion* into other languages, especially English, which is a tactical strategy for "communicating with the world" (Chang, 2019) and "marketing Taiwanese culture internationally" (Wu, 2019). Overcoming the language barrier is simply the first step for the products to enter the international market. Red Candle Games exceeds gamers' expectations by cleverly exploring themes of institutionalised horror, ghost haunting, parent-child relations, and the pursuit of freedom. Evocatively designed with consideration of the continuing socio-political issues in Taiwan, these two games reflect the particular troubling times and spaces experienced by players across diverse age groups.

While revealing the questionable act of blind devotion to symbolic authorities, Red Candle Games' video games hinge upon gamers' experience of immersion and point to the reproduction of Taiwanese history and historical awareness, especially in the context of the political tensions between Taiwan and China. As ghost haunting is usually associated with the return of the repressed in literature and film, *Detention* and *Devotion* arouse gamers' primary affect of fear and disgust in a similar vein by inviting them to directly engage, if not confront, with historical spectres and the repressed memories of Taiwanese people in the past and present. Through their subjective involvement in the two video games, gamers are led to psychologically invest in the storyline and the characters they play in the virtual environment and further develop a vital link with the historical background and political horror drawn from the actual world. Each player's gameplay and cognitive process contribute to the transmission of the political effects from the gameworld to the actual world. On a deeper level, it is through the blended structure of interactive video gaming that the local history and politics can be accessed and re-thought in a new light, which was unprecedented in the video game history of Taiwan. Importantly, the success of Red Candle Games, despite the controversies the company has also sparked, expands the horizons of the gaming industry in Taiwan and assists in forming a collective Taiwanese consciousness, which corresponds with the DPP's ongoing political

campaign. As *Detention* and *Devotion* feature the unique character of Taiwan in the face of challenges from within and across the Taiwan Strait, Red Candle Games testifies the trajectory of Taiwan's historical horror with respect to gaming politics in the twenty-first century. It is an indomitable spirit that never wears out in the Sinophone world.

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Games as Historical Representations: The Present/Presence in the Past

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Abstract

This essay examines the nature and socio-cultural value of games as historical representations that bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present. Through a close examination of Detention (Fan xiao 返校, 2017) and Devotion (Huan yuan 還願, 2019), the two Taiwanese *horror games produced by Red Candle Games. I argue that games as historical representations not only introduce players to the traumatic past but also engage them in the turbulence of the present to envision a better future.*

Keywords: game narratives, historical representations, Taiwanese horror games, *Detention, Devotion*, Red Candle Games

This essay examines the nature and socio-cultural value of games as historical representations that bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present. Through a close examination of *Detention* (*Fan xiao* 返校, 2017) and *Devotion* (*Huan yuan* 還願, 2019), the two Taiwanese horror games produced by Red Candle Games which have gained global popularity in recent years, I argue that games as historical representations not only introduce players to the traumatic past but also engage them in the turbulence of the present to envision a better future. It is not my intention to flatten games into literature nor undermine the importance of gameplay in these games, or indeed in any game at all. Instead, by proposing a new method by which to approach game narratives, I suggest that games can be one of the many forms of historical representations. As historian Hayden White proposes, history must first be written to be digested as such, and we must access history by way of language and through narratives (White, 1999: 1).

To begin with, games as historical representations must establish an 'authentic' relation to the player's living present, instead of merely serving as vehicles of facts. This essay draws from Michel-Ralph Trouillot's idea of 'authenticity', as illustrated in his chapter "The Presence in the Past". Trouillot criticizes attempts to represent traumatic historical events which fail to consider the fact that 'The Past' is *not* a fixed reality and that true historical authenticity resides in an honesty vis-à-vis the present (Trouillot, 1995: 148). Nonetheless, games as historical representations do not only serve to create a factually accurate virtual reality nor as simulacrums of a certain past. Bridging the temporal gap between the past and the present, these games often reveal to us the turbulent present as much as they reveal the traumatic past, perhaps even more so. This is because such historical authenticity with regard to the past resides in the struggles of our present (Trouillot, 1995: 151). As *Detention* and *Devotion* respectively address the traumatic past of Taiwan's White Terror period and the rise of religious cults, these horror games offer their players immersive and "authentic" experiences by reintroducing them to the past in hopes of reshaping their relationships to the living present - given the fact that such terrors still loom over Taiwan in alternative forms today.

Moreover, the conjunction of past and present - and thus historical authenticity - is usually achieved through expressions of nostalgia. *Detention* and *Devotion* carry nostalgic

elements drawn from Taiwan in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively. Cinematic representations of nostalgia are a double exposure of past and present, dream and everyday life (Boym, 2001: xiii-xiv). Nostalgia is not an objective recovery of historical specificities, as the details portrayed do not aim to invoke a sense of sameness with the past. Instead, nostalgia relies on a deliberate display of temporal displacement in which a modernized gaze towards the past is established (Chu, 2004: 334, 336). Such a modernized gaze towards the past is not only retrospective but also speculative, wherein one can strive toward historical authenticity with the past in the present. Natalia Chan also identifies that on one hand the essence of nostalgic experience cultivates an appreciative stance toward former selves, and on the other hand helps to manage the unpleasant present by celebrating the past and transcending the future (Chan, 2000: 264). Nostalgia can be a social remedy for the turbulent present as the past in cinematic form can reconstruct collective identities and memories (Chan, 2000: 265). And just such a modernized, restorative gaze can be found in *Detention* and *Devotion*.

Whilst recent public attention for *Detention* has focused on the film adaptation that was released in 2019, conversations around *Devotion* have also been diverted towards a controversy which led to the removal of the game on Steam, probably the most popular online distribution platform for PC gaming. This was due to the inclusion of a now-removed small talisman in the game, which Chinese netizens saw as an unlawful criticism of Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China (Muncy, 2019). Nevertheless, the two critically acclaimed games from Red Candle Games have recently been added to the collections of Harvard-Yenching Library in Harvard University for preservation and educational purpose (Carpenter, 2020).

In *Detention*, a side-scrolling survival horror game, players control the protagonist Fang Ray Shin (Ray) who wanders around an abandoned high school to gather fragments of her memories and overcome her inner demons. Set during 1960s Taiwan, the White Terror era-inspired game conveys the fear of political and religious persecution as a subtext by incorporating aspects of Taiwanese and East Asian culture, as well as religious themes from Taoism and Buddhism (Chin, 2017). For instance, in Figure 1, Chinese deities such as the City God (*Chenghuang* 城隍) and Taoist talismans are depicted as hints and puzzles of the game.
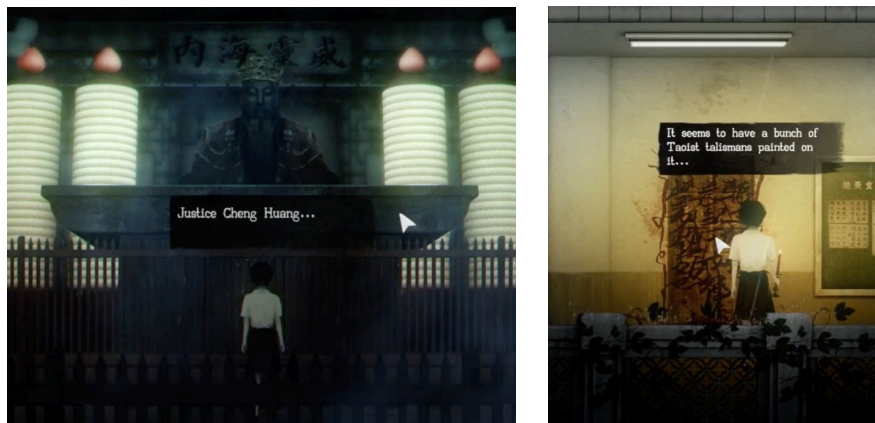
Figure 1. Screenshots taken from the game Detention*. (Left) Ray faces City God; (Right) Ray struggles to enter a door with Taoist talismans.*

Martial law in Taiwan (1949-1987) restricted both civilians' physical and intellectual freedom as they could be labelled and prosecuted as 'Communist spies' for speaking the 'wrong' dialect, singing the 'wrong' songs, reading the 'wrong' books and more (Wang, 2019). Similarly, the secret book club which plays an important role in *Detention* eventually causes

the demise of two teachers and countless students when Instructor Bai, a military officer stationed in the high school, is later informed of its existence. In Figure 2, Ray finds a court verdict which imposes a death sentence and a sentence of imprisonment on two members of the book club, namely a teacher and a student.
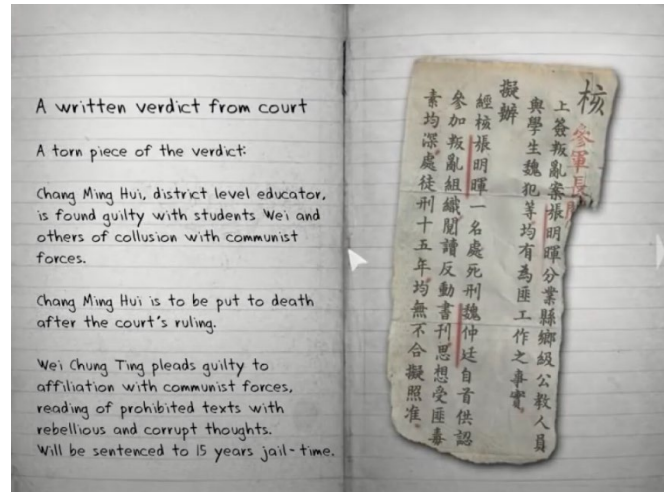
Figure 2. Screenshot taken from the game Detention. *This written court verdict records the death sentence and the sentence of 15-year imprisonment on two members of the book club.*

Further, as shown in Figure 3, one of the puzzles involves a melody from the song "A Flower on a Rainy Night" (*Yu ye hua* 雨夜花), along with three other songs composed by renowned Taiwanese Hakka musician Teng Yu-hsien 鄧雨賢. Once banned by the government during the White Terror era, these songs from Teng are one of the many nostalgic Taiwanese elements local players can easily identify, alongside the visual representation of the school setting in *Detention*.

Figure 3. Screenshot from the game Detention*, showing an old cassette player which plays "A Flower on a Rainy Night" and other three songs from Teng.*

Between 1949 to 1992, millions were arrested for criticizing and defying the government under martial law and at least 1,200 were executed. Current President of the Republic of China Tsai Ing-wen's advocacy has encouraged historians to work on recovering the lost records of these political prisoners (Sui, 2016). Tsai, when first elected in 2016, has advocated for a re-investigation of the February 28 Incident and the White Terror era that followed. As she openly stated: "There would be reconciliation only if there is truth, there would be unity only if there is reconciliation…… And then Taiwan can finally move forward"

(有真相才有和解，有和解才能帶來團結……台灣才可以繼續向前走) (Sui, 2016). On the other hand, Tien Meng-shu 田孟淑, who had provided shelter and aid for many political prisoners during the White Terror era, commented in an interview that *Detention* is an unforgettable nightmare that she had lived through, and what was portrayed on screen is only the tip of the iceberg (Wang, 2019). The brutal torture in the film adaption reminded Tien of that which happened during the Meilidao Incident 美麗島事件 in 1979, where the government suppressed pro-democratic demonstrations and arrested leaders of the opposition camps. In the game, torture of students reported to be 'Communist spies' who intend to overthrow the government is also heavily implied, as demonstrated in Figure 4.
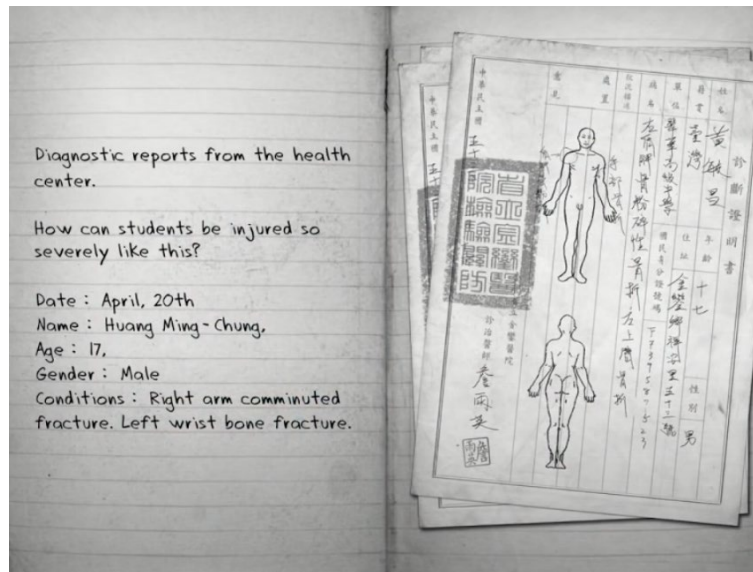
Figure 4. Screenshot from the game Detention. *This medical report documents suspicious wounds suggests the brutal torture of a male student.*

In short, by establishing historical authenticity, *Detention* serves as a restorative gaze for the locals towards their distressing and almost-forgotten past. The protagonist Ray's search for lost memories resembles that of the Taiwanese in the present under their current president's advocacy. Nonetheless, the game also provides foreign players with an 'authentic' outlook on Taiwan's past, providing a better understanding of its current political scene and struggles.

As compared to *Detention*, *Devotion* is undoubtedly more concerned with the personal (Muncy, 2019). Set in the 1980s Taiwan, *Devotion* puts the players in a haunted apartment and narrates a tragic family story. Similar to Ray in *Detention*, the father Du Feng Yu (Feng Yu) is also a ghostly figure who seeks to redeem his sins and who is searching for his daughter, Mei Shin. This second Red Candle Games production has reminded many Taiwanese players and netizens of a cult-related tragedy in 2013, in which a high schooler was introduced to a cult called Ri Yue Ming Gong (日月明功) by his mother, but was later abused and starved to death as the members accused him of being a drug user (Zhu, 2019). Red Candle Games does not shy away from religious references in *Devotion*. For example, in Figure 5, the game depicts a household guardian ceremony commonly practiced in Asian cultures and a Taoist ritual called the Guan Ling Rite (*Guanluoyin* 觀落陰), when Feng Yu is convinced that it is the only way to save his daughter Mei Shin from the evil spirits which have caused her distress.
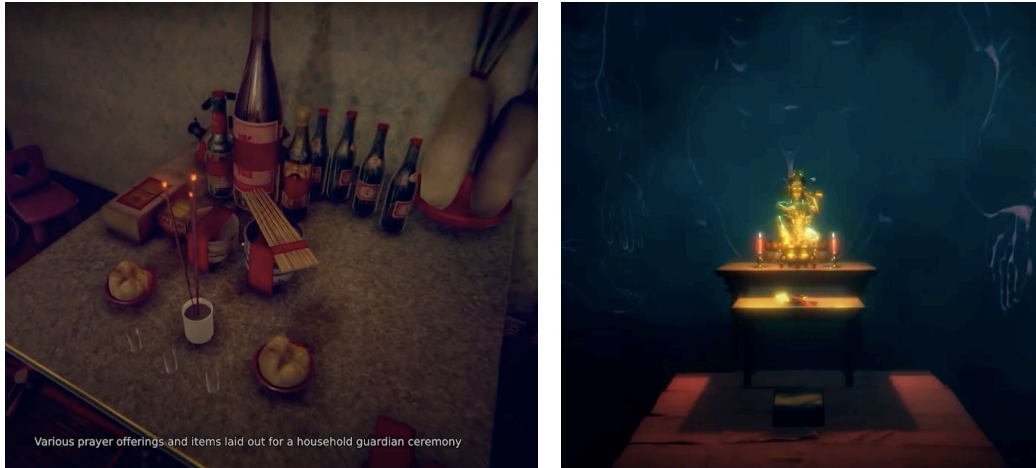
Figure 5. Screenshots from the game Devotion*; (left) common offerings and items for a household guardian ceremony can be seen; (right) Feng Yu performs the Guan Ling Rite, a Taoist ritual where a person's spirit is guided to travel to the nether world*

Again, akin to *Detention,* music is another major vessel for nostalgia in *Devotion*. "The Rainbow Star Stage" (*Qicai xing wutai* 七彩星舞台) recreated in the game is a homage to "Five Lights Award" (*Wu deng jiang* 五燈獎), a popular singing contest in Taiwan that was televised from 1965 to 1998. Moreover, "Lady of the Pier" (*Matou guniang* 碼頭姑娘), a song featured in the game as the mother Li Fang's song, is specially made to resemble songs from the 1980s Taiwan. According to the composer Chang Wei Fan, the production team's aim was to create as nostalgic a song as possible, and so they invited the drummer who played for Teresa Teng, the iconic Taiwanese singer active in the 1970s-90s, as well as the saxophone player who played on the "Five Light Award" show, to participate in the recording (Chang, 2019).

Figure 6. Screenshots from the game Devotion*. (left) A vinyl record of "Lady of the Pier"; (right) "The Rainbow Star Stage" is being aired on a vintage television.*

Devotion may be a cautionary tale that offer many players a teary lesson, but the horrors of cults continue to haunt the locals. Cult-related news of missing persons and deaths in Taiwan can be found without much difficulty. Local players during their playthroughs also note that similar experiences must have happened to real people around them. To give an example, in 2019, a 26-year-old woman was beaten to death for trying to leave another local cult named China Baiyang Sigui Lingbao Holy Path (*Zhonghua bai yang si gui lingbao shengdao* 中華白陽四貴靈寶聖道) while at least ten more followers were reported missing (Song & Feng, 2019). Feng Yu's fatherly love for Mei Shin in *Devotion* has certainly moved hearts of many - yet his blind faith is not entirely fictional, but also stands as a brutal reminder to both local and foreign players of the dangers that cults have brought to the lives of many.

Upon an examination of *Detention* and *Devotion* as historical representations and reimaginations in the context of Taiwan, we can observe that video games do have the capacity to establish a historically authentic relationship with a traumatic past for the audience, offering them a restorative gaze from the also-turbulent present for the sake of a better future. I believe the role of gameplay and player audience reception in these two games, as well as the topic of games as historical representations in the context of Southeast Asia, merits further research.

Acknowledgements

Ludography

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Devotion 還願 (standard edition) (2019), PC [Game], Red Candle Games: Taiwan

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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

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[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.

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[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

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[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.

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The Revolution Will Not Be Gamified: Videogame Activism and Playful Resistance across the Sinophone

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Abstract

Videogames are political spaces. For more than twenty years, videogames have been co-opted by activists globally to organise protests in amorphous, organic, and rhizomatic assemblages. Presenting instances of videogame-based activism in global Chinese language contexts, this paper connects cases of videogame activism in Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement of 2019, to earlier videogame protest repertoires and playful resistance in Mainland China and Taiwan. Through an extensive literature review approach, this paper surveys cross-disciplinary discussions on Sinophonic game-based activism in three ways: by contextualising the antagonisms that drove the protesters to action; by exploring the strategies and tactics employed in each; and by drawing them into a lineage of Sinophone activism that has spread predominantly through Massively Multiplayer Online Games. With much of the discourse surrounding videogame activism occurring in US and European contexts, this paper recalibrates existing discourses of videogame activism to consider their most prominent instances: those that occur in Sinophone contexts.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, videogame activism, playful resistance, gamification

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, videogames have increasingly appeared as sites of activism into which protest energies have been directed. A key example is Joseph DeLappe's *Dead-in-Iraq*, a pacifist act of civil disobedience that saw him type the names of US soldiers killed in Iraq into the chat function of the US army's recruitment and training game *America's Army*. DeLappe's 'micro-protest' raises complex questions around how a game player's rights and responsibilities can be evoked within military style games. Also notable is Schleiner, Condon & Leandre's *Velvet-Strike* (2002) which saw antiwar graffiti mods adorn the *Counterstrike* first-person shooter, and Eddo Stern's RUNNERS*: Wolfenstein* (2002) a mod that invited Israeli players to invade Nazi Germany.

These works of digital activism have been interpreted and contextualised at the intersection of art, activism, and videogames, a field of practice that has more recently included such works as *Escape from Woomera* (EFW Team, 2003), *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, 2006), *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), *Papers, Please* (Lukas Pope, 2013), and *Everyday Racism* (All Together Now, 2014). While in the US, Europe, and elsewhere in the West, activist videogames have either emerged from or been embedded into conceptual art domains, across the regions of China, videogame activism has remained firmly entrenched in the political underground. Modes of activism that emerge within and through videogames rely upon on a governmental acceptance of both videogames and civil dissent, an acceptance that is not enjoyed in the Chinese Mainland. As a result, videogame protests and activism across Sinophone contexts take on dynamic new dimensions.

Sinophone videogame protests and protest videogames have arisen at the activist frontlines, resembling in this regard the works produced during Turkey's Taksim Gezi Park Protests of 2013. Koenitz (2014) and Sezen and Sezen (2016) have each investigated how Turkey's protest games such as *Occupy Istanbul* (2013) appropriate game structures, logics, discourses, and popularity to showcase forms of civic participation within the safety of the virtual domain, but in ways that might draw players into the actual activist frontlines. Drawing on previous work by Emre et al. (2014), Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz (2018) have suggested that a new grammar of playful resistance that is identifiable across both the Tahrir Square and Hong Kong protests is founded in a ubiquitous recognition and understanding of the game-like qualities of social and political unrest. Extending upon Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz with attention to the scholarship of videogame protests in the northeast Asian context, this paper makes the case that Hong Kong's videogame activism inherits strategies and tactics that have appeared elsewhere in Taiwan and Mainland China.

Today, China dominates the global gaming industry. With a market worth nearly twice that of Japan and attracting nearly three and a half times as many players as its nearest rival in the United States, China represents the world's largest player base (Christensen, 2019). The size of this gaming community is larger again when we include the regional discursive linkages sometimes referred to as Greater China, here termed as the 'Sinophone'. Massively Multiplayer Online Games play a huge role in the Sinophone's vast virtual entertainment culture, generating at once enjoyment, profit, online communities, and public anxieties about addiction and social isolation. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) also constitute key sites of antagonism, protest, and activism.

In discussing the activist appropriation of games within Chinese-speaking spheres globally, I deploy the term Sinophone to collectively describe these communities. The term Sinophone rejects monolithic representations of Chineseness by giving attention to the plurality of cultural identities, linguistic practices, and ethnicities of globally located Chinese-speaking communities. For Shu-mei Shih who coined 'Sinophone', the term recognises the cultural relatedness of Chinese speakers, but also their fundamental differences: cultural, political, social, and geographical (Shih, 2011). As such, the term Sinophone works to confront and destabilise the hegemony and homogeneity of 'Chineseness' within a transnational context. I use the term Sinophone here predominantly to refer to players within Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but I also recognise the Sinitic speakers that are connected through games servers from across the Chinese diaspora, especially within MMOG spaces.

Nationalist sentiments are often expressed in MMOG spaces in the Sinophone. Residents of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan diverge in their linguistic dialects, their use of simplified or traditional Chinese characters, their histories, political systems, and cultural customs, and are physically separated by national borders. However, these often-conflicting communities converge in MMOG servers where borders are much more porous. Lin and Sun (2019) note that although both Taiwanese and Hong Kong players generally hold neutral opinions and a level of mutual respect, relations between Mainland Chinese players and those in Hong Kong and Taiwan have tended to be strained at best. Exchanges between these player groups are often outright abusive. Lin and Sun note the prevalence of open nationalist confrontations in MMOG spaces; however, they also remark on the presence of more civil discourse and interactions, noting the "restrained yet

frank exchanges of political opinions on one-to-one private channels" (Lin & Sun, 2016: 195). As a result, Lin and Sun suggest that online games provide alternative spaces for cross-border relations, influences, and interactions, and thus have the potential for new constituencies to emerge. The very act of social connection between these politically separated groups bears an activist dimension. In discussing multiple strategies and tactics of activism in Sinophone game spaces, this paper acknowledges the marginalisation of game communities, especially within Mainland China, and how this propels activist action. Indeed, the intense derision, regulation, and poor consumer rights of mainland Chinese gamers appears to have nurtured game activism that has spread to other areas of the Chinese-speaking world.

This paper proceeds as follows. Beginning with a brief literature review, the first section sketches out the scholarly discourse surrounding videogame activism and its strategies and tactics from within the field of game studies. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to illuminating instances of videogame activism beginning with the 2019 anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong. Discussing several videogames that were specifically developed as objects of protest, such as *Liberate Hong Kong* (2019), *Revolution in Our Time* (2019), and *Add Oil* (2019), this section also considers the ways in which existing digital games such as *GTAV* (2013), *Pokémon GO* (2016), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) were each tactically deployed by Hong Kong activists to articulate the contours of their dissent. In the section that follows, this paper recalls histories of videogame activism and protest in Mainland China, and the circumstances that led to these virtual unrests. Specific attention is given to the games *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Fantasy Westward Journey* (2001) and the seminal protests that occurred in these game spaces, as well as to MMOG spaces more broadly. It is through MMOG server networks that we can trace a genealogy of in-game protests through the Sinophone. What emerges is not only the resonance of common themes: of spatial access and independence, of competing notions of Chinese identity and of calls for a cyberspace homeland, but also the increasing prevalence of MMOGs as networks, tools, and sites through which activisms are transmitted and enacted.

The use of videogames in protest and activism represents an instance of gamification - "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Detering *et al*, 2011: 2425). While the process of gamification popularly entails applying game systems such as points, badges, levels, and progress bars to non-game activities to make them more appealing, it can also involve the introduction of game-like narratives or flow experiences to evoke a game-likeness to increase engagement. Crucially, gamification can also draw on the popularity of games, their vernacular, spatial logics, and cultural gravity in attempting to make a product, service, or a cause more attractive to captivate user engagement. The uptake of games tactics at the overlap of politics and activism operates as a potent example of what Mahnič (2014) and Bogost (2006) have each respectively described as a form of gamified politics.

Methodology

Through a semi-systematic review, this paper collects and collates the reporting and scholarship into game activism in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Exploring the appearance of protest videogames and in-game protests during Hong Kong's extradition protests, this paper recalls the strategies, tactics, and ambitions of previous videogame protests across Mainland China and Taiwan over the past two decades. The aim of this

paper is to review the instances, contexts, and methods of videogame protest and to locate these activisms within a lineage of tactical repertoires that are connected via MMOGs in the Sinophone. The occurrence of videogame and game-inspired activism across the Sinophone world is rich and varied, making it impossible for this survey to be conclusive. For that reason, this article draws focus on tactics that emerge in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan that have used videogame spaces, cultures, and rhetorics in their tactical and strategic repertoires. Particular attention is given to MMOGs as sites in which numerous activist actions have occurred and as virtual locations where players from across the Sinophone can connect.

In delineating these research boundaries, important instances of game activism across the Sinophone are excluded. Significant omissions include feminist activism against the mobile dating simulator "Love and Producer" (*Lian yu zhizuoren* 恋与制作人) developed by Suzhou Diezhi Network Technology Co., Ltd (SDNT). "Love and Producer" was targeted as its game advertisement featured derogatory depictions of female players. The resulting in-forum protests and exodus of players is excluded from the analysis here but is well documented by Mao (2020). Also beyond the remit of this paper is the ongoing activist campaign known as the 'Gamer Rights Protection Movement' (*Wanjia weiquan* 玩家维权) which has repeatedly evolved into violent confrontations, mobilizations, litigations, protests, and collective discursive critiques. Constituting perhaps the largest series of game actions globally, it is only briefly touched on here, but has been given sustained attention elsewhere by Chew (2011, 2019, 2022). While significant attention is given here to the 2019 Anti-ELAB activism and the game protests it produced (see below), the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and the *Yellow Umbrella* (*Huangse yusan* 黄色雨伞) (2014) game that emerged from those protests are omitted. These have been examined thoroughly by Yang (2018) and Shea (2019) respectively. Other noteworthy absentees include the Taiwanese videogame *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還願) which included insults directed at the President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, concealed within its code (Xiao, 2019), and the Taiwanese game *Bloody Day 2.28: Vampire Martina* (*He yi Tai ji xixuegui* 荷裔台籍吸血鬼) which presented a pro-independence protagonist (Po-hsuan and Hetherington, 2019). These Taiwanese protest games, as with the games emerging from Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protests, each provoked nationalist/patriotic responses from gamers in Mainland China. While these Chinese anti-game protests and protest games such as *Everyone Hit the Traitors* (*Quan min da Hanjian* 全民打汉奸; 2019) as discussed by Ye (2019) fall beyond the scope of this discussion, these nationalist games warrant further collective investigation. The broad scope of this study into Sinophone game activism, and the many games listed above that fall outside it, serves to accentuate the rich diversity of activist practice, and firmly underscores the need for additional and ongoing scholarship to examine it. While western discourse often downplays the desire or capacity of Chinese people to dissent, the vast spectrum of videogame protest movements and the many instances of playful resistance present a different picture.

As noted by Yu (*2010*), protest assemblages such as flash mobs, although technically illegal in Mainland China, have occurred in MMOG spaces and provide an outlet for Chinese netizens to express dissatisfaction. Within the broader domain of digital activism in China, the virtual spaces of MMOGs open up new public spheres and cyberspaces in which popular discontent to be organised and expressed (Yang, 2009a; Yang 2009b). Chan (2009a) has noted that in-game protests in MMOGs are a dynamic part of a burgeoning global cartography of activism and mass mobilisation which unfolds across virtual worlds

in the Sinosphere and elsewhere. Chew (2011) has catalogued gamer protests, both online and offline, which have taken place in China between 2003 and 2007, citing them as evidence of an emergent sociology of radical yet playful activism that has built through the early 2000s.   More recently, Huang and Liu have identified three ways in which ludic elements are becoming intertwined across activist contexts as a means of nurturing playful resistance: namely, "[the] game as an action tactic, [the] game as the mechanism for critical pedagogics, and [the] game as a tool for public education" (Huang & Liu, 2021: 26). Huang and Liu foreground the notion of "gaming capital" as a phenomenon within protests movements that denotes both the cultural capacity of activists to interpret social movements through game design and the technical competencies required to create them (Huang & Liu, 2021: 26). More broadly, Davies (2020b) has proposed that increased restrictions and limitations for activism within city spaces results in a centralisation of videogames as alternative sites of protest. In multiple ways, videogames emerge as the strategies, tactics, terrains, and logics through which protest movements increasingly occur.

Game Activism Against Empire

The inherent participatory nature of videogames recommends them as sites of activism. In his chapter, *Saving Worlds with Videogame Activism* (2009), Robert Jones endorses videogames as a uniquely ideal activist platform owing both to their capacity to engage through interactivity as well as to what Ian Bogost has termed their "procedural rhetoric" (2007: 1), referring to the persuasiveness encoded into their rule-based systems (Jones, 2007: ix). Jones suggests that by leveraging procedural rhetoric, videogames can pry open new political spaces and modes of collective thinking. Complicating Jones' position, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) show that videogames are already constructed as tools of Empire. In deploying the term "Empire", Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter do not specifically evoke the British, American or Chinese empire, but instead draw on Hardt and Negri's notion of Empire, which they characterize as the present stage of decentralized but globally connected spheres of cultural, political, and economic power and control (Hardt & Negri, 2000). As products evolved from military technologies translated through hypermasculine cultures into systems of capital accumulation, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter contend that Empire is already hardcoded into videogame software. Moreover, through play, story, structure, and code, videogames serve to indoctrinate players into these structures and thinking.

Along similar lines, Chan (2009b) has questioned the extent to which the values of choice and freedom often ascribed to games are correct, asking whether they are simply part of a broader western self-deluding discourse and ideology concerning what is free and democratic. As echoed by Ingrid Hoofd (2019), what are often lauded as 'user agency,' 'active participation', and even 'play' are often camouflage for types of value extraction. Within such conceptions, games do not constitute solutions, but are instead authoritarian structures to be overthrown. However, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter envisage that a gamified revolution can occur – that "games of Empire" can be overthrown by what they term "games of multitude". Toward this, they propose a six-point plan for multitudinous game development that includes "[c]ounterplay, dissonant development, tactical games, polity simulators, self-organized words, and software commons" (2009: 211). These playful tactics draw inspiration and extend upon earlier lineages of digital and electronic activism including electronic civil disobedience (Critical Art Ensemble, 1995), internet activism (Kellner & Kahn, 2003), culture jamming (Negativland, 1995; Raley, 2009),

tactical media (Boler, 2008; Garcia & Lovink, 1997) and social netwar (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1997).

The tactic offered by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter most specific and unique to videogames is that of "counterplay" (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 2009: 211), of opposing and resisting the gamified Empire through playful means. The notion of counterplay finds resonance with Galloway's invocation of "counter gaming" (2006: 109) – of disrupting the mainstream expectations and subverting the norms around how electronic games should be designed and played. Paradoxically, it is the subversions of play that both enable and upset the structures of videogames.

Complicating matters further, Woodcock and Johnson suggest that gamified structures may be effectively developed in the service of resistance. Drawing on histories of games tactics and playful resistance by groups like the Situationist International, Woodcock and Johnson differentiate two types of gamification: "gamification-from-above" and "gamification-from-below". According to Woodcock and Johnson, the former involves "the capture of 'play' in the pursuit of neoliberal rationalization and the managerial optimization of working life and labour"; while the latter is a form of active resistance against the "standardization of everyday behaviour" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018: 542). Developing Dragona's notion of "counter-gamification" (2014: 239), rather than pursuing the standard formula of gamification wherein game-like and playful elements are applied in managerial contexts, the authors make a case for transforming non-games into games as resistance.

While the efficacy of games as mechanisms of resistance is contested, the increasing use of games as a medium of protest can be accounted for in the growing status of games as among the most significant media interfaces of contemporary life. It is precisely because of their popularity and cultural gravity that games are becoming so widely applied in a variety of everyday and global contexts, including dissent. In the following section, we move from theory to praxis to explore how the nature and culture of game activism plays out in real world contexts. Beginning with attention to the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protests, the following sections describe and contextualise protest strategies and tactics of videogame activism in the Sinophone.

2019 Hong Kong Protests

Throughout the second half of 2019, Hong Kong became a pitched battleground between police and protesters, producing scenes of street violence that were "redolent of videogames" (Davies, 2020a: 1). The initially peaceful demonstrations arose in opposition to the controversial Extradition Amendment Bill (ELAB) that would allow Hongkongers to be extradited to be tried within Mainland China's justice system, leading to a further erosion of the city's judicial independence. From March 2019 onwards, increasingly large and determined Anti- ELAB protests erupted every few days in Hong Kong. As the year wore on, police and protester violence intensified. When the government finally revoked the bill, activist demands evolved, taking on broader democratic ambitions and incorporating both pleas for justice and calls for regional autonomy. For many, the movement represented Hong Kong's last stand for autonomy against Mainland Chinese encroachment. These sentiments were echoed in the protester clarion calls of 'Liberate Hong Kong' and 'Hong Kong Revolution in Our Times'. Both the phrases would become the titles of protester-made games. Simultaneous with the fierce clashes that took place

on the streets of the city, another battle was occurring behind computer screens, smart phones and within digitally networked spaces. Videogames were being tactically deployed as an inventive new domain of political protest and activist action (Davies, 2021).

Games and Play within the Protest

In their 2020 article "'Block the Spawn Point': Play and Games in the Hong Kong 2019 Pro-Democracy Protests", Wirman and Jones discuss how multiple forms of games and play were deployed during the year-long protest movement to globally publicise and elucidate the plight of Hongkongers as well as to create a sense of collective belonging through the common language of games. Wirman and Jones document and categorise the innovative and wide-ranging use of games in protest art, street slang, the tactical use of existing games, and game modifications as well as the development of protest games specific to the unfolding events. Throughout the unrest, a media discourse emerged in Hong Kong that likened the protests to the visual aesthetics and logics of videogames (Wirman & Jones, 2020). Writing in the Hong Kong Free Press, Ming Ming Chiu (2019) outlined resemblances between Hong Kong activists and players of MMOGs.

The parallels between the street protests and videogames were more than a media discourse within Hong Kong in 2019; videogame rhetoric permeated the protest movement itself. Ho has explored the use of computer game vocabulary, jargon, and slang during the planning and coordination of protest actions. He highlights how, in their online discussions, activists used the term 'Hong City Online' instead of 'Hong Kong' to disguise their real-world actions as game strategies. When Molotov cocktails became part of the activist tactics, they were referred to as "fire-magic" to codify them as in-game tactics found across numerous MMOGs such as *Project Gorgon*, *Gothic II* and *World of Warcraft* (Ho, 2020). Elsewhere in this issue, Ho provides further digital ethnographic evidence of ludic mechanisms employed by the Anti-ELAB protesters in Hong Kong.

In their own analysis of gamer activism in the Anti ELAB movement, Lin and Sun also detect ludic rhetoric and mechanisms. They suggest that online gaming literacy had strengthened activist toolkits and intensified the networked nature of the leaderless social movement. Cataloguing the extensive examples of game-associated terms used by Hong Kong extradition movement protesters, Lin and Sun illustrate that "game-literate participants…shared a common language when discussing tactics and strategies involved in various confrontation scenarios" (Lin & Sun, 2022: 7). In this way, they write "videogame culture provided a ready-to-use set of activities within a recognizable framework consisting of action modules and other components that protestors could use to execute large-scale collective movements" (Lin & Sun, 2022: 7). The slippage between real world and videogames was more than visual or conceptual; it was tactical and strategic.

A potent instance of the activist mobilisation of videogame culture is found in the guerrilla tactic of sharing *Pokémon GO* maps to indicate where forthcoming protests may take place. If cornered by police, groups of protesters claimed they had congregated not to demonstrate but to play *Pokémon GO*, thereby circumnavigating laws denying permission for assembly (Vincent, 2019). More broadly, the Pokémon character, Pikachu, who had featured as a Hong Kong protest symbol in 2016, again arose in the 2019 protests

as a symbol of Cantonese defiance.[1] Davies (2020b) has detailed the extent to which global videogame communities such as players and fans of *Pokémon GO* lent support to the protests, expressing solidarity via Twitter with redesigned Pokémon in protest gear under the hashtag #PokemonForHK. Meanwhile, protest art featuring the *Pokémon* character Weezing was used to refer to the effects of tear gas on demonstrators and across the space of the city. Just as game mechanics had informed tactics of protest, game brands were mobilised as activist memes.

Reluctant Game Company Involvement

The global game company Blizzard unwittingly found itself at the centre of Hong Kong-China political tensions. The controversy was sparked when the e-sports champion Blitzchung proclaimed support for the Anti-ELAB protests then taking place in Hong Kong. Blitzchung, a native Hongkonger, shouted the statement: "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of our time" in a live-streamed post-match interview while wearing a face mask, contravening the recently enacted anti-mask law. Blitzchung's protest was met with a swift one-year ban and the forfeiture of his winnings from the tournament from for violating Blizzard rules. The live-streamers who interviewed Blitzchung were also fired. Three days later, and following a massive online backlash, Blizzard was forced to reverse its position reducing the ban and refunding Blitzchung's prize money. As highlighted by Minotti, the incident cast a light on the capitulation of western game companies to pressure from Chinese authorities (Minotti, 2019).

More broadly, the incident compelled gamers globally to assess their own ethics and the loyalty to game properties for their proximity to human rights violations (Kent, 2019). Blizzard found itself plunged into crisis-management as players across the company's game worlds, including *Overwatch*, *Hearthstone*, and *World of Warcraft,* began conscripting Blizzard intellectual property into anti-CCP and Pro-Hong Kong protest memes. A key example was the deployment of *Overwatch's* playable game character 'Mei-Ling Zhou' 周美灵 as a protest symbol. Within the *Overwatch* narrative, Mei's motto is "Our world is worth fighting for" a slogan that became a potent call to arms for Hong Kong nativists (Kent, 2019). Digitally manipulated images of Mei covering one eye appeared across social media in solidarity with the Hong Kong based journalist who was permanently blinded by a riot police officer. Other images appeared of Mei wearing a mask with the words 'liberate Hong Kong', including on deviantart, Reddit and Twitter.

Protest Games

Beyond the mobilisation of game rhetoric and cultures, several games in which the player is active within the Anti-ELAB movement appeared. These included the browser-based

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[1] Pokémon originated as a Hong Kong protest symbol in 2016 when Nintendo altered the pronunciation of standout character Pikachu's name from Cantonese to Mandarin. Although the change was purely economic, designed to draw the vast pool of Mainland Chinese player to the Pokémon franchise, it enraged Hong Kong players who saw it evidence of a broader replacement Hong Kong's Cantonese dialect with Mandarin. In response, dozens of Pokémon players demonstrated outside Hong Kong's Japanese Consulate demanding Nintendo offer a unique Cantonese translation for the game.

game *Add Oil* (*Jiayou* 加油). Little more than a design reskin of the then-popular mobile game *Angry Birds, Add Oil* positions the player as a Hong Kong protester who uses slingshots and trebuchets to destroy police defences. At once more confronting and more technically complex is *Liberate Hong Kong*, a protester-developed Virtual Reality videogame that simulates the battlefield-like street-level protest environment in Hong Kong within a 3D headset. The player takes the role of an unarmed protester attempting to evade police attack and arrest. Play is brutally difficult, and each game typically lasts seconds before the player is killed or incarcerated.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and nuanced work was the mobile news game *Revolution in our Times* (*Shidai geming* 時代革命), which presents a pro-democracy narrative following the life of a Hong Kong protester. Resembling the interface of social media apps through which the protests were organised and mediated, the game captures the difficult personal choices and conflicts faced by activists. Players as activists must delicately navigate personal relationships, employment, and individual freedom while monitoring broader public opinion towards the protest campaign. More than any other protest game, *Revolution in our Times* details the personal deliberation of fighting for democratic principles, a quandary that would also come play out in the games' hosting company.

Made available on Google Play on October 5ᵗʰ 2019, the game *Revolution in our Times* was then removed on October 8th 2019, only to return several days later. This process hints at conflicting priorities within the US tech giant. According to Gonzalez (2019), during the brief period between the games' removal and then its restoration to the app store, a heated debate broke out among Google staff with Hong Kong-aligned workers demanding the US company support Hong Kong's democratic movement. Others, including pro-Chinese staff, argued that political disputes were ill-suited to company listservs. Meanwhile, the removal of the app saw many accuse Google of pandering to pressure from China. The game had provoked a political schism in a major company from half-a-world away.

In-Game Protest Players

By the end of 2019, Hong Kong activists – perhaps best termed as protest players – began using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access the Chinese servers of *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)*. Once inside, Hong Kong protest players attired their avatars in the distinctive garb of Hong Kong protesters - black clothing, goggles, gas masks and signature yellow construction helmets. These Hong Kong protest players then ran amok in the Chinese servers of the *GTA V* open-world game, flinging petrol bombs, vandalizing train stations, and attacking police (Subagja, 2019; Yee, 2019). Mainland players rapidly organised and responded in kind, reskinning their avatars with riot police outfits, and resisting the Hong Kong insurgents. This tactic of virtual violence cannot be directly read as an instance of counterplay because *GTA V* already encourages free-form violence within the open-world it presents. The in-game clash involving both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese players was absolutely in keeping with the ideological coding of the game. However, a form of counterplay arises through the incursion of real-world politics into the game's political vacuum. Although the GTA franchise celebrates combative spaces, its virtuality in this instance ensured that within heated clash between opposing sides *no-one was hurt*. The exchange opens new horizons for political dissent and activist energy in virtual domains.

In early 2020, the combined restrictions of pandemic lockdowns and new security measures rendered public demonstrations in Hong Kong impossible. In response, activists moved further into videogame spaces, enacting their pleas for independence in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Players fashioned virtual pro-democracy posters and imagery critical of both Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam, and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Soon after, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and its merchandise disappeared from Mainland Chinese game outlets. No official reason was provided (Yin-Poole, 2020). As the year drew on, protest videogames and many articles discussing them were taken offline while their titles, including *Hong Kong Revolution in our Times* and *Liberate Hong Kong,* were made illegal utterances under a new National Security Law for Hong Kong, that was passed 30 June 2020 by the People's Republic of China.

The contextualisation or analysis of videogame-based activism in Hong Kong also disappeared alongside the games themselves. The strategies, tactics, vernaculars, and domains of activism that arose in the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement warrant recollection and inquiry within a regional and historical context. In contrast to the videogame protests that have appeared in the west, largely in gallery and arts contexts, Hong Kong's videogame activism exists alongside a lineage of videogame protest movements in other Sinitic regions over the past 20 years, specifically in Taiwan and Mainland China. Notwithstanding the fundamental differences in scale, communities, and spaces, parallels emerge between the desire for autonomy as expressed by Hongkongers and the Mainland Chinese inhabitants of *World of Warcraft* whose protests took place more than a decade earlier. At stake in these Sinic and ludic communities is an existential quest for agency, identity, and homeland.

The lynchpins that connect these protests across time and place are MMOGs. MMOGs do not simply erode national borders, they have also been found to foster social connections across political and national spheres nurturing tolerance and civic engagement (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). For Shen and Chen (2015), MMOGs transcend cultural boundaries, presenting comprehensive 'worlds' of their own in which networked participants lead virtual lives, build social groups, and cultivate shared concerns. Lin and Sun (2017) give particular attention to the strategic and tactical elements of MMOGs as providing cooperative frameworks for collective combative interactions. More recently, Lin and Sun have directly connected tactics that emerged in Hong Kong's protests to MMOG organisation and mobilisation tactics within Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement (*Taiyanghua xueyun* 太陽花學運). In Lin and Sun's estimation, the use of MMOG vernaculars across both these movements evidence cognisance and influence from Mainland Chinese protest practices that have occurred in game spaces over the past two decades (Lin & Sun, 2022). With attention to this lineage, the remainder of this article outlines and contextualises three historic instances of protests in Mainland China with attention to MMOGs. The aim is to establish the precedence of Mainland Chinese protest actions but also to show how these modes of playful protest and resistance were disseminated throughout the Sinic region in MMOG spaces.

Mass In-game Protests

In the history of in-game protests, the 2005 mass in-game protest within *Fantasy Westward Journey* (*Menghuan xi you* 梦幻西游) looms large. The incident remains the highest attended in-game protest to date. The event was sparked when a single-player account called "Kill the little Japs" (*Gan si 4 xiao riben* 干死 4 小日本) was banned by the game

administrator NetEase for their insensitive username. The following day NetEase dissolved the same player's 700-member guild "The Alliance to Resist Japan" (*Kangri tongmenghui* 抗日同盟会) for propagating anti-Japanese sentiment. Irked at the forfeiture of their hard-earned game rankings and confused by NetEase's admonishment, especially given they had used these pseudonyms for two years without issue, many of the 700+ players from the now-dissolved guild took their grievances to the game forums. A conspiracy theory was already swirling through these bulletin boards stating that NetEase would soon be taken over by a Japanese company. Although untrue, the conspiracy appeared to explain the banning of the insensitive account names. The following day, when a symbol resembling Japan's rising sun emblem appeared in an in-game Tang Dynasty government office in *Fantasy Westward Journey*, up to 80,000 players stormed into the game's server. In a space designed to accommodate no more than 20,000 players, server engines ground to a halt.

Game scholarship has approached these protests from numerous angles. Where Jenkins (2006) identifies in them an unexpected internalization of Chinese state sentiments within the gamer body politic, Apperley identifies the incident as a key turning point whereby the "game consumer/player reconstitutes themselves as citizens of the virtual world" (Apperley, 2011: 113). More than highlighting a Chinese nationalist identity that connected *Fantasy Westward Journey* and Mainland China, the protest evidenced a slippage between actual and virtual identity spaces. The mass in-game protest brought to the fore the principle that games are not merely places of leisure and enjoyment, but are complex terrains in which sense of self, nation, space, and agency are constructed and enacted. More broadly, Hjorth, Richardson and Davies (2021) have outlined how videogames are a culturally specific medium that inevitably reflect the specificities of technology, location, and the concerns and desires of players. Videogames are inhabitable places where communities of players gather and share common interests and grievances. Situated in the milieu of protest and activism, videogames are taken up and adapted not only as tools to communicate demands, ambitions, and opinions, but the spaces of games further become terrains in which protest movements occur. Within huge games spaces, such as MMOGs, differing identities and complex agendas come to the fore.

In the early 2000s, *World of Warcraft* rose to prominence as the largest MMOG. At once immersive, challenging, and fun, the popular game world presents a convincing and distinctly ornate universe of detailed characters and lavish environments. As early as 2008, the game had accumulated over a ten million players, approximately half of whom were Chinese (Nakamura, 2009: 129). More than merely offering escapist play, *World of Warcraft* holds up a mirror of the actual world in its social and cultural intricacies, ecologies, and economies. *World of Warcraft* transcended its digitality to become a dense yet hybrid space – a complex social and cultural territory that cast its borders well beyond the virtual space of the game to include internet cafes, dormitories, and other locations of play. Within Mainland China's diversity of cultures, ethnicities and dialects, *World of Warcraft* offered a shared sense of space, but also nurtured a growing set of grievances.

In her 2020 book *Mapping Digital Game Culture in China,* Szablewicz details how MMOGs came to represent escapist utopias for many young Chinese gamers. Informed by ethnographic studies in and of Mainland China's dorm rooms and cybercafes, Szablewicz identifies how a "spiritual homeland" and "social and a geographical reality" emerged within MMOGs (Szablewicz, 2020: 115). Szablewicz finds that the friendships, camaraderie, and even marriages and families forged through the guilds and raids built

toward an "affective register" and a profound sense of belonging in these virtual worlds (Szablewicz, 2020: 23). In similar findings, Lindtner et al. (2008) explore the deep relationships that were forged between *World of Warcraft* players. These exchanges cultivated a growing sense of fraternity, community, and egalitarianism in both the virtual game world and in the physical spaces in which MMOGs were played.

However, as extensively outlined by both Szablewicz and Lindtner and colleagues within their respective studies of Chinese gaming from the early 2000s onwards, dominant attitudes toward videogamers in Mainland China have been deeply strained. Players suffer stringent regulation and are the subjects of strikingly negative portrayals by state and media. Depictions of uncontrollably addicted players dropping dead from extreme use, obsessively stalking other players in real life, and even killing their own parents in fits of internet-induced violence have marked the popular discourse around videogames (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010; Pissin, 2021). Internet addiction was and continues to be treated like a disease in the Chinese Mainland, cured in military style camps that charge excessive monthly fees (Lee, 2010). These multiple and intensifying pressures led to inevitable reactions from growing constituencies of self-identified gamers – to the point that the most popular videogame in early 2000s China, *World of Warcraft*, emerged not only as a primary target of state and media concern, but also a central location in which numerous playful protests would be staged.

An early example arose in 2005 when, in response to government plans to introduce three-hour limits to online gaming at cyber cafés, a small group of *World of Warcraft* players staged a dramatic mass suicide of their digital avatars in the game world. The protest echoed a real world 'die-in', an activist action that sees participants feign death in physical space. As such, the incident emphasises Cermak-Sassenrath's observation that political activism in digital games often take its cue from activism in in the actual world (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015). However, the *World of Warcraft* die-in also raises larger questions around how the performative work of protest is altered by the immaterial space of digital games, a domain in which the corporeal body is not present. As noted by Golub and Lingley, this avatar suicide must be understood not materially but symbolically, "as a powerful but ambiguous response to social and moral dilemmas"; a culturally inflected form of "resistance" demonstrating that that even death is preferable to living under unacceptable political conditions", be they virtual or actual (Golub & Lingley, 2007: 296). Several months following the die-in and the subsequent larger public outcry against the three-hour limit, the Chinese government reversed the restriction, allowing adults to play MMOG for as long as they like (Suellentrop, 2006). Even a symbolic protest in the virtual world of games appears to bear some impact.

Protests in *World of Warcraft* went beyond the state regulation of the game space and also targeted what players considered to be unfair practices, both in the game world, as well as what Chew has expressed as the "corrupted authoritarian rule of virtual worlds" by game corporations (Chew, cited in Chan, 2009a: 154). Everyday difficulties in lived experience both in-game and real-life bred discontent against both state and corporate governmentality. Notwithstanding its popularity as a play space, *World of Warcraft* was also home to enormous social and economic inequities mirroring global systems in which the game was produced and played. Most notorious among them was the practice of gold farming, and the industry surrounding it. Gold farming entails the organisation of virtual sweatshops wherein players work long shifts harvesting in-game currency, experience points, and rare items to be sold for real money to more affluent players ambitious to level

up faster by any means (Fickle, 2020). Gold farming presents a quintessential instance of what Kücklich terms "playbour" – the convergence of play and labour (Kücklich, 2005). Through playbour, game companies extend the videogame market beyond merely selling hardware and software and to exploit playtime itself (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Gold farming practices were unpopular among many *World of Warcraft* players who believed that in-game goods should not be purchasable, but rather attained only through 'honest play'. Yet as Dibbell (2007) points out, gold farming was never a method of cheating or a mode of counterplay – it was intrinsic to the coded affordances of the game from the outset. Through in-game marketplaces, hardcoded currencies, and desirable objects within a subscription-based game, *World of Warcraft* was *already* fully commodified.

It was due to player antagonism against in-game economies, corporate exploitation the overbearing control of game-worlds that the Virtual Property Rights movement first emerged. As deployed by Chew, Virtual Property refers to valuable and tradable goods, assets, equipment, raw materials, avatars, and currencies existing in the virtual worlds of MMOG. In his tireless examination of the complexity of Virtual Property rights protests in Chinese MMOGs, Chew documents the actions of activists against this multibillion-dollar industry and has catalogued the battlefronts of anti-corporate Chinese gamer activism that include real-world violent protests, in-game protests, clicktivism, media campaigns, connective action, political consumerism, and litigation (Chew, 2022). For Chew, gamers' participation in consumer activist politics and social movements are at once informed by and enhanced by their gaming experience. However, gold farming holds more than just economic implications, it also has social and racial undertones. As documented by Nakamura (2009), there was a popular misconception that all gold farmers were Chinese players, and by extension that all Chinese players were gold farmers. The popular stereotype in game communities was that *"Chinese gold farmers are low wage, low tech, low culture, and low class"* (Nardi and Kow,2010).

Resentment toward gold farming practices meant that many Chinese MMOG players experienced xenophobic backlashes in-game and online. The anti-Chinese rhetoric grew so vicious that blogger Nick Yee (2006) drew resonant parallels between anti-Chinese gold farmer discourses in online games and the anti-Chinese rhetoric that emerged during the 1800s gold rush. Gold farming became an oft-cited issue in fan-made game films known as machinima. Machinima denotes the production of cinema by using footage recorded in videogames engines often by videogame fans. Machinima treats the game space as readymade to be recorded, remixed and reproduced as cultural artefacts with their meanings and popularity (Huang, 2016). Machinima themself became a filmmaking phenomenon, a significant site of activism, and an integral aspect of *World of Warcraft* culture (Nakamura, 2009). Xenophobic machinima were unambiguous bearing titles such as "Ni Hao", "Chinese gold farmers must die", and "Chinese farmer extermination" (Nakamura, 2009: 133). Chinese gold farming workers themselves were mute in this discourse, for as incisively noted by Dibbell (2007), these playbourers could not afford to enjoy the games they had mastered, let alone produce media about them. Meanwhile Chinese MMOG players found themselves discriminated against both within Mainland China and in the virtual worlds. The rising tensions and multilayered grievances ultimately led to an impassioned call from Chinese netizens for the end of government repression of digital culture in the form of a persuasive and influential machinima.

War of Internet Addiction (*Wangyin zhanzheng* 网瘾战争) (Corn dog 性感玉米, 2010) is a 64-minute Chinese protest machinima made using the World of Warcraft game engine. Ostensibly, the film relays the story of an average Chinese *World of Warcraft* player, their frustrations with the Chinese operators of the game, and their dissatisfaction with the continued delays to the game's expansion. In executing this, the film is steeped in memetic humour and a distinctly Chinese online vernacular known as '*egao*' (恶搞), a kind of remix satire that playfully criticizes while skilfully evading both censorship and prosecution.[2] But beneath the tactical veneer of *War of Internet Addiction*'s parody, the film delivers a powerful critique of the stigmatization of Chinese gamers, a protest directed less at the international *World of Warcraft* player community as the Chinese government. The primary target is China's ruling Communist Party and the regulations it imposes purportedly to protect netizens from pornography, sensitive material, and internet addiction. The film reserves singular disdain for those who criticize videogames as addictive and destructive for young minds, chief of which is 'Crying Beast Yang Yongxin', a thinly veiled pseudonym for the controversial Chinese psychiatrist Yang Yongxin 杨永信. Yongxin's Internet Addiction Treatment Centres practised and promoted electroconvulsive therapy as a cure for alleged Internet addiction in youths (Moore, 2009). Playing videogames in China was effectively cause for torture.

War of Internet Addiction compellingly highlights the injustices and humiliations that Chinese gamers are forced to endure. Toward the film's end, one of the central characters fervently demands the right for free and fair participation in digital game spaces without oppressive government interference, in effect asserting what Apperley has termed "a right to play" (Apperley, 2015). According to Beijing based game journalist Frank Yu (2010) "It was this plea that moved the video from being just a game parody but a manifesto for freedom with gut wrenching emotional impact". What follows is an extract of the machinima character's plea to government officials, as translated by Shao and Kuo (2010):

> Everyday, you have nothing else to do but enjoying your prestigious social status, and pointing at us from an ethical high ground. Have you ever wondered why five million gamers are collectively taking this Net poison (as you so describe our addiction to the virtual game), and the deep-rooted social reasons that are covered?

The creative force behind the film was 26-year-old video blogger known as 'Corn Dog' or 'Sexy Corn' (*Xinggan yumi* 性感玉米）from Hunan. 'Sexy Corn' mobilised 100 volunteers from across *World of Warcraft* servers to spend three months assisting him to create the machinima epic. Whether players from outside Mainland China were among those creating *War of Internet Addiction* is uncertain, but the film certainly was seen across the Sinophone

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[2] China's strict regulatory environment on freedom of speech combined with the rich homophonic affordances of the Chinese language have cultivated a vernacular of online jokes and entertainment known as *egao* (恶搞). Egao is a form of online parody through which satiric, subversive and absurd humour or memes and remix culture operate beneath the radar of sensors offering civil resistance without exceeding the boundaries of acceptable personal expression. According to Gong and Yang (2010) egao "playfully subverts a range of authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for both comic criticism and emotional catharsis" (Gong & Yang, 2010: 4).

region. Although banned within days of its release on Chinese video hosting sites, *War of Internet Addiction* remained widely accessible online. The film quickly spread, as it appealed not only to MMOG players, but resonated across an entire generation of Sinophone internet users (Chao, 2010; Yu, 2010). Three months later, it won the Best Video award in the Tudou Video Film awards. The film's greatest praise came from Chinese gamers and fans who regarded it "more important than Avatar", the 2009 US Science Fiction blockbuster which centres on resistance against an encroaching hegemonic power (Lee, 2010).

In another response to the state and corporate oppression that had driven the production of *War of Internet Addiction*, in 2008 and 2009, hundreds of thousands of Chinese *World of Warcraft* players migrated en masse to the Taiwanese servers of the game. Unfortunately, in seeking to escape regulation and demonisation at home, Mainland Chinese players found themselves the target of racial derision abroad. As attested by Lee, many Taiwanese *World of Warcraft* players called this influx of Mainlanders "the plague" (2010). By contrast, Lin and Sun reveal that the mass exodus also brought positive exchanges "resulting in unprecedented levels of interaction between players from the two sides of the Taiwan Strait whose official relationship has long been marked by limited contact and political tension" (Lin & Sun, 2016: 180). From these online diasporas of Mainland Chinese players found in a Taiwanese MMOG server, Lin and Sun (2016) identify the emergence of new hybrid Sinophone communities that alter political practices, challenge traditional borders, and subvert official narratives. Lin and Sun also speculate that MMOG virtual worlds provide spaces outside of nationalist frameworks, evoking Oldenburg's concept of "third place"— "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1999: 16). Along similar lines Szablewicz has discussed how MMOG players carve out alternative spaces and modes of being, forming new sociocultural constituencies. In these spaces, gamers struggle against games-related racial discrimination, gender inequality, homophobia, colonialism, and other hegemonic game content and/or oppressive gamer groups. In this light, MMOGs emerge as connective and collaborative spaces in which transnational Sinophone communities might find solidarity in playfully fashioning their discontent.

Although this paper makes the case that MMOG have operated as conduits through which social and activist dynamics have spread across the Sinophone region, it must be emphasized that this activism takes place within the broader hegemonies of networked/digital authoritarian use of games in Mainland China and elsewhere. As noted by Jenkins, it is not only Chinese players but the Chinese government that have "transformed online games from a mere pastime into a highly political environment" (Jenkins, 2006). Zhao recalls that as early as 2001, China's then President Jiang Zemin referred to the Internet and online games as "political, ideological and cultural battlefields" that were pivotal for winning the hearts and minds of new generations citizens (Jiang cited in Zhao, 2014: 31). More recently, Nie (2013) has asserted that China's digital game industry is highly involved in the rise of popular nationalism and the one-party state has developed online games to propagate patriotic values, or what Chew and Wang (2021) expound as 'propagames'. As documented by Yin-Poole (2020), the party state also exerts strict ideological control of its gaming communities. Videogames cannot contain anything that threatens China's national unity, sovereignty, or territorial integrity. In these ways, videogames are not only increasingly foreclosed as spaces of playful resistance, but are in fact crucial sites of state-sponsored political persuasion.

China is not unique in its development or deployment of propaganda games. Many western countries, most notably the US, use videogames as military training tools, as well as to spread democratic ideals and neoliberal economic systems at home and abroad. Indeed, the tensions at the heart of *World of Warcraft* and the practices of gold farming it enables are a logic of extraction hardcoded into the US-produced game. As with many games, practices of playbour are reframed as philosophies of empowerment resulting in ideological associations drawn between choice and agency. In these ways, videogames are imagined as nurturing democratic values of freedom and equality in virtual and actual worlds (Kahne, Middaugh & Evans, 2008; Castronova, 2005). Yet given the place of commercial videogame as authoritarian structures of infotainment, persuasion and indoctrination within the geopolitics of Empire, it is questionable if these experiences can play any role in giving rise to civic solutions, or if instead they crystalise as hegemonies to be overthrown.

Conclusion

The permeation of videogames throughout activist movements globally serves to remind that interactive digital products are not merely artefacts of leisure or entertainment but can also be powerful tools to engage and enable civic participation, protest, and activism. Where the playful resistance of videogame activism has largely resided in arts and museum contexts in the west, as this article has demonstrated videogames have become frontlines of battle across the Sinophone world, thereby giving the phenomenon a wider scope and meaning. Detailing a history of videogame activism and exploring its repertoires and manifestations across the Chinese regions, this article has illustrated how videogames can operate as a locus of social activism and as popular avenues through which political dissent can be channelled. Beginning with a discussion of ludic activism in Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB protests of 2019-2020, it has traced protest styles and vernaculars to Mainland China and presented how these modes of playful resistance have spread across the Sinic region via digital diasporas and cross-border encounters through games servers within MMOGs. Within these server spaces, often-conflicting Chinese speaking communities have wrestled with notions of independence and of dissimilar understandings of identity yet have found common ground in their desires for a right to play and in their acknowledgement of games as a medium through which resistance and discontent can be enacted. In this way, videogames not only emerge as spaces in which play, identity, and politics entangle, but as compelling locations in which protests can transpire. However, as this article has also articulated, given the overriding networks of power in which videogames are produced, distributed, and monetised, the countervailing effects of these modes of protest and playful resistance are rendered uncertain and contested.

Acknowledgements

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Civil Disobedience in the Era of Videogames: Digital Ethnographic Evidence of the Gamification of the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that the 'gamification' of the 2019-220 Hong Kong extradition protests was instrumental to the longevity of the protests and their success in repealing the Extradition Bill. Two elements of the protests are identified to be both crucial and game-like: the 'play' and the 'meta-game' elements of the protest. The play element is best exemplified by the mobile application colloquially known as 'Popomon Go'*, where 'players' are incentivized to go on 'missions' to seek and geotag police officers to form a heat-map of police officers throughout Hong Kong, as well as gather their personal data. The meta-game element, on the other hand, looks at every other aspect of those games except the gameplay. The combination of these two elements helped an apparently leaderless civil disobedience movement evade mass arrest, reduce anxiety, and increase efficiency, but also led to a long period of civil disobedience, thus placing more pressure on policy decision makers.*

Keywords: Hong Kong, protest, videogames, cyberbullying, civil disobedience, gamification

Introduction

This essay analyses the use of videogaming elements in acts of civil disobedience in the context of the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in Hong Kong (HK). By way of context, in 2018 HK discovered it was harbouring a murderer: 19-year-old Chan Tong-kai had murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan before fleeing back to HK. However, since there was no extradition agreement between HK and Taiwan, there was the possibility that Chan might escape justice. In response, the HK Government sought to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and Mutual Legal Assistance Ordinance (hereafter, the Bill) to plug this legal loophole. The Bill planned to remove the geographical limitations on extradition, making it possible to extradite Chan to Taiwan but also, by extension, others to Mainland China.

The timing of the Bill, however, was poor, for the public's confidence in the Government was still low following the 2014 Occupy Central protests and 2016 Mong Kok Riots, especially considering that there had been protests against a similar proposed bill back in 2003 (Harney & Mackay, 2003). As a result, civil groups and individuals took to the streets to protest the Bill, fearing it would strip them of their autonomy and legal protections in HK. The ensuing protests at the early stages were peaceful, but after 10 June 2019 protests were more likely to devolve into violence, and the events that did so could be better characterised as riots. This essay only focuses on the latter variety and investigates the impact of videogames on these types of protests, especially events following the storming of the Legislative Council on 1 July 2019, after which point multiple Telegram channels were created to promote gamified violence.

The literature on the economic potential of videogames is well-established (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013; Tomić, 2019), and the potential for videogames to be used in smart power exploits – such as civil disobedience – has also received attention in recent years (Davies, 2020). This essay takes the 2019-20 Extradition Protests in HK as a case study by examining how videogames and their respective mechanisms were adopted by rioters (as opposed to peaceful protesters) to gamify the protests and perpetuate the momentum of the movement. My findings are based on digital ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis of multi-media sources such as online forums and posters. The remainder of this essay is organised around two thematic videogame elements: the 'Play' and the 'Meta'.

Play

Some videogames are designed to simulate reality. The game *Liberate Hong Kong* (2019) (Fig.1), for example, was designed to simulate the HK protests throughout 2019-20 to deliver "the experience [of rioting] to the non-frontline fighters" (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019: 0:55). However, the videogame also functioned as a tutorial, teaching players how to riot in HK. The game does this by rewarding players for "throwing tear-gas canisters back at the police" (*SCMP*, 2019a, 0:20), ducking from rubber-bullets when warning signs are raised and when they "hide away bullets [and from arrest]" (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019, 1:46-2:00). When coupled with virtual reality technology, such as an Oculus Rift headset, a simulation of the riots could also be used by people outside of Hong Kong and be exported to "enhance [this type of] digital activism [abroad]" (*Bloomberg Quicktake*, 2019, 2:15).
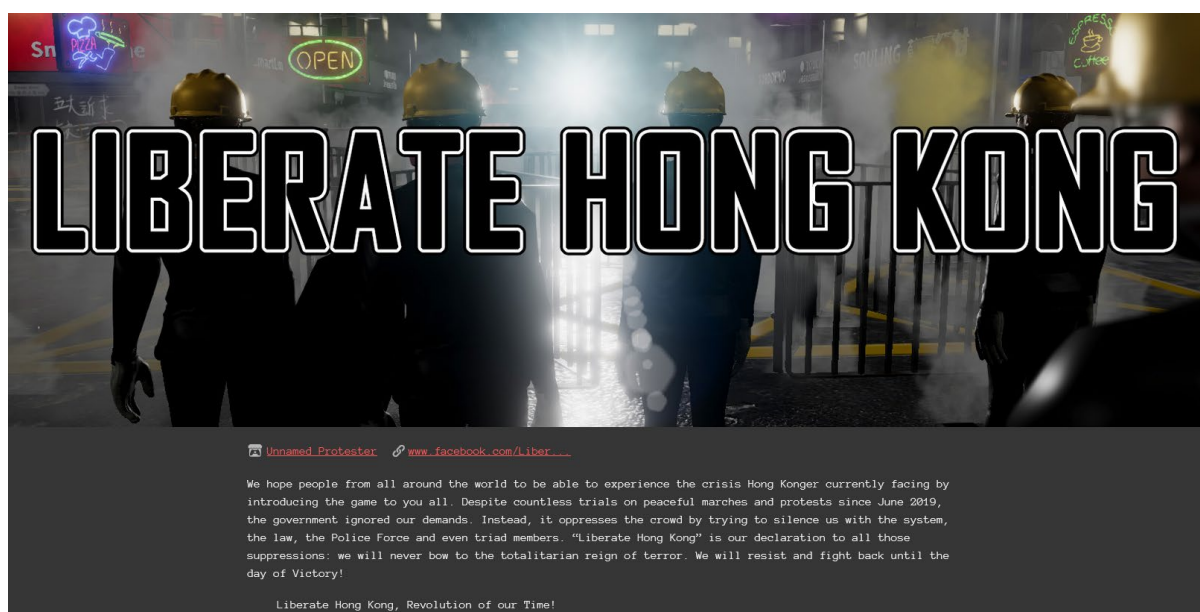
Figure 1: Screenshot of the Liberate Hong Kong videogame homepage, 2022, Unnamed Protestor.

Another example of the riots gamified is the game *PopomonGo* (Fig.2C) which is derived from combining the functionalities of the website and mobile app Hkmap.Live with social-media platforms like Telegram and LIHKG.com (Fig.2B). The title 'PopomonGo' and its style of gameplay referred to the wildly successful augmented-reality game *Pokémon Go* (2016-present). However, rather than catching imaginary creatures, *PopomonGo* was devised to help rioters to evade arrest and to cyberbully police officers. There were two parts to this

game. The first part incentivised players to go on 'missions' to seek and geotag HK police officers in real-time, which formed a heat-map of the locations of police officers throughout HK. The heat-map in turn helped those on the frontline to evade arrest (Fig.2A) and preserve their numbers for subsequent 'missions'. These 'missions' were then advertised on posters and widely circulated online – as well as affixed to "Lennon Walls" throughout the city (Fig.3). These walls functioned like noticeboards, relaying pro-protest information and further doubling as political sanctuaries for protestors to gather and share words of encouragement for one another.
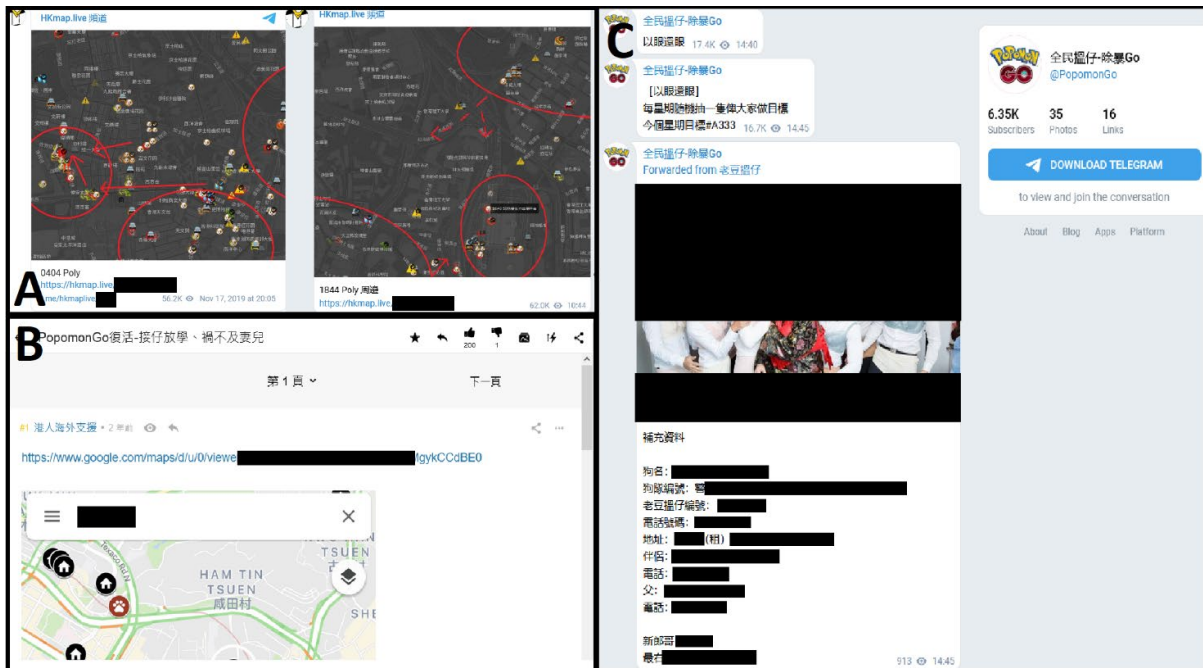

Figure 2: Censored screenshots of @PopomonGo and @hkmaplive on Telegram, and LIHKG forums, 2021.

Figure 3: Digital posters advertising Hong Kong protest events that circulated on Telegram, 2019, Anonymous.

The second part of the game was to profile police officers, mimicking *Pokémon Go*'s 'stats' function in which the details of a captured Pokémon would be displayed. The stats of a 'captured Popomon', however, would be the personal details of that individual, discovered, stolen, and uploaded by users on Telegram, hkchronicles.com and/or Google Drive after combing their social media profiles (Wong, Brian, 2021; see Figs.2&4). Details could include the officer's name, ID number, phone number, address, and details of their children, parents, and spouses – sometimes even their love interests (Fig.4). This was referred to as 'game-data' (*jau4 hei3 zi1 liu2* 遊戲資料; see Fig.4A) within the PopomonGo world. Similarly, private images of officers and their families uploaded to the game were predicated on the idea of harmless gameplay, which was referred to as 'in-game photos' (*jau4 hei3 tou4 pin3* 遊戲圖片; see Fig.4A). The language used within the game further dehumanised officers and their families by using words like 'dogs' (*gau2* 狗; see Fig.4A), 'cockroaches'[1] (*gaat6 zaat6* 甲由; see Fig.4B), and the use of animal pronoun 'it (they)' (*taa1(mun1)* 牠(們); see Fig.4B). The 'it' pronoun is characterised by its use of the semantic indicator 'cow' (*ngau4* 牛) instead of 'male' (*jan2* 亻) in 'he' (*taa1* 他) or 'female' (*neoi5* 女) in 'she' (*taa1* 她), to strip them of their individuality and humanity.
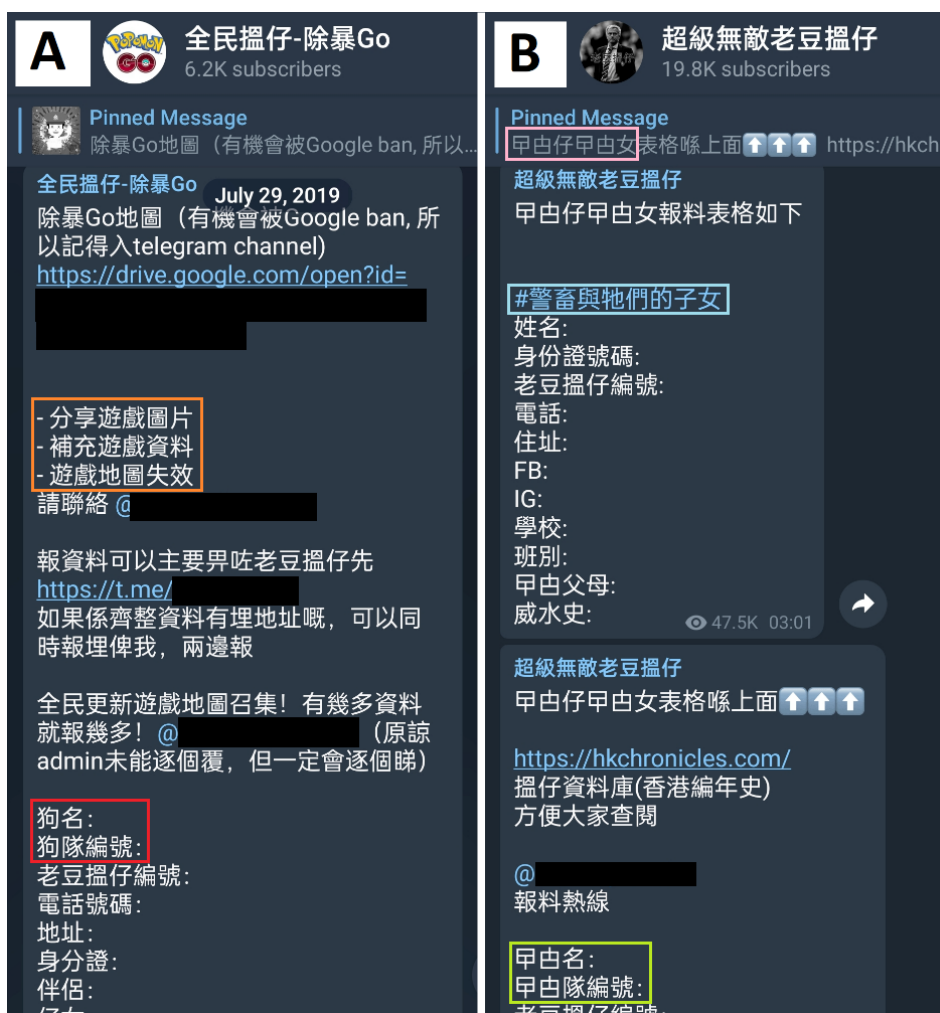

Figure 4: Censored screenshots of PopomonGo *game details on Telegram, 2021.*

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[1] The later adoption of the phrase "cockroaches" may have also been a reaction to people referring to rioters as cockroaches due to their chosen black uniform and their signature hit-and-run tactics.

The gamification of HK's riots, as demonstrated above, effectively trivialised the psychological violence directed against officers and their families under the veil of gameplay. The phenomenon of referring officers as 'it/them', 'dogs' and 'cockroaches', for instance, echoes Kelman's (1973: 48) psychological explanation for mass violence, as summarised in Kafumann *et al,* where perpetrators of violence see their victims "outside [their] moral kinship or scope of justice, and thus [were] a legitimate target for… oppressions and exclusions" (2011:87). A similar effect is seen in the way non-playable characters (NPCs) are treated in other videogames, as violence inflicted upon NPCs is generally exempt from real-world moral repercussions. It was through this and other methods of gamifying rioting that an escalation of violence was promoted in 2019-20. For example, prior to the breaking in of the Legislative Council on 1 July 2019, protestors mainly relied on previously established methods of rioting that were reminiscent of "the 2016 violent clashes in Mong Kok" by "breaking up pavements to hurl [bricks] at [the] police" (*RTHK*, 2019). But after 1 July 2019, Telegram channels promoting gamified violence had begun to emerge that coincided with the timing of the escalated violence. This included the normalised use of petrol bombs (Lau, 2020), assassination attempts with box-cutters (*SCMP*, 2019b), arrows fired against officers (Ong, 2019), as well as injury inflicted on bystanders (*SCMP*, 2019c; Wong, Kayla, 2019; Siu, 2019; Wong, Brian, 2020).

Moreover, a secondary effect of the game was to reduce police morale by adding psychological stress for the officers and their families, on top of the physical stress officers had to endure when suppressing the riots on a daily basis (*China Daily*, 2019; Tsang, 2019). This combination of psychological and physical stress resulted in a number of resignations (Leung, 2020) and consequently decreased the overall efficiency of the police force, allowing rioters more opportunities to prolong their protests (Lo & Lau, 2019; Lo, 2020).

The intent of using violence to disrupt the reading of the Bill on 12 June 2019 was always clear, as demonstrated by testimonials of ex-Legislative Council member, Charles Mok, and protestors alike, who claimed that they have "no choice" but to use violence and that peaceful protests "are no longer working" (*BBC Newsnight*, 2019, 0:43-1:26 & 2:27-3:08). However, protestors were neither satisfied when Chief Executive Carrie Lam suspended the Bill on 15 June 2019, nor when Lam declared that the Bill "is dead" on 9 July 2019. To that end, rioters readily adopted the use of lethal force to deal with frontline officers, and officers also had to use increasing force in return. This resulted in an undermining of the city's political and moral integrity through the propagation of news articles citing police brutality in the international media,[2] which in turn increased international pressure on local politicians to permanently withdraw the Bill on 4 September 2019.

At the time of writing, *PopomonGo* still has some users. However, newly uploaded content is swiftly censored for violating either the law or Telegram's terms of service. One of the applications used during the 2019-20 period, Hkmap.Live, has a spiritual successor known as *zau2 gwai5* 走鬼 or, 'run, the cops are here' (Fig.5). Along with its rebranding, the app's function has also been ostensibly revised: it now helps users evade parking fines. However, the implicit function of the app for monitoring the movements of officers and evading police action remain clear.

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[2] When asked to condemn the violence in Hong Kong after the Bill was withdrawn, during a live debate between Shaun Rein and Joshua Wong on 5 October 2019, Wong famously refused to do so and held his ground by stating that the "use [of] force and [maintaining] public support" was a matter very important to the protestors (Economist Impact Events, 2019, 2:40:42-2:44:34).

Figure 5: Screenshots from Zau Gwai 走鬼 and its entry on Apple's App Store, 2021.

Key: **Red** – *Police Presence*   ***Blue*** – *Sightings of Police*

Grey – *Tickets Issued*   幫 *(bong1; help)* – *Pro-protest Outlets*

Meta

During the riots, violent protestors made use of terminology and systems which paralleled videogame 'metas'. Metas refer to the systematic ways in which videogamers discuss, improve, rate and share gaming strategies. For example, rating of strategies is usually done through tiered-ranking systems ranging from A to F, with A being the most prized. When this system was borrowed by rioters, riot gear was graded using the same kind of tier system (Fig.6). This simplified the decision-making process for rioters who were seeking to procure weapons and defensive tools for upcoming missions.

Figure 6: Digital posters of Gas Mask Tier-lists on Telegram, 2019, Anonymous.

Similarly, rioters shared 'recipes' on social media platforms for things like Molotov-cocktails. Recipes (Fig.7) in videogames are the meta-manuals used to create weapons or other items within the game world and are a core gaming mechanic in games like *Minecraft* (2011-present), *Don't Starve* (2013-present) and *Magicite* (2014). This also added to the gamification of rioting and enabled less experienced protestors to participate. By circulating recipes and using visual cues reminiscent of videogames, the knowledge barriers to entry were lowered and the prospect of rioting gamified. The spread of recipes via Telegram therefore contributed to the increased use of Molotov cocktails and other home-made weaponry.

Figure 7: Censored screenshots of weapon recipes on Telegram, 2021.

The names chosen for these recipes implied that rioting was nothing more than a game. For example, a recipe for a truncheon-like blunt weapon was called a 'cow-beating... toy' (*daa2 ngau4* 打牛...玩具; Fig.7-8) and a recipe for making Molotov-cocktails was titled 'basic fire magic' (*jyun4 ci2 fo2 mo1 faat3* 原始火魔法; Fig.9). These recipes can also be tweaked, improved, or personalised to fit the gamer's individual needs: for instance, 'mid-tier fire magic' (*zung1 gaai1 fo2 mo1 faat3* 中階火魔法) and 'napalm fire magic' (*min1 sing3 fo2 mo1 faat3* 粘性火魔法), were variations of the basic fire magic recipe which produces Molotov cocktails, respectively, with either greater explosive power or an added gelling property to the flames. The naming pattern of these recipes furthermore echoed the appellations of (fire) magic spells in games such as *World of Warcraft*[3] (2004-present) and *RuneScape*[4] (2001-present), which further alludes to the idea that rioting is akin to videogaming.

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[3] "Fireball", "Improved Fireball", "Empowered Fireball", "Greater Fireball" etc.

[4] "Firestrike", "Fire Bolt", "Fire Blast", "Fire Surge" etc.

#056 隔山打牛既玩具

May 29, 2020

Figure 8: Image of Recipe #056 on Telegram, 2020.

Figure 9: Collage of Molotov cocktail recipe-related screenshots on Telegram, with instructions redacted, 2022.

These recipes and the weapons that they described allowed protestors to fulfil their gaming fantasies. Rioters could pick and choose from the many recipes that best represent their chosen riot personas. A sharp-shooter, for instance, would make use of "slingshots" (*daan6 gung1* 彈弓), "air-guns" (*hei3 coeng1* 氣槍; Fig.7) or the classic bow and arrow combination (AFP, 2019). These riot personas were structured in a way that mirrored the class systems found in popular role-playing games. Similar to those games, it becomes natural for players to seek others to form a party with skills that complement one another in order to succeed in future missions. The combination of videogaming culture, visual cues, and lexicon saw rioters band together to mass-produce booby-traps (Marzo, 2019), Molotov-cocktails (Fig.9; 10; Channel 4 News, 2019, 2:24-3:08; Sky News, 2019, 1:00) and other weapons, as well as to establish training camps (AFP, 2019; Channel 4 News, 2019, 0:00-0.11; Sky News, 2019, 1:59) and socialising hubs (Sky News, 2019, 1:23) within the grounds of universities across HK. These camps resulted in significant, large-scale, violent clashes such as the Siege of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Conclusion and Further Considerations

This essay has shown through digital ethnography and textual analysis the ways in which violent protestors used elements from videogames to operate, communicate and organise their members and events. It was evident that videogame technology, vocabulary, and imagery were central aspects of perpetuating the Hong Kong protests, attracting potential protesters and escalating protester violence. However, a more comprehensive analysis of this under-researched area is required to assess the wider implications for society: 1) whether a wider variety of videogame techniques have been borrowed by protesters to compel lawmakers and government officials to permanently suspend the Bill; 2) whether participants/organisers of these games could be tried for organised crimes; 3) whether involvement in these games have lasting (psychological) damage on young participants; 4) whether locations with a high saturation of gamers, such as Seoul and Tokyo, pose an increased risk in which such exploits can be taken advantage of; and subsequently, 5) whether law enforcers or criminologists can create predictive models to accurately identify and mitigate the said exploits as they emerge.

Finally, with further research into how videogames and videogame culture were exploited during the Hong Kong protests, researchers may be able to uncover ways in which other multi-media platforms could be utilised in the future by other civil disobedience actors.

Ludography

Don't Starve (2013), Android/iOS/Linux/Microsoft Windows/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/PlayStation Vita/Wii U/Xbox One [game], Klei Entertainment: Vancouver, Canada

Liberate Hong Kong (2019), PC [game], Unnamed Protestor: Hong Kong

Magicite (2014), PC/New Nintendo 3DS/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Wii U/Xbox 360/Xbox One [game], SmashGames: Florida.

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Negotiating Chinese Youth Cyber Nationalism through Play Methods

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Abstract

In this paper, we will look at how Chinese youth perform nationalism through player-devised play methods. We argue that as young players become more politically conscious, they are negotiating their politics through play. Within these play situations, players are solidifying their individual beliefs while finding like-minded players. However, players are also establishing a nationalism that is defined not only through a set of core characteristics, but also through an active rejection of the politics embedded within western-oriented digital spaces, by playing in non-standard ways. Through transgressive play methods, players are countering hegemonic western politics present in commercial games and replacing them with their own nationalist politics through player-enforced rules, discussed through internet forums and preserved through memorial videos on online websites. We will look at two specific case studies: firstly, we will look at the Red Shirt Army, a streaming community in H1Z1, *where players acted out Chinese military superiority by flouting the four player limit originally set by the designers; secondly, we will look at the Great Socialist Production play method, where Chinese players went against the morality set in* Frostpunk, *a steampunk game by Polish developers, by arguing that greater societal prosperity was more important than "white left" moral posturing.*

Keywords: play, play methods, games, nationalism, transgressive play, politics, *H1Z1, Frostpunk*, Red Shirt Army

Introduction

In this paper, we will look at how Chinese youth perform patriotism through player-devised play methods in digital games. We argue that as young players become more societally conscious, they start negotiating their politics and personal beliefs through play. Within these play situations, players are solidifying these individual positions while finding like-minded players. Players are also establishing a nationalism that is defined not only through a set of core characteristics, but also through an active rejection of the politics embedded within games dominated by western politics, by playing in non-standard ways. Through innovative play methods, players combat the hegemonic politics present in commercial western-made games and replace them with their own nationalistic politics through player-enforced rules, discussed through internet forums and preserved in various multimedia forms on online websites.

We will first open this paper by looking at previous literature on online youth nationalism in China. Youth cyber nationalism has co-evolved alongside different political, cultural and technological elements over three stages in the past decades in China, each with their own representative events. Though this brief literature review, we will show that subsets of online spaces have formed identities based around performative nationalism – that is, not only is there an identity growing and being founded on a dominant patriotism, but this identity is also being brought forward outside specific online spaces, into both the Chinese mainstream as well as largely foreign-dominated digital spaces. The literature also shows how the intersectionality of youth, cyber nationalism and game space in China have significantly

increased over the past decade. The term 'youth' in our paper is a general orientation held by Chinese digital game players. In this usage, 'youth' incorporates a flexible age range mostly including those born after 1980s, as Marcella Szablewicz has identified (Szablewicz, 2020).

We will then discuss how this performative patriotism positions itself differently in games by looking at papers which discuss player-created performative practices. We will start by showing how game design embeds meaning, including political meaning, which is revealed through play. We will then analyse how players become co-designers of meaning in their chosen game spaces. We use play methods (Harrington, 2020) to show how play that diverges from designer intentions happens not only by having specific rules created through a community, but also by seeking to use that same play as a way to learn, reflect and even challenge latent meaning within games. Online youth communities create their own play, not only to reject previous politics embedded within the original game designs, but also to negotiate what it means for them to be patriotic in unwelcoming environments.

We will then look at two case studies: first, we will look at the play method devised by Douyu streamer EMoQQ (恶魔 QQ) and his Red Shirt Army (*hongyi jun* 红衣军). The Red Shirt Army devised a play method in *H1Z1* (Daybreak Game Company, 2015) where they would gather as large groups in order to dominate players outside their makeshift army. In the second case study, we will look at the simulation game *Frostpunk* (11bit, 2018) and the online youth-devised "Great Socialist Production" (*shehui zhuyi da shengchan* 社会主义大生产) play method. In this play method, youth players denigrated the western-facing morality system in the game, instead choosing to focus on a play method which emphasised hard work and sacrifice in return for a brighter in-game future.

By the end of this paper, we will have shown how nationalism forms an integral part of a subset of online youth identities, and how making play methods within previously established, rhetorically loaded game spaces provide these youth players with a space to not only make sense of their identities, but also a way to negotiate them with other players and put them to the test with what are often seen as foreign adversaries. These communities form around specific games, and the newly fashioned ways to play them. While these communities are not formal and their play methods are rarely codified (as disagreements within the case studies will show), there are often enough consistent play results for this analysis to be tenable. These stem from a collective iterative play making process which seeks a similar goal – to make sense of nationalism as a core tenet of certain cyber youth identities.

Youth Cyber Nationalism

Cyber activities of Chinese youth have proved to be a rich field for study of cultural practices and political engagements, despite their seemingly apolitical appearance as concentrated on recreational and commercial practices (Lindtner and Szablewicz, 2011; Liu, 2012; Yang, 2011). Moreover, in the last decade, scholars have observed and commented on surging online cyber nationalism, particularly in the communities built around digital game spaces and forums.

Wu Xu conceptualises Chinese cyber nationalism as "a non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed in China's online sphere over the past decade (1994–present)" (Wu, 2007: 155). It is intertwined with a frugal patriotism, historical nationalism, and top-down ideology, but distinguishes itself by "its popularity, persistence, and independence" (Wu, 2007: 156). Wu also refers to the reactive characteristics of cyber nationalism, driven by particular events and instances. Zhang Tao (2013) outlines the evolution of "cyber nationalism" in China in two stages among Chinese youth internet users across the first decade of the 21st century. The first stage stemmed from the mid-1990s, as early netizens responded to international disputes over China's territorial sovereignty. These mostly

took the form of "Defending Diaoyu Island" (*Bao Diao* 保钓) movements by Chinese activists, in reference to territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea in 2003 and 2004. Various internet forums were formed in response and both online and offline patriotic campaigns were incubated as grass-roots patriotism. The "anti-CNN.com" internet campaigns have been one of the most significant registers of the second phase, arguably more organized than the first. The 'anti-CNN' website was launched by a Chinese university graduate in 2008 as countercriticism of CNN and other western news media for their critical coverage of the Chinese state, particularly of the Tibetan protests during the Beijing Olympics. Participants in the 'anti-CNN' website interpreted western coverage and critique of China as "a wider systematic western anti-Chinese bias" (Zhang, 2013: 79). Charles Zhang (Zhang Chaoyang 张朝阳), the founder and CEO of the Sohu internet services company, a leading Chinese web portal and internet firm, also announced a public boycott for French products in protest against the French media's sympathy for Tibetan activists (Osnos, 2008). The patriotic public outcry from the younger generations led to the emergence of the popular designation for them as "angry youth" (*fen qing* 愤青). Evan Osnos has described this Chinese nationalist voice as "neocon nationalist" (Osnos, 2008). This represented a significant change in orientation from earlier youth generations in the 80s, who were more liberal-minded and looked up to western democratic values, to the extent that some domestic critics observed that they had developed a "reverse racism" (*nixiang zhongzu zhuyi* 逆向种族主义) against their Chinese identities (Wang cited in Rosen, 2009: 361). Stanley Rosen describes youth nationalism among the post-1980s generation (*baling hou* 八零后) as multifaceted and highly flexible, as the youth expressed their political orientations in surveys as "materialistic" and "pragmatic", but were also willing to self-sacrifice in service of certain collective calls and during national disasters such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (Rosen, 2009: 361).

Through in-depth interviews with Chinese university students, Liu Fengshu (2012) has argued that surging cyber nationalism among Chinese youth, including game forum discussions, should be seen as bearing a "'dual' political identity". This political identity encompasses two seemingly contrasting but complementary stances: one voice adopted by youth focused on patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) as apolitical and as a naturalized moral deed rather than a form of political participation; the other reflects the actual political situation mediated through the youths' online and offline selves in a post-socialist and market-oriented authoritarian society, where citizen engagement is not encouraged and western democratic values can be labelled as anti-China (Liu, 2012: 53). As elucidated by Liu, the Chinese youth in his research "did see online nationalism as a demonstration of democracy because, they claimed, it is participatory in nature and everyone (with internet access) has an equal chance to have a voice" (Liu, 2012: 63).

At the beginning of the Chinese online digital game industry, from 2001, patriotic red themes were strong sellers, especially China's war of resistance against Japan – this includes games from the *KangRi* (抗日 *Resistance War Online*) franchise (Nie, 2013). Annie Hongping Nie identifies the phenomenon of these Sino-Japan war games as a multi-scalar showcase for Chinese nationalism, infused with both top-down patriotic propaganda led by the party-state and internet-grounded popular nationalism shared by the gaming public. Nie has also pointed out how the Chinese game industry has been incorporated by the government since the early 21st century. The Chinese gaming industry collectively capitalizes on the sentiment of popular nationalism through domestic 'red' games as economic, cultural and political capital to align with the ideological pursuits and struggles that the country is facing. Although it was not centred on player agency in their play methods, Nie's article mentioned the important role Chinese patriotic gamers played in this game franchise's early boom, and how players went

beyond the official reductionist historical narratives by creating feuds and group battles between the in-game Chinese soldiers in anti-Japanese war games which more closely resembles historical events (Nie, 2013).

The youth players in our analytical lens are a generation that have grown up amid a domestic and international discourse wherein China as an economic-political entity is significantly different from previous generations, and one in which China occupies a much more central role in contemporary global discourse. While youths are regarded as an 'informed public' with abundant internet exposure and the skills to break through firewalls, they are not necessarily aligned with western liberal values. On the contrary, many youths identify with Chinese ideological territoriality and with state-led patriotic education and its associated master narratives of the country's history and collective memories (Wang, 2008). The Chinese government launched the nationwide 'patriotic education' in 1994 to strengthen the ideological weight of the country's education system via state-proved pedagogical cultural materials. This state-initiated education is centred around the country's historical key narratives, present goals and future revitalizations. Such narratives include the 'Century of Humiliation', portraying China as a major victim of western imperialism and colonialism in the 19th and 20th century; as well as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as a major discourse in the grand 'Chinese dream' embodied in the current party leadership. Following these top-down ideological mouldings, Huang observed that public media discourse in China had shifted to "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122) and that the post-90s generation (*jiuling hou* 九零后) or Generation Z, who grew up in a more economically well-off Chinese society, have formed new ways of perceiving China and the outside world, with "a false sense of national superiority" (Huang, 2021: 126).

We could trace youth nationalism as it has emerged in digital game spaces to several cyber nationalist events in earlier years, performed on broad internet spaces with important digital game-related elements. One is the Diba Expedition (*Diba Chuzheng* 帝吧出征) in 2016, where huge numbers of users of the Baidu forum Diba 帝吧 launched planned trolling campaigns on the Facebook pages of several pro-democracy media and public figures in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The forum's membership, which numbered over 20m at the time, mostly consisted of young male post-90s gamers (Yang, 2019). Diba 'warriors' left large numbers of emoji with Chinese nationalist content, using the battle rhetoric of digital games as if they were in large multiplayer war games (Yang, 2019; Wang, 2019). As Yang Guobin points out, the Diba Expedition was more of "a performance of the self" as the effects and reactions from the imagined enemies were not the participants' primary concerns (Yang, 2019: 2). The patriotic slogans and images were mainly a performance for like-minded Chinese youth. Wu Jing, Li Simin and Wang Hongzhe (2019) argued that the Diba Expedition represented a new form of cyber nationalism (the third wave) with roots in internet fandom culture, transplanted into national politics (Wu et al., 2019). The Diba Expedition involved many young female netizens who were into idols and celebrity culture, such as from the popular internet novel website Jin Jiang 晋江 with its iconic pink background, hence the emergence of the term "little pink" (*xiao fenhong* 小粉红), which referred to a new type of patriotic Chinese youth (Liu, 2019). Interestingly as observed by scholars studying the Diba Expedition, the collective coordinated cyber activities were carried out under strict community-imposed rules, such as posting unified messages. The campaign thus formed a highly repetitive ritual, while any alternative personal expressions were largely fended off in order to "secure an 'overwhelming Victory'" for the goals of the patriotic expedition (Liu, 2019: 105). This emphasis on collective victory as a form of cyber nationalism is more obviously seen in Chinese e-sports discourse and communities. When the Chinese Dota 2 team Wings won The International 6 in 2016, it was widely

celebrated as a victory for the Chinese nation. Here, the century of humiliation narrative was reproduced to generate shared sentiments among players and game fans, in which the Chinese (game) victory brushed off former discrimination that Chinese players endured (Ismangil, 2018).

Finding the Right Way to Play

Game studies work has spent significant time and effort discussing what it means to play a game the right way. Earlier research has especially focused on the player's role in the game. Jonas Heide Smith distinguishes between the "active player" who is looking for play "not prescribed or predicted by the game designers" and the "rational player" who is "optimising her outcome within the game as defined by the objective goals" (Smith, 2006: 24). Espen Aarseth has discussed the difference between the implied player who finds "a set of expectations that [they] must fulfil for the game to exercise its effect" and the transgressive player who rejects the implied player for "a (perhaps illusory) way for [them] to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (Aarseth, 2007: 132). David Myers states that there is a difference between "good play", which is attained through mastery of the game, and "bad play" gained from transgressing the standard set method of play (Myers, 2010: 19). While approaches towards divergent play differ between these theorists, all have common threads. Firstly, they acknowledge that players overwhelmingly realise that there is an ascribed way of playing: this method is shown to players through either explicit means, where game designers instruct players or even forbid specific play methods, or through implicit means, such as rewarding specific plays and disincentivising others. Secondly, they also acknowledge that no matter how strongly these explicit and implicit means are pushed, players overwhelmingly find ways to play against these currents – whether out of curiosity, a wish to win at all costs, or even out of self-discovery.

Game design choices can encourage divergent and curious play. Rilla Khaled argues that game design can encourage critical reflection through being "less focused on product and more focused on process" (Khaled, 2018: 5). She further states that situations in games can "explicitly represent systems of beliefs, propositions and processes" and "present us with problems for which we may not have ready-to-hand or simple solutions" (Khaled, 2018: 5) The transformative potential of game design, through the chosen manners of play, is a position that is equally shared by other scholars (Flanagan, 2009; Gualeni, 2015).

Players can adopt transgressive mindsets towards previously established play, and game design choices encourage players to adopt an active player mindset towards their state in the game. The next step is to analyse how players form communities around creating divergent manners of play, expanding the communities that perform this play, and ultimately even codifying this play both for posterity as well as ease of sharing. These methods ultimately convert "bad play" into "good play", as players become productive towards a game space's ecosystem that previously resisted it. In previous work, one of the authors introduced the term "play methods" (Harrington, 2020) to look at how players form communities and create their own play by creating and upholding their own creative constraints.

The concept of play methods incorporates two ideas: firstly, it acknowledges that whenever players play, even when they are actively flouting designers' intentions, they are following self-created rule-sets. They have a method behind their play. These can be very meticulously made, as players meet in online communities to discuss and develop the best way to play for a specific purpose. There is a great deal of seriousness in playful endeavours. Secondly, it further acknowledges the earlier discussion of Khaled and Flanagan – that play can be a method for learning, even when it is done in a way that lacks academic rigour. Players

establish ad-hoc hypotheses in their play, whether hypotheses of skill or of reflection, and they use their play to test these hypotheses.

Players create their own play methods for several reasons: some players might develop a play method out of sheer curiosity for what the results might be, such as standing still for a long time in an action game. Other players develop new play methods to modify previously set goals within a game – speedrunners and e-sports players generally fit under this category, where additional parameters are added to the base rules. However, for a large subset of players, creating new play methods serves as a way to create meaning. Players sometimes inject meaning into game-spaces that might not have previously had it – players creating spell-lit vigils for lost friends in online spaces serves as a particularly touching example. However, players also create new play methods to challenge previously established meaning within a specific game: for example, Muslim players in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) felt slighted that while most other global holidays are celebrated through events uploaded by the game's Japanese developers, they did not receive representation. Hence, they created play methods which replicated the morning suhoor and evening iftar meal held during the month of Ramadan, as well as the fast-ending celebration of Eid al-Fitr in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and invited other players to join them (Ismail, 2020).

In the following two case studies, we will claim that Chinese youth players have created specific play methods both to inject meaning in spaces that under-represent them and also to challenge pre-designed meaning within these game spaces. Just like most play communities, their play methods are not codified, necessarily organised or even always congruent. However, as these play methods develop, commonalities emerge – both in the way these play methods are created and executed, but also in what they mean for the players executing them.

These two game examples have very significant common elements in negotiating players' nationalistic Chinese identities: firstly, both of our cases were made by western companies, in the USA and Poland respectively and with according hegemonic game design choices embedded inside them. Secondly, both of these games became very popular in China. While this was not completely unintentional, as the developers did include Mandarin localisation (which many bigger games still lack to this day), the Chinese to non-Chinese ratios were higher than the developers anticipated. Thirdly, both of these case studies include instances in which online Chinese youth had strong reactions to their western-oriented designs and player bases. Having two closely aligned case studies will help us more easily draw comparisons and find commonalities in how Chinese online youth sought to negotiate political ideologies within games that resisted such play through play communities.

Case Study 1 – H1Z1's Red Shirt Army

H1Z1 (2015) is an early battle royale survival game akin to *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (2016, hereafter PUBG) and *Rust* (2013), landmark games which really pushed the genre to prominence. *H1Z1* was designed by Daybreak Games, a San Diego based company. The game peaked in popularity in the summer of 2017, at which time it had over 150,000 concurrent players from all across the world on Steam alone, including a very sizeable Chinese player base (SteamCharts, 2022).

In *H1Z1* and other battle royale games, players are encouraged to form small groups to gather resources such as guns and makeshift cars and then work to eliminate the other players in the same game lobby. The game ends when there is only one team (or the last living individuals in any given team) left. In *H1Z1*, players are allowed to form a four-player team within a hundred-player game. However, this constraint is very easily flouted by more

resourceful players who use outside means to coordinate larger groups through matching in-game clothing and pre-establishing meeting spaces on the game map.

EMoQQ (恶魔QQ), a famous Chinese streamer on the Douyu 斗鱼 streaming platform, was one such player. He flouted the four-player team limit constraint by establishing the Red Shirt Army. While streaming, EMoQQ encouraged his viewers to clothe their avatars in red shirts and look for an *H1Z1* play lobby at the same times as he was. In an interview with the user Jiuyue (九月; Jiuyue, 2017), EMoQQ stated that at first he wanted his viewers to wear a Chinese flag shirt. However, since buying this would cost money for his followers, he instead settled on a red shirt, a free in-game choice. In addition to flouting the team limit constraint, he also added another play constraint – he implored his loyal viewers to never shoot any other players in the Red Shirt Army so that they could easily overwhelm all the other players. In any given hundred-player game, EMoQQ would often muster at least thirty people to his Red Shirt Army. Since *H1Z1* only recognises up to four players (one team) as winners, EMoQQ added one final constraint. At the end of each game, the Red Shirt Army lined up to be shot by EMoQQ, guaranteeing his individual (but their communal) victory. Unsurprisingly, EmoQQ's play sessions usually ended with the Red Shirt Army's absolute dominance, to the chagrin of other players in the same lobbies.

For some players, the Red Shirt Army play method was overwhelmingly an iterative form of play which guaranteed they would win every game – it was a form of collective cheating (Consalvo, 2007). Internet commenter Youdian taoyan wenrou de nühaizi (有点讨厌温柔的女孩子, hereafter Youdian) stated that they felt that the red shirts were overwhelmingly a front to make griefing, which means annoying other players just for the sake of it, in H1Z1 acceptable (Youdian, 2018) – before the Red Shirt Army, EMoQQ had led the "EMo Army" (lit. "Monstrous Army", *Emo jun* 恶魔军), affectionately named after him. However, as even EMoQQ stated in the earlier interview playing up conflict with foreign players led to a large increase in viewer numbers and player interest, which affirmed the performative aspect of their play (EmoQQ cited in Jiuyue, 2017). Youdian further complained that the Red Shirt Army play method sought to eliminate anyone who did not conform by wearing red even if they spoke Chinese – to the point that *H1Z1* became a sea of red shirts, as all the players who did not assimilate started quitting in groves for brighter battle royale pastures (Youdian, 2018).

However, for other players, it served as a way to express nationalism in a game that did not account for such displays of identity, especially when some players felt they were being subjected to racist and xenophobic attacks by foreign players. Some users defended the Red Shirt Army, arguing it was only intended to simply counter foreign aggression in the first place (Fei chang ta buke, 2021；acen, 2018; Wang Guanxiong, 2017), as many non-Chinese *H1Z1* users shouted insults directed against China no matter who they killed. Player acen stated that these nationalistic reactions eventually degenerated to the point where players were acting merely as "patriotic bandits" (*aiguo de tufei* 爱国的土匪), but their original intention was to show that merely that Chinese players would not take insults lying down (acen, 2018).

Playing to combat foreign aggression aligns with the non-play goals of online Chinese nationalist youth described earlier. We can locate the second and third waves of Chinese youth cyber nationalism as discussed earlier in the Red Shirt Army's play method: playing in an organized, self-sacrificial way to secure overall a Chinese victory against the 'foreign' rivals. *H1Z1* presents an interesting case as, within games, the perceived other is no longer an intangible being that is imagined to wish harm onto a core group; the perceived other is tangible, acting and actively retaliating against them as foreign threats. The threat of the perceived other is being actively legitimised through the operation of the inbuilt game goals originally set by

the designers – namely, to defeat other players outside of your pre-set player cluster (Heide, 2015; Aarseth, 2013). For the Red Shirt Army, this cluster instead turned into a makeshift national collective bound by a shirt-based standard.

These accounts of insults against China are not without their merit, although even EMoQQ himself stated that these verbal duels were common within *H1Z1* and often reciprocal (Jiuyue, 2017). Meanwhile, blogger Wang Guanxiong 王冠雄 argued that aside from wanting to stand up to a climate in which unremitting insults were directed against them, Chinese players were also not particularly used to the sandbox environment that *H1Z1* afforded. In the absence of a clearly delineated designer intentionality, players made up their own intentions. This led them to band up and play together, and incentivised inside rules which focused around displays of "enhancing national prestige" (*hongyang guowei* 弘扬国威; Wang Guanxiong, 2017) even if they often came at the expense of international players. This aligned with the previously noted online nationalist fervour, which focused on "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122).

EMoQQ was eventually banned from *H1Z1*. However, the Red Shirt Army play method that EMoQQ pioneered continued not only in *H1Z1*, but also in similar games such as the aforementioned *PUBG* and *Rust*. This trend accelerated following EMoQQ's ban, which caused a slight dip in Chinese player numbers, and *H1Z1*'s cataclysmic loss of players. After EMoQQ was banned from *H1Z1*, some of his viewers fondly reminisced on their play sessions. For example, the viewer Shenfancong 神烦葱 uploaded a compilation video on Bilibili, in which he uploaded short clips of players performing the Red Shirt Army play method (Shenfancong, 2017). Viewers were actively using "bullets" (*danmu* 弹幕), the term for Bilibil's embedded video comments, to express their gratitude to EMoQQ and the Red Shirt Army. As the bullets appear overlaid on the video itself, the screen itself was flooded with colourful comments. Some bullets expressed sympathy for EMoQQ following his ban, some expressed affection for the Red Shirt Army, which might simply have acted as a proxy for being an EMoQQ viewer and part of his online community as the next iteration of the EMo Army. However, quite a few bullets directly performed nationalistic sentiments, as similarly evidenced in previous online communal expeditions such as the Diba warriors (Yang, 2019). "China number 1" was the most commonly employed nationalistic phrase. Equally, many homophonic iterations of this phrase such as *chuan ne nan bo wan* (穿呢难波湾) and *chuan na nan bo wan* (传娜男拨玩) were scattered throughout the video.

However, there were also further internet culture phrases that found themselves prominently displayed in the video. This included phrases such as "If miracles have a colour, it is definitely Chinese red" (*Ruguo qiji you yanse, na yiding shi Zhongguo hong* 如果奇迹有颜色，那么一定是中国红).

This phrase was carried over from the *LoveLive!* community, a collective of Japanese virtual idols, which form different idol groups including μ and Aquors. As might be expected, the fan community for these virtual idols is largely made up of young male fans. While the *LoveLive!* groups are overwhelmingly virtual, forming parts of anime, manga and games, the *LoveLive!* franchise occasionally organises live shows, performed by hired singers and dancers who play the part of the virtual idols. During the Animelo Summer Live show in 2014, the stage was flushed with the μ's trademark orange hue, at which point viewers watching the even on a Bilibili livestream posted a flurry of bullets, writing "If miracles have a colour, then it is definitely orange" (*Ruguo qiji you yanse, na yiding shi chengse* 如果奇迹有颜色，那么一定是橙色). This phrase spawned many iterations. However, the aforementioned Chinese red version of the phrase has surpassed the popularity of even the original phrase. The Chinese red

iteration has made it all the way to mainstream discourse, especially during the 2016 Rio Olympics and subsequent National Day celebrations (Geng Baike, 2016). Even more recently, the phrase has been seen on CCTV (2021) and China News (2021) online news articles as a catchy phrase that acts as praise for China's technological and societal advances. However, the journey into mainstream discourse could not have happened without first gaining prominence in online youth communities, starting with the *LoveLive!* fandom and eventually moving from the idol's orange into the country's red in uploads such as Shenfancong's Bilibili video. This shows not only the cyber nationalism as it is performed in internet ecospheres, especially in games and game-adjacent spaces (Szablewicz, 2020), but how these cyber nationalistic discourses are influencing mainstream political discourse, if not mainstream politics at large.

The Red Shirt Army play method became so widespread that it not only attracted copycats within the Chinese internet sphere, but also across the globe. North American players such as Zeb (2016) turned *H1Z1* into a battleground of red vs blues (or occasionally non-reds), as EMoQQ attested in his interview. Thus the game took on a double layer of signification, as players tried to defeat the masses of red shirts. Not only were outside players trying to negate the effectiveness of the Red Shirt Army play method, they were also offering a political rebuttal, albeit a weak one, to an ideological performance. Other players such as Grimmybear (2017), as well as others (Ther01231, as shown by Bibou, 2017) responded by trying to infiltrate the Red Shirt Army instead, bringing them down from the inside, albeit with minimal success.

While Chinese players felt slighted and devised play methods in order to transform the embedded politics of *H1Z1* into something more amenable, Zeb and similar players used new play methods to maintain the designed status quo. These examples both sought to negate Chinese players' transformative play (Gualeni, 2015) by showing that it was unwelcome within the online space, but also affirmed the "dual" political identities of Chinese players (Liu, 2017) who took patriotic performative play as apolitical, but ended getting caught up in the politics of both the game world and the social world. Games are positioned uniquely in this respect, as their base rhetorical model not only invites user input, but often results in unexpected pushback. Khaled discussed how effective reflective game design encourages disruption and reflection, over comfort and immersion, as this encourages players to constantly remediate their beliefs through their play (Khaled, 2018). *H1Z1* affirmed these political identities by not only giving space for players to present these identities, but by further allowing them to survive in the face of adversity. The only way foreign players could stop the nationalistic rhetoric was by appealing to higher powers in the form of the developers of *H1Z1* to suppress the resilient voices of players such as the Red Shirt Army.

The Red Shirt Army play method bore a bit more weight than Zeb and Ther01231's counterplay methods as their nationalistic performance served as a two-tiered response to *H1Z1*'s design. First of all, the Red Shirt Army rejected the prototypical design premise established in *H1Z1*, which sought to force all players to play in small teams – as we saw earlier, some iterations of Chinese online nationalism interpret democratisation as many online voices all counting equally (Liu, 2012). This nationalistic sentiment seen as core to China's identity is spelt out much more clearly in the next case study, wherein players demonstrate this both in their writing, and also through their chosen play method. Secondly, the performance of the Red Shirt Army Play method also serves as an answer to a gaming landscape which rarely portrays China as successful, militarily or otherwise, or even as anything but an antagonist. Popular western game design rarely offers players ways to express non-American identities, especially within military settings, as noted by research on 'militainment' and the hyper-capitalistic military complex in games (Sterczewski, 2021; Höglund, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). This nationalistic response was also reflected by the popularity of anti-Japanese games discussed earlier (Nie, 2013). The Red Shirt Army play method allowed players to not only

perform a nationalistic Chinese identity, but more importantly perform it on their own terms – as protagonists, and more importantly, as winners.

Case Study 2 – Frostpunk's Great Socialist Production

Frostpunk (2018) is a game released by 11Bit Studios, a Polish game company. Unlike *H1Z1*'s rise and fall, *Frostpunk* had a very strong release showing, amassing 25,000 players in consecutive peak player counts on Steam on release in the first month. This figure fell over subsequent months. Part of its formula for success was its notably excellent Mandarin localisation. Ye notes that upon release the game was wildly popular in China. Of the 668,000 copies sold as of his article's publication, well over a third had gone to Chinese players (Ye, 2018).

In *Frostpunk*, players find themselves suffering amid a new ice age. Players take on the role of commander of one of the last few remaining human settlements. Their job is to make sure that people under their rule survive. As they play the game, they are presented with moral choices: whether to subject their workers to awful labour conditions, whether to establish a cult of personality, whether to adopt child labour in their settlement, whether dissidents should be forcefully removed from your society, and so on. The game's motif is that moral choices are hard, but they have to be made.

Success is determined by two metrics: survival and moral resilience. The first condition is straightforward – players have to make sure their settlement does not succumb to sheer cold. This is done by controlling the workers in their settlement, sending them to collect resources, produce food, maintain electricity and other such simulation-based tasks. If they do not manage to maintain their settlement, the game ends: they are given a game over screen and told that they have to start all over.

The second condition is much less clear-cut. Players are pushed towards maintaining as high a degree of high moral absolution as possible. When presented with the choice to employ child labour, players are encouraged (but never forced) to say no. When given the opportunity to install a police state that heavily penalises non-conformist actions, players are yet again nudged towards allowing more individual liberties, rather than assuming totalitarian rule. There is a moral threshold encoded in the game, generally invisible from its players until the end of the ice age. At that point, if players have not gone past the threshold, they are told that they "have not crossed the line." Meanwhile, if players skipped this moral threshold, they are given a list of the immoral choices they resorted to and told "the city survived: but was it worth it?" (*Frostpunk*, 2018). Both conditions lead to a win screen as determined by the first success metric. Additionally, both play methods allow their players to unlock achievements – badges that players can collect outside of the main gameplay loop as a metagame to allow game replayability using different methods (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017). The only difference is that taking morally questionable actions results in mild disapproval from the game designers, who through these end screens sit in judgement as to whether a player's play method was right or not.

Soon after the game's release, it was review-bombed by Chinese users. They felt that the game's secondary success condition was ill-conceived, and reeked of 'white left' (*baizuo* 白左) moral judgements. This epithet originated in Chinese internet ecospheres, as a way of speaking against western liberals (and like-minded individuals) who practice "meticulous and inhibitive norms of 'political correctness'" (Lin, 2021: 95). Zhang Chenchen states that anti-white left sentiments in the Chinese internet sphere are mainly directed at "condescending" positions that westerners, and any people who align with liberal values as a universal standard for the world, adopt and ascribe onto others. Zhang added that this consternation "becomes

particularly irritating for nationalist netizens when combined with perceptions of a rising China and a declining West" (Zhang, 2020: 106). An opinion article by Zhao Ziyun 赵子云 published in The Paper (*Pengpai Xinwen* 澎湃新闻；*The Paper,* 2018), one of the major Chinese online news platforms, summarised the political position of netizens in *Frostpunk* through the following paragraph.

> 社会主义大生产"的玩家认为，民众能否吃饱穿暖是第一位的，只要达到了这个目标，其他权益并不重要。游戏的开发者显然对此有不同意见，所以会将一些决策认定为"越界"。由此，很多中国玩家发出了嘲笑："我们"在"你们"的游戏里，把末日变成了乌托邦，"你们白左"却还在纠结那些无足轻重的东西。

> "Great Socialist Production" players believe the first step is making sure the people can eat, you first have to attain this goal. Other (human) rights are not important. The game developers clearly do not have the same view, so some strategic decisions will be deemed "crossing the line". Because of this, a lot of Chinese players have derided this: "We" inside "your" game, turn Judgement Day into a utopia, while "you white left" are still struggling with these insignificant things. (Zhao Ziyun, 2018).

The Great Socialist Production, and its associated play method, stems from the Cultural Revolution slogan "Grasp Revolution, Promote Production" (*zhua geming, cu shengchan* 抓革命、促生产). It emphasises the unification of ideological goals and material production, which harks back to Wu's observation that netizens tend towards historical nationalism (Wu, 2007). Players partaking in the Great Socialist Production play method emphasised choices that promoted science and technology, even if they came with large human costs. By focusing on production above every other metric, they felt they would be better equipped to enter the post ice-age era stronger than ever. Human rights choices, such as fourteen-hour workdays, forcing children to work, and crushing revolutionary dissent were seen as not only necessary choices, but ones willingly taken. Being asked whether "it was worth it" to make these choices felt like western ideological policing to those players, rather than a worthy judgement, as by the end of the ice age their settlement had impressive technological advancements, strong productivity, and no resource shortage.

Working less than strictly necessary during the ice age's hardships were seen by this group as symptoms of white left, idealist fantasies that would leave the settlement perennially struggling even once the ice age ended. 11-Bit's designer intentionality, and its associated play method, left the settlement with weak production, primitive technology, and a society that would only just make it past the ice age finish line, all to maintain a weak premise of moral ideology. As we have seen in the previous case study, games give players a unique opportunity to not only reflect on their ideological inclinations, but to put those same beliefs to the test in an adverse arena. In *H1Z1*, the opponents were other players who went up against the Red Shirt Army and lost. In *Frostpunk*, the opponent was the system itself, instilled with loaded values that online netizens felt reeked of western consternation – and they felt that they managed to beat the system too.

This was not the only time that Chinese netizens review-bombed a game because of politics. *Devotion* (2019), designed and developed by a Taiwanese company but published by a Mainland Chinese company, is one of the more well known recent examples. After the developers placed an Easter egg which was deemed by Mainland Chinese players to be insulting to President Xi Jinping, Chinese netizens reacted so negatively that the publisher decided to withdraw the game from the Steam storefront and the designers issued a public

apology. What set *Frostpunk* apart is that the Great Socialist Production play method was a performable politics within the game itself. In *Devotion*, and even the earlier mentioned Diba Expedition*,* the nationalist wrath was targeted, but ultimately unproductive in displaying the success of nationalistic politics: while players were successful in taking *Devotion* off the shelves, they did not manage to show why their viewpoint was the correct one. The online users effectively resorted to browbeating the relevant parties, and their tactics were not only met with consternation by foreign users, they were actively rebuked – as Chinese users review-bombed *Devotion*, western users tried to review-boost the game back up.

In *Frostpunk*, not only was the anger targeted, but the players could show how their politics was not only successful, but clearly achieved more than the white left alternative. On western communities (such as Steam forums), there are still online guides to helping players perform better that detail the Great Socialist Production play method and therefore forgo specific moral inclinations for production. In Myers' terms, "bad play" quickly found itself legitimised as "good play" (Myers, 2010). This occurred even as the developers themselves patched the game to take into account the choices that large swathes of players were taking in the game, all stemming from these transformative politics at play.

Zhao Ziyun was not the only person to give players and their play methods a voice. The Great Socialist Production play method was shared by other netizens on different platforms. In their comments, they favoured a Chinese spirit, and decried western-oriented design choices. Just like the Red Shirt Army's community, *Frostpunk* enjoyed some mainstream cross-pollination: Weibo accounts such as the Communist Youth League's official account, shared a player-written article which also talks about the Great Production Method with the title "Hey? Have we played video games for so many years only to lose the author's intended meaning? Internet users discuss the real situation." (*Ai? Women wan le zheme duo nian de youxi, yuanlai dou shi le chuanzuozhe de benyi? Wangyou pinglun dao zhenxiang* 诶？我们玩了这么多年的游戏，原来都失了创作者的本意？网友评论道出真相; 2018). Another player BBJi (BB 姬）wrote an article provocatively titled "Chinese players in this game teach this group of idiotic foreigners what CHINA NO. 1 truly is" (*Zhongguo wanjia zai zhege youxi li jiaohui le zhe qun yuchun de laowai shenme cai shi zhenzheng de CHINA NO.* 1 中国玩家在这个游戏里教会了这群愚蠢的老外什么才是真正的 CHINA NO.1; BBJi, 2018). The title has a clear resemblance to Shenfancong's Red Shirt Army video on Bilibili which also employs the China No.1 phrase. Online communities share a lot of cross-pollination.

In the Great Socialist Production play method, the emphasis on the necessity of food as the core human right for *Frostpunk* citizens is prominent. This emphasis was explained by players like BBJi with direct references to the Chinese socialist construction period in the 1960s to 1970s, in which a "grain-first" campaign was launched nationwide to secure grain production and food security (Ho, 2003: 38). BBJi includes expressions such as "with grains in hand, the heart doesn't panic" (*shouli you liang, xinzhong buhuang* 手里有粮，心中不慌) and "eating solid food in the busy season, watery food in the slack season, eat half solid and half watery food in seasons that are neither busy nor slack" (*mangshi chi gan, xianshi chi xi, bumang buxianshi bangan banxi* 忙时吃干，闲时吃稀,不忙不闲时半干半稀). BBJi attributes both phrases directly to China's past, introducing them as "said by previous generations" (*qianbei shuoguo* 前辈说过） and from "China of decades ago" (*jishi nianqian de zhongguo* 几十年前的中国） respectively. BBJi highlights Mao's own writings in guiding the country's political struggles and material shortage in the impoverished era (BBJi, 2018). Players' attitude and justification of their performative socialist play method harks back to the tendency of cyber youth towards a kind of historical nationalism. However, invoking this socialist past is greatly reductionist and romanticising, and does not take into account the

profound human tragedy and environmental destruction caused by such political campaigns (Dikötter, 2018; Shapiro, 2001). It also ignores the historical background of the grain-first policy, which is attributed as a remedy for the deadliest famine in China between 1959 and 1961, itself caused by the country's political upheavals, especially the Great Leap Forward, in pursuit of achieving communism (Ho, 2003).

Both Zhao and BBJi also draw a direct comparison between the hard-working Chinese spirit and the hedonistic, liberal Occidental world. BBJi also uses the phrase Great Socialist Production to describe the play method, and also tie it much more directly to the Chinese spirit with phrases such as "our unassailable hard-working spirit" (*women chiku nailao de jingshen* 我们吃苦耐劳的精神), along with a general propensity to describe this chosen play method as "our" play method. On the other hand, just like Zhao before them, they describe the western players and their focus on human rights as the white left, further describing them as in thrall to "western hedonism" (*xifang xiangle zhuyi* 西方享乐主义). Their nationalistic portrayals have the same self-sacrificial leaning characteristic of this cyber youth nationalism and which was also seen at the culmination of the Red Shirt Army's performance. These shared terms, ideologies, and similarities in gameplay also confirm that while these gaming communities are not necessarily actively coordinating their play, they are reading other players' play, discussing it on different forums, and actively reflecting on the best play method to adopt in order to use games as a transformative practice (Gualeni, 2015), not only for themselves, but for anyone reading of their activities on Weibo posts, Bilibili videos and even in mainstream newspaper articles.

Readings from Chinese Youth Play Methods

In these case studies, we find common elements across the players' adopted play methods, despite the two games being significantly different in theme, scope, and execution. These are as follows:

1   **A defence against the perceived (often western) other:** As Zhang described, nationalistic netizens often felt there was "a wider systematic western anti-Chinese bias" (Zhang, 2013: 79). This sentiment was present and performed in both our case studies: the founder of the Red Shirt Army commented that their origins stemmed from a reaction to insults coming from a non-Chinese player base. This division was further propagated both by EMoQQ's in-game performances, as well as by non-Chinese players inadvertently adopting the mantle of the other by trying to counter the Red Shirt Army play method by organising against them or infiltrating them. On the other hand, in the Great Socialist Production play method, the perceived other was instead the original designers of the game itself, who cast moral aspersion on 'non-white left' play methods. The newly created play methods in both examples allowed Chinese youth to explore their nationalistic identities and politics, by reflecting on how they performed against other people in *H1Z1* and the designed system in *Frostpunk*. Most important, they reflected on how they performed against the (western) other.

2   **A focus on victory:** Huang noted that social media discourse had shifted to "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122). Meanwhile, Liu noted how during cyber expeditions, individual expression was denigrated as it was seen at the cost of "secur[ing] an 'overwhelming Victory'" (Liu, 2019: 105). Equally, the Red Shirt Army always played in a way that all but guaranteed their victory, as teams of four were instead extended into teams with dozens of players. Meanwhile, BBJi notes that the Great Socialist Production play method turned the in-game "ice age" (*bingqi shidai* 冰期时代) being suffered by players in the west into an

era of "central heating" (*nuanqi shidai* 暖气时代) for Chinese Netizens (BBJi, 2018). Both methods were deeply successful in guaranteeing material wins, reflecting the necessity of victory as part of the adopted discourse. This point is also especially important as it sets games apart from other media and internet ecospheres, as games' inbuilt victory systems validate such self-aggrandizement – their play method was not only nationalistic, it allowed them to also state that it was right.

3   **A sacrificial patriotism:** Rosen (2009) noted how this subset of youth was not only pragmatic, but also willing to self-sacrifice for a collective call. When led by EMoQQ, the Red Shirt Army ended every play session lined up in a row, sacrificing themselves for their shirt, as EMoQQ shot each of them down to get to the victory screen. On the other hand, *Frostpunk* players found themselves arguing that apart from the necessity of feeding their populace, every other human right was negotiable for the good of the community. Chinese socialist history and ideology were selectively invoked to justify the sacrificial price necessary for forward-looking governance. Chinese youth players in these games could be seen as substituting themselves with imagined strong-handed socialist leaders, to simulate a reductionist red socialist past within the game world.

While these player communities might not have originally had any intention of securing ideological internet victories through community organisation and actively trying to create play methods that combatted foreign aggression, we do argue that through a combination of shared interests, communal identity issues, as well as a common existence within an often unresponsive internet ecosphere, players end up discussing why they play and how they play. These discussions result in somewhat formalised play methods that carry out players' nationalistic politics and reflect the politics of and beyond game spaces.

Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at how players perform nationalistic sentiment through community-fashioned play methods. We did this by first looking at the history of Chinese cyber nationalism, then described how players create their own play methods, and then illustrated how these newly created play methods manifest as nationalistic performances in two different case studies.

We first started by discussing how Chinese youth cyber nationalism has evolved through different stages via multiple internet platforms, mostly outside of play situations in online games, but share a strong performative characteristic. We discussed how the aforementioned case studies have earlier precursors in initiatives such as the Anti-CNN website (Zhang, 2013) and the Diba Expedition (Yang, 2019). In these earlier initiatives, users performed a nationalistic identity that was characterised by a complex patriotic and nationalistic spectrum, including frugal patriotism (Liu, 2012), a focus on historically oriented nationalism (Nie, 2013), a defence against biased portraits of China and a simulated national pride (Rosen, 2009; Zhang, 2013), as well as the popular fandom transformation of national politics (Wu et al., 2019). We argued that these qualities equally came into play within the community-performed play methods. However, games gave players a way to confirm their performed politics by measuring them against game-ascribed victory conditions.

We looked at how players often create their own play methods to supplement or even counter embedded meaning within games. We first started off by discussing notions of playing the right way (Smith, 2005; Aarseth, 2007) in order to show that while designers often prescribe their potential audience with a play method, players often stray away from it for different reasons. We also described how game design itself is often embedded with meaning and critical reflection (Khaled, 2018). At times, this meaning is political, and loaded with western hegemonic biases, especially when this involves the military industrial complex (Sterczewski,

2021; Höglund, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). If players stray from ideal play, and that design is loaded with meaning, then it would follow to argue that players sometimes move away from the 'right' play method to challenge previous meaning and create new meaning within hostile digital spaces. This has been shown through research on play methods (Harrington, 2020, Boluk and LeMieux, 2017; Van Vught & Glas, 2017).

Finally, we used this theoretical base to look at our two case studies. In the first case study, we looked at the Red Shirt Army, a collective of players originally led by the streamer EMoQQ, that wore their eponymous red shirts in the game *H1Z1*. They flouted the game's prescribed rules by teaming up in groups of larger than four and proceeded to beat anyone who was not part of their makeshift army, citing prior foreign incitement as a common motivation to rally together under the same shirt. In the second case study, we looked at *Frostpunk* and the Great Socialist Production play method, in which players focused on solving the simulation puzzle presented to them through a method with Chinese characteristics. Despite the implicit judgement placed upon them by the game designers, players persisted with their Great Socialist Production play method citing their easy path to victory as not only proof of accomplishment, but also vindication that their views were ultimately correct.

Since there were shared goals, there were often common results across their play. Seen in the analysis of the two cases, the alternative play methods devised by Chinese youth players express certain nationalistic politics, including defence against the perceived (often western) other, a focus on collective victory and a sacrificial patriotism. We argue that through critically analysing how Chinese players perform these alternative play methods in games, we may draw further discussions of the players' politics, particularly in this article, on nationalism, as well as the latent politics within and beyond the games themselves.

Ludography

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (standard edition) (2020), Nintendo Switch [Game], Nintendo: Tokyo.

Devotion (first edition) (2019), PC [Game], Red Candle Games: Taiwan.

Frostpunk (standard edition) (2018), PC [Game], 11 Bit Studios: Warsaw.

H1Z1 (standard edition) (2015), PC [Game], DayBreak Game Company, San Diego.

PlayerUnknown Battleground (standard edition) (2017), PC [Game], PUBG Corporation: Seoul.

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Through the Shanzhai Lens: Reframing the Transmedial Copying and Remaking of Games

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Abstract

China is one of the fastest growing games markets, housing not only some of the world's largest video and computer games companies, but also millions of active gamers. From a Western perspective, engagement with China is considered essential to future growth for game developers and publishers, both in terms of inward investment from Chinese publishers and in growing sales with what will become one of the most important markets. However, Western perceptions of copyright, IP, and, copying of games in China can problematise game creators' and consumers' views of China. In this paper, we develop a framework for understanding the act of game copying in the West and in China that combines the Chinese concept of shanzhai with developing understandings of the concept "transmedia" and fan-created works. The aim of this framework is to introduce cultural and contextual awareness to our collective understanding of why game copies exist in the West and in China, and how they intersect with existing copyright and IP concerns. Through a case study of the 2018 game Among Us, we demonstrate that the reality of Western and Chinese game 'copies' is far more nuanced than is often depicted in Western media.

Keywords: games, remakes, shanzhai, copies, transmedia, Intellectual Property, Chinese games, *Among Us*, *Werewolf*, westernisation

Introduction

The Chinese games market is known as a global powerhouse generating billions of pounds of revenue and interacting with nearly 700 million gamers. In this context, it is no wonder that Western games companies are trying to break into the Chinese market. In this paper, 'the West' refers largely to countries located in Europe, North America and Australasia. Barriers to cooperation between China and the West arise, however, when considering the complex relationship between Intellectual Property (IP) rights, the Chinese tradition of *shanzhai* (山寨; often translated as a cloned or counterfeit product) and Westernization. We follow Bozkurt's definition of Westernization as the "process of social change where societies convert to customs and practices of Western civilization" and consider it to be closely linked with modern and historical colonialism (Bozkurt, 2012).

In the West, IP rights are used by the games industry to protect the copyright of games software, code, artwork, music, text, and gameplay, as well as the trademarks and design of characters. In doing so, businesses can bring legal action against those who use or illegally copy aspects of protected games without permission. Games-related IP rights in the West are complicated by both illegal distribution and consumption of games as well as 'grey areas' of fan interaction with protected IP, such as through fan art, fan fiction, streaming of game content, or even fan-made games. These grey area interactions are considered transmedial and

are an important part of any successful franchise. While 'transmedia storytelling' has been defined as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels" (Jenkins, 2007), fans today also expect to participate directly in media creation (Rose, 2012). To that end, games creators in the West tend to anticipate a degree of transmedial engagement with their IP, and this is generally regarded positively and as a reflection of an active player community and a successful brand rather than IP infringement.

In China, the lines between IP, transmedia, and commercially accepted copying are further blurred with the notion of shanzhai. While there is a plethora of scholarship on shanzhai, we find Lindtner's and Lin's definitions most helpful. Lindtner considers shanzhai to be "China's partially illicit and experimental production culture" (Lindtner, 2020: 79). The author further explains that China has been perceived by the West as a "prototype nation" or, a "place to prototype alternatives to existing models of modern technological progress" (Lindtner, 2020: 6). As such, China's culture of shanzhai has been conflated with the racially charged Western idea that China is neither innovative nor creative, relying on Western ideas and IP to generate commercial success in China. While the term shanzhai is often translated in the Western world negatively as cloning or copycat culture (Page, 2019), consideration of its cultural context and history can show that some shanzhai games are more akin to the Western idea of transmedia production than the industrial practice of copying or remaking games for commercial gain. Lin finds that "China's contemporary counterfeit culture" can be understood as both "the desire to create a shared sense of cultural intimacy" as well as "a way for consumers to resist and reclaim control of meanings from a changing economic system" (Lin, 2011: 10, 7). Thus, shanzhai culture can be seen as a series of frictions between Western perceptions of Chinese production and 'Chineseness' in innovation. The friction between shanzhai products and IP stems from China's complicated relationship with Westernisation, to be discussed below. Further friction is occasioned by a lack of localised content, which is in part due to a ringfenced market with a high degree of regulatory oversight. While there are many other forms of shanzhai products, the focus in this paper is on shanzhai games.

In this paper, we develop a framework for understanding Western and Chinese game copies that links shanzhai culture to the everchanging Western ideas of transmedia and commercialisation of game IP. This framework is applied through a case study of the 2018 game *Among Us* (InnerSloth, 2018), the Chinese game *Werewolf Among Us* (Shenzhen Youliang Technology, 2020), as well as several Western-produced fan and commercial copies. Through this case study, we posit that fan creation, game remakes, and other transmedial expressions can be seen differently through the lens of shanzhai, and vice versa. Shanzhai games thus reveal an unstable relationship between player, maker, IP, and user-generated content that extends beyond Western and Chinese gaming cultures. It also highlights the problematic Western view of Chinese game copies as existing in opposition to industrially copied or cloned games in the West. While there is arguably a Western bias against Chinese clones, we can observe that copycats, close copies, and reskinned games are popular across global markets. *Among Us* makes for a strong case study for several reasons: the original game IP is itself based on existing game concepts; it has what some consider a Chinese 'copycat' version; it has generated numerous Western clones and transmedia interactions, including a number on successful commercial platforms.

The focus of this paper is an understanding of shanzhai products that are of interest to the Western games industry, rather than shanzhai of any other kind, such as shanzhai versions of Chinese-developed cultural works or products. The article starts by discussing game production with respect to remakes and recycling game material, before discussing IP and copyright for games in the West and in China. The article then goes on to discuss fan

participation in the West, considering the transmedial notion of fan participation and production in a Western context, before introducing the Chinese cultural and historical properties of the tradition of shanzhai. Finally, we apply the above as a framework through which to consider shanzhai games, transmedia, and commercial copying through the *Among Us* case study. In sum, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of cultural differences between Western transmedia and Chinese shanzhai games.

The Copy in Western Commercial Game Production

To build an understanding of shanzhai and transmedia perspectives, the concept of a 'copy' in the context of Western games production (industry perspectives) and markets (consumer perspectives) requires further consideration. In this context we can identify that game copies, instead of being regarded derogatively as copycats or knockoffs, can in fact be seen as commercially, culturally, and legally 'acceptable' forms of imitation. Two such forms of accepted copy are the remake/remaster, and the neo-retro/nostalgia game (Garda, 2014; Sloan, 2016).

The remake or remaster is a literal reconstruction of an existing game, most often with the objective of updating the audio-visual fidelity (and occasionally also the gameplay) for a new generation of games hardware. Many notable games have been created with a view to extending the commercial lifespan of IP and exploiting the potential of well-known brands. Recently, *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy – The Definitive Edition* (2021) was rebuilt in a contemporary game engine, Unreal Engine 4, "to make these classics more vibrant and more immersive than ever, celebrating the legacy of the series that redefined interactive entertainment and helped propel video games to the center of culture" (Rockstar Games, 2021). These types of copy are not always produced by the original developer, but rather by a development team versed in the processes of re-production (an industrial approach to 'copying'). Such copies are instigated by rights holders (establishing the legal acceptability) with a view to extending the commercial life of a game for fans and new audiences alike, thereby justifying the perceived acceptability of the 'copy' from a consumer perspective.

With neo-retro or nostalgia games, we can observe more nuanced acts of 'acceptable' copying in Western markets. Using the example of *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014), we can see that Western developers engage with copying or remixing existing games media and games technologies on different levels (Schreier, 2017). This approach to game copying can be considered through the lens of applied media archaeology, where the constraints of selected media technologies are considered and adhered to in the creation of novel artistic or creative works (Parikka, 2012). This is evident in how *Shovel Knight* is presented, in terms of colour palette and resolution, which clearly seeks to 'copy' the look and sound of a specific games technology, in this case the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). In short, *Shovel Knight* can be considered a copy of *all* NES games. We may also consider that these forms of copy can move beyond the surface visuals and audio presentation to become an imitation of the underlying processes and logic of digital media (see Wardrip-Fruin, 2011). In other words, such copies can include the game mechanics (playable actions), systems (interactions between mechanics and other variables), and rules. In the case of *Shovel Knight*, this includes copying – and playing with – the technical limitations of the NES as a computer system. As a form of nostalgia game, *Shovel Knight* is simultaneously regarded as an 'original' and as a broad pastiche of disparate cultural, design, and technical reference points that nevertheless remains commercially and legally acceptable.

The remake and the nostalgia game both offer invaluable insight into the complexity of Western framing of game copies. While game piracy, such as through homebrew approaches, is considered part of the discourse on game copies in the West, even in this context of seemingly illicit copying practices a justification of the practice can be argued from the perspective of legitimate creative expression (O'Donnell, 2013). As we will discuss later in our analysis, it is important to consider the ways in which Western perspectives can seek to 'justify' game copies as being acceptable by virtue of established production practices, market demands, and legal compliance.

Copies, copyright, and intellectual property

This leads us to the issue of copyright and intellectual property, which is of relevance to Western views of the challenges of doing business within the Chinese market. In an analysis of official Western media discourse, Wirman discusses how Western news and media have represented games and gaming in China since 1999, noting a focus on the growth and scale of the Chinese market in terms of companies, developers, players, and investment (Wirman, 2016). This analysis points to a shift towards increasing similarities in terms of Western and Chinese industry and markets, but nonetheless highlights persistent issues around Western representations of China. Nakamura and Wirman label the time period in Chinese game development from the late 1990s to 2005 as the "chaotic" and/or "formation period" in which "major studios in PRC [were] being accused of infringing copyrights of other works" (Nakamura & Wirman, 2021: 289). The combination of the words "chaos" and "infringement" evokes a negative image of Chinese studios copying Japanese studios and thus feeds into negative stereotypes of Chinese copycat behaviour. With regards to how the games industry and developers are covered in Western media, Wirman concludes that designers and developers are often "characterized in terms of mischievous imitation and copycatting and simultaneously plagued by piracy and limitations such as console bans" (Wirman, 2016: 309). Here, then, we can identify a common Western assumption that there are little-to-no IP rights and regulations in China, an assumption that likely stems from Western media representations and the rapid growth of Chinese games production over the last 25 years.

In the UK and across the West, copyright is in most cases an automatic right, protecting literature, art, music, dramatic works, sound recordings, film, and broadcasts. Creators do not need to formally register their creative work for it to be protected (Fairhurst, 2020). This creates an emphasis on the protection of ideas before the protection of products. However, the practice of protecting IP requires proof of infringement as well as proof of a monetary loss because of said infringement. This once again places larger studios at an advantage as they are more likely to have the funds and employees to dedicate to identifying and combatting infringement. A notable example is the Nemesis System developed by Monolith Entertainment for *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014) which, as reported by Ryan (2021), was awarded a patent legally protecting the concept of a hierarchy of Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) that can store the memory of player encounters (see O'Donnell 2014).

Contrary to many Western reports, China does have regulations surrounding IP. Recently, the Chinese government has implemented stricter IP and copyright laws intended to protect companies against piracy, copycats, and other forms of infringement. Like in the West, the onus remains on the developer to protect their IP by developing a proactive strategy to secure rights both domestically and in foreign markets (Greenspan, Boyd and Purewal, 2014). Different aspects of game development are protected via different means. For example, as seen in Table 1, copyright law in China protects music, code, story, character, art, box design, and website design. When making a derivative work which incorporates an existing character or

story, appropriate licenses must be obtained from the copyright holders. Trademarks protect the name and logo of the game and/or company, thereby allowing these products to stand out from others.

Copyright	Trade Secret	Trademark	Patent
Music	Customer mailing lists	Company name	Hardware technical solutions
Code	Pricing information	Company logo	Inventive game play or game design elements
Story	Publisher contacts	Game title	Technical innovations such as software, networking or database design
Characters	Middleware contacts	Game subtitle	
Art	Developer contacts		
Box design	In-house development tools		
Website design	Deal terms		

Table 1 – *Reproduced from* Video Games and IP: A Global Perspective, *Greenspan, Boyd and Purewal (2014)*

One case where copyright and intellectual property rights were found to have been infringed was in Blizzard's 2014 lawsuit against Unico Interactive over the game *Legend of Crouching Dragon* (2014), which Blizzard claimed was a 'reskin' or clone of their game *Hearthstone* (2014). The term 'reskin' was used to demonstrate that the *Hearthstone* rule system and "fast-paced card slinging" remained intact in *Legend of Crouching Dragon*, which was said to have simply "re-themed" the artwork on the cards around the theme of the Chinese Three Kingdoms (Jou, 2014; Katzenbach, Herweg, & van Roessel, 2016: 854). As they were able to prove in Chinese courts that the basic IP rights of the game mechanics and structure belonged to Blizzard and their Chinese partner NetEase, Unico Interactive were ordered to pay 10,000,000 RMB ($1.6 million USD) to Blizzard and NetEase for copyright violations (Jou, 2014).

When it comes to IP protections in China, the written rules, laws, and regulations are clear: China has developed legal protections and actions set out in the Berne convention that are akin to those in the West. Much of the problem, then, lies in Western perceptions of Chinese law and shanzhai culture. Like the UK and the West generally, China recognises the protections

and is an assembly member of the Berne Convention. Western media, however, regularly portrays Chinese industry as intent on piracy, quick turnaround, and profit (Wirman, 2016).

Game fandom and transmedial works in the West

Across the world, fans play an important role in the popularity, and even the generation, of cultural and media content such as videogames. The contradictory need of fans to consume, commodify and create transmedial content can and often does create a grey area in terms of IP protection.

The participatory relationship of fans with transmedial products has been studied since the 1990s. Jenkins finds that the combination of the "encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts" and their subsequent "gaps or excesses," gives readers "a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take a life of their own" (Jenkins, 2007). When content takes on a life of its own, fan creations and other forms of user-generated content often reside in limbo when it comes to IP. Jenkins explains that fan fiction, for example, "can be seen as an unauthorised expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader's desire to 'fill in the gaps' they have discovered in the commercially produced material" (Jenkins, 2007). While unauthorised, the participatory nature of fan creation is often integral to the successful development of franchises. Fans have also adopted what Ritzer and Jurgenson call "prosumption" or the conflation of production and consumption of products (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010: 14). This can be seen in fan-generated content. In his work on fan cultures, Hills identifies a "contradictory process" within fan cultures which includes both challenging and intensifying notions of commodification (Hills, 2002: 182). Thus, fan participation within transmedia fan culture tends to be made for consumption (Scott, 2017: 1047).

While fans are drawn to fill in the gaps of the media they engage with, they also expect to be able to participate in all kinds of media creation (Rose, 2012). This expectation can be positive for companies wanting to increase fan interaction and raise brand awareness. The content created by fans allows them to express themselves by copying or mimicking the characters, interactions, and stories within their choice of media and/or generating their own new content with existing IP. This helps fans feel closer to the media in question and allows them to be a part of the content they enjoy, often providing good publicity for companies at the same time. This production, then, spurs further fan consumption of commercially produced content. Thus, transmedial fan-produced works can be seen as copies or imitations. Stein and Busse also find that "limitations of culture and technology are at the heart of fan creativity" and that these restrictions have generated a wide spectrum of fan-produced transmedia that "publicly challeng[e] long-held cultural values of originality, creativity as newness, and ownership of ideas and style" (Stein & Busse, 2009: 192). Thus, fan creativity and their prosumptions can be seen as pushing back against the concept of an original as well as the notion that ideas can be owned, further creating a grey area within IP protection.

The concept of transmedia and transmedial cultural products can be seen as an active participation from fans where they both consume and produce their own 'copies' and 'imitations' of content with established IP protections. This prosumption is not seen as an IP infringement. Instead, it is highly encouraged by companies and is often seen as the sign of a thriving franchise. Fan studies scholars like Stein and Busse have also noted that fan-produced transmedia works push back against originality and ownership, precisely as we argue in the case of shanzhai products. In the following section, we compare Western transmedia production and Chinese shanzhai culture to show their overlaps.

The Tradition of Shanzhai in China

As in the rest of the world, there has long been a tradition of imitation and reworking in China. However, many portrayals of Chinese copycat or shanzhai culture in the Western media have taken on overtly negative and racialized overtones; one report, for example, considers *Werewolf Among Us* to be a "rip-off version" of *Among Us* (S., 2020), while another article argues that Chinese game production began through "copying, imitation, and gradually moving to innovation" rather than recognising their labour as innovative (Nakamura & Wirman, 2021: 275). According to Fan, the Chinese word shanzhai went from meaning a "fenced mountain village located in remote areas and usually inhabited by ethnic minorities" to "cheap imitation or unauthorized reproduction; its extended meaning includes all activities involving a deliberate imitation" in the twenty-first century (Fan, 2016: 323). The modern interpretation of Chinese shanzhai has been translated into English as "imitation" (Chubb, 2015: 261; Page, 2019: 185; Chen, 2021: 265), "copycat" (Page, 2019: 185), "playful parody" (Chubb, 2015: 275) and/or "copy" (Hennessey, 2012: 609). While these terms do not necessarily hold negative connotations, other definitions, such as piracy (Hennessey, 2012: 609; Nakamura and Wirman, 2021: 280), "knock-off" (Fan, 2016: 324) and "counterfeit" (Jiang, 2014: 74), obviously do. These negative connotations evoke imagery of illegal goods and cheap imitations that are not nearly as good as the original product. Fan also notes that in the mid-twentieth century, it was common to refer to subcontracting and outsourcing as shanzhai (Fan, 2016: 328 note 2) underpinning perceptions of commercial plagiarism and a lack of creativity and innovation when it comes to Chinese creative production. These portrayals have a distinctly racist undertone and, as Chia discusses, "erase and denigrate the labour of marginalised people" (Chia, 2022: 24:19). In modern discussions of automation, outsourcing and subcontracting, racialised people are depicted as less creative and more robotic (Chia 2022; Amrute 2016; Irani 2018).

The original literal translation of shanzhai as a mountain fortress references remote mountain strongholds that Chinese warlords used to historically stockpile contraband and other stolen goods (Lin, 2011: 3). According to Lin (2011) and Chen (2021), the positive association with 'mountain bandits' lends itself better to the modern Chinese interpretation of the word (Chen, 2021: 265). The imagery of mountain bandits closely links the term, as well as shanzhai products themselves, to hacking culture. Unlike Westernised definitions of the term, hacking culture carries positive connotations. Specifically, this positive understanding of shanzhai refers to quick and efficient prototyping and localisation efforts performed by new businesses, blurring the boundaries between the original and the copy (Keane & Zhao, 2012). This blurring is part of Chinese culture. According to Han, in China and Chinese culture, the concept of an original is almost non-existent in that "the trace always lets the artwork *differ from itself*" (Han, 2017: 10). As such, works that imitate, copy, pastiche, or are inspired by another work are just as viable as the original because they are *part of* the original. As De Boever points out "Chinese thought breaks out of a *monological* notion of art" common in the west, so that "both individual and collective works are open to transformation" (De Boever, 2019: 44). As such, the culture surrounding an original is different in China, expanding the Western notion of a single original into the notion that copies are also part of the original work.

The expression of Chineseness and the use of local talent are important in shanzhai culture. The original imagery of the mountain bandits evokes similar implications as the Western legend of Robin Hood who redistributed wealth in a heroic manner. In China, shanzhai has gone from referring to illegal and poor-quality electronic goods from Shenzhen to suggesting a modern cultural movement that appropriates, combines, recreates, and parodies

consumerism and capitalism (Duval, 2015). The intention of many shanzhai products is to mimic the original while being distinctly Chinese. Chen refers to shanzhai as "the pop art of China" because it demonstrates China's understanding of their transformation of Western sensibilities and capitalism, by "reversing the engineering of capitalism for [their] own benefit" (Chen, cited in Duval, 2015). Shanzhai also recognises Chinese labour and creativity that is often taken away in Western racialisation and outsourcing, as discussed by Chia previously. Lin also notes that shanzhai culture is closely related to protest and rebellion against corporate wrongdoing, and as such, is a grassroots form of self-expression that creates cultural intimacy (Lin, 2011: 58). In this way, shanzhai culture is akin to that of transmedial fan-produced work, which can be said to act as a self-expression of fandom within a fan culture.

When considering the Westernisation of China, and usurping Western ideas of clones and copies, the term shanzhai can be broadened from the Western notion of a copy to include localisation and subversion, in addition to illegal imitations and counterfeit products. Fans in East Asia often adapt, localise, and translate Western content into a more recognisable and relatable form "in a dynamic cultural adaptation process" (Chen, 2021: 273). With this in mind, we might consider copies and shanzhai versions of games to be akin to localisation and culturalisation efforts to understand and enjoy original source material that is potentially not available in an East Asian language or context. According to Kerr, culturalisation is a type of localisation in which culturally specific terms or ideas are replaced with culturally appropriate alternatives for target markets (Kerr, 2017: 126). As such, shanzhai games can be thought of as localised Western games. Chen finds that, "Shanzhai, when understood critically, is not mere copying. It is a mutual constructing process, a cultural 'transmitter' for the local Chinese culture to break with its past (the Chinese School) and incorporate the foreign, and vice versa" (Chen, 2021: 265). In this way, shanzhai products are iterative in that they are copying one way of thinking and translating it into a more understandable and/or palatable way for local audiences. Like the conflation of production and consumption in fandom, shanzhai products can be seen as the conflation of negative Western stereotypes about Chinese copies, as well as efforts to localise content and subvert Westernisation.

The significance of the term shanzhai has grown and changed over time, first referring to mountain fortresses and bandits, and now having associations with copies, knock-offs and specifically Chinese products. Culturally, the different definitions of shanzhai are weighted toward positive (Chinese) and negative (Western) connotations. Western notions of shanzhai are negative largely because of the conflation of negative reports of Chinese game remakes, ideas of Western exceptionalism and a racialisation of outsourcing with an assumption that China and other Eastern countries are neither creative nor innovative. In China, however, the term shanzhai has changed and evolved over time to increasingly imply a pushback against the basic tenets of Westernisation. We argue that a shanzhai game can simultaneously be a game copy, an effort towards localisation and culturalisation of content that is otherwise unavailable in China, *and* a subversive anti-colonial act of mimicry that identifies gaps between Western and East Asian tastes and markets.

Reframing Game Remakes

From the above discussion, we have examined various perspectives on the practice and perception of copying in the West and in China. In Western games production and culture, we noted that copying has a place in commercial practice and in fan cultures, both of which are understood by clear processes with copyright and IP protection. In contrast, the Western perception of copying and protection in China is problematic and subject to simplification, with the reality being that copyright and IP protection in both China and the West are complex

issues. To expand on this, we have discussed how the Chinese tradition of shanzhai culture can help with understanding recent Chinese games that are considered copies. We argue that considering shanzhai alongside Western copying practices (i.e., from commercial to transmedia fan culture) can help develop a more nuanced understanding of Chinese and Western game remakes.

To explore our framework of shanzhai games in the context of Western ideas of transmedia and game copies, we selected the game *Among Us* (InnerSloth, 2018) as a case study. Inspired by the social deduction game "Mafia" (also known as "Werewolf" *Langren* ⬜ ⬜), *Among Us* is an online multiplayer game for PC, console, and mobile that brings four to fifteen players together in one of four locations and tasks them with completing a series of minigames (see Figure 1). Up to three members of the crew are randomly assigned as impostors whose job it is to sabotage and eliminate crewmates. It is the job of crewmates to try to work out who the impostors are, while impostors work to avoid detection until all crewmates are eliminated.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Among Us start screen from the InnerSloth website, available at: https://www.innersloth.com/press-kit/ (accessed 05.07.2022).

Though the game was released in 2018, it was in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic that a surge of interest in *Among Us* propelled it to being discussed as one of the prominent 'lockdown' games enjoyed by players around the world. *Among Us* makes for a particularly interesting case study, not only due to its global reach during lockdown but also because it inspired a series of copies and imitations, including fan imitations and homages, commercial imitations in the West, and a Chinese game with ludic similarities, *Werewolf Among Us* (*Langren zhi jian* 狼人之間; Shenzhen Youliang Technology, 2020).

When it comes to considerations of IP and copyright infringement, there are several stylistic and ludic similarities between *Among Us* and *Werewolf Among Us*. These include the simple character design and ability to customise characters, as well as borrowing gameplay mechanics from popular party games. This has led to several instances in which *Werewolf Among Us* has been considered a shanzhai game in a negative context, such as MintCat (*Bohe*

mao 薄荷貓) game's video playthrough of the game, which is titled "Among Us copy" (MintCat, 2020). We argue instead that the game can be considered a shanzhai game in a positive way. In the following case study, we examine the mechanics and transmedial productions surrounding *Among Us* in the west. We consider the Chinese game *Werewolf Among Us* to be an example of a game that localises and culturalises *Among Us*. Even though *Among Us* was one of the bestselling games in China, it was accessed illegally through the grey market. Because of this, the game *Werewolf Among Us* provided a kind of cultural awareness of the Chinese version of the party game Werewolf as well as an innovative business mindset by filling a gap in the legal Chinese games market.

Copying *Among Us* in the West and in China

According to the developers, the game was inspired by the live party game "Mafia", as demonstrated in the fact that the original ID for the App was "Space Mafia" (Carless, 2020). The party game "Mafia" was invented in 1986 by psychology students in Moscow State University (Demyanov et.al, 2015: 336). In it, players are secretly assigned the role of mafia (minority) or an innocent (majority). There are two stages of the game: night, where the mafia can covertly choose an innocent to 'murder', and day, where the surviving innocents can debate the identity of the mafia members and choose a player to eliminate. Play continues until all the mafia or the innocents have been eliminated.
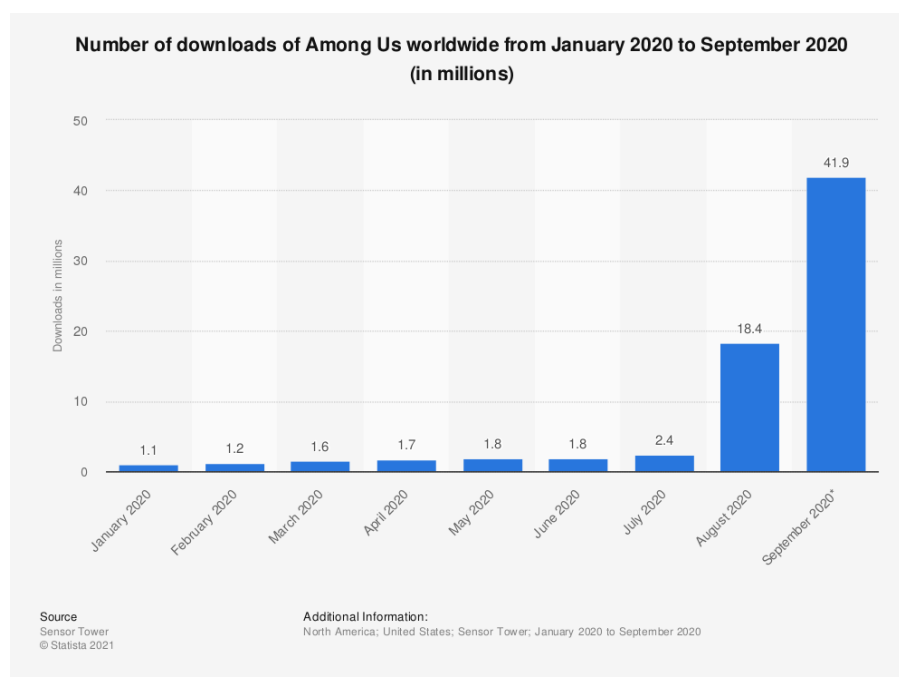

Figure 2. Among Us worldwide downloads from January 2020 to September 2020 (Clement, 2021).

Like "Mafia" before it, *Among Us* randomly splits players into crewmembers (majority) and impostors (minority) with the goal to either find the imposters or sabotage and kill the crewmembers. Because of the similar underlying processes and logic of the game as set out by Wardrip-Fruin (2011), the videogame *Among Us* could be considered a copy of party game "Mafia". As a live party game, however, "Mafia" is not necessarily protected by IP or copyright. On top of that, *Among Us* is different enough from "Mafia" for several other reasons: it borrows science fiction elements from other sources such as the film *The Thing* (1982); it is played not as a traditional party game but as a videogame across various gaming platforms; it does not overlap in terms of its direct market. Thus, there are sufficient degrees of separation

between the source materials and games to avoid copyright infringement, and it has not been considered a copycat game.

Notably, fan interaction with source material has driven the success of *Among Us*, informing the marketing from Innersloth. Two years after launch, *Among Us* shot to international overnight success (see Figure 2) after well-known Twitch and YouTube streamers promoted the game on social media. This success included downloads of the game on the grey market in China. According to Innersloth artist and *Among Us* game designer Bromander, content creators in South Korea and Brazil kicked off the 2020 surge of popularity, leading it to become most popular game in Mexico, Brazil and South Korea at the time (Bromander, cited in Grayson, 2020).

Figure 4: Screen shot of the newly released airship level of Among Us, depicting the new map and features used in the game, (Innersloth, 2020).

Innersloth recognise the importance of fan participation and user-generated content, but with certain limitations. They state on their DMCA and Fan Creation Policy for Innersloth Licensed IP page that while they welcome the excitement and drive to generate fan-made creations, they wanted people to be sure to purchase licensed merchandise. Their policies regarding "fanart, fan works, and other items created" based on their properties includes "if you create something based on our properties, please do not sell it yourself", "please do not vectorize, trace, or otherwise reproduce our marketing, branding and other assets to use in your items", do no use title or names in conjunction with the items you share and that they "reserve the right to reach out to you to ask you to remove infringing material […] on a case-by-case basis" (Innersloth, 2021). Thus, they understand the fans' needs for prosumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) of content as well as the "contradictory process" of challenging and intensifying commodification of their product and original IP (Hills, 2002: 182). Interestingly, Innersloth also call upon their fanbase to report any unlicensed or unofficial merchandise to developers, who will send the reports along to their brand protection team Morrison Rothman LLP (Innersloth, 2021). In doing so, the team utilise the fan passion for the game and recruit them into finding companies and/or other people attempting to profit from their original IP.

Many clear game remakes or imitations of *Among Us* were produced in the West and for Western consumption, where Roblox has become one of the most notable sources of the creation of *Among Us* copies (see Figure 5). Roblox remakes vary from close copies to creative adaptations and remixes with other media. These remakes, viewed through a transmedia lens, appear to be understood as 'legitimate' copies, transforming the original work into fan or hobbyist games shared on a platform that pushes user-generated content. Nevertheless, the copies of *Among Us* on Roblox, as shown in Figure 5, not only appear to contradict Innersloth's Fan Creation Policy with respect to close tracing of marketing or branding, but also potentially commercialise and capitalise on *Among Us* IP. While Roblox games are free to play, transactions are possible with in-game content using the platform's currency, Robux. The potential for monetisation and the commercial risk to Innersloth is arguably minimal, but nevertheless these Western copies of varying degrees of close similarity to *Among Us* are neither challenged nor generally seen in a negative light.
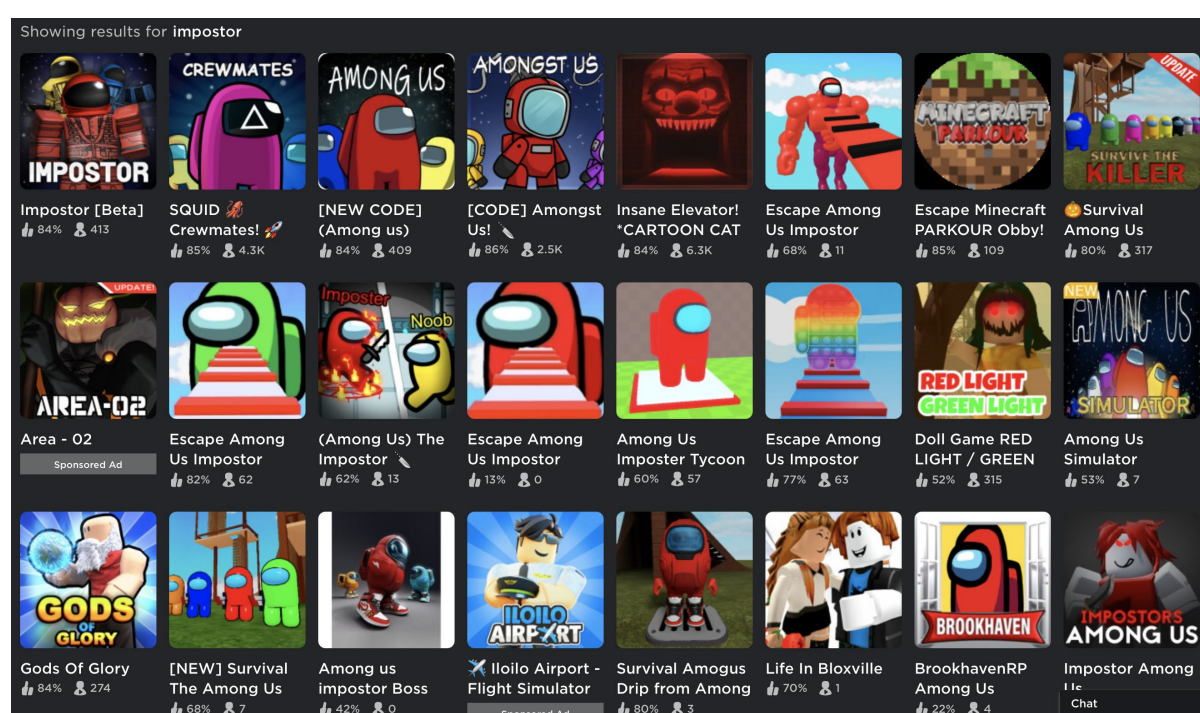

Figure 5: Examples of the diverse fan-made Among Us copies available to access on Roblox, screenshot taken by the authors of the above search for 'Impostor' via the Roblox storefront (https://www.roblox.com/discover/?Keyword=imposter), as returned in October 2021.

Werewolf Among Us

During the height of the popularity of *Among Us* in 2020, and while fan engagement and imitation games were being produced in the West, the Chinese developer Shenzhen Youliang Technology released *Werewolf Among Us*, an online multiplayer social-reasoning game where villagers reinforce the defences of a mysterious castle to combat invading werewolves (see Figure 6). However, mixed-blood werewolves are in the castle amongst the villagers, who attempt to sabotage reinforcements and attack villagers. The game can be considered to be a shanzhai version of *Among Us* given how closely the game mechanics map onto each other. However, it could alternatively be considered a localised version of the game for several reasons.

Even with the availability of *Werewolf Among Us*, Chinese players have still downloaded *Among Us* from both the Apple App Store and Steam on the grey market. According to the *South China Morning Post*, *Among Us* was the 10th most downloaded game in China in November 2020 (Ye, 2020). Qimai Data found that in 3 months, over 885,000 Chinese players downloaded Innersloth's game (S., 2020). Prime among these reasons is that *Among Us*, despite being available in China via the grey market and being a popular download in the country, is not compliant with Chinese state regulations for games (see Pilarowski, Lu & Zhu, 2021) and therefore is not available as an officially approved game. Had *Among Us* been previously approved for license, it would risk being banned due to several issues inherent in the game that would raise flags for regulators, such as depictions of real death, gender ambiguity, and even some of the player-to-player communication functions. However, *Werewolf Among Us* can also be considered to have been localised due a number of cultural and language adaptations made to better suit the China market, such as the game title, payment model, and the reframing of the 'kill' mechanic.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Werewolf Among Us from Wong (2020) demonstrating the stylistic and ludic similarities to Among Us.

In China, the party game "Mafia" is called "Werewolf" (*Langren* 狼 人). Using the word 'werewolf' in the title informs Chinese players of the base mechanics of the game. As such, the game acts as a localised version of *Among Us*. While the payment model of *Werewolf Among Us* is similar to that of *Among Us*, it conforms to the expectations that Chinese consumers have. While *Among Us* was free to download and play in its mobile version, there were charges for skins or for playing on different platforms. *Werewolf Among Us* is free to download in China with customisable 3D rather than 2D characters. *Werewolf Among Us* characters are also gendered, with a bow denoting a female character. There are also randomly assigned names given to players that they also have the option of changing. While skins and other customisable aspects of *Among Us* are available for purchase, *Werewolf Among Us* allows the unlocking of skins and pets within the game as gameplay continues. The first skin can be unlocked twenty-four hours after initial download. Changes to the 'kill' mechanic in *Werewolf*

Among Us allowed the game to pass Chinese games regulations. Rather than the violent and gory death scenes in *Among Us*, when a werewolf attacks a player in *Werewolf Among Us*, the character is simply knocked unconscious. Subsequently, players return as ghosts to finish their tasks in the hopes of winning the game as a villager.

Like *Among Us*, *Werewolf Among Us* was instantly popular. According to Forde (2021), it was the top free game downloaded from the App store in China upon its launch on 28th of October 2020. By November, *Werewolf Among Us* generated more than 100,000 installs in a 24-hour period, and by January 2021 the game had been downloaded an estimated 663,000 times. It is clear from the nearly one million downloads of the game made by Chinese players in the first three months of 2020 that Chinese audiences were aware of and interested in *Among Us*, but nevertheless were also interested in playing *Werewolf Among Us* as a China-developed game. Simultaneously, *Werewolf Among Us* not only demonstrates linguistic and cultural localisation, but also adheres to the strict regulatory requirements necessary for licensed sale in mainland China. In this sense, it is difficult to regard *Werewolf Among Us* as a market competitor to *Among Us* despite its close proximity: it is instead making possible a route to market, both culturally and legally, that *Among Us* was either not aiming or not able to achieve. This aligns with the earlier discussion of shanzhai as the reverse engineering of capitalism and Westernisation for Chinese benefit (Duval, 2015).

Even without Chinese localisation, players still had an appetite for *Among Us*. However, Shenzhen Youliang Technology took advantage of the lack of localisation as well as the delays that often accompany registering international games with Chinese publishers, a process which is known for being time consuming for Western companies (Borak, 2020). This kind of industrial ingenuity and business sense would likely be rewarded in the West. However, as it happens in China, and thanks to the negative press towards Chinese shanzhai, these shanzhai products are viewed negatively as "rip-offs" (S., 2020).

Fortnite Impostors

While attention shifted from seemingly innocuous Western-made fan copies of *Among Us* on platforms such as Roblox to the perceived 'rip-off' *Werewolf Among Us*, another copy of *Among Us* was on the way – one which was both Western-made and packaged as part of a commercial product by a major Western company. Launched in August 2021, *Fortnite Impostors* is a game mode for Epic Games' *Fortnite* (2017). This game mode incorporates the conventions of 'Mafia' and 'Werewolf' social deduction games, just as *Among Us* did in 2018. As described by Epic Games, Inc., "Fortnite Impostors is a mode for a maximum of ten players: eight Agents maintaining The Bridge and two Impostors out to overtake it", in which agents must "complete Assignments like calibrating chests and llamas, repairing the Battle Bus, and delivering Storm reports for analysis" and "work together to root out anyone masquerading as a fellow Agent" (Epic Games, Inc., 2021). Ultimately, *Fortnite Impostors* bears a striking resemblance to *Among Us* in both its ludic structures and presentation, from the use of the word impostor in the title through to the way agents (crewmates) vote for and eject potential impostors (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: screenshot of Youtuber Ali.A. playing Fortnite Imposters which has a similar elimination sequence to Among Us (Ali.A., 2021).

The release of *Fortnite Impostors* was almost immediately met with a swathe of gaming media articles drawing attention to the similarities with *Among Us* and questioning the actions of Epic Games. Some of the press coverage drew particular attention to the response of Innersloth, a notable example being Yin-Poole writing in *Eurogamer*. Drawing upon tweets from the Innersloth team, Yin-Poole summarised the sense of disappointment that members of the Innersloth team felt, concluding that it was a missed opportunity for collaboration between Innersloth and Epic Games and that limited effort had been put into differentiating *Fortnite Impostors* from *Among U*s (Yin-Poole, 2021). Interestingly, Yin-Poole highlighted commentary from Bromander on whether the mechanics of *Among Us* could have been copyrighted. Bromander is quoted having tweeted that "I don't think that leads to a healthy game industry" but also that "If WB can patent a Nemesis System and Square can patent the ATB system we could patent the tasks system for example" (Bromander, cited in Yin-Poole, 2021). On the 12th of October 2021, Epic Games credited *Among Us* and Innersloth as inspirations for the Impostor mode in *Fortnite* via Twitter (Carpenter, 2021).

While *Fortnite Impostors* is a Mafia-style social deduction game like many other games before it, it is also clearly perceived as an imitation specifically of *Among Us*. While anxiety over game imitations exist within Western games markets, we argue that *Fortnite Impostors* is not a shanzhai game: it is not a culturally differentiated and localised imitation. Indeed, the discourse on this imitation is more one of corporate power. *Fortnite Impostors* is a game produced by a large and powerful corporation that imitates a commercially successful game created by a small independent studio. It does not infringe upon copyright, but nevertheless is so close an imitation as to be widely recognised as such. To that end, we can observe that the Western perception of shanzhai games as being imitations that remake or otherwise rip off game products produced outside China is problematic. Arguably, anxiety over the risk that original game ideas may be taken and repackaged within the Chinese market can be misplaced where we can observe similar activities occurring within the West, with public and media recognition of it happening, but framing it as an example of corporate power rather than cultural difference.

From Western Transmedia to Chinese Shanzhai: Reframing the Remake

In this paper, we set out to examine how perceptions of game copies vary depending on the context in which the copy is produced, presented, and consumed, with a specific focus on the differences in Western and Chinese produced imitations of Western games. We identified that widely held Western perceptions of Chinese-produced imitations could paint a simplistic picture with respect to creativity, commercialisation, and copyright recognition, and proposed that a more complex set of legal and cultural factors impact how and why game copies exist.

Though seemingly straightforward, game copies and remakes, as well as their subsequent IP protections, are complex, commonplace, and often colonial. We proposed that the Chinese notion of shanzhai is closer to the Western practice of transmedia when considering the *intent* of imitation in a gaming context. When it comes to transmedia cultural production in the West, the line seems to be drawn at others using licensed IP to make money. Fan-produced games, art, costumes, and other products are encouraged and help propel the popularity of franchised content.

We also posited that Westernisation, negative media attention around China, and the Western racialisation of creativity have played into the Western negativity towards Chinese game remakes. This paper considers that a shanzhai game can be simultaneously a game copy, an effort towards localisation of content that is otherwise unavailable in China, *and* in some cases a subversive anti-Western act. Some shanzhai games can be thought of as transmedia that are both a production and consumption of Western products reframed for Chinese audiences. This means that such shanzhai games can be considered prosumption in the same way as other forms of fan-generated content. In doing so, shanzhai games simultaneously challenge and intensify notions of commodification *and* capitalism. In contradictory fashion, they both work against Westernisation and reimplement it.

Our case study on the origins of *Among Us*, its rapid global popularity in 2020, and subsequent myriad of fan engagements, imitations, and remakes in both the West and in China, has shown that the act of copying games in China is far more nuanced than Western media often report. Interrogating *Among us* and the *Among Us*-likes from the perspectives of copyright/IP, transmedia, and shanzhai has revealed a need for greater cultural awareness for transnational game development and publishing. While games companies such as Innersloth increasingly engage with transmedia notions of fan engagement as a legitimate but measured interaction with IP, the concept of shanzhai offers an additional lens through which to understand and interpret game remakes and copying in different cultural contexts. To that end, we conclude that game makers and rights holders in the West would benefit from a greater understanding of shanzhai as a complementary mode of engagement to Western transmedia. In particular, as we have discussed in this paper, a more nuanced understanding of how shanzhai mediates Chinese cultural, production, and regulatory difference can inform how game developers and publishers in Western nations approach mutually beneficial collaborations with China-based developers in the future.

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Issues and Strategies of Localising Sensitive Audiovisual Elements in Game Streaming: A Case Study on *Overwatch* League (OWL) Chinese Streaming

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Abstract

This paper is a participant-observer case study of the Overwatch *League (OWL) 2021 Chinese streaming. Within the contemporary dynamic and diversified mediascape of China, esports streaming has become increasingly popular (Taylor, 2018; Wohn & Freeman, 2020). Esports streaming allows spectators to watch esports players' intense competitions in real time and interact through danmu (bullet comments), gift sending systems, or via streaming lotteries (Lee et al., 2019; Abarbanel & Johnson, 2020; Zhang & Cassany, 2020). The Chinese streaming of* Overwatch *League (OWL), a series of* Overwatch *(OW) esports tournaments owned by Activision Blizzard, on Bilibili can be considered a game streaming localisation practice which localises audiovisual content from the original English-language streaming source into Chinese and then innovates upon it in the form of a number of local streaming programmes. The OWL Chinese streaming has disclosed many issues and strategies taken toward sensitive elements like game slang, cultural differences, the presence of erotic or violent content, gambling, media accessibility and censorship laws. The analysis of the selected cases in this article extends the current theories dealing with game localisation (e.g. Zhang Xiaochun, 2012; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013; Mangiron et al., 2014) into a new layer, dealing with game streaming localisation. The findings suggest the complications of game streaming content, including the controversial impacts of localisation strategies on sensitive elements, cross-media marketing of streaming practices and the participation of various stakeholders (e.g. officials, sponsors, fans) in game streaming localisation.*

Keywords: Game streaming, game localisation, game streaming localisation, game streaming interaction, cross-media marketing, and game slang.

Since the first commercial arcade video game (a game machine typically in public places like malls, restaurants, or bars), *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962) was released in the early 1960s, the world has witnessed the rapid development of video games (Donovan, 2010). Today, lots of new practices on game genres and gameplay and diversification of programming talents and gaming skills have emerged. Video games are celebrated by players of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds, and are played on an assortment of platforms and devices (Donovan, 2010). Technologies used to play games in recent years include arcades, consoles, PC, mobile phones and virtual reality (VR) gear. As an omnipresent form of global entertainment, video games have exerted a significant impact on social-cultural development and technological advancement (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). The evolution of video games has elicited a strong response within game studies concerning genres, playability, and audiovisual components. To meet the research gap on the integration of video games into streaming practices, this paper examines concepts and forms of sensitive audiovisual elements in game streaming and analyses related strategies and issues of the English-Chinese localisation based on an exploration of esport streaming in the case of the game *Overwatch* (2016). It aims to present a new academic

view of game streaming localisation, discussing variously definitions, content, features, stakeholders, and potential impacts.

The release of video games exclusively in just one or even a couple of languages can hardly meet the demands of global gamers, leading some scholars and gaming practitioners to acknowledge the importance of game localisation (Jooyaeian & Khoshsaligheh, 2022). Game localisation is not just a straightforward translation of game texts (Mangiron, 2018). However, limited by non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), localisers, no matter whether they are in-house or outsourced workers, usually have limited access to game files, lacking additional context. Meanwhile, most game companies adopt a simship (short for 'simultaneous shipment') mode that requires the simultaneous release of localised editions alongside domestic products, emphasising the urgency of localisation work. Therefore, especially in the early stages of the Chinese game localisation industry, there has been a degree of conceptual confusion between 'game translation' (*youxi fanyi* 游戏翻译) and 'game localisation' (*youxi bendihua* 游戏本地化). As the industry has evolved, the importance of game localisation across areas such as images, audio files, censorship law, advertising strategy and cross-media-marketing has gradually been revealed (Zhang Xiaochun, 2012). For instance, the localisation of game trailers, namely promotional videos to raise awareness, hype and ultimately sales for upcoming video games, has produced many collaborations between video game makers and film works (Švelch, 2017). Such new initiatives have, in turn, urged game localisation teams to subdivide and normalise localisation jobs and tasks. As shown in its official news, Blizzard's Chinese localisation team have increased their numbers, adding positions such as outsourcing manager, localisation engineer, audio specialist, and quality assurance analyst. With game localisation becoming more extensive, both the issues covered, and strategies taken have evolved (Zhang Xiaochun, 2012). In academia, localisation phenomena have not yet been fully researched, but may serve as theoretical support to broader interdisciplinary fields such as translation studies, communication studies, linguistics, lexicology, and advertising.

Game streaming can be most simply defined as an activity whereby people stream video games via the internet (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Since the mid-2000s, improvements to data speeds, decreases in broadband costs and the popularity of video games have created an explosion of game streaming activities (Burroughs & Rama, 2015), causing the commercialisation and standardisation of game streaming on global streaming platforms (Twitch, Youtube Gaming and Facebook Gaming) and via agencies (Upfluence, Viral Nation). Although in its early stages, 'streaming' referred primarily to TV streaming (e.g. Rodriguez & Bressan, 2012) or online-based content sharing like Netflix (e.g. Burroughs, 2019), current 'streaming' in both industry and academia is used in particular to denote streaming that provides real-time interaction as a form of tandem spectating between streamers and audience (see Lee et al., 2019; Shen, 2021).

Notably, popular game streaming in China includes two types of production, live and pre-recorded. Live game streaming allows streamers to play and stream a game in real time with no post-editing of content, while pre-recorded game streaming, as a kind of 'fake live streaming' in terms of the streaming authenticity, is usually embellished with pre-edited cuts, effects, transitions, stock footage, well-rounded storyline, subtitles, and voice-over. Streaming forms and interactions are closely connected to the purpose. For example, the streaming of closed game tests like Blizzard's PvP (player versus player; as opposed to player versus environment, PvE) streaming of *Overwatch 2* (2022) is a pre-recorded streaming of what is in effect a commercial collaboration, with strict censorship of content to reduce the negative impacts of game bugs and to attract potential customers (Kang et al., 2017). Machinima-style

game streaming pre-records real-time computer gameplay in service of fan creations (Jones, 2019).

As game streaming studies is not yet a truly mature field of research, huge gaps exist in the literature, such as with regard to game streaming genres. Most game streaming platforms allow spectators to select a game streaming room (the streaming webpage) by the video game played, game genre, streamers' genders, or via keywords, and thus these standards could be considered to be practical indicators of genre. By contrast, game streaming genres in academia are determined based primarily by game streaming features like content or performance. Limited by the perception of researchers and the state of streaming development in its early stages, the three major genres proposed by Smith et al. (2013) include speedrunning (a fast game playthrough of a whole video game or a selected part), 'Let's Play' (a normal playthrough of a video game with no time goals) and esports (the streaming of competitive video games or game competitions). However, there is an inconsistency on the terminology both in research and practice about game streaming. Though digital games have been played competitively since the 1980s, they were not fully accepted as professional sports at that time (Szablewicz, 2016). Esports were originally defined as a form of competition using competitive video games across many genres of games, including sports games, racing games, action games and massive multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), where competitors could be either individuals or teams (Burroughs & Rama, 2015). With practical expansion, the term 'esports' came to describe the official streaming of esports tournaments (see, for example, Smith et al., 2013; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) and for a time, self-conducted game streaming based on competitive video games in the first-person view was classified as a form of 'Let's Play'. However, the world has witnessed the rise of many new streaming genres related to esports gaming, such as post-analysis streaming hosted by fans or professionals on esports strategies or prize-giving quizzes based on esports tournaments. New jobs in the esports streaming industry are emerging, such as shoutcasters, observers or capture artists. [1] These changes suggest that mixed usages of the term 'esports' in gaming and streaming may cause ambiguity. Therefore, I retain the original definition of esports as a form of competition using competitive video games and use 'esports streaming' to include a wide range of streaming activities related to esports gaming.

Since the recognition of esports as sports by the General Administration of Sport of China in 2003, China has witnessed a significant development in esports and esports streaming (Lu Zhouxiang, 2016). In 2007, *FIFA 07* (2006), *NBA Live 07* (2006) and *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (2005) were listed for the first time as official esports competitions at the 2nd Asian Indoor Games in Macau, China. For the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China will officially debut eight esports games as medal sports. The government's emphasis and the public attention on esports in China have led to a boom in development, wherein not only business streaming platforms such as Huya Live 虎牙直播, Bilibili 哔哩哔哩, DouYu 斗鱼 and NetEase CC 网易 CC but also national franchises are broadcasting esports streaming. For instance, the final of King Pro League (KPL) Spring of 2020, an esports tournament of *Honor of Kings* (2015), was broadcast by China Global Television Network. This was the first tournament to be broadcast via a Chinese government-operated platform at a national level since 2003. In addition to this, the finals of *League of Legends* Pro League (LPL) 2018 Spring, an esports tournament of *League of Legends* (2009) held in Chengdu were live-streamed on both online

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[1] Shoutcasters provide running commentaries in live matches, observers control the in-game camera, and capture artists work after the game as directors and cinematographers to produce graphic artworks like posters or trailers.

game streaming platforms and the sports channel of Guangdong Radio and Television. Even amid the coronavirus pandemic around 2020, China's digital economy has proven resilient, experiencing an upsurge in game streaming upsurge via mobile streaming apps such as Douyin 抖音 and TikTok (Li et al., 2021). Key Opinion Leader (KOL) streaming, a streaming mode led by influencers who influence others' ideas, aesthetics and buying decisions, has been widely spread among game streamers (see Lu & Siegfried, 2021).

As much esports streaming was not initially conducted by Chinese organisations or streamed through Chinese platforms, Chinese spectators have been yearning for localisation. As might be expected, such practices, defined in this paper as 'game streaming localisation' are emerging. Game streaming localisation challenges the original concept of game localisation mainly at the level of game-content and brings it to an interdisciplinary area that involves media studies and marketing. Similar to cases of game localisation (e.g. Zhang Xiaochun, 2012; Mangiron, 2018), examination of game streaming localisation reveals significant audiovisual localisation phenomena displayed in the text, audio or image. Meanwhile, stakeholders such as streamers, spectators, streaming platforms, and game companies also shape the localisation from their stances by means of business collaborations, for instance, proposing localisation requirements for ads that appear in streaming (Pun, 2020). However, the lack of localisation foresight in game streaming causes many issues. To answer what potential sensitive audiovisual elements are in game streaming and what the underlying issues and strategies can be, this paper takes the Chinese-language streaming of *Overwatch* League (OWL), an esports tournament of the game *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) as a case study for research. OWL has been researched in terms of its broadcast structure and game presentation (Turtiainen et al., 2016), fan impact (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2019), the participation of female esports icons like Geguri (Cullen, 2018; Choi et al., 2020) and toxicity towards esports players (Tomkinson & Van Den Ende, 2021). Driven by practical phenomena, I use netnographical approaches such as participatory observation, transcribing, screenshots and screencasts to collect localisation samples of OWL-sensitive audiovisual elements. By using interdisciplinary approaches such as corpus studies and content analysis, I provide my analyses, discussions, and findings to extend relevant theory into new areas. The following sections introduce the case study and provide examples including ads, game slang, streaming notes, and streaming programmes. The findings shed light on the theoretical extension of game localisation on streaming practices by arguing for the importance of localisation, innovation, and fans' participation in game streaming localisation, and emphasising the significance of game slang in game streaming and online communication.

A Brief Introduction to the Localisation of *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* League in China

Overwatch (OW) is a team-based massively multiplayer online (MMO) first-person shooter (FPS) game, developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016. OW is now available on various gaming platforms including Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch. It has four servers, located in the Americas, Asia, Europe and China respectively. The OW storyline is set on a fictionalised Earth 30 years after the resolution of the Omnic Crisis, a calamity caused by the conflicts between humans and robots. Due to the Omnic Crisis, the United Nations formed Overwatch, an international task force intended to combat the threat, maintain peace and restore world order. There are thirty-two playable characters to date, called as 'heroes' and identified as heroic fighters in the OW storytelling, including eight heroes classed as tanks, seventeen heroes classed as damage and seven heroes classed as support. Tank heroes lead the charge by soaking up damage, creating space, and breaking apart fortified positions. Damage heroes seek out, engage, and defeat the enemies.

Support heroes empower the allies by healing them, boosting the damage, and providing vital utility. Each hero has different abilities that diversify their responsibilities in team missions (e.g. 1v1, 3v3, 6v6). Gamers can select missions from the main menu.

The *Overwatch* League (OWL), owned by Blizzard Entertainment, is a series of professional esports OW tournaments. The OWL tournament was originally announced in 2016, while its inaugural season started in 2018. OWL is comprised of twenty international independent city-based teams to date, differentiated by their cultural identities (e.g. colour, logo), ownership and most importantly, their team players. In OWL 2020, OWL teams were divided on based on their city bases into Atlantic teams (ten teams) and Pacific teams (ten teams). In OWL 2021, due to city base changes and an updated schedule, OWL teams are re-classified into the East (seven teams) and the West (thirteen teams).

Blizzard has developed unique China-based localisation and advertising strategies in response to the fast-growing Chinese gamer community, taking on board many Chinese investors for OW (Chang, 2020). First, there is a separate OW China server operated by NetEase (*Wangyi* 网易) while the other three servers including the Americas, Asia and Europe are operated by Blizzard. Gamers on the China server are thus technically unable to team up with players on others. In addition,, there are two localised versions for the Chinese market (e.g. websites, subtitles and dubbing). The one distributed in Mainland China in simplified Chinese is commonly described as 'the Mainland server' (*guofu* 国服), with the name of the game *Overwatch* translated as "*Shouwang xianfeng*" 守望先锋(lit. The Watching Vanguard). The version in traditional Chinese is called 'the Taiwan server' (*taifu* 台服), with *Overwatch* translated as "*Douzhen tegong*" 鬥陣特攻 (lit. Special Attack of the Fighting Battalion). Gamers can switch between the two versions via the language setting on Battle.net, the Blizzard desktop app. There are two versions in existence as simplified and traditional Chinese characters have a profound influence on the target users' written or spoken language and language habits (Yang & Wang, 2018). Simplified Chinese is officially used in Mainland China, Malaysia, and Singapore, while traditional Chinese is commonly used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Additionally, the game markets of Mainland China and Taiwan are separate. As clarified in "The Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area" (Dalu weiyuanhui, 1992), profit-seeking enterprises based in Mainland China are not allowed to conduct business activities in Taiwan until they have obtained official permission and established branches or offices in Taiwan.

Although OWL is a global esports competition, Blizzard has set English as the default language for the gameplay interface, in-game text, and in-game speech in global OWL streaming. Internal factors relate to the fact that over half of OWL teams are USA-based to date, featuring large numbers of English native speakers. External factors may involve difficulties in localisation faced by English-speaking broadcasting teams. In contrast, in cooperation with local streaming platforms, local OWL streaming teams including teams from China, Korea, Europe, and Australia, differentiated by region or language, broadcast streaming sourced from OWL (English) officials and replaced the English content (e.g. English commentaries) with localised versions. Once local OWL teams initiate region-based OW tournaments such as *Overwatch Contenders*,[2] a high-level regional tournament series for pro players who dream of ascending to OWL, other OWL streaming teams similarly broadcast streaming sourced from the regional tournaments and replace any content that requires

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[2] *Overwatch Contenders* 2021 has five regional tournaments including Contenders North America, Contenders Europe, Contenders Korea, Contenders Australia, and Contenders China, live-streamed to global spectators.

localisation. Currently, the official English streaming is available on the OWL YouTube English channnel, [3] and the Blizzard OWL official webpage. [4] Before OWL 2021, Chinese platforms including Bilibili, Huya Live, NetEase CC and Zhanqi TV co-hosted an OWL Chinese streaming room. Following OWL 2021, exclusive broadcast rights have been given to Bilibili. The other Chinese streaming platforms thus cancelled all OWL streaming schedules but collegiate, fan-organised tournaments or OW gameplays are still available.

Bilibili has connected many interesting platform-based interactions to OWL's localisation, such as *danmu* (弹幕) commenting, gift-sending systems, streaming lotteries and cross-media collaborations to attract spectators and activate interactions. Danmu, or 'bullet-curtain' style comments, also known as danmaku after the Japanese term, are one of the most common forms of interaction on most Chinese and Japanese video streaming platforms (Zhang & Cassany, 2020). It allows real-time comments sent by registered spectators to zoom across the screen like bullets. It was first adopted by Niconico, a Japanese animation, comics, and games (ACG) content-sharing platform, and then gradually spread across Chinese media platforms such as AcFun and Bilibili in the 2010s (Yang Yuhong, 2020). Spectators are allowed to turn off danmu, block keywords or report toxic danmu. Significantly, on most Chinese media platforms, streaming and video sharing are two separate sections. Danmu in streaming are in effect a visualisation of comments made on the stream (see Figure 1), while comments and danmu are separate objects as displayed in video sharing.
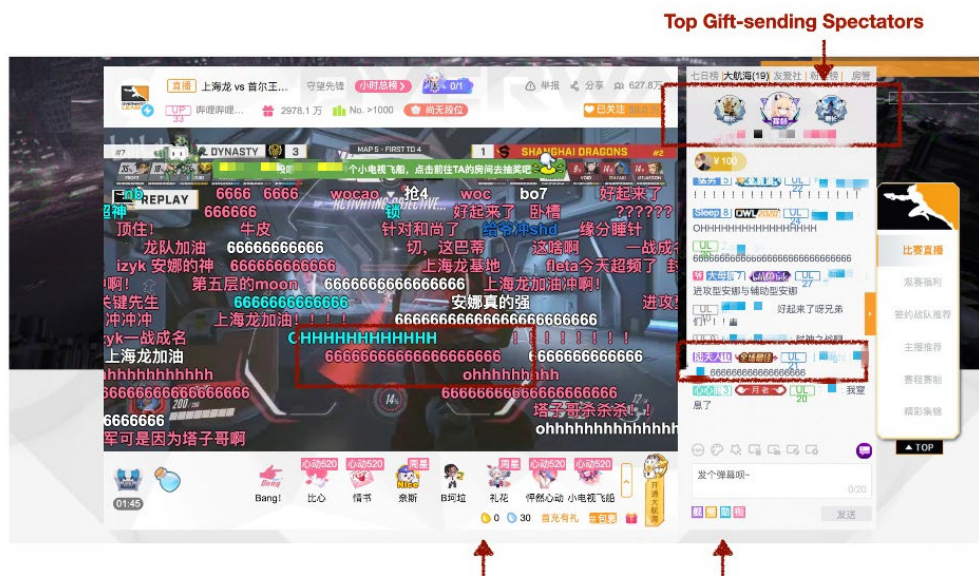
Figure 1: Display of danmu in OWL Chinese streaming on Bilibili, screenshot taken by the author, 24.05.2020

Case Study: Localising Sensitive Audiovisual Elements in *Overwatch* League Chinese Streaming

A video game is a manifestation of multiple semiotic modes (e.g. text, speech, gesture, image, moving image, sound effect, music, haptics, layout, olfaction, gustation, interactivity and immersion) and their coordination styles (Hawreliak, 2018). Sensitive elements in video games

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[3] For more information, please see: https://www.youtube.com/c/overwatchleague
[4] For more information, please see: https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/

broadly refer to audiovisual content that can easily cause discomfort, misunderstanding, upset, embarrassment, anger, and fear (Metallinou et al., 2012). Potential sources for such sensitivities include controversial cultural orientations, any extreme political inclinations, changeable censorship laws, copyright issues and any elements that may incite pornography, gambling, violence or instigate crime (Zhang Xiaochun, 2012; Jooyaeian & Khoshsaligheh, 2022). To decrease the negative impacts of such content through game localisation, strict censorship over imported video games has been established in China (Liao, 2016). Notably, since 15 April 2022, unapproved video games have been prohibited from being shown in online movies and TV series, variety shows, game streaming and short video platforms (Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju, 2022). The removal reflects a huge gap between game streaming localisation practices and the relevant laws in China. The following sections introduce typical examples of sensitive content in OWL Chinese streaming, analyse localisation issues and strategies, and explore the attitudes of potential stakeholders. They provide an overview of game streaming localisation and extend the conventional game localisation theories surrounding in-game content to new aspects such as fan localisation and online communication.

Case Group A: Ads

Game streaming is inseparable from digital promotion and business collaboration (Lakomy, 2019). OWL business partners are shown on its official webpage, with ads in pop-up windows that dynamically appear and disappear in game streaming. There are both English and Chinese ads in OWL Chinese streaming, with typical localised cases shown in Table 1. Following a July 2021 lawsuit in which Activision Blizzard was sued by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing for harassment and discrimination against female employees, business giants such as Coca-Cola, Kellogg, State Farm and T-Mobile temporarily reassessed partnerships with OWL and proactively removed their ads from global OWL streaming. It should thus be noted that the following examples were recorded before the lawsuit.

Table 1: Examples of Ads in OWL Chinese Streaming

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Name of the Company	Product
Your Team Your Chair	你的队伍，你的椅靠	Your Team, Your Chair, Your Companion	Zipchair Gaming	Gaming chairs
(The Logo of) HyperX	内存合作伙伴	The OWL Partner for Internal Storage	Hyperx	Game headsets, keyboards and more
Taste the Feeling	可口可乐，劲爽一刻	Coca-Cola, the Moment to Refresh	The Coca-Cola Company	Drinks
Subscribe to youtube.com/overwatchleague to get the latest and greatest OWL videos!	Non-localised	Non-localised	OWL (English)	The OWL English Streaming on YouTube

Transcreation is a translation technique that paints the original intent, style, tone, and context of source text (ST) in translated text (TT) (Pedersen, 2014). Transcreation in ads localisation keeps the essence of ST, explains the utility of the product, and appeals to the target consumers (Benetello, 2017). In Table 1, a slogan for Zipchair Gaming is localised as "your team, your chair, your companion" (*nide duiwu, nide yikao* 你的队伍, 你的椅靠). 椅 *yǐ* refers to "the chair", similar in homophonic pronunciation to 依 *yī*, a component character within the word *yikao* 依靠, meaning companion, or to rely on. It creatively delivers a similar-tone

association between different pronunciations of *yi* in Chinese, linking 'a gaming chair' to 'a good companion'. Furthermore, Hyperx are localised as "the OWL partner for internal storage" (*neicun hezuo huoban* 内存合作伙伴). *Neicun* (internal storage) implies the market positioning and product features, while *huoban* (partner) indicates the partnership between OWL and Hyperx, and the potential relation between the product and the users. Lastly, the slogan "taste the feeling" is localised as "the moment to refresh" (*jin shuang yi ke* 劲爽一刻), thereby avoiding a literal translation of "taste the feeling", which might be rendered as *pinchang ziwei* 品尝滋味 (lit. "experience the flavour"). The localisation imitates the physical and mental enjoyment of sipping Coca-Cola.

Notably, the ads of the OWL English YouTube channel, broadcast by the OWL Chinese streaming team from the English source are non-localised due to the lack of a realistic market. Although YouTube has an exclusive streaming deal for Activision esports, China has enforced standing national bans against YouTube since 2009 (Zhang Xiaochun, 2013). On the one hand, China's concerns over political and ideological influence from abroad may lead to the banning or rewriting of imported audiovisual products (Moskowitz, 2019). On the other hand, since no age-rating system for audiovisual products has yet been established in China to date, any potential illegal and immoral content may still be beyond the government's supervision.

Case Group B: Game Slang

Game slang, known as gamer-speak, gamer idiolect or ludolect, are context-dependent neologisms derived from the game environment (Strong, 2019). Game slang can be a word, a sentence, a number, a symbol, or even gibberish, following certain syntactic patterns (Olejniczak, 2015), produced through processes that can including compounding, blending, affixation, giving old words new meaning, creation of acronyms, conversion, and clipping (Liu & Liu, 2014), or no rules at all. Slang terms are initially attached to a game environment, and gamers may have similar or distinct recognitions of the slang terms, influenced by their gaming experiences, educational backgrounds, and cultural acceptance (Laato et al., 2021; Laato & Rauti, 2021). Slang terms have been observed in streaming titles, subtitles, danmu, in virtual gift-giving, the players' in-game chats or in shoutcasters' live commentaries. Those spectators who watch game streaming in effect immerse themselves in an interactive learning environment (Dizon, 2022) and potentially can thus take game slang as the default lexical choice (Strong, 2019). Through use of netnographical methods such as participatory observation, taking screenshots and screencasting, I record widely-used OW game slang terms in OWL Chinese streaming (see Table 2), as classified by language pattern.

Table 2: Selected Game Slang Examples in OWL Chinese Game Streaming

Category	Example	Connotation
Arabic Numeral	1	1 is to express "a positive answer", which indicates the eagerness to join a team, or agreement with someone's idea.
Symbol	+ and =	If a gamer invites you to a team, your responses can be +, = or "sorry, next time". + means "please invite me" as it is similar to the player-invite button in OW. = means "wait for me", because the equals sign in Chinese is called the *dengyuhao* 等于号, and *deng* 等 can also mean "to wait".

Emoticon	ʕ•ᴥ•ʔ	A bear's smiling face. In addition to this, diversified emoticons are sent in danmu.
English	Cloud 9, or C9	Cloud 9 is an OW esports team, famous for its dramatic performance in an OW tournament. All Cloud 9 players devoted themselves to killing the enemy but forgot the game mission of protecting the payload and they lost the game. Cloud 9 is thus to describe situations in which OW gamers forget their mission and are defeated.
	Gency	Gency is a compound word of Genji (a male character) and Mercy (a female character), a couple who have great popularity in OW fandom.
Chinese	永远的神, 永远滴神, or YYDS (the pinyin initials for *yong yuan de shen* 永远的神 or *yong yuan di shen* 永远滴神)	These word variations all mean "forever god", with *yongyuan de* 永远的 or *yongyuan di* 永远滴 as "forever" and *shen* 神 as "god". They are employed to compliment a player's talented gameplay. Although *yongyuan de* 永远的 and *yongyuan di* 永远滴 have the same connotations, the latter is more playful, using a non-standard character and the colloquial pronunciation *di*.
	明星球	The back translation of *mingxing qiu* 明星球 is "superstar's ball". This term is uncommon in non-OW contexts. To describe a nice shot in ball games, Chinese people may say *hao qiu* 好 (nice) 球 (shot). In this case, *hao* 好 is replaced with *mingxing* 明星 (superstar), and is used to congratulate a player for a super-star-style nice kill or a nice kill from super-star player in OWL.
Chinese phrases or Pinyin (initials) with the same or similar pronunciation of borrowed words	西巴, or Xi Ba	*Xi ba* 西巴 or Xi Ba is close to the pronunciation of the Korean swearword *ssi bal* □ □ (what the hell).
	润	The pinyin of the character 润 with is "*run*". 润 is thus equivalent to "runaway" in gaming slang. By using *run* 润, the gamer may express either "step back" or "I am getting offline".

As fanatical Chinese OW gamers or OWL fans are not satisfied by only taking part in Sinophone cross-media activities, they actively watch Anglophone streaming or news and surf Anglophone fandoms like Discord, Twitter, or Reddit. English slang terms are likely to be learned, used, or recreated, thereby spreading across Chinese media (Han & Reinhardt, 2022). Due to their own distinct gaming experiences and recognitions, connotations of slang terms are self-constructed by users (Laato & Rauti, 2021), echoing the definition of audiovisual sensitive elements. To introduce correct connotations of popular slang terms in OWL Chinese streaming,

a series of Chinese video clips titled "*Tuo nide fu*" 托你的福 ("Thank you for blessing me") were released on social media platforms (Douyin, Weibo) and streamed in OWL Chinese streaming as promotional videos in the interval since OWL 2021. Although the Weibo versions (see Figure 2) were originally designed to be viewed on a smartphone, causing some digital inconsistency and inconvenience for PC users, the videos imply potential ways to spread OW slang from streaming to other social media. Notably, Chinese localisers seem to notice the significance of slang localisation between English and Chinese contexts, because the title *Tuo nide fu* imitates the format of *tuofu* 托福 (the Test of English as a Foreign Language). The slogan of the series is "*kan liansai xue danci*" 看联赛学单词, which could be translated as "learn English vocabulary by watching OWL".

Figure 2 OWL Tuo nide fu 托你的福*: mobile view and webpage view on Sina Weibo, screenshot taken by the author, 30.08.2020.*

Figure 3 shows an episode of Tuo nide fu, wherein "dive", an English-language slang term from OW is compared to a Chinese slang item, "*fang gou*" 放狗 (free the dog). "Dive" and "*fang gou*" co-exist in the Chinese OW context and OWL streaming. "Dive" is used to refer to instances when highly mobile characters jump into an opponent's front line as a dog might do, echoing *fang gou* which could be translated as "release the dogs". In the Chinese gaming context, apart from in assassin-like gamers, *gou* (dog) is used to describe a gamer who is carefully watching for enemies and being very circumspect about potentially putting themselves into a situation where they might be at a disadvantage. The term is popular in games such as C*ounter-Strike: Global Offensive* (2012) and *League of Legends* (2009). The over-circumspection that such players show in certain in-game actions such taking shelter, hitting someone through the hole in a door or taking treatment packs can infuriate their fellow gamers. Insulting expressions such as "*ni zhege ren zhen gou*" 你这个人真狗 (You are really such as dog) have thus emerged, targeting such players. This could be glossed as "you are a very

insidious person who interrupts my gameplay enjoyment, shame on you". Therefore, a direct comparison between "dive" and "*fang gou*" may break the neutrality that the strategy described by the slang term "dive" has, and hence distort the connotations of both slang items. It further extends the lexical borrowing of concepts between different language contexts (e.g. Daulton, 2012) into the context of gaming.

Figure 3 Game Slang: "dive". Screenshot from Sina Weibo (https://weibo.com/6399645614/JDUV29H05), taken by the author, 19.01.2021.

Figure 4, below, shows the special danmu triggering system, which activates to allow spectators to send an uneditable danmu to Team Paris Eternal 巴黎永生队, after they had become the champions of the Summer Showdown tournament in OWL 2020. Although danmu are usually flexibly editable, in this case, a window pops up showing the message to be sent, reading "Congratulations to Team Paris! Dong dong dong!" (*gongxi bali yongsheng!!! dong dong dong!* 恭喜巴黎永生！！！咚咚咚！）, which will close automatically after the danmu message is sent. "*Gongxi Bali yongsheng*" means "congratulations to Paris Eternal", while "*dong dong dong*" is an onomatopoetic phrase used in Chinese to imitate the beat of a drum in the festival or a victory banquet. The mimetic use of "*dong dong dong*" indicates a Chinese-rooted creative strategy to increase the sense of belonging of Chinese spectators. Though this particular danmu was a compliment to a specific OWL team, which itself may attract same-interest groups and provide a differentiation in the identities of spectators (Strong, 2019), for spectators, playfully deactivating the ads provides a combination of notifying the audience of the winner of the tournament (the victory of Team Paris Eternal) and of the reward given for sending the danmu (100 OWL tokens), reinforcing the OWL brand and psychological satisfaction of fans (see Altmeyer et al., 2019).
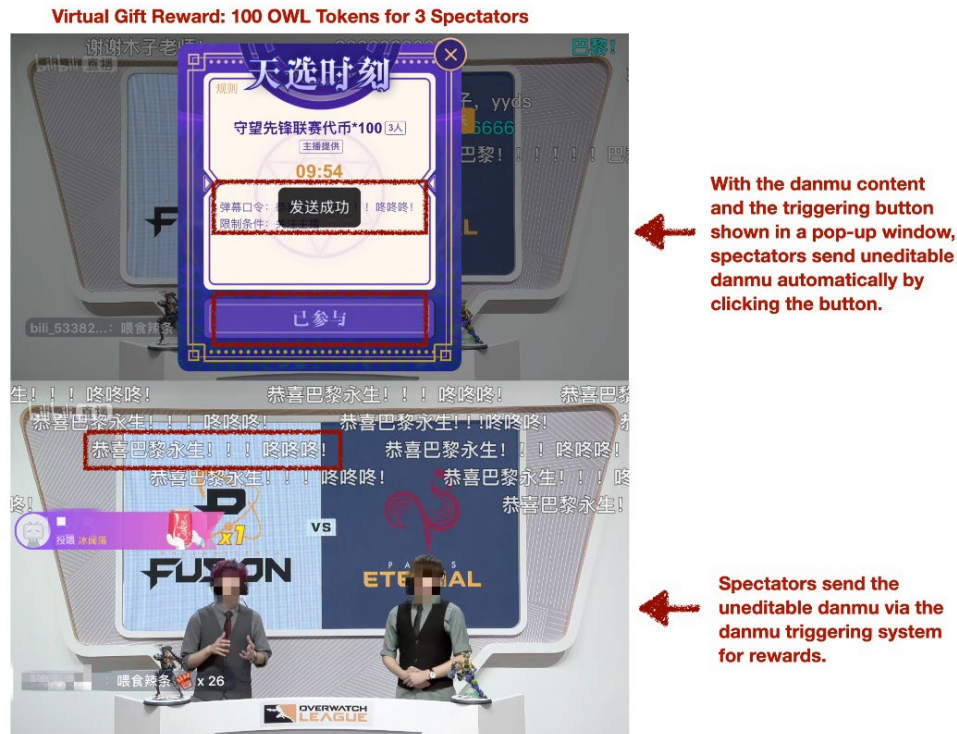
Figure 4: the danmu triggering system, screenshot taken by the author, 06.07.2020

Game slang is often adopted by OWL players and shoutcasters in streaming. For OWL players, due to time constraints and space limits, they tend to use game slang to talk to teammates through voice chat or to communicate with opponents in text chat. The public text messages are sometimes streamed by directors and the introduction of the live text communication may revive and enliven the streaming atmosphere. However, some Chinese OWL shoutcasters avoid translating English text communications. Figure 5 explains the reasons for non-localisation of chat messages in streaming. First, the text is too small to capture under the quick shot transition through the monitor for shoutcasters. Second, the lack of translation skills on the part of shoutcasters, their distracted attention and the pressure they are under to perform may influence the results of translation (Dwyer, 2017). Remarkably, the lack of localisation of the OWL players' text chat in streaming stimulates fans to participate in fan translation, an activity inspired by fans' affinity for creation of fan-made products to feed the audience (Vazquez-Calvo, 2022). Fans not only translate OWL in-game chat messages but also translate other audiovisual products that might be of interest to the fandom, such as social media posts (e.g. Tweet, Insta Story) and news reports. In Figure 6, the Tweets of Eternal players are localised into Chinese in the format of "Player: Content" on Eternal's Weibo fan page. Most game slang terms that originated in English are not localised in the Chinese context. OMG is an acronym for "oh my god"; "duo" describes a pair of fixed players who always play together; "GGs" means "good games"; "WTF" is an acronym for "what the fuck". They suggest lexical borrowing and English acronyms are frequently used in the Chinese context, and further indicates fans' participation in spreading slang terms.

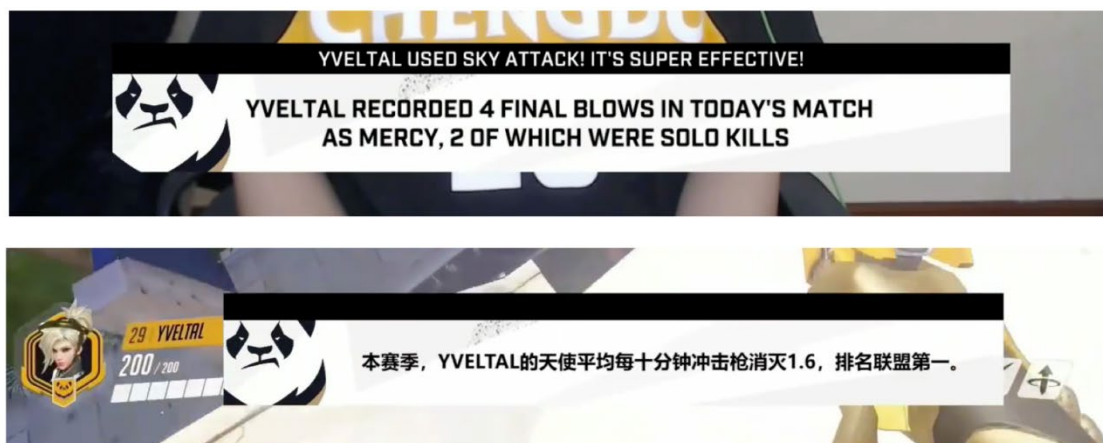*Figure 5: Game slang in OW text chat in OWL Chinese streaming; screenshot taken by the author, 20.07.2020.*

Figure 6: Fan translation into Chinese of Tweets sent by Team Paris Eternal players; screenshots from Sina Weibo (left https://weibo.com/6562805286/J9TRQaT8M; right https://weibo.com/6562805286/J9VuR3V4U), taken by the author, 06.07.2020.

Case Group C: OWL Notes

"OWL notes" refers to the pop-up windows showing OWL statistics in OWL Chinese streaming. The main source for the statistics is OWL Stats Lab the Blizzard official online database. [5] Evidence from streaming suggests that Chinese shoutcasters have real-time access to English-language OWL notes in streaming through their monitors, no earlier than online spectators.

Both English and Chinese notes appeared in OWL 2021 Chinese streaming. Limited by the real-time broadcasting of the English streaming source, the English version is normally replaced with the Chinese translation in a few seconds, but mistranslation and omission remain prominent issues. In Figure 7, the note above was replaced by the bottom one after approximately 2 seconds. Although both notes are to commend the Chinese Mercy (a support hero) player, Li "Yveltal" Xianyao 李先曜 for his commendable performance, the content of the Chinese note does not match the English one. Notably, the title of the English note indicates a famously quotable meme among game communities such as *Pokémon GO* (2016), and it is also a *Pokémon* game line, taking the form "A used B ability! It is super effective!". Although no clear clue has been shown linking the source of Li Xianyao's BattleTag (a player-chosen nickname for Blizzard games) to the *Pokémon* mascot "Yveltal", the English note reflects that people who recognise "Yveltal" as the name of Li and the name of a *Pokémon* mascot may comprehend the in-joke provided by the game line. It also indicates a transmission of the humorous messages within game communities. Similarly, in Chinese online communities, the slang term "*geng*" 梗 is used to describe widely-accepted jokes that represent a particular phenomenon or theme, and "*wan geng*" 玩梗 ("play geng") refers to the spread of such jokes through imitation, association, and quotation. Unfortunately, because of the lack of awareness of this joke and skills, the Chinese localisation team has not clearly distinguished and localised the joke made in the original note about Yveltal. The failure to localise the humour here indicates the potential difficulties in instant localisation of English-language OWL notes.

Figure 7: Chinese and English OWL Notes referencing Yveltal. showing the mismatch between English original and Chinese translation. Screenshot taken by the author, 21.08.2021.

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[5] For more information, please see https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/statslab

The difficulties of localising English notes in turn create a space for innovative Chinese notes in OWL Chinese streaming. Figure 8 shows two Chinese notes in the battle between Team Hangzhou Spark and Team Shanghai Dragons in OWL 2021. *Tu cao* 吐槽, a fansubbing and subtitling strategy used to embed translators' humorous comments in subtitles or as translators' notes (Zhang, 2013) is adopted. Since Dragons, the champion of OWL Grand Finals 2021, normally perform better than Spark in the seasonal team rankings, the Chinese note in Figure 8 below reads "The first time since 2019 that… Spark has taken points off the Dragons …" (*Zhe shi Hangzhou shandian dui zi 2019 saiji…diyici zai Shanghai long zhi dui shou zhong nafen* 这是杭州闪电队自 2019 赛季···第一次在上海龙之队手中拿分), with the title as "We never expected that you would be seeing this note, so we hadn't prepared a title" (*Xiangbudao nimen neng kandao zhe yi tiao, suoyi women meiqi biaoti* 想不到你们能看到这一条，所以我们没起标题). The bottom line states "There is not much time left for the Dragons" (*Liugei Shanghai long de shijian yijing buduo le* 留给上海龙的时间已经不多了) and emphasizes again the unexpected scores.

Figure 8: Chinese OWL Notes in tu cao *style, screenshot taken by the author, 23.04.2021.*

Case Group D: Game Streaming Programmes

To better attract spectators in the OWL match interval, many different streaming programmes are offered as part of OWL Chinese streaming (see Table 3). Those with 'localised' tags have been localised from English OWL streaming with pre-edited Chinese subtitles and (optional) voiceovers, while the 'innovative' tag is applied to programmes that have been created by the Chinese OWL team.

Table 3 OWL Chinese Streaming Programmes

Programme (Chinese)	Back Translation	Pre-recorded or Live	Localised or Innovative	Description
赛场时光机	OWL Time Machine	Pre-recorded	Innovative	To introduce famous gameplay in OWL history

				and replay game highlights. Programmes follow certain themes, such as teamwork, unexpected kills, or talented players.
联赛监测站	OWL Watch Point	Live	Innovative	To commentate on famous rounds, give professional analysis and introduce the upcoming rounds.
联赛靶场	OWL Shooting Range	Live	Innovative	This programme is a live commentary on game strategy hosted by shoutcasters and analysts. They commentate based on screenshots or un-edited playback of OWL gameplay, broadcast immediately after the round finishes.
战术小抄	OWL Strategy Notes	Pre-recorded	Innovative	This programme is pre-recorded and provides analysis of game strategies, with a voice-over and advanced video editing techniques.
高光时刻	OWL Highlights	Pre-recorded	Localised	To introduce game highlights on a weekly or seasonal basis.
本周最佳	OWL Best of the Week	Pre-recorded	Localised	To introduce game highlights on a weekly basis.
赛场休息时间	OWL Time for Break	Live or pre-recorded	Innovative	To show the live performance of shoutcasters or pre-recorded promotional videos in the interval.
队内语音	OWL Team Voice Chat	Pre-recorded	Localised	To show pre-edited interesting voice chats between OWL players.

Almost all OWL gameplay and OWL Chinese programmes, localised or innovative, are uploaded onto the Bilibili OWL programme channel,[6] an independent content-sharing platform that is separate from the Bilibili OWL Chinese streaming room[7] and the Bilibili OWL match-sharing channel.[8] However, most innovative Chinese programmes are not uploaded onto OWL English platforms like YouTube. Potential reasons include English spectators' distinct language preferences, cultural backgrounds, unfamiliarity with the OWL Chinese community compared with the Chinese spectators, and most importantly, ideological factors and censorship laws (Moskowitz, 2019). On the other hand, there are many localisation loopholes in the Chinese programmes, which may cause miscomprehension for non-Chinese spectators. For instance, the OWL Chinese team has not designed an English logo for *Liansai jiancezhan* 联赛监测站 (OWL Watch Point), but they provide an English logo for *Saichang shiguangji* 赛场时光机

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[6] For more information, please see https://space.bilibili.com/365902357?spm_id_from=333.337.0.0
[7] For more information, please see
https://live.bilibili.com/76?broadcast_type=0&is_room_feed=1&spm_id_from=333.999.0.0
[8] For more information, please see https://space.bilibili.com/50333369

(OWL Time Machine) which reads "OWL Machine Time" (see Figure 9), breaking the more conventional top-to-bottom reading order. Meanwhile, the content of *Saichang xiuxi shijian* 赛场休息时间 (OWL Time for Break) is random, including pre-recorded programmes and live-streamerd content. The director once streamed the Chinese female shoutcaster Li "Xiaoshuang" Yongshuang 李咏霜 in this programme while she dozed off at break time. Fan-made screenshots and videos of Xiaoshuang's sleepiness (see Figure 10) resulted in heated discussions concerning her, including compliments, toxic comments, and spoof videos.

Figure 9: OWL Machine Time, otherwise known as OWL Time Machine, screenshot taken by the author, 06.09.2021.

Figure 10: Fan-uploaded recorded streaming clip of Xiaoshuang on Bilibili. screenshot taken by the author on 13.04.2022.

The lack of messages from Chinese communities in non-Chinese OWL streaming thus motivates fans to utilise forms of online communication to offer a window by which parallel, non-Western cultures can reach out to new audiences (Cruz et al., 2021). For instance, a Reddit post (see Figure 11) introduces the proposal made by Chinese shoutcaster Liu "Roy" Yuanyi 刘远仪 to his fiancée, "Xiaoxiao" 萧萧 in Hangzhou Spark Homestand, a series of games played at the home field of Team Hangzhou Spark. The fan's online introduction plays an important role in conveying messages that are omitted from game streaming and offers a comparatively neutral and accurate introduction to those involved. This said, it has been noted in other scholarship that fan activities can sometimes convey the biases of subsections of the fandom and mistranslations are also possible (Vazquez-Calvo, 2022; Zhang Xiaochun, 2013).

Figure 11: Fan's Reddit post on the proposal made by Liu Yuanyi to his fiancée, Xiaoxiao, screenshot from Reddit, taken by the author, 21.04.2022.

Findings and Discussion

As OWL localisation data is not fully open to the public, most instances are collected through participatory observation using netnographical methods to examine the forms, content, localisation strategies and issues surrounding sensitive audiovisual elements in OWL Chinese streaming. I have no concrete data from which to argue whether these localisation strategies are born from localisers' reactions in the moment, or if they are the results of mature consideration. However, many of the instances examined here echo localisation theories such as transcreation (e.g. Benetello, 2017), omission (e.g. Zhang Xiaochun, 2012) and cross-media strategies (e.g. Mangiron, 2018). Meanwhile, two layers of sensitive audiovisual elements of game streaming can be determined, namely sensitive in-game content and a further layer of sensitivity derived from video games' integration into streaming media. The first category includes erotic images, non-localised in-game speeches, or ideological differences (Zhang Xiaochun, 2012). This first category of sensitivity rarely occurs in OWL Chinese streaming due to the strict censorship and the adoption of considerate strategies for video games' publication and localisation in China (Liao, 2016). Although the English OW interface used in streaming is an exception to the general care taken over localisation in OWL Chinese streaming, the details of play are normally introduced by Chinese shoutcasters. In contrast, the second-type of sensitivity is reflected in a diverse range of examples, including ads, game slang, streaming notes, and streaming programmes, leading to unique streaming localisation strategies and issues as follows.

First, game streaming localisation cannot be considered a simple combination of video game localisation and game streaming. What officials do regarding OWL Chinese streaming is not exclusive to localising imported audiovisual elements but is instead related to producing streaming content infused with creativity and innovation. For imported content, they adopt strategies like literal translation, transcreation, and omission. Due to cultural differences, personal interpretation and the quality of localisation quality, spectators may self-interpret localised content. In terms of innovation, Chinese localisers not only create unique Chinese programmes to deliver local news but also creatively connect popular OW slang and special localisation techniques such as *tu cao* to streaming interactions (e.g. danmu, the gift sending system) to help create a common identity for Chinese spectators. However, such early-stage innovation, pursued with a lack of experience and foresight, can cause issues. For instance, in an episode of the innovative streaming programme OWL Time for Break, a fan-created comic painting depicting sexual intercourse between animals held up by a spectator in the streaming studio was live-streamed to spectators of all ages. This painting led to a dispute between fans of Team Chengdu Hunters, who have a panda logo, and Team Seoul Dynasty, whose logo is a tiger. The incident further exposed the absence of code of conduct for the audience and streaming workers, echoing the conclusionss of Szablewicz (2016): although China plays an important role in technological production and digital game culture, the necessary regulations or laws to regulate the streaming industry are not fully established. Specially, for this instance, it highlights the lack of an age rating system for this kind of content and the absence of censorship laws specifically related to streaming content. My findings should spur localisers to study broadly in pursuit of cross-cultural insight and advanced localisation skills, and to work towards creating industry norms to guide the establishment of a complete and professional streaming system.

Second, this paper argues that fans contribute to game streaming localisation in diverse ways. OWL spectators have various personas (Cheung & Huang, 2011). Those with particularly strong interest can be considered fans, and such individuals will voluntarily post danmu, take part in streaming lotteries, and conduct cross-media localisation practices like fanrepost, fantranscript and fansubbing. Fans offer insights that work to remedy information omitted from game streaming and create fan-based audiovisual products. Their motives vary from a simple desire to share game news to an enthusiastic appreciation of certain teams or players. Fan localisation practices co-create a collaborative streaming localisation alongside the officials managing the formal game tournament environment, as in the live-streamed proposal. This reflects the importance of fan participation in the game community and further casts light on the inadequate resources provided for official localisation efforts. Meanwhile, because fan localisation is usually uncensored and unproofread, their works may contain mistranslations, omissions, non-translations, and self-interpretations. However, these same features also disclose unique features in the form of localisation or its content. My findings suggest that, as an indispensable part of game streaming localisation, fan localisers and their works should be taken seriously to optimise the impacts of localisation.

Lastly, the unique features of game language, namely game slang, reflected in gamer communications or shoutcaster commentaries, is observed throughout almost the entire process of game streaming localisaton. Some slang terms may have previously existed in the video game environment as a kind of default language, but they can evolve to become part of the identities of specific players in streaming. Others may be created in streaming as in the case of Cloud 9, a term now used to describe an unexpected loss. Mixed sources and forms of slang terms are presented in OWL Chinese streaming in titles, descriptions, and commentaries, which are then imitated by spectators in what can be considered an online immersive learning environment through danmu, reposts, and comments. On the one hand, the imported slang reflects a translingual slang environment in streaming, and the Chinese-rooted slang indicates unique cultural identities and perceptions. On the other hand, the spread of slang terms via streaming platforms or social media through official programmes or fan posts implies a new state for game slang, in which it transcends the limits of specific video games (Strong, 2019). My findings emphasise the significance of game slang in the online game community and game streaming localisation, especially when internet communication is one of the dominant forms of communication within Chinese society and between Chinese citizens and the international community (Hu & Chen, 2022).

Overall, through the analysis of streaming localisation as in the case of OWL, I underscore the interdisciplinary nature of game localisation studies, touching on linguistics, lexicology, translation studies, communication studies and advertising. The results and findings shed light on game streaming localisation, a nascent research area with great commercial prospects and academic significance.

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Ludography

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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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Tech Otakus Save The World? Gacha, *Genshin Impact*, and Cybernesis

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Abstract

With the shift of life online, accelerated by the pandemic, cybernetic conceptions of personhood are becoming increasingly pertinent. The anthropological literature has yet to properly contend with Donna Haraway and Gregory Bateson's challenges that the person might be best understood as a cybernetic organism. Based on eleven months' ethnography during COVID-19, conducted in-person in Hong Kong and Korea, and digitally with communities in Taiwan and farther afield, this paper takes up that challenge in an intimate look at the cybernetic formation of personhood through videogames. I focus on the recent output of miHoYo's Genshin Impact, *which has a playerbase in the hundreds of millions. In two contrastive Chinese contexts, Taiwan and Hong Kong, I interrogate the effects of gacha monetisation on personhood. Through the activities in-world, and engagement in internal and adjacent communities, videogame identities become componential to personhood. However, so too do the players become components in the gacha characters, and even in miHoYo, as cybernetic organisms. Given the developers' explicit ambitions – not least of all in their motto, 'tech otakus save the world' – and potential tensions with Mainland regulations, I explore the nascent Chinese metaverse from its present limits. In so doing, I show the significance of this game and its community for the future of all cyber society, and the utility of my conception of 'cybernesis' for understanding that future.*

Keywords: cybernesis, personhood, metaverse, dividuality, psychological anthropology, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, gacha, *Genshin Impact*

Introduction

Genshin Impact (*Yuan shen* 原神; miHoYo 2020), a fantasy-themed open-world action role-playing game produced by the Chinese games company miHoYo 米哈游, has been a runaway success since its initial release in September 2020. A major cultural export that has made tens of billions of renminbi around the world, it is the flagship product in the developer's bid to become a lead player in the metaverse. [1] Studying *Genshin*, its community, and competitors, offers a unique window onto what the 'metaverse' may mean for digital subjectivity, what new forms of personhood such a world makes possible, and what this may tell us of China's future role therein.

     Genshin's success centres on its 'gacha' monetisation system. The unique pattern of valorisations engendered thereby alters the psychodynamic relationship between the subject and non-subject software. Its extreme profitability allows the developers in turn to reinvest in the game, the company, and the technology. Gacha has yet, however, to be comprehensively

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[1] The common $3 billion total revenue figure is only for sales outside the Mainland, and then only to the ca. 118 million users on mobile (Blake, 2022). Counting users and spending on PC, PlayStation, and the Mainland would make for a significantly larger figure.

studied by scholars of anthropology. For my own contribution, I apply a cybernetic logic influenced by Lacan's (1977, 1978) psychoanalysis and develop a term, 'cybernesis', to aid in discussion of the kinds of subjectivity produced by gacha and metaverse sociotechnologies.

Few in anthropology would contest that personhood is processual. Its consideration as a *cybernetic* process is hardly a leap, suggested as early as Bateson (1967) and Mead (1968), and influentially beyond the discipline by Haraway (1990). If we consider 'personhood' a status achieved cybernetically, then personhood is the 'cybernesis' of all components that interact dynamically to produce it. From the Greek *cyberneisis* κῠβέρνησῐς (1 Corinthians 12:28), roughly 'government', the source both of 'cybernetics' and the English verb 'to govern'. I resurrect the root term in a Latinised form to explicitly denote the process by which nominally discrete cybernetic systems are fused. While Facebook and the userinevitably interpolate, 'cybernesis' allows us to talk about, say, the formation of Facebook *as a whole* and the personhood of any individual Facebook user *as a whole*. Each is a subcomponent of the other, yet when speaking of the cybernesis of that user, I can refer to the emergent character of coherence, wholeness, or 'governance' that gives them form under the term 'cybernesis'. This allows for some engagement of cybernetic logic without the need to get waylaid in discussing control systems and quantum information theory.

'Cybernetic' does not necessarily refer to the incorporation of advanced technology, despite common usage, and abuse, of the term 'cyber'. This said, living through COVID-19, one can perhaps most easily conceive of how we become 'cybernetic organisms', that is, composites of human and technology, say, with selves partitioned between Zoom meetings for work, our socials, and our private enjoyment of the internet. It is 'cybernesis', vertically, of various partitioned selves that produces in each of us the nominally 'individual' person. Cybernesis is a doubly useful term due to its flexibility. It can denote the coherence of all dividual persons within a network where we wish to consider the *network* as a cybernetic organism. It can also denote the consolidation of all the dividual components in a single person. I have here termed the former 'horizontal', the latter – *cross-network* – as 'vertical', to distinguish the two uses.

Gacha characters in games like *Genshin Impact* exist as metapersons (after Sahlins 2017), whose cybernesis would cover their expression, embodiment, and performance across the boundaries of multiple domains. They are partially computed in each disparate performance by an individual. Yet the gacha character *also* forms a subcomponent within the cybernetic construction of countless otherwise distinct persons – as has been discussed without the cybernetics, for instance, in Taylor (2006), Yee (2007), Lindtner & Szablewicz (2011), Lindtner & Dourish (2011), and Pearce (2014). Into each 'individual' some elements of the gacha character are incorporated, to a greater or a lesser extent, in their own cybernesis as a person.

Allow my idiosyncratic reading of Strathern's (1988) dividuality as the *cybernetic* production of persons from exchanges across every network in which they are enmeshed, i.e. properties are given thereby. Then gloss this with Deleuze's (1992) dividual as persons formed, almost fractally, by their participation in numerous human machines: as a customer of Amazon, a worker in a business, a citizen in a polity. These machines are the quintessential cybernetic organisms. For large transnational platforms such as *Genshin Impact*, *Fortnite*, or *World of Warcraft*, communities have a horizontal cybernesis that crosses national boundaries.

Socialisation within these spaces can thus transmit the norms of the developers into foreign markets: Mainland regulations can be exported through platforms such as *Genshin*. miHoYo is thus at the forefront in mediating the influence of Mainland social policy in markets

overseas that consume Chinese cultural goods and metaverse technologies. *Genshin* is particularly massive, so decisions taken about its world matter: they have repercussions for the world beyond the game, and beyond China.

There has been an uptick in regulatory intervention with the goal of 'purifying cyberspace' and making China's new cyber society a *moral* society (Shi, 2015). The effects of these regulations iterate differently in Hong Kong and Taiwan, i.e. partially and indirectly, and those effects attenuate as one moves farther afield, for instance to overseas Chinese or to users of Chinese internet products and services globally. Thus, Hong Kong and Taiwan provide a delimitation that straddles the periphery of the Mainland internet and is thus an excellent purview from which to diagnose a 'Chinese metaverse' in the context of global competitors.

miHoYo has made explicit their aim to be a major player in the metaverse, with the goal of building a fantasy world for a billion people by 2030.[2] On its 'About' page, HoYoverse announces its goal of "creating immersive virtual world experiences for players around the world", listing their current games catalogue – *Genshin Impact*, as well as *Honkai Impact 3rd* (*Beng huai 3* 崩坏 3), *Tears of Themis* (*Weiding shijian bu* 未定事件簿)*,* and *Honkai: Star Rail (Beng huai: xing qiong tiedao* 崩坏：星穹铁道) – as evidence of their progress so far (Hoyoverse, 2022). The company's ambitions are backed by heavy investment in research and development, in AI, avatar technology, and virtual reality. miHoYo are now the largest single videogame studio in the world, with at least 700 developers working on *Genshin* alone and HoYoverse employing thousands more (China Edge, 2022). But *Genshin* already exemplifies a great leap forward in metaverse technology via its pioneering of cross-progression from mobile to other platforms. For such a technologically advanced game, the fact that it functions on mobile and that progress can instantly be picked up on a home system, such as a PlayStation, means it can follow users about their day.

For, in essence, metaverse *is* continuity. In Mark Zuckerberg's promulgation of Meta's vision for the metaverse, the flashy 'new' technologies were front and centre (Meta, 2021). However, it is the social aspect that concerns me as an anthropologist. What the technology affords us is greater *continuity* between virtual and corporeal realities. We already have *a lot* of continuity. In Mainland China, and now arguably anywhere priced into surveillance capitalism, there is for all but every action an equal and corresponding datum on a server. In this form, the metaverse already exists. It is largely synonymous with 'the internet' or 'cyberspace', but its deepening through mass surveillance and ever more pervasive systems of social credit, formal or otherwise, is a trend that accelerates as the metaverse becomes better integrated and embodied.

Meta's vision suggests further fragmentation of the person that would be unacceptable in Mainland China. Meta announced that it will be making its metaverse available without the need to use a Facebook account (Meta, 2021), a move allowing a slight separation between online identities though still within their own walled garden of sorts. There will no doubt be competitors to Facebook's metaverse, with miHoYo one of them, and this will mean fragmentation of the person across multiple accounts and different tech firm ecosystems. It arguably means *dis*continuity and is thus antithetical to metaverse. For now, one can use a Facebook account to log into HoYoverse, if one resides outside of the Mainland. The other side of the Great Firewall, one's account is instead linked directly to one's government ID, and in

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[2] Current playercount was popularly estimated at ca. 250,000,000 in the community. I reached out to miHoYo to confirm numbers but could not secure an interview.

turn one's WePay and so one's finances and one's forms of social credit are both centralised and semi-private.

In terms of the Gibsonian vision of cyberspace as formed of the intersubjective hallucination of billions of legitimate operators (Gibson, 1984), the Chinese state is thus the ultimate underwriter of operator legitimacy. Each 'person' has this backstop that assures their cybernesis, and this provides a fundamental infrastructure of coherent nodes, representing 'individuals' that can then be arranged into networks without losing stability. A Meta-style system, or one based on competition where one can make multiple different accounts and so live multiple lives ostensibly partitioned, allows for contradictory subjectivities and a fragmentation of the person.

Yet formalised social credit systems on the Mainland are not so different from those that emerge in all social media, where 'likes' or 'follows' valorise particular behaviours. These follow a logic of gamification that flourishes within technocracy but is becoming more prevalent everywhere. It has altered how we perceive competition (cf. Kirkpatrick, 2015). As Zhu (2018) has suggested, the self-fashioning we undergo through hexis[3] in gameworlds follows the Cartesian lines of the neoliberal economy, and that of gacha games is particularly routinised and work-like. In China, it thus follows the lines of socialism under Xi Jinping, and these are reproduced to some extent wherever the game is exported.

In China the algorithms that drive social media are shackled. On Douyin, for instance, TikTok's progenitor and sister app on the Mainland, legions of state employees nudge suggestion algorithms and content on the platform towards *zheng nengliang* 正能量, '#PositiveEnergy' (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021). Platforms thus learn to produce content that forges legitimate operators, tethered by their ID to one corporeal human with "an emotionally placid habitus" (Hird 2018: 150). These then internalise, perform, and reproduce the morals of socialism with Chinese characteristics even at a remove from the source: it is a *command* moral economy (see Triggs, 2019, for discussion of the broader ideological function of 'positive energy').

miHoYo's company motto, 'tech otakus[4] save the world' (*jishu zhai zhengjiu shijie* 技术宅拯救世界), may at first sound like hubris. Of course, the plots of their games tend to revolve around 'saving the world', but the actual practice of playing the game tends to consist of working a little each day, often with others, to accrue resources, while diligently paying into the gacha system and so keeping the gameworld alive. As I will touch on in this paper, there are overlaps between the hexis of *Genshin Impact* and that implicit in President Xi's goals of producing "neo-socialist" citizens.[5] Yet there are other aspects of the game that, while not openly contradicting this, perhaps cast it in a different light.

One way to 'save the world', or to build one corresponding to Xi's vision of China, is by reforming the humans that inhabit it, altering their perspectives and morality. Yet the largely

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[3] "…a 'state of character' that is more enduring than a mere disposition" (Aristotle and Foucault, cited in Zhu 2018: 88).

[4] Otaku (*zhai*) is a term from Japanese meaning approximately 'geek' and often used to refer to devotees of anime culture, i.e. the majority of my respondents.

[5] 'Neo-socialist'/'neo-socialism' is a term I borrow from my respondents, a contraction of Xi Jinping's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era' (*xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* □□□□□□□□□□□□). There is overlap between this usage, as I encountered it in English, e.g. '[President] Xi wants to make us into good neo-socialists', and academic discussion thereof (cf. Brødsgaard 2018).

*un*shackled algorithms, say, of TikTok – unshackled in that they are left to drive up engagement without direct human intervention to promote specific values – polarise and variegate the social, moral, ritual, and oftentimes libidinal (after Lyotard, 1970) values attached to exchanges. Valorised through open competition, the result is more a free-for-all. There is no coherent ethical structure for persons or metaverse, no *moral core*, no coherent world to save.

I will present my findings on *Genshin Impact* and its community in this context, to answer two key questions: What does gacha mean for cyber sociality? And what might *Genshin* signal for the future of a Chinese metaverse? In five parts, I present first (1) how gacha reshapes persons and their relationship to a gameworld through multiple, simultaneous processes of cybernesis. I will then demonstrate (2) how this process spreads outwards through contiguous social media spaces, and so alters their sociality and work, and (3) how in non-contiguous spaces this process becomes untethered, reproducing cybernesis at a great remove from the source and overlapping with campaigns of #PositiveEnergy. I then (4) show the potentialities for creation of wholly new types of person, partially or indeed predominantly AI, and suggest tensions these may have with any government vision of a 'metaverse with Chinese characteristics'.

'Metaverse' is a term originating in science fiction (Stephenson, 1992), used by Silicon Valley dreamers to project a utopian vision of a world with frictionless interface of humans and technology. It is perhaps contentious that we use this same term in discussing a future that, in China, may differ: are *their* tech otakus trying to save the same world? Thus, in a final part, I will explore (5) how Project HoYoverse may overlap with the Western vision of metaverse and the potential for building a new world together. The article is structured in this order to show spatially how gacha and HoYoverse have effects that are meaningfully transformative beyond the gameworld, in our 'real' world.

Methods

I conducted my initial recruitment via Reddit and Discord, on official and unofficial groups and servers for *Genshin Impact*, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea. This produced a core research population of 300, all of whom filled out surveys that collected basic socioeconomic data and preferences related to their use of *Genshin Impact* and similar platforms. Though my focus was on the age-range 18-25, six players, all male, exceeded this age-range, the oldest being 41. I had scheduled interviews with thirty of these, either in-person or online, e.g. via Zoom. I was able to snowball through participant observation with my initial respondents, then their friends, friends of friends, et cetera. In 'realspace' this was in Hong Kong, and briefly in Seoul, in cafes, cyber or otherwise. I was invited to join Discord servers ranging in membership from a couple dozen to thousands. Around 1000 hours of 'virtual' participant observation was conducted with players *inside* the gameworlds and in livestreams via Discord, TikTok, and Twitch, from January to November 2021. All interviews were conducted in English, using a translator, or using translation software throughout the same period.

At the suggestion of many of my predominantly Taiwanese correspondents, I used TikTok to follow accounts both of my respondents and of those whom they followed within the *Genshin* community globally. Likewise, I followed a large selection of streamers and V-tubers (Virtual YouTubers), and I joined the associated Discord servers for each sub-community. This meant that in addition to my participant observation with respondents directly, online, in-person, and in-game, the largest volume of data I was able to generate came from social media, including miHoYo's own HoYoLab, Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, and YouTube, which may be linked directly from the game client. This also incorporated non-contiguous

platforms like TikTok,[6] DeviantArt, and VRChat, alongside private groupchats on Line and Telegram. In fast-paced interactions online, I did not exclude those from farther afield but Taiwanese and Hong Kongers were my focus.

1: How gacha valorisation escapes the gameworld

Gacha is yet to be comprehensively studied by anthropologists. From the Japanese *gachapon*, an onomatopoeic for the sound of chance-based toy machines, gacha creates a money value for in-game items, characters, and mechanics, and so gives them equivalencies in the 'real-world'. It assures their reality (compare Boellstorff, 2008). Not playing a day means a loss in potential accrual of gacha resources. Through gacha, the gameworld and its contents *become*. Gacha makes the world.

This reorients players towards every aspect of the gameplay. Time could be invested directly in accruing the resources necessary to 'pull' for characters, or in the materials necessary to level those characters and their abilities. Most of my respondents paid monthly fees for an allowance of in-world currency, which still required habitual play: from the completion of tasks as simple as logging in each day right up to those requiring hours of work-like 'play'. There is thus a large amount of power in the hands of developers, who are interposing directly in their consumers' self-representations and reshaping their daily routines (cf. Britt & Britt 2021).

The identification I found of persons with characters obtained via gacha appeared deepened precisely because obtention was probabilistic – in other words, what you get via gacha is down to a series of calculated probabilities (cf. Koeder & Tanaka, 2018). 'Pulls', or *yuanwang* 願望 (lit.'wishes'), as they are called in *Genshin Impact*, had a value of approximately £2, or 16 RMB, if bought directly from the cash-shop, with a 0.6% chance to get a 'featured' five-star character. You need to collect a character seven times to unlock their full selection of passive abilities. One is only guaranteed the featured character after 180 pulls, with a 50:50 chance on the 90th pull guaranteed by *Genshin*'s 'pity system'. It would thus cost thousands to get a fully functional character, plus dozens of hours of levelling. The amount one can do each day is limited by a 'stamina' system. After exhausting stamina for the day, one needs to use resources worth chunks of real money to continue playing, at a cost of about £1 per additional 20 minutes of focused levelling.

A fully maximised character and weapon would then cost as much as £5000, ca. 40000 RMB, and require perhaps a full month of playing every day. To get a fully upgraded weapon, with the best weapon for each character locked behind another gacha system, one would have to 'pull' up to 450 times. To fully refine a weapon and unlock all its passive abilities one needs to have collected it five times within a specific window of approximately three weeks, an opening which may or may not ever repeat – ergo another possible £1350, plus the time to level that weapon. This will again require perhaps hours of further gameplay gathering resources that when depleted take real-world days to replenish.

Of course, very few players invest anything like this sort of money. Only about 1% of all players with whom I interacted had invested more than £1000 in the game and none had a fully maximised character or weapon. Most focussed instead on earning pulls through completion of tasks in-world. That said, there are those who invest significantly more money,

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[6] Though TikTok is in an ambiguous regulatory situation in Hong Kong, TikTok content was still regularly reproduced and discussed in HK-based groupchats.

and these big spenders increase the game's revenue and so subsidise players who spend little or no money. The game is otherwise completely free-to-play and so democratic in that sense.

The valorisation created by gacha is powerfully habit-forming. Subliminally, it conditions through sound. The accrual of resources and characters is accompanied by distinct audio. Thus, *Genshin Impact* and its competitors develop rhythm and meter that direct the user towards productivity in the same way that gamified social media spaces direct towards increased social credit. Sonic cues are tied not only to economic but also libidinal, moral, and ritual value, which map onto our dopaminergic reward chemistry. Genshin has unique sounds associated with the completion of highly ritualised in-world tasks, such as the accrual of useful resources or currencies. Platforms such as Discord similarly play sounds not just on notifications of responses, or likes, but on 'levelling up' after reaching thresholds of contribution and approval on a server. This is the substance of the game and community's cybernesis.
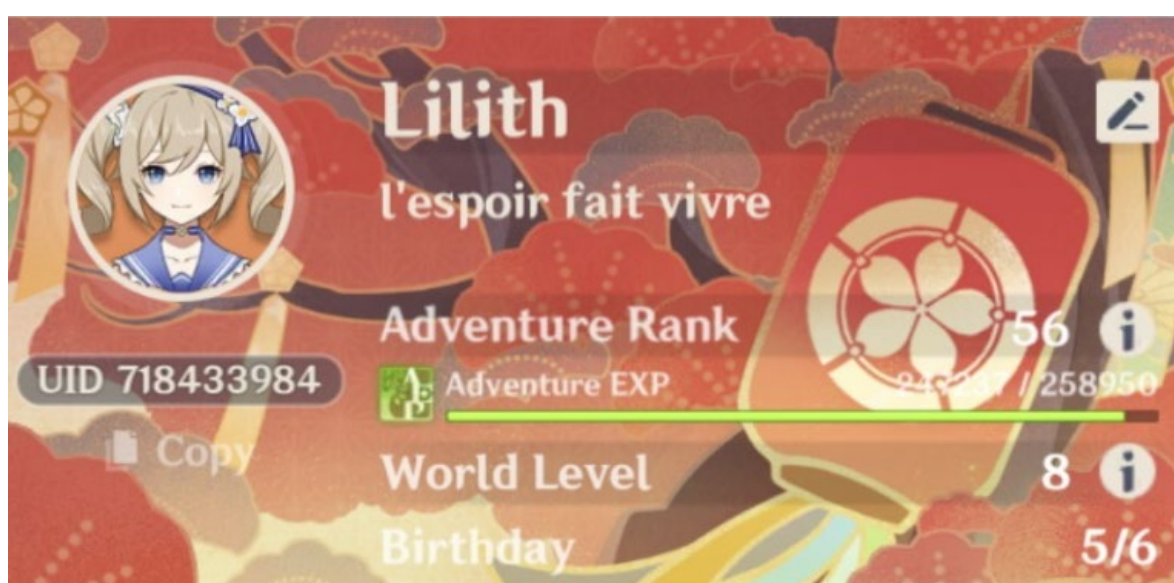

Figure 1: Namecard from Genshin Impact *for one of the accounts used in this research, screenshot taken by the author, 21.4.2022.*

Cybernesis of individual users is focussed on their 'main'. Often this was the character selected first on the character selection screen, whom they used on their namecard and whom they favoured for exploration. When asked about this, I would receive variations on "because that's my main", or even "that one's me". I received answers suggesting facets of the character they preferred, suggestions of how that character was, or would be, their friend and so forth. I chalked this up in the former case as identification (Li, Liau, & Khoo, 2013), in the latter as symbolic consumption (Nagy, 2010) – particularly in group play. Players suggested elements of a gacha character's 'personality' as a means of explanation for their choice: "because he's suave", "he's loaded", "he has a nice ass".

The avatar is both self and other. A part of that sexualised other is taken into oneself cybernetically, but one's performance thereof and the net effect of thousands, likely millions, of players embodying that avatar every day across the whole of the community leads in turn to a cybernesis of that character as a metaperson. The construction is, therefore, bivalent.
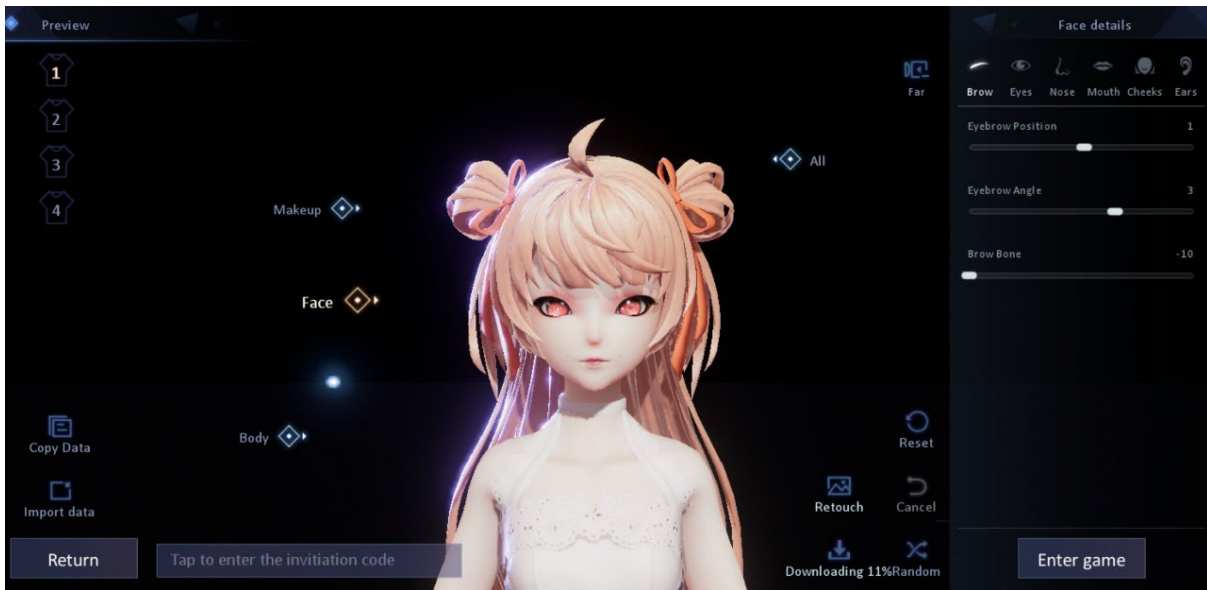
Figure 2: Avatar creation screen from Dragon Raja*, screenshot taken by the author, 21.4.2022.*

Compare this with *Dragon Raja* (Archosaur 2019), wherein players construct their avatar with gacha reserved only for companions and the most highly desirable in-game cosmetics. For respondents who preferred this, the freedom to construct a custom avatar was the main draw (fig. 2), and yet the money and time investment in *Dragon Raja* tended to be vastly less than in *Genshin* – unless accruing gacha resources.

Choice of names, avatar, profile picture, and namecard together constitute one's digital 'face' (fig. 1). One's 'face' within *Genshin* is a choice made only from among the pictures of the different characters one has obtained via gacha. So, in interacting with other players within the gameworld, one always embodies one's chosen avatar. Many then also used images of their character out on Discord and beyond.

2: Transcending through the interstices and into our world

As shown in the previous section, gacha value thus spills beyond the gameworld. Through choice of one's avatar and namecard and transference therewith, gacha characters come to interpose in players' self-representations out in our world. This section will consider the social spaces directly contiguous with the game: miHoYo's own forum-cum-social network, "HoYoLab", official and unofficial forums, e.g. on Discord and Reddit, Facebook groups, and private groupchats. Therein, in abounding self-presentations of 'here is me in front of my home', 'me' *is* one's favoured gacha character and 'home' that which they built in *Genshin Impact*.
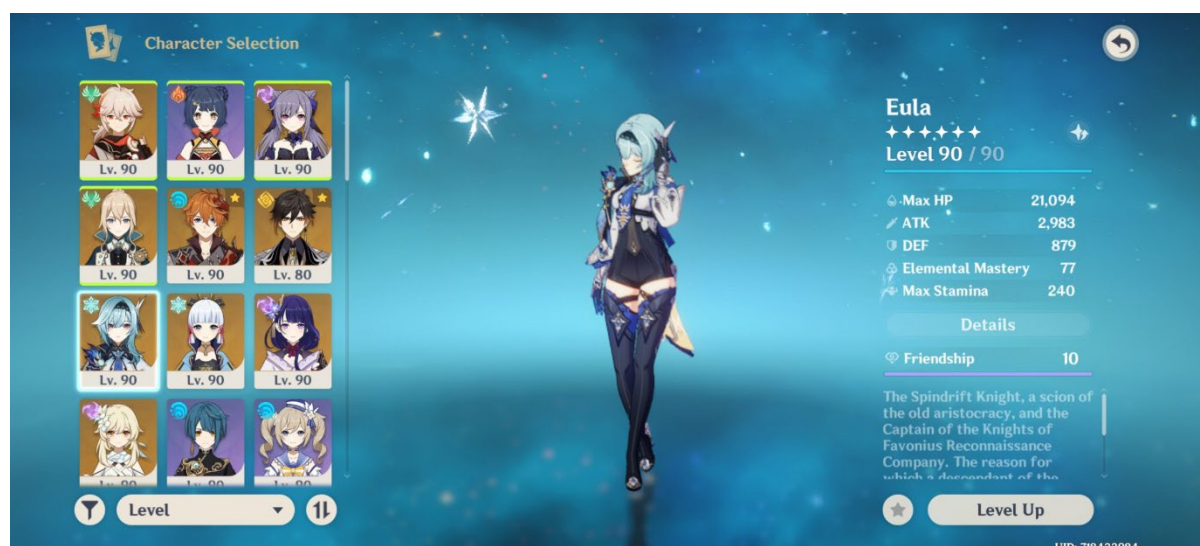
Figure 3. Character selection screen from Genshin Impact, *screenshot taken by the author, 21.4.2022.*

My research showed that the conflation of self with the avatar, or its absence, varied greatly across those studied. However, it varied equally greatly across my interactions with any one player. Someone who created a high degree of linguistic distance at one moment would, perhaps unconsciously, obliterate that distance the next. For instance, a player in Hong Kong who was explaining to me his choice of avatar, a five-star female named Eula 优菈 (fig. 3), did so by allusion to her large thighs and his appreciation thereof. Yet in the very next sentence he would revert to using 'I' in reference to the blue-haired avatar's progress across the screen: "I'll just climb up here". Of course, given the dynamic nature of the player's input, his locomotion in the gameworld is mapped onto hers. Her virtual body stands in for his. Yet on Discord, he used an image of her as his display picture.

Another player was explaining why she had Amber 安柏, one of the starter characters, and Klee 可莉, a child 5-star with an imaginary friend in the form of a stuffed rabbit, 'living' in her virtual house. She explained it to me both in terms of how she, the player, would get along with both and how she, as Amber, would get on with and care for Klee. For, while interacting within the network, while situated within discourse with the gacha characters on their terms, there is an inevitable cybernesis of player and avatar. Relationships were mapped from one to the other. She posted posed pictures of her virtual house and companions in groupchats with other players.

In both cases, the gacha characters were components of the player's cybernesis. But through interacting with them in other spaces, that facet of their identity fell away, i.e. was no longer primed when discussing other matters or when on forums marked for other sorts of content, et cetera. I lean on Lacan's allowance for contradictory subjectivities that are differentially primed by changing master signifiers (Neill 2013, Newman 2004). Only, I feel this is precisely explained by cybernesis *of the network*, i.e. that the users conform to certain properties conferred by the network. However, where the users carry the gacha character's face into other spaces, as their display picture and as their avatar, the cybernesis with that character can carry interstitially.

A key function by which gacha games create a shared hexis is through time-limited content each week. The events vary widely in terms of format, location within the gameworld, and the selection of gacha characters participating. Players may be tasked with cooking foods,

playing music, collecting flowers or materials, combat exercises, and so forth, typically accompanied by a storyline. These player events draw in millions of new, continuing, or returning players, and the rhythm of these was an *a priori* in the lives of all my respondents. It was a given that they would spend upwards of an hour a day doing certain events as these would contain the most easily obtained gacha rewards, as well as new gameplay experiences and story beats. This helps structure the shared experience and so was a foundation of community cybernesis – not simply individual self-fashioning, as, say, in single player RPGs (Zhu, 2015, 2018). All the events are free, and so democratic in that sense too.

The rhythms of these systems were clearly felt in the content shared by players through each contiguous social network.[7] Simply in their 'shitposting', they accommodated up-to-the-minute tweaks in the gacha character's presentation or role *from the gameworld*. For example, players using the character Tartaglia emulated his supposed penchant for shameless flirting in their presentations on other media. The reactions of the community, diachronically, would then directly inform growth and change in the character through miHoYo's attention thereto, and thus the cybernesis of the gacha characters interstitially, as metapersons.

'Special web events' further blur the boundaries of the gameworld by having the player carry out tasks in social media. These are essentially marketing tasks for the developers, e.g. posting adverts that link to *Genshin* or the developer's socials in exchange for rewards in-game. This straddles the line between work and play, though it is dressed in animations of key gacha characters and often one's browser will play the game's sounds and music. This creates an augmented reality in which the player is assimilated into miHoYo as a cybernetic organism.

Through feedback of community and the 'product', the gameworld further becomes a living world. On HoYoLab, the developers actively encourage the production of fan art and fiction. Chosen pieces are then elevated to the level of marketing, officially branded and shared and incorporated into the game's mythos, and in doing so become valid representations of that metaperson.

The game's story thus exists not simply within the gameworld, but is co-constructed from transference with the community. Its characters are embodied by players more *outside* of miHoYo's direct control than within it, not just on social media but in cosplay or as V-tubers (discussed below). For instance, several in-jokes or memes produced in the community translated directly into canonical features of the world during my fieldwork, for example fans wilfully projecting a romantic connection between two female characters, Beidou 北斗 and Ningguang 凝光. This garnered overwhelmingly positive reactions from players, who would frequently talk about different characters in terms that suggested they were peers, friends, or otherwise 'real' personages, and events in their 'fictional' lives of real consequence. Certainly, the community was participating in the characters' lives and vice versa.

Respondents thus willingly take on the 'work' in these games due to the value placed on progression by the gacha system and their belief in the world and relationships therein. They then take these practices, performances, and incentives into contiguous social media. This may be a harbinger of new economics for the metaverse, which will likely further blur the boundary between work and play – just as our work lives becomes more gamified (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

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[7] Though I tried to keep on top of content in each of the games studied, so I would understand nuances in reference to experience within the world, right down to intuitive humour about everything from object physics to brand-new mechanics, I could maintain a pretty good feel for developments 'in-world' simply through presence in the contiguous networks.

Many of my respondents had used Discord for their school, with students distributed into class groups – likewise at university and in some businesses. Thus, just a click away from the gacha game communities, they were in a nominally school- or work-coded space. Yet the systems of gamification were clear in each, with social credit awarded to behaviours across networks. The work put in within *Genshin* would produce results that achieved likes, reactions, and upvotes on contiguous media. Players often 'levelled up' even on serious chat servers hosted on Discord where we were only discussing politics or the coronavirus, accompanied by the system's approving sounds.

Peer-to-peer surveillance on each of these levels is panoptic, with the only real privacy to be found in the interstices. If performances of personhood match up on each level, one's identity coheres vertically about one's citizenship. This is increasingly the case in Hong Kong as on the Mainland, and so the emergent metaverse becomes composed of operators nigh on wholly formed by the systems of control in which they are members: Deleuze's dividuals in a pure sense. Yet where gaps, spaces, duplications, and so forth persist, there remains the possibility of ambivalence, partitioning, and something of a moratorium on identity: true play, however bracketed.

3: Untethering, and reproduction at a remove from the source

The gacha characters live lives beyond even the social networks directly contiguous with the game. On Facebook, through official marketing, through fan art, and through users who wear that digital face, the characters take on a life beyond through a form of autopoiesis.[8] The gacha character can be reproduced, and iterated upon, outside the gameworld. As already discussed, actions 'out here' co-construct the character in-world. But those gacha metapersons in turn may contribute to the cybernesis of individual users as legitimate operators befitting Mainland Chinese campaigns to create whole, neo-socialist netizens. It is thus helpful to consider in this third section the reproduction of personhood that takes in social spaces that are not contiguous with *Genshin Impact*.

To abuse Foucault (1975): the gacha characters spread like disciplines 'unlocked'. That these will dovetail with the effects of the #PositiveEnergy campaign on the Mainland is all but a given: regulators will ensure that they do, or else *Genshin* will have to change. Whether they do so further afield will help us to predict the role of Chinese developers in the metaverse globally. For now, the only major alteration in the Mainland version of the game is that more modest outfits for some of the female characters were made obligatory in early 2022, while they are optional elsewhere.

We might normally consider the physical body a tether about which persons form. But in cyberspace, the physical tether is not wholly necessary. Tethers to location and intersecting networks, e.g. work or school, are only partial. The most obvious divider of the *Genshin* community is its regional servers: Asia, Europe, North America, and the Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan 'Special Administrative Region (SAR) server', plus Mainland China's servers. One cannot access the Mainland version from this side of the Great Firewall, indeed few of my respondents had accessed it even if they lived or worked on the Mainland. Players in Hong Kong and Taiwan were instead split about fifty-fifty between the Asia server and the SAR server.

The divides between servers are hugely important in understanding what role *Genshin* might play in a global metaverse. They instantiate the space and re-tether geographically. Of

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[8] Self-fashioning with an emphasis on reproduction in wholly new realms discontinuous with origin of that form (see also: aesthetic self-transformation, in Zhu 2015: 2).

course, one is free to create accounts on any server outside the Mainland, and many players have multiple accounts, but the possibilities for interaction across the Great Firewall are limited. Yet network cybernesis of the community often transgresses national boundaries, for instance a "bubble tea travel bubble" joked about by some respondents, that would include HK, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan.

The codebase of *Genshin Impact* still unifies those either side of political boundaries and the Firewall, but the social experience is not frictionless. A minority of players, particularly Western expats, were keen to explain to me that their choice to use the Asia server instead of the SAR server was a decision intended to signal opposition to what they understood to be censorship on the SAR server. One cannot type 'Hong Kong' or 'Taiwan', for instance, though I found this on other servers too, demonstrating the exporting of Mainland political censorship. When I directly asked those on the SAR server about this, few had noticed. None expressed any consternation at the fact. One respondent explained, shrugging, that "*Genshin* ought to be a space free of politics", thus tacitly accepting the censorship.

Hong Kongers and Taiwanese players spoke to me from either side of the Great Firewall as though themselves partitioned thereby. They spoke with one voice and access to one set of truths discussing happenings or relations within Tencent-owned infrastructure, and a different voice and set of truths when using Meta-owned infrastructure. One repeated conversation I had was where a participant would tell me confidently that they "did not use" Facebook or Messenger, and yet would clearly use them in my presence, perhaps to log in to *Genshin Impact*. When pressed on this they would qualify, "oh, I mean I am not the *sort* of person [who uses X or Y]", "I only have it to talk to my grandparents", or suchlike. Many spoke similarly about WeChat, and when likewise caught out they made similar justifications. Line, Telegram, or Discord were typically the preferred presentation. This demonstrates the fragmentation I would predict in a metaverse without the sort of vertical cybernesis of individual operators a Mainland rendition would require.

The imperfect reference of signifiers to the coherent character, and its imperfect assimilation within an individual's cybernesis – as discussed in the previous section – can also be explained by a Lacanian view on subjectivity (Neill, 2013). Where Foucault would suggest subjects wholly formed within the sort of discourse here described, Lacan and his interpreters (Butler; Žižek, cited in Newman, 2004) allow for contradictory and competing subjectivities: both for the metaperson, and for their assimilation into the many dividual persons who embody them. The copies are never perfect copies, their coherence is given only by the cybernesis of each instanced network: the person, the groupchat, et cetera. Movement interstitially can be the work of fans consistently reproducing the gacha character in new realms, and if these performances can cohere with neo-socialist values then *Genshin* can nest into Chinese nation-building.

Self-stylings afforded by HoYoverse allay the desire to make choices, but these are largely *false* choices, or at least choices that give a false sense of freedom within the infrastructure of the game. They are akin to the futility of disconnecting one's Facebook account only to use a Meta account. Freedom to recreate oneself in the metaverse is something Mark Zuckerberg has pressed hard (Meta, 2021). But the Chinese metaverse offers something unique: what Louisa Schein (2002) described as freedoms *from* choice. This is especially pertinent given the otherwise absurd infinity of options available. *Genshin*'s world offers a set of archetypes – the gacha characters – from which one can choose an identity, and in doing so one plays a marginal role in *co*-constructing them as metapersons. The autopoietic effect, however, does not originate from total chaos, and is instead curated.

4: Virtual reality, livestreaming, and idols on the Chinese periphery

As we have already seen from the previous sections, HoYoverse can make possible wholly new types of personhood. Yet despite being developed by a successful Mainland company, this vision of the metaverse may still come into conflict with Mainland regulations, as this section will explore. Livestreamers, for instance, are hugely important in the *Genshin* community. Yet the donation economy on which they run, and the fan culture they tend to engender, is now a target of constricting regulation (Tan, 2022).

A sizeable proportion of *Genshin* streamers are V-tubers, i.e. people who use virtual avatars that are modelled in real time. The extent of functionality to their avatars varies, be they pre-animated to follow simple patterns, with pre-programmed reactions and voice lines that may be triggered manually or contextually, or more sophisticated, using advanced face and motion tracking, real-time expression mapping, and voice modulation technology. This software can be expensive, but its price is collapsing, especially with the low-budget 'PNG-tuber', i.e. an avatar with as little as one frame.

The communities that grow around the V-tubers vary from the extremely intimate, i.e. a close group of friends with much back and forth, to enormous followings around a mini-celebrity. Construction of a V-tuber persona and iteration thereupon reflects that of the gacha characters. I have seen many of these communities nucleate during my fieldwork. In the smaller livestreams, groups of V-tubers might stream together, sometimes in VRChat. The game may be instanced there in VR, the viewer thus watching the V-tuber and whoever else is in the virtual room, and interacting with both through the chat on their phone.

V-tubers can be understood quite clearly as cybernetic organisms, human-AI composites, but this does not mean that they cohere totally with the corporeal human to whom they may be tethered. Indeed, in many cases, they could literally be switched off. A user could move to another account, a 'personal' account (ie. for their offline person who was distinct from their V-tuber person), and voila, they are someone else. They could switch up identities as fast as one can in a videogame. However, of course, on the Mainland, and in any centralised metaverse, the possibilities for doing this will be reduced in that each account will be tethered to one's government ID.

The production of new meaning and subjectivity then takes another recursive step where, on the Discord servers that spawned around each streamer, I found some fans would cosplay *as the V-tuber*. They produced fanart and even hentai[9] thereof, used their name and image in their own self-presentations, and elements of their identity in the creation and performance of their own online personae in turn. Like the gacha characters, they become metapersons and escape through the interstices into our world. As such, it follows that Mainland regulators will want to maintain a power of censorship much as they do over *Genshin Impact*.

V-tubing has exploded alongside *Genshin Impact*, likely accelerated by the pandemic. Many of my respondents started livestreaming to deal with isolation. Intimacy in the livestream could take on many forms. Haptic feedback loops are core to community cybernesis online – we make the phone vibrate in the pockets of our interlocutors, the screen as they tap in their response. This is taken to another level in V-tuber communities. The libidinal element in some exchanges is all but made explicit, where viewers pay to perform certain virtual actions upon a streamer, such as stroking or tickling them. This is awarded with recognition and explicit social credit within the stream, replete with encouraging sounds and written adulation. Viewers

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[9] A Sino-Japanese term for a form of animated pornography in an anime style, originating in Japan.

buy subscriptions, and can make inordinate donations that curry favour both with the idol and their following. For now, these communities are in regulatory limbo on the Mainland (e.g. Tan 2022), creating a contrast with what is currently permissible in HK, on Taiwan, and beyond Should a middle-ground not be found, then this will be another major fault-line along which the *Genshin* V-tubing community fractures.

Figure 4: A screenshot of Lumi N0va Desktop for mobile, miHoYo's V-tuber idol.

miHoYo, meanwhile, is developing their own V-tuber, 'Lumi' (fig. 4). Fully AI and currently in beta, she lives 'behind' a user's desktop, a sort of virtual companion somewhere between the likes of Amazon's Alexa and a gacha character. In a particularly hyper-real move, she also has a social media presence and posts vlogs on YouTube. But should they wish for Lumi to have success on the Mainland, she will have to conform to the norms and expectations thereof. In her current, fully-scripted iteration, Lumi is likely preferable for authorities to V-tubers that are tethered to the corporeal human form, as the latter are less easily programmed to stick to party lines.

miHoYo's R&D are also working on AI-assisted anime avatars so advanced that the physically and intellectually disabled could use them to effectively communicate and interact in HoYoverse seamlessly. They would not be distinguishable from able-bodied users. At this point, where ever greater amounts of code are introduced into the cybernesis of the person, albeit code trained by inputs from a human specifically to learn their subjectivity, we may see copies that function wholly legitimately in spaces within the metaverse without any directly human components. The performances that are normalised in this space may be thus doubly significant in shaping the moral character of Chinese metaverse. Yet some of this research is world-leading, and respondents joked that these 'ghosts' (compare Derrida 1994) could then be programmed to directly befriend and influence players, and train them to be good socialists.

Consider the many content creators on TikTok, say, who are not even players of *Genshin*. Gacha valorisation creates new forms of personhood that then operate and replicate far from the source. In the VRChat space, I spoke with many who were using avatars directly recreating their favoured gacha characters. Someone could join the chat embodying, say, blue-haired Eula, and one of the interlocutors would ask where they got the virtual body, later seeking it out and downloading it such that they too could embody this character (incidentally, in this example too, because she was "sexy", and "has nice thighs"). They never needed to have played *Genshin* themselves and yet experienced cybernesis therewith. Whether this becomes a target for regulatory constriction or is seen as a useful tool for promoting appropriate values remains to be seen.

5: The world as viewed from Genshin Impact

Most players of *Genshin Impact* have been unable to attend international festivals this past year, thus TikTok and livestreaming have provided the most intimate view of the metapersons embodied, say, by cosplayers. It is through images and videos, abetted by the vastly more bountiful producers of short 'edits' from in-game and marketing material, that the reality of the gameworld intensifies beyond the virtual more so than ever before.[10] As this final section will describe, it is this continuity of experience that aligns HoYoverse with Western visions of what the metaverse could become.

Of course, this user-created content is also free publicity for the game, a form of labour that users gladly undertake and which can often be monetised. There is ostensibly an infinite amount of *Genshin* content, from the tens of thousands of Twitch streamers to the countless channels on TikTok. One can thus become fully immersed in a purview on the internet in which that world, and its manifestations in this one, are the totality of existence. For me, as was the case for many of my respondents who used such applications, *Genshin* appeared to be realer than quotidian reality. Respondents of all ages told me they had deleted their news applications, Facebook feeds were only memes and curios, many of them also from the game. *Genshin*

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[10] *Genshin* was a world-leading trend on networks such as Twitter and TikTok in this period.

TikTok was their window onto the zeitgeist, full of beauty, sincerity, and cuteness, with a moderate libidinal content.

Add to this how gacha affected valorisation of the characters whose images, or reflections thereof, composed so much of this environing media, the consistent voice and feel of the social networks, and the streamer communities contiguous therewith. For many of my respondents – indeed, in some ways I along with them – were living *more* in the HoYoverse than in corporeal reality. Genshin was able to permeate one's entire social life, to fill every idle moment, and to do so with an aesthetic clarity of purpose, and a world worth saving. For we lived in a world more complete, with knowable rules and beatable evils: a world 'perfect' in the literal, unconnoted sense of the word. We lived a Lacanian fantasy of wholeness.

This sense of being wholly subsumed within the world of *Genshin Impact* has led to some extreme cases of fan behaviour. The attempted assassination of miHoYo's founders by a *Honkai Impact 3ʳᵈ* (miHoYo, 2016) fan, after a small change was made to his favourite character outfits, is heuristic for understanding the profound psychological effects gacha valorisation can have (Yang Zeyi, 2021). The reality and significance of the metaverse for those living in it ought not to be understated.

Genshin Impact's 2021 concert "Melodies of an Endless Journey", for instance, was ostensibly a metaverse event (Genshin Impact, 2021). Available through YouTube this side of the Firewall, it was presented as a simultaneous performance by European orchestras and Chinese rock-bands of each gacha character's theme, while both the virtual avatar and a human performer embodied the character on screen, all but at the superposition of one another.

The most shared images and references to the concert were from its marketing material, which depicted *the gacha characters* as the musicians. They, through the players themselves, were co-creating the world, music and all. In an accompanying event in-game, players performed the songs by pressing rhythmic button prompts while controlling their avatar. The implied simultaneity of the performance was directly productive of cybernesis.

Some particularly committed players have created servers where entire cities from *Genshin Impact* are recreated in VR. Already, bringing one's custom avatar into VRChat is very simple, and any infrastructure created, say, by miHoYo, to better facilitate this will accelerate the cybernesis of player and gacha character.

Genshin is pioneering portable access to the metaverse. The physical space occupied by players varies between those comfortable on mobile, online during commutes or breaks at work, on the couch, in bed, and those preferring a more involved experience, typically on PC but also on a television hooked up to a PlayStation. But I found that though many respondents first told me they used one or the other, most actually used both. It is one of miHoYo's great technical feats that cross-progression allows play on immersive home systems, turning off and heading out, and picking it back up right where you were the moment you sit down on the train.

Genshin is thus able to exist with continuity across spaces in ways few games have before. I was often able to interview, say, at a coffeeshop where my respondents could be idly continuing with gacha-related resource collection tasks, which require minimal attention, while we spoke. This continuity between quotidian and virtual realities is the foundation of the metaverse, well-aligned with Meta's vision of reduced barriers between worlds.

Conclusions: Towards a 'metaverse with Chinese characteristics'?

I mused with my respondents as to what HoYoverse's slogan 'tech otakus save the world' might mean. The implication that the world can be saved by otaku culture, by anime and waifus,[11] is hard-wired into Project HoYoverse. But whether this refers to the *isekai* (Japanese 'alternate world', or in Chinese, *yishijie* 异世界) notion of being whisked away to a fantasy world in order to save it, and so live out a power fantasy, or to bona fide ambitions for this world is debatable.

miHoYo's ambitions are unequivocally to become a major player in the metaverse. Their 2022 rebranding of their flagship products under the banner 'HoYoverse' attests to just this. The sort of world that HoYoverse will help produce, though there are multiple possible temporalities contained therein, will all but certainly cohere into one that adheres to Communist Party policy. Several respondents suggested that perhaps that is precisely what the motto meant, that their lives as anime waifus and husbandos were creating a softer facet to a world under greater influence from China culturally and through the metaverse. Where a HoYoverse remains consistently transnational, its cybernesis could yet provide an undergirding to the global metaverse that promotes peaceful intercultural exchange.

Current Communist Party initiatives from the Belt and Road Initiative and New Development Bank to #PositiveEnergy are intended to reform the world about a moral core, not just an economic one (Thompson, 2020). 'Purifying cyberspace' (cf. China Daily 2015, Yang Zekun, 2021) may yet mean significant changes to metaverse platforms developed by miHoYo and goliaths like Tencent. Should HoYoverse stay on the right side of regulations, it can contribute to the broadband and algorithmic replication of contemporary Chinese norms and values far from Mainland China.

In this article I have shown the salient effects of *Genshin*'s gacha system in the creation of persons. I demonstrated how these effects morph and replicate far beyond the game and suggested that they interface with perpendicular processes of cybernesis, of the individual and of the networks in which they are enmeshed. I have contextualised this alongside policies of #PositiveEnergy and interventionist regulation set out on the Mainland. While HoYoverse appears to be a metaverse project in many ways aligned with Western visions of the metaverse as expressed by Facebook parent company Meta and others, I believe that the work-like hexis it produces, and miHoYo's vision of moral rectitude with Chinese characteristics, could just as easily be integrated with pushes in Xi's China towards what my respondents called "neo-socialism", shorthand for Xi Jinping's term "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era". If this is the case, and HoYoverse products continue to be offered globally, then either the Chinese and international versions will diverge, or *Genshin Impact* and its successors will offer those outside China access to an alternative vision of the metaverse.

In the latter case, miHoYo has the opportunity to become a unifying influence that can help better integrate web 3.0 across the Great Firewall. What is certain is that the ramifications of the metaverse for personhood and for sociality cannot be fully understood without looking at the Chinese context, and more research is needed. For now, through its present successes both economic and cultural, miHoYo's legacy may better be considered an example of tech otakus attempting to save the *metaverse*, with Chinese characteristics or without. But with the 2020s already proving a time of deepening polarisation and fragmentation, and ongoing descent into real-world conflict, the role of multi-billion dollar,

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[11] A *wasei-eigo*, i.e. Japanese term of English origin, from 'wife', for anime girls, equivalent to 'husbandos' (cf. Britt & Britt, 2021).

potentially multi-billion user megaplatforms such as HoYoverse could still well be to help save our world.

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