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Heteronormativity and Penalization: Marriage Systems in *A Chinese Ghost Story*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in Informatics

by

Mengqi Gao

Thesis Committee:
Professor Kylie Pepler, Chair
Professor Katie Salen
Associate Professor Bo Ruberg

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Heteronormativity and Penalization: Marriage Systems in *A Chinese Ghost Story*

by

Mengqi Gao

Master of Science in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Kylie Peppler, Chair

[This paper explores how the popular Chinese massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *A Chinese Ghost Story* represents marriage and opens space for queerness through its game mechanics. As a popular game with over one million players who have been married, *A Chinese Ghost Story* helps us understand the impact of games on the perpetuation and possible subversion of social norms and policies in the game space and society more broadly.

Using qualitative content analysis, I investigate gender and queer representation and systems of marriage and divorce in the game. My findings suggest that the game's marriage systems impose heteronormativity and players who deviate from it are penalized. By analyzing *A Chinese Ghost Story*'s representation of marriage, this paper provides insights into how games reflect ongoing back-and-forth dynamics between social norms, ideologies, values, and laws in current society and the dynamics and experience of "play."]

Introduction

Marriage has a long history of being represented in various forms of media, such as fiction, paintings, music, and movies. However, how do video games represent marriage? Video games are sites for play and socialization and are highly related to cultural norms and real-world policies. They reflect an ongoing back and forth between the norms, ideologies, values, and laws in current society and the dynamics and experience of “play.”

On the one hand, current social norms and rules shape what a video game can be; on the other hand, games reflect current ideologies and can be quite heavy-handed in how they structure “play” in a manner that socializes players to live in terms of societal norms. In doing so, they can also be sites of socialization that affect “real world” behavior outside of the game.

Because of the role of games as sites of socialization, perpetuation, and possible subversion, they are worthwhile sites to interrogate in order to understand how nuances around gender, sexuality, and social institutions such as marriage are being played out (literally and figuratively) in virtual play. A particularly complex ideology about gender and marriage in China is reflected in *A Chinese Ghost Story*.

A Chinese Ghost Story is a Chinese massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) game made by NetEase. The PC version of the game was released in 2009, and the mobile version was released in 2016. Social interactions between players and the marriage gameplay are key features of the game. In 2022, on the game’s official website, one of the features of the game listed is that it allows players to “socialize with real people and say goodbye to singlehood in no time” (NetEase, 2022). Some players who met in this game have also got married in real life. On Feb 5, 2023, the game hosted a group wedding of 5 couples in Nanjing, China (QianNvYouHunShouYou, 2023). This game has been very popular in China, and by the year 2020, “there [were] more than 1 million players who are or have married and the game

witnessed nearly 2 million weddings” (Chang, 2020).



Socialize with Real People and Say Goodbye to Singlehood in No Time (NetEase, 2022)

As games are becoming a more and more important part of people’s lives, it is crucial to see how marriage and games relate and what kind of experiences they offer to players.

I would also like to focus this research on *A Chinese Ghost Story* because Chinese society and culture has long pressured people, especially women, to get married by calling single women derogatory names such as “Leftover Women” (To, 2013). Analyzing *A Chinese Ghost Story* would also give us insights on how games relate to the real-world problem of women being pressured into marriage.

Focusing on the mobile version of the game, this study uses qualitative content analysis to look at the marriage systems from a feminist point of view to investigate the gender representation, queer representation and systems of marriage and divorce in this game and finds that the marriage systems in *A Chinese Ghost Story* impose heteronormativity and players who deviate from it are penalized.

Background

Heteronormativity

Having its roots in the second wave of feminism, heteronormativity is a key concept that has been widely discussed in feminist and queer studies (Herz & Johansson, 2015). According to Michael Warner, heteronormativity is a "regime of truth" that naturalizes and normalizes heterosexuality as the dominant and normative form of sexuality (Warner, 1991). The concept of heteronormativity is used to understand and analyze systems of oppression, gender structures, hierarchies and how people reproduce the binary gender framework of men and women (Herz & Johansson, 2015). As the concept of heteronormativity reinforces and perpetuates heterosexual privilege and power in society, it is very useful to engage this concept in understanding how *A Chinese Ghost Story* represents marriage, divorce, gender and queer issues (Butler, 1988).

Marriage Representation in Video Games

Marriage has been a longstanding cultural institution with a rich history of representation in various forms of media, such as literature, film, and television. *Simulating Marriage: Gender Roles and Emerging Intimacy in an Online Game* investigates the representation of marriage in online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and their impact on player experiences. Through a content analysis of popular MMORPGs, the authors examined the inclusion of marriage systems and the role of gender in those systems. They found that while marriage is often represented as a social activity in MMORPGs, gender differences are prevalent, with female characters typically positioned as "the pursued" and male characters as "the pursuers." Such power dynamics within virtual marriages reinforce traditional gender roles and the power dynamics of marriage as an institution within virtual marriages (Freeman et al., 2015).

Marriage representations in Chinese video games draw a lot of inspiration from the history of “cyber marriage” on the Chinese internet. According to *Beyond Virtual Carnival and Masquerade: In-Game Marriage on the Chinese Internet*, cyber marriage is a virtual-marriage-making activity that is mostly conducted on the Internet and remains there (Wu et al., 2007). Originally emerged as text-based marriage hosted on websites and online communities, cyber marriage has changed when it comes to games. Compared with the simple procedure of text-based cyber marriage, in-game marriage is complicated and is dominated by heterosexual ideology and the gendered-biased gaze because of the systematic regulations of how to get married in the games (Wu et al., 2007). The authors also have argued that in-game marriage “turns out to be the most visualized, institutionalized, and heteronormative form of cyber marriage” (Wu et al., 2007). Overall, the research on marriage representation in video games suggests that these systems are often based on traditional and restrictive views of relationships and gender roles.

RQ1: How do players get married and get divorced in *A Chinese Ghost Story*? How do games’ designs of marriage systems reflect heteronormativity?

Representation of Gender in Games

Gender representation in video games has been a topic of extensive research and critique. Scholars have highlighted the prevalence of gender stereotypes and limited portrayals of women in games, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and objectifying female characters. In *Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances*, Mia Consalvo examines gender representation in dating simulation games and their influence on player experiences (Consalvo, 2013). Consalvo argues that dating simulation games, while providing opportunities for player agency and romantic

exploration, still tend to perpetuate traditional gender norms and heteronormativity. Women characters are portrayed as submissive, passive, and in need of men's validation and protection. The romantic narratives presented in these games frequently revolve around the pursuit of heterosexual relationships and reinforce idealized notions of love and romance (Consalvo, 2013).

Other studies have also illuminated the limited representation of women in video games. A content analysis by Dill and Thill found that female characters are often hypersexualized and portrayed as damsels in distress or secondary to men protagonists (Dill & Thill, 2007). Similarly, a study by Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess revealed that women characters in video games are more likely to wear sexualized clothing and engage in sexually suggestive behaviors (Burgess et al., 2007).

Queer Resistance in Games

Queer resistance in video games has emerged as a significant area of research within game studies, exploring how games can challenge and subvert normative assumptions about gender and sexuality. A notable contribution to this literature is the book *Queer Game Studies* edited by Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017).

Queer Game Studies offers a comprehensive exploration of queer representation and resistance in video games. The book features a collection of essays that examine various aspects of queer identity, politics, and activism within gaming. It delves into topics such as LGBTQ+ character representation, queer narratives, and player experiences. The contributors highlight the potential of games as a medium for queer expression, challenging heteronormative frameworks and promoting inclusivity (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

One notable approach to queer resistance in games is the inclusion of diverse LGBTQ+ characters and narratives. Games such as *Life is Strange* and *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating*

Simulator feature queer protagonists who explore their identities and relationships. These games provide players with opportunities to engage with and empathize with queer experiences, challenging dominant heteronormative norms (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

Furthermore, game modification, or modding, has been used as a form of queer resistance. Modding involves altering or expanding game content to include queer themes, characters, and storylines. For instance, the "Gay Planet" mod for "The Sims" series allows players to create queer-inclusive virtual environments, challenging the limitations of the original game (Shaw, 2015).

By utilizing games as a medium for queer resistance, scholars and activists seek to create more inclusive and diverse gaming experiences. These efforts contribute to broader conversations about representation and social change, unlocking the potential for games to challenge and transform cultural norms.

RQ2: How can players exercise queer resistance in *A Chinese Ghost Story*?

Methodology

Data collection

In order to investigate *A Chinese Ghost Story*'s marriage systems, I used the in-game chatbot support system called "Qiannv Little Spirit" [倩女小精灵]. "Qiannv" is the abbreviation for the game's name in the Chinese version, which literally means beautiful woman. The game's chatbot support system answers players' questions about the gameplay and game-related issues by giving out a set of written information and instructions. Thus, I entered keywords related to marriage, divorce, pregnancy, and queer issues into the chatbot and collected screenshots of our

conversations with it. Through our conversations, the chatbot offered instructions on how to play the game.

I also included advertising materials of the game to analyze. Advertising materials in this game also serve as a great window of opportunity for us to look at how the game developers view their game and what are the most important things in the game that they want their players to focus on.

Translations

A Chinese Ghost Story currently does not have an English version, and I cannot find official English translations of the game's information and chatbot answers. Thus, I translated all my conversations with the chatbot from Chinese into English.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of the chatbot's responses to examine how the game represented these topics. I began by reading through the chatbot responses to gain a sense of the content and identify any recurring themes or patterns. I then coded the responses based on these recurring themes and patterns.

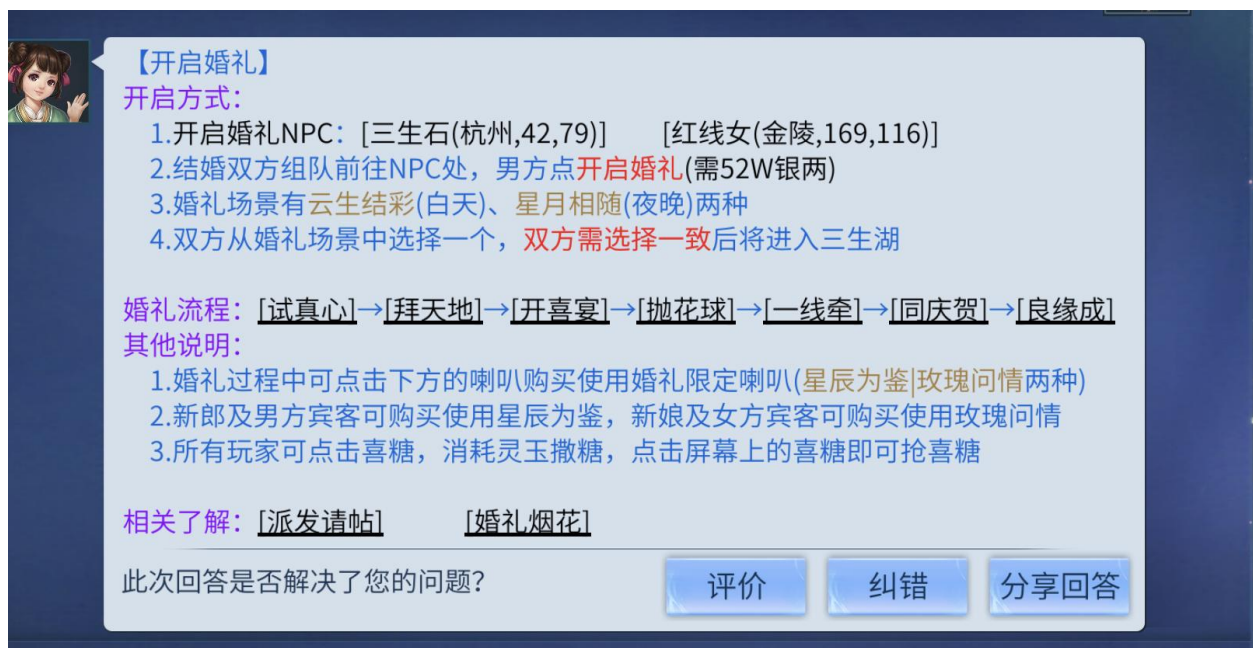
Results

Systems of Marriage

Idealized Heterosexuality

Wedding Equals Marriage. To get married in this game, the couple will first find the wedding NPCs, and then men will talk to the wedding NPC to initiate the wedding. Women cannot initiate the wedding in the game (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). This is an obvious

indication of the game's rigid gender roles and gender expectations for women and men. Also, after getting married, the couple will receive a marriage certificate, indicating that hosting a wedding ceremony means getting married legally in the game. However, in reality, holding a wedding ceremony does not mean getting married in a legal sense. Hosting a wedding ceremony in reality will not give people a marriage certificate. There is a whole other set of procedures to follow in order for couples to get a marriage certificate. This legal aspect of marriage is omitted and idealized in the game, giving players signals that marriage can be easy since it only requires one ceremony.



The screenshot shows a help page titled '【开启婚礼】' (How to Initiate the Wedding). It includes a small character icon on the left. The text is as follows:

【开启婚礼】
开启方式：
1. 开启婚礼NPC: [三生石(杭州,42,79)] [红线女(金陵,169,116)]
2. 结婚双方组队前往NPC处，男方点**开启婚礼**(需52W银两)
3. 婚礼场景有云生结彩(白天)、星月相随(夜晚)两种
4. 双方从婚礼场景中选择一个，**双方需选择一致**后将进入三生湖

婚礼流程: [试真心]→[拜天地]→[开喜宴]→[抛花球]→[一线牵]→[同庆贺]→[良缘成]
其他说明：
1. 婚礼过程中可点击下方的喇叭购买使用婚礼限定喇叭(星辰为鉴|玫瑰问情两种)
2. 新郎及男方宾客可购买使用星辰为鉴，新娘及女方宾客可购买使用玫瑰问情
3. 所有玩家可点击喜糖，消耗灵玉撒糖，点击屏幕上的喜糖即可抢喜糖

相关了解: [派发请帖] [婚礼烟花]

此次回答是否解决了您的问题? [评价] [纠错] [分享回答]

How to Initiate the Wedding (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

Commitment

The game features a strong sense of commitment and expects married player couples to be bonded forever as long as they are heterosexual couples. First of all, players are not only expected to be together for this life but also for the next reincarnation, and so on. After players got married in the game, they would be able to acquire different titles based on their relationship

levels. These titles are the following:

- 一世郎才女貌 the man has talent and the woman has beauty in the first reincarnation.

“The man has talent and the woman has beauty” [郎才女貌] is a traditional saying that is often as a compliment in saying that a couple is a good match. However, this saying portrays heteronormativity. It sets the expectations for men to hold talents and women to hold beauty, and not the other way around. Relating this to another ancient Chinese saying, “It is virtuous for women to hold no talents [女子无才便是德],” it is obvious to see that although “the man has talent and the woman has beauty” is often used as a compliment, it is inherently promoting heteronormativity.

- 二世心心相印 “Mutual love” in the second reincarnation
- 三世珠联璧合 “This couple is like putting pearls and jades together” (a synonym for saying a couple is a good match) in the third reincarnation
- ...
- 十世相濡以沫 “Going through hardships and difficulties together” in the tenth reincarnation



Married Couple Titles (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

These titles go from the player’s first reincarnation to the tenth reincarnation. The idea of reincarnation here is based on Buddhism and Taoism, which are two religions that have deeply influenced Chinese culture. Reincarnation means that when a living being passes away, they would be reincarnated into a different form: a human, an animal, etc.

This game draws references from Buddhism and Taoism in its ancient Chinese fantasy narrative background. In the titles that the game gives out to married couples, it is clear to see that the game sets an expectation that the couples should always be together, not only in their current life but also in their future reincarnations (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

In addition, players must purchase an item called “This Love is Set for Three Lives” [情定三生] in the game in order to propose for engagement. Although the name of this item only says three lives, it is actually referring to forever. In Taoism religion, the number three is used to refer to many, more, and everything in the world (Sacred-Texts, 400 BC/2023). Hence, by stating “This Love is Set for Three Lives,” the game is actually trying to convey to the players that their

love is set for all future reincarnations and till forever.

What's more, the game's advertisement for introducing its marriage system also features a saying that expects this heavy commitment on couples. This saying goes: "We will not be separated till the end of the world" [三界不老, 我们不散]. This saying is another example of the game's expectation for the married players to be bonded together forever. This advertisement also features a very stereotypical representation of heterosexual couples. In the ad, the man is holding this woman's waist and taking initiative.



We Will Not Be Separated Till the End of the World (NetEase, 2022)

Transcendents and Nirvana: The Game's Representation of Religious Ideas. Although the game draws its commitment expectation for marriage from Buddhism and Taoism, it is not representing these religions in a respectful way. Both of these religions offer ways for people to transcend beyond their mortal lives (Taoism: become a Transcendent 仙人; Buddhism: reach Nirvana). How does this expectation work if one or both parties of the couple transcend beyond their mortal form? This game indeed offers a game mechanic for players to transcend and become Transcendents, but becoming Transcendents in the game feels similar to being a mortal human. The only difference is that becoming a Transcendent would make the stats of the player character stronger. In this sense, becoming a Transcendent seems like a way to power up the player character, and does not have deep religious ideas in it.

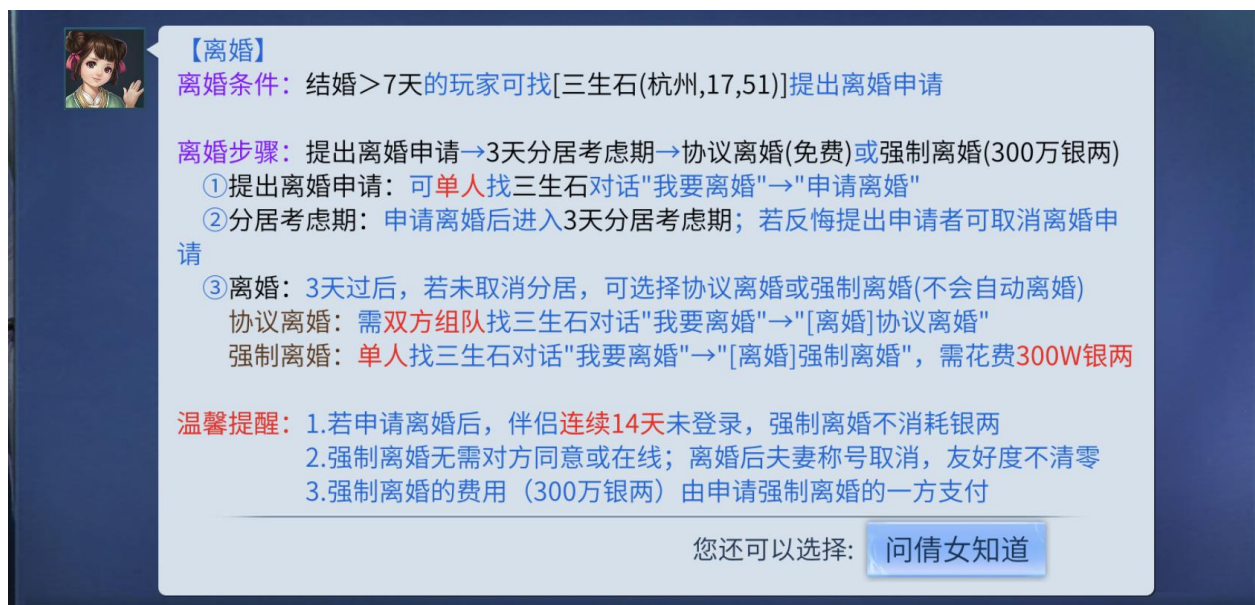
Also, what if one or both parties of the couple choose to become a Buddhist bhikkhu/bhikkhunī or a Quanzhen School Taoism (全真派道教) daoshi [道士], who are required to follow monastic orders, which include staying single? In those cases, the commitment expectation breaks. Thus, it can be argued that although the game draws heavy references from Buddhism and Taoism on its commitment expectation for marriage, the game is still portraying a very idealized version of marriage and commitment without truly looking into and respecting its religious roots.

Systems of Divorce

More Realistic Representation

In this game, the system of divorce is portrayed in a more realistic and troublesome way compared to the dreamy and idealized marriages in the game. According to the game, only players who are married for more than 7 days are allowed to file a divorce application. The divorce application can be filed by only one partner in the marriage and does not require mutual

agreement. After the divorce application is filed, the couple needs to wait for 3 days, a divorce cooling period in which the couple needs to reside in separate housing. During this period, the person who filed the divorce application can withdraw it. After these 3 days, if the couple is still residing in separating housing, they can then decide on whether they would like to proceed to a negotiated divorce or a forced divorce. Negotiated divorce requires mutual agreement for both parties and does not cost extra money. However, forced divorce will make the person who filed a forced divorce (could be different from the person who filed the initial divorce application) pay 3 million yinliang [银两], a type of in-game currency that can be earned in the game or buy using real-world money.



【离婚】
离婚条件：结婚>7天的玩家可找[三生石(杭州,17,51)]提出离婚申请

离婚步骤：提出离婚申请→3天分居考虑期→协议离婚(免费)或强制离婚(300万银两)

- ①提出离婚申请：可单人找三生石对话"我要离婚"→"申请离婚"
- ②分居考虑期：申请离婚后进入3天分居考虑期；若反悔提出申请者可取消离婚申请
- ③离婚：3天过后，若未取消分居，可选择协议离婚或强制离婚(不会自动离婚)
协议离婚：需双方组队找三生石对话"我要离婚"→"[离婚]协议离婚"
强制离婚：单人找三生石对话"我要离婚"→"[离婚]强制离婚"，需花费300W银两

温馨提醒：1.若申请离婚后，伴侣连续14天未登录，强制离婚不消耗银两
2.强制离婚无需对方同意或在线；离婚后夫妻称号取消，友好度不清零
3.强制离婚的费用（300万银两）由申请强制离婚的一方支付

您还可以选择：[问倩女知道](#)

How to Get Divorced (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

The whole process of divorce is lengthy and difficult, which serves as a discouragement for those who are thinking about getting divorced. They have to think about time, energy, and money in order to get divorced. The whole process is also more realistic compared to the marriage gameplay, as in reality, a couple will also need to pass the divorce cooling period of thirty days before getting a divorce in China (Chongqing Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, 2023).

Although yinliang can be earned by playing the game, 3 million yinliang is still not a small number. Asking whoever wishes to get divorced when the other partner does not agree to pay extra money to get out of marriage serves as a penalization. Players who want to get a forced divorce are viewed as betraying and sabotaging the marriage commitment and thus are penalized by paying extra money. The extra money of 3 million yinliang becomes a way to penalize players who deviate from marriage.

However, it is also interesting to find that even though marriage in the game is extremely important and highly promoted, keeping players to continue playing the game is more important. There is only one scenario for players who want to conduct forced divorces to avoid the penalty of paying extra money, that is when their partners have not logged into the game for a consecutive 14 days after they have filed a divorce application. Marriage is indeed sacred, but logging into the game is more.

Harder to Find and Less Detailed Divorce Instructions

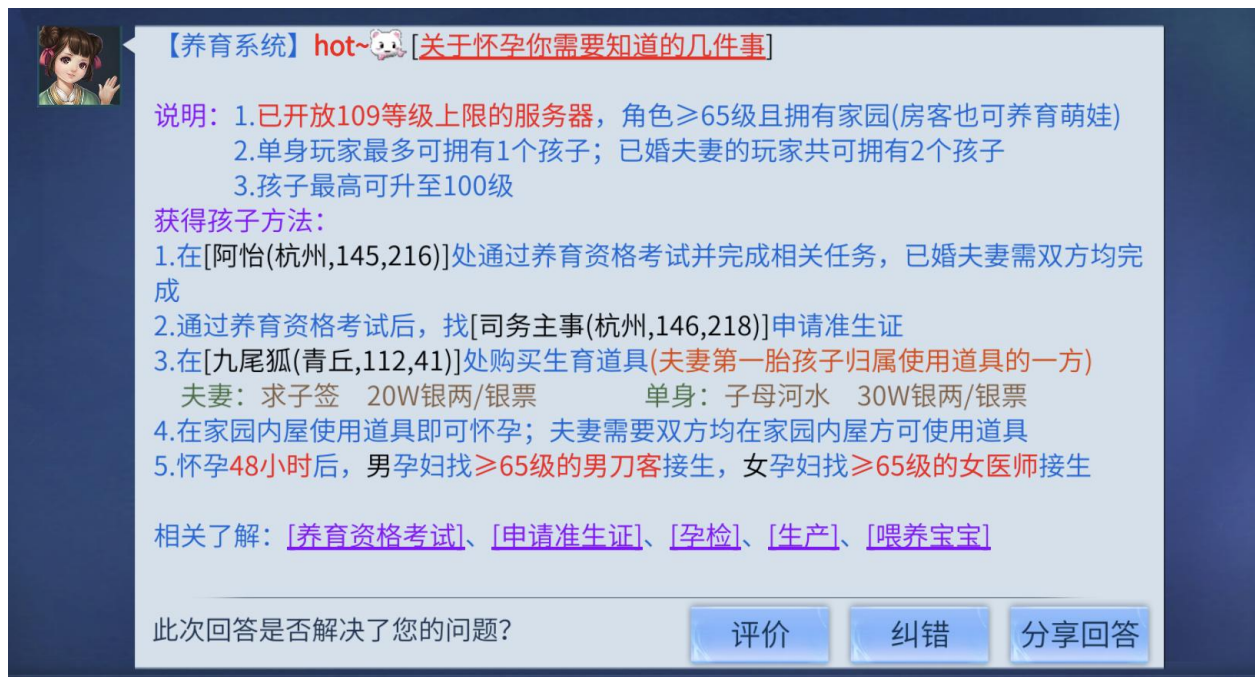
Unlike the rules for marriages, which can be found easily through the help assistance chatbot, information for divorce is harder to find. To find information on marriages, one just needs to type “Marriage” in the help assistance chatbot and will receive a detailed description of the rules and links to related resources. However, when asked about “divorce,” the chatbot does not offer links to related resources. Players would need to figure out who gets to keep the house, and who gets to raise the child by typing into very specific keywords. The game, in this case, takes no consideration for players who did not think about these issues before getting a divorce.

Parenting systems

Both female and male characters can get pregnant and give birth to children in this game. However the pregnancy gameplay is highly idealized and simplified compared to reality.

His Masculinity Must be Secured

One of the detailed descriptions of pregnancy says, “male pregnant woman should find a male swordsman to help with delivering the baby” [男孕妇找男刀客接生] (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). “Male pregnant woman” seems a strange phrase to refer to a pregnant man. Obviously, although the game says that both men and women can give birth, the game is not ready to support men in delivering babies.



The screenshot shows a help page for the parenting system in the game. It features a small character icon on the left and a main text area with a light blue background. The text is in Chinese and provides instructions on how to get pregnant and deliver a child. At the bottom, there are buttons for '评价' (Evaluate), '纠错' (Report Error), and '分享回答' (Share Answer), along with a question '此次回答是否解决了您的问题?' (Did this answer solve your problem?).

【养育系统】 hot~ [关于怀孕你需要知道的几件事]

说明: 1. 已开放109等级上限的服务器, 角色≥65级且拥有家园(房客也可养育萌娃)
2. 单身玩家最多可拥有1个孩子; 已婚夫妻的玩家共可拥有2个孩子
3. 孩子最高可升至100级

获得孩子方法:

1. 在[阿怡(杭州,145,216)]处通过养育资格考试并完成相关任务, 已婚夫妻需双方均完成
2. 通过养育资格考试后, 找[司务主事(杭州,146,218)]申请准生证
3. 在[九尾狐(青丘,112,41)]处购买生育道具(夫妻第一胎孩子归属使用道具的一方)
夫妻: 求子签 20W银两/银票 单身: 子母河水 30W银两/银票
4. 在家园内屋使用道具即可怀孕; 夫妻需要双方均在家园内屋方可使用道具
5. 怀孕48小时后, 男孕妇找≥65级的男刀客接生, 女孕妇找≥65级的女医师接生

相关了解: [\[养育资格考试\]](#)、[\[申请准生证\]](#)、[\[孕检\]](#)、[\[生产\]](#)、[\[喂养宝宝\]](#)

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[评价](#) [纠错](#) [分享回答](#)

Parenting Systems (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

It is also strange to see that a pregnant man needs to find a male swordsman for help, while there is a class called doctors, and male doctors are available in the game. For pregnant women, the rules are easier to understand: “female pregnant woman should find a female doctor

to help with delivering the baby” [女孕妇找女医师接生] (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). Why male swordsmen when there are male doctors who are more professional? Is it because a male swordsman sounds way more masculine than a male doctor? This indicates that no matter what the circumstances are, a man’s masculinity must be secured in the game. Especially in the case of giving birth to babies, the game needs to ask him to seek someone who is the most masculine of all to save him out of this feminine task of giving birth and secure him as a man.

Miscarriage

Miscarriage was never mentioned in the detailed descriptions of parenting the support assistance chatbot offers. It is hidden so that it will not interrupt an idealized dream of easy and painless pregnancy and parenthood.

Divorce will also result in miscarriage. Although the game allows single players to have kids, it is still promoting heteronormativity that players need to be married to have kids, and kids are brought to this world by marriages, by marriage certificates. It is surprising to see that single players can give birth to kids, while players who become single due to divorces during their pregnancy will result in miscarriage. In this case, miscarriage becomes a penalization for players who get divorced.

Attitudes toward Queer Issues

Binary Gender Framework

When the player first opens this game, they will be taken to a character selection page. On this page, the players would be able to choose from a set of twelve classes. Each class has two character available for the players to choose. One male character and one female character. The male and female characters of the same class are different characters that have different

names and background stories of their own. Starting from here, the game is already imposing a binary gender framework since there are only two genders for players to choose from.

A Superficial Understanding of Queer Marriage

Operating under a strictly binary gender framework, *A Chinese Ghost Story* considers queer marriage as same-sex marriage as the game takes no consideration of other gender identities besides women and men. In this context, although *A Chinese Ghost Story* encourages players to get married in the game, this encouragement only exists for heterosexual couples. Same-sex marriage, as of April 2023, is not supported in the game. When asked about the keyword “homosexual” [同性], the support assistance chatbot replied:

“Dear player, we don't support same-sex marriage yet. I will notify you immediately if there is a related update in the game~ (smiling emoji). Related Resources: Same-sex Sisterhood/Brotherhood” [亲爱的玩家, 倩女暂不支持同性婚姻哦, 如以后有相关功能更新小精灵会第一时间推送哦~(笑脸表情)。相关介绍:同性结拜] (*A Chinese Ghost Story*, 2023).



Same-Sex Marriage (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

It is one thing not to support same-sex marriage in the game, but another to indicate that the game offers players a chance to become sisters or brothers as an alternative. Not supporting same-sex marriage itself already promotes heteronormativity and penalizes queer couples by not allowing them to get married in the game. In addition, the promotion of heteronormativity and

the penalization for queer players become stronger when the game indicates an alternative could be sisterhood/brotherhood.

First of all, becoming sisters/brothers [结拜] is more about close friendships that are not related to romantic relationships (Li, 2009). This is not the same with same-sex romantic relationships. In this case, the chatbot replied the game provides demonstrates ignorance and a lack of understanding of queer romantic relationships. It hints that these relationships are more similar to friendships, implying that they are not genuinely romantic and inferring that genuine queer romantic relationships do not exist, at least do not exist in this game. Trivialization of queer romantic relationships becomes a punishment.

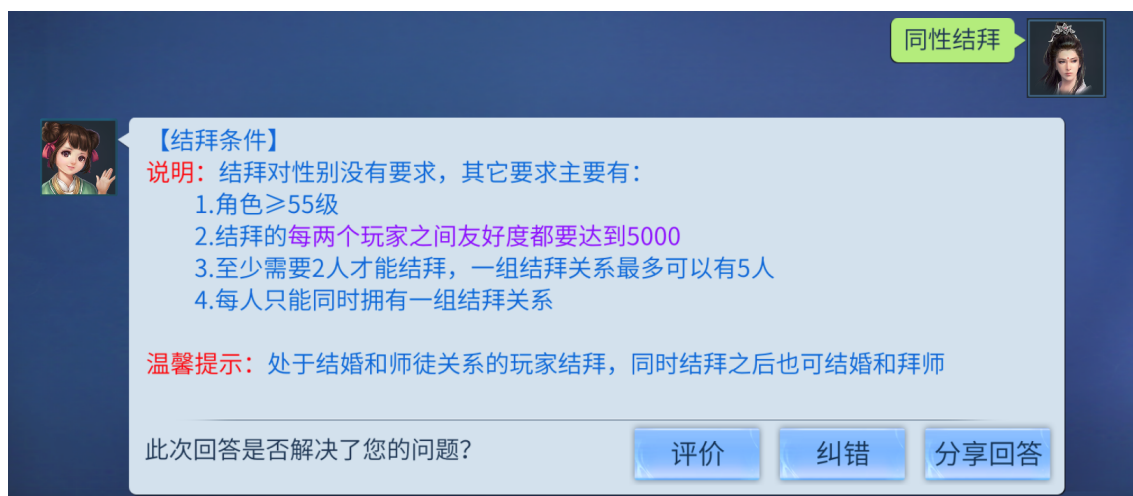
Secondly, it could indeed be argued that the game may have chosen to specifically point out that there is an alternative to same-sex marriage in order to attract queer players and avoid censorship related to queer content at the same time. There has been a tradition of hiding queer romantic relationships under sisterhood/brotherhood in media work to avoid censorship in recent years (Ng & Li, 2020). However, this gameplay of becoming sisters/brothers hardly holds as a way to accommodate queer players under the threat of censorship if one examines closely at the details of this gameplay.

Although the chatbot's related resources showed "Same-sex Sisterhood/Brotherhood," when asked about same-sex marriages, the details of sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay indicate that it is not designed as an alternative to same-sex marriage to avoid censorship in the first place. Comparing to the marriage gameplay, this sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay lacks a lot of details both in the description given out by the chatbot and in the richness of content. The chatbot's reply about sisterhood/brotherhood does not give out information about where and how to become sisters/brothers. Do players need to find a certain place on the map? Find a specific

NPC? Or buy a specific item? In contrast, the chatbot's reply about marriage gameplay gives out all this information clearly, for example, players would need to find the wedding NPCs and talk to them to initiate the wedding (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). In addition, marriage gameplay offers sophisticated content that includes elaborate processes of marriage, such as engagement and the seven steps of the wedding ceremony. On the contrary, sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay does not offer a similar level of detail in its content. Therefore, it can be concluded that the game does not view sisterhood/brotherhood to be as important as marriage. Marriage gameplay is the feature of the game, and sisterhood/brotherhood is not. It is not the focus, and does not need the same level of details. In this case, arguing that it can work as an alternative for queer players is again putting queer romantic relationships into a second place, a place that is not worth the same kind of attention compared to heterosexual romantic relationships. In this way, the game promotes heteronormativity by stating out and valuing the importance of heterosexual marriages and penalizes queer players by giving them an alternative that lacks content and details in the description.

In addition, when consulting about the details of this gameplay, the help assistance chatbot replied that “Players of any sex/gender identity can participate in this gameplay,” and “The sisterhood/brotherhood requires a minimum of two players and a maximum of five players” (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). This detailed description shows that unlike the design of marriage systems, which is solely monogamous and only open to heterosexual couples, the sisterhood/brotherhood supports a relationship with a maximum of five players of any sex/gender identity. Moreover, “married couples can participate in this gameplay to become sisters and brothers,” and “players who are already in sisterhood/brotherhood relationship can get married” (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023). This gameplay rule again indicates that sisterhood/brotherhood

relationships are different from heterosexual marriage and should not be viewed as the same or as an alternative to each other. This sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay stands on its own and is dragged into an awkward place by the game to become a “special accommodation” for queer players under censorship. This alternative is in no way an accommodation. It is a punishment because, unlike heterosexual players who can experience both marriage and sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay, queer players can only participate in sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay and are suggested by the game to treat this one as an alternative for marriage. The alternative fails to work in reality and results in a deprivation of both the sisterhood/brotherhood gameplay and marriage gameplay for queer players. No matter how hard one tries to pretend the sisterhood/brotherhood is an alternative to marriage, it simply will not work because it is inherently designed for friendship and will not give players the same kind of experience. Also, pretending sisterhood/brotherhood is an alternative to marriage will in return ruin the experience of participating in sisterhood/brotherhood by projecting on it an expectation that can never be fulfilled.



Same-Sex Jiebai Sisterhood and Brotherhood (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

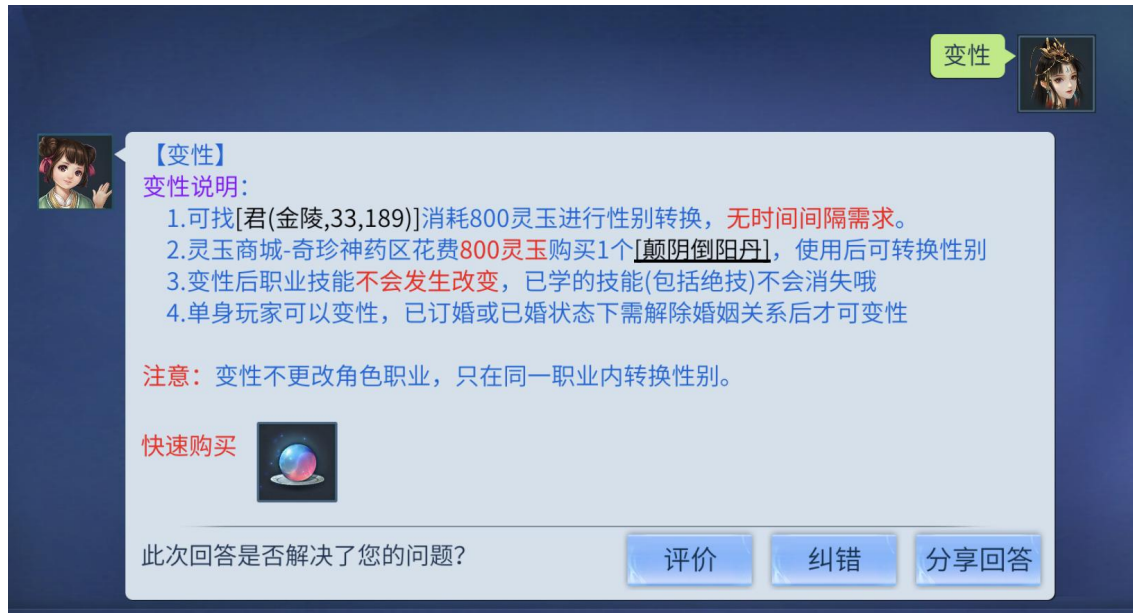
Transgender Issues in the Game

Besides showing a superficial understanding of queer marriage, this game also presents a superficial understanding of what it means to be transgender. When inquired about the instructions to transgender in the game, the chatbot replied the following:

“Transgender Instructions:

- (1) Players can find the NPC named “Jun” and spend 800 lingyu (in-game currency) to change gender identity, and there is no cooldown time when it comes to changing gender identities.
- (2) Players could spend 800 lingyu to buy a “Pill that inverts yin and yang” inside the game store and use the pill to change gender identity.
- (3) The player’s class and abilities gained in the game will not change after the player changes gender identity; the abilities (including the special abilities) gained in the game prior to changing gender identity will not disappear.
- (4) Only players who are single can change their gender identities; players who are engaged or married must end their current engagement or marriage before changing gender identities.

Note: Transgender will not change the player’s class. Players can only change their gender identities within the same class.”

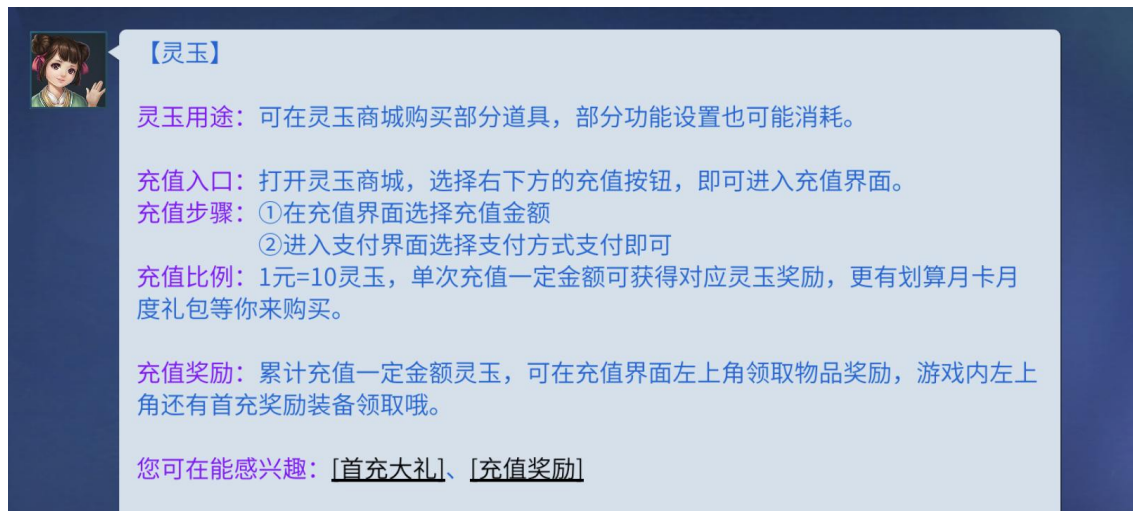


How to Change Gender Identities (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

The whole instruction provided by the game's chatbot indicates a superficial understanding of being transgender. First of all, changing one's gender identity does not mean switching characters. As mentioned previously, during the character selection process, the game provided players with two characters in each different class. There is one female character and one male character for players to choose from within the same class. Each of these characters, although in the same class, has different names and background stories. When it comes to transgender, the game basically gives the player a totally different character of the opposite sex under the binary gender framework who has a different name and different background story, instead of actually changing the gender identity of the original player character while keeping the original player character's background stories.

In this way, although the game calls this mechanic as transgender or changing one's gender identities, this gameplay is more similar to switching to another player character of the opposite sex within the same class instead of what transgender actually means.

What is worse, in order to participate in this superficial “transgender” gameplay, the player needs to pay 800 lingyu, a kind of in-game currency to buy a “Pill that converts yin and yang,” or pay the money to a specific in-game NPC. According to the in-game chatbot, lingyu is a kind of in-game currency that players will need to use real-world money to buy. “1 RMB equals 10 lingyu,” as indicated in the game’s explanations for “lingyu,” which means that in order to change their gender identity, the player will need to pay ¥80 real-world Chinese money (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).



Lingyu, The In-Game Currency (A Chinese Ghost Story, 2023).

This payment that the game requires players who wish to change their gender identities to pay is a penalization that the game holds for players who deviate from heteronormativity. Players who follow heteronormativity’s rules do not need to pay the extra 80 RMB to get a character they want, while players who deviate from it are forced to either pay the 80 RMB for their “deviation” or stay in a heteronormative character that may not be the character that they want.

Furthermore, even though the players paid the fine of 80 RMB to change their gender identities, what they get is a new character of the opposite sex under the binary gender framework and may not be even closer to what they truly want.

Queer Resistance and Special Accommodation

Although the game features a binary gender framework, a superficial understanding of queer marriage, and penalizes those who deviate from heteronormativity, there is one specific class in this game that can be viewed as a queer resistance or special accommodation that the game provided for queer players.

The class, Yingling [影灵], which literally means “Shadow Spirit,” is a class that features “One class and three changes - man, woman, and a yaoguai” [一职三变 - 可男可女可妖怪] (NetEase, 2023). One of the abilities of this class is called “Three in All” [三生万物]. Using this ability, the player can switch from three different forms: Yaoyu (the woman form), Yueming (the man form), and Awu (the yaoguai monster form). Each of these three different forms has different physical appearance and different abilities.



Left to Right on this Screenshot: *Assassin Yueming, Wooden Spirit Yaoguai Awu, and Princess Yaoyu*, (NetEase, 2023).

For the background story of the class, it is said that there is one little wooden spirit yaoguai named Awu (the yaoguai form of the class) who used a special tool to experience the memories of Princess Yaoyu (the name of the woman form of the class) and the memories of Assassin Yueming (the name of the man form of the class). After experiencing the memories of those two characters, Awu gained a special ability to change into a man or woman form. Awu also started to find their real self afterward (NetEase, 2023).

Based on the background story, it seems that the player character is named as Awu, the wooden spirit yaoguai and the man form of Assassin Yueming and the woman form of Princess Yaoyu are just abilities of Awu who gained after experiencing those two character's memories. Awu now can change into those two characters' forms and use their appearances and abilities. However, on the character selection page of the game in the beginning, the players still need to choose between a male character named Yueming or a female character named Yaoyu of the class Yinling. Thus, although this mechanic seems to be in dissonance with the characters' background story, the game still forces players to choose between a male character and a female character so that the game would be able to assign the player a gender under the binary gender framework.

The gender identity of Awu the wooden spirit yaoguai is unknown and was not mentioned in the game. It could be assumed that Awu is outside of the binary gender framework since that game listed that “One class and three changes - man, woman, and a yaoguai” [一职三变 - 可男可女可妖怪] (NetEase, 2023). In this way, the game offers queer players a way to express their identities in the game by using the ability “Three in All” to transfer into different

forms. Players who wish to change their gender identities can easily change between the man and the woman character form within the same class without having to pay 80 RMB like the other classes. Queer players can also change into the Awu form to be outside of the game's binary gender framework. What's more, players can have queer marriages in the game by using this ability to change forms. One player posted a video of two men getting married in the game using the ability "Three in All" on the game's official discussion app. The player wrote under the caption: "I want to thank the class Yingling for making my dream come true ✨ men same-sex marriage(•••••)..♡" [倩女影灵圆我一个梦想 ✨ 男男结婚(•••••)..♡] (Qutang, 2020).

Although not very ideal, since the game would still view the player as either a woman or a man based on their initial character selection at the beginning of the game, the class Yingling indeed offered queer players a way to express their identities in the game under the current censorship around queer content.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, my analysis is solely focused on the marriage and gender systems in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. It did not consider the broader context of the game or the players' perspectives. While the chatbot responses provided insights into the game's representation, they may not fully capture players' experiences or reactions to the marriage systems. Future research could incorporate player surveys or interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

Another limitation is the lack of existence of an official English version of the game. The absence of official English translations limited the researcher's ability to gather additional information and resources related to the game's marriage systems. This may have resulted in an incomplete analysis and a narrower understanding of the topic. Also, the study relied on

translations of the chatbot conversations from Chinese to English. Translation introduces the potential for misinterpretation or loss of nuance, which could impact the accuracy of the analysis. It is important to recognize that the translation process may have influenced the findings to some extent.

Additionally, the study did not consider player agency or player responses to the game's mechanics. While the paper examined the game's representation of marriage, it did not explore how players interacted with and potentially resisted or subverted the game's expectations. Investigating player behaviors and perspectives would provide valuable insights into the negotiation of norms and the potential for queer resistance within the game.

Furthermore, the study focused specifically on *A Chinese Ghost Story* and its marriage systems. The findings may not be generalizable to other video games or cultural contexts. Different games may have varying approaches to marriage representation, and cultural factors can significantly influence the portrayal of gender, commitment, and queer issues. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to other game contexts.

Lastly, the study acknowledged the limitations of the game's representations of transgender identities. However, it did not delve deeply into the experiences and perspectives of transgender players within the game. Further research could explore the impact of the game's limited understanding of transgender issues on transgender players and their sense of inclusion or exclusion.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the representation of marriage in *A Chinese Ghost Story* and highlights areas for further exploration and research.

Discussion

This study has investigated marriage systems in *A Chinese Ghost Story* by analyzing its gender roles, commitment, divorce, parenting, and queer issues. The methodology involved using the in-game chatbot support system, "Qiannv Little Spirit," to collect data through conversations and screenshots. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns in the chatbot's responses.

The game's marriage systems reflect an idealized version of heterosexual marriage, promoting rigid gender roles and expectations. Initiating a wedding is solely the man's responsibility, reinforcing traditional gender norms. The game simplifies the legal aspect of marriage, suggesting that hosting a wedding ceremony equates to legal marriage, disregarding the complexity of real-life procedures. The concept of commitment extends beyond one lifetime, emphasizing the expectation that couples remain together in future reincarnations. This expectation draws from Buddhist and Taoist beliefs but overlooks the practical challenges that arise if one or both partners pursue paths such as monastic orders.

Divorce is portrayed as a realistic and arduous process compared to the dreamy nature of marriages. The game imposes waiting periods, separate housing, and the choice between negotiated and forced divorce. Forced divorce incurs a financial penalty, serving as a deterrent for deviating from marital norms. The game's portrayal of divorce reflects societal expectations, mirroring the 30-day cooling period required for divorce in China. However, the game prioritizes player retention, allowing forced divorce under specific conditions, highlighting the game's focus on engagement over the sanctity of marriage.

Queer representation in the game is limited and lacks depth. The game operates within a binary gender framework, offering only male and female character options during selection. Same-sex marriage is not supported, and players are directed toward alternative options such as

same-sex sisterhood/brotherhood. This alternative is a superficial accommodation, treating same-sex relationships as mere friendships and trivializing genuine queer romantic relationships. The game promotes heteronormativity by valuing and emphasizing heterosexual marriages, penalizing queer players by offering an inadequate alternative.

Transgender issues in the game are addressed with a lack of understanding and insensitivity. Changing gender identity involves creating a new character of the opposite sex, requiring players to pay in-game currency or real-world money. This payment functions as a penalization for deviating from heteronormativity and reinforces the binary gender framework. The game's approach to transgender representation oversimplifies the concept and fails to respect the complexity of gender identity.

However, the class Yingling provides a potential avenue for queer resistance and special accommodation. Players can utilize the "Three in All" ability to switch between male, female, and yaoguai (monster) forms, allowing them to express their identities within the game. Queer players have used this ability to engage in same-sex marriages, offering a way to fulfill their dreams of representation within the game's constraints. While the game still assigns players a binary gender at the start, the Yingling class allows for some expression of queer identities.

Overall, *A Chinese Ghost Story's* marriage systems reinforce traditional gender roles, promote heteronormativity, and provide limited and superficial accommodation for queer players. The game's representations reflect societal norms and expectations, but fail to fully explore and respect the diversity of gender and sexual identities. Future research could delve into players' responses to the game's mechanics and explore their potential for resistance or subversion of societal norms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has investigated how marriage is represented in the popular Chinese MMORPG game, *A Chinese Ghost Story*. As games are increasingly becoming part of people's lives, it is important to understand how they connect with real-world institutions like marriage. *A Chinese Ghost Story* serves as an interesting case study because it offers players the opportunity to engage in social interactions, including forming romantic relationships and getting married virtually. However, the game's marriage systems impose heteronormativity and penalize those who deviate from its designs of marriage and divorce, parenting systems, and attitudes toward queer marriage and being transgender. By analyzing the game's marriage systems from a feminist perspective, this paper reveals the gender and queer representation in the games. Ultimately, this paper highlights the need to critically examine the representation of marriage in popular culture, especially in games, to better understand the impact of these representations on individuals and society.

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