Beyond Stereotypes: Exploring the Multi-layered Portray of China in and around Video Games

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Content

Abstract

The field of video game studies positions games as complex cultural texts that reflect, interact with, and sometimes challenge the image of a nation or culture. This dissertation explores how China is constructed and interpreted in digital spaces and how these representations contribute to discussions about identity, cultural exchange, and power dynamics in global gaming. By examining both Western and Chinese-developed games, this thesis investigates video games as platforms that both mirror and influence perceptions and relationships between China and the West.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis is built on several key theories, notably Althusser's concept of ideology and Said's Orientalism, along with its extensions into neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism. These theoretical frameworks are essential for analysing how video games reflect and reinforce ideological constructs related to China. Viewing ideology as pervasive and constant offers a framework for analysing how video games reinforce and challenge prevailing ideologies within their cultural context. Orientalism and its derivatives are crucial for scrutinising China's representation in video games and the wider geopolitical and cultural dynamics involved.

For a comprehensive understanding of video games as cultural artifacts, it is crucial to explore the interplay between procedural design, narrative representation, and the discourses surrounding video games. This research focuses on the relationship between gameplay and storytelling in video games, unveiling the interactions between gameplay mechanics, narrative structures, and player agency. Employing 'play' as a methodological approach, the research uses procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and the concepts of ludo-narrative dissonance and coherence to understand how video games shape the player's understanding of China's depiction and the China-West relationship. Methodologically, the research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to scrutinise both game design and player interactions. The selected games include "*Civilization V*," "*Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*," "*Chinese Parents*," "*Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*," "*The Wall*," "*Devotion*," and "*Animal Farm: China*." The analysis uses theoretical approaches discussed before, such as procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance/coherence to dissect the portrayal of China in and around video games.

The findings reveal a multi-layered representation of China in both Western and Chinese games. In Western games, China is depicted through Orientalist and Sinological Orientalist lenses, reflecting stereotypical interpretations aligned with contemporary China threat theories, while also highlighting similarities between China and the West. This image is often challenged by players through in-game actions such as playing and modding, as well as out-of-game actions like forum discussions. In contrast, Chinese games negotiate the "exclusiveness" of Chinese culture, presenting a multi-layered Chineseness and the relationship between China and the Western world. An authentic Chinese lifestyle is presented, alongside distinct cultural references unique to China. However, the experiences and embedded values are not exclusive to

Chinese culture, allowing Chineseness to be appreciated by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The political discourse within and around these games amplifies the differences between China and the Western world, with players exercising their agency to express their interpretations of these representations. This exercise of agency can be seen as a confrontation between two discourse systems, Orientalism and Occidentalism, perpetuating the dualism between the East and the West.

Chapter One: Introduction

Video game studies have significantly evolved, positioning games as complex cultural texts imbued with narratives and ideologies. This transformation is aligned with the increasing recognition of video games as mediums that can reflect, construct, and sometimes challenge social, political, and cultural narratives (Hjorth 2011). In this light, the portrayal of nations and cultures in video games emerges as a creative process deeply intertwined with cultural understanding, political narratives, and historical contexts. Focusing on China, a country with a rich cultural heritage and a growing influence on the global gaming market, offers a distinctive perspective in this field of study.

In 2015, Liboriussen and Martin undertook a comprehensive study of game studies, emphasising the concept of "regional game studies." Their research revealed substantial potential within this subfield, capable of significantly influencing the broader domain of game studies. They argued that regional game studies could revitalise the interdisciplinary field by introducing diverse methodological approaches and new perspectives. This innovative viewpoint, centred on the game's cultural aspects and player experiences, challenged the traditional focus of game studies predominantly centred on Western Europe and North America. This shift promised to enrich the field and broaden its geographical scope significantly (Liboriussen and Martin 2016: 228).

Following this, in 2016, Liboriussen and Martin proposed a special issue of 'Games and Culture,' titled 'Games and Gaming in China.' This issue delved into the historical progression of both traditional and digital games in China, scrutinising their cultural, social, and political implications. The featured articles spanned various topics, including the ascension of China's gaming industry, integrating gaming within Chinese consumer culture, exploration of national identity through gaming, and perspectives on gaming within Chinese academia. This special issue marked a pivotal moment in game studies, significantly contributing to the understanding and appreciation of Chinese cultural contexts in gaming.

China, with its rich history and multifaceted socio-political landscape, offers a compelling context for examining how national identities and cultural narratives are constructed in the virtual world. The significance of studying video games in China transcends the mere size of its gaming market, encompassing the intricate interplay between tradition and innovation. Video games that feature Chinese themes or settings often draw from a reservoir of cultural stereotypes and historical references (Hjorth and Chan 2009). While these elements can create engaging gameplay experiences, they also risk reinforcing simplistic or monolithic portrayals of China and its people. This research aims to unravel how China is depicted in digital spaces and how these

depictions contribute to wider discussions about identity, cultural exchange, and the power dynamics in global gaming. Beyond being mere visual elements, the pixels on the screen serve as portals to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between culture, technology, and representation, particularly within the context of China's gaming culture.

Central to this research is an exploration of the diverse representations of China in and around video games. This includes investigating the dichotomy between the images presented by the game system and narrative, and the tension between the pre-designed image of China and the one experienced and portrayed by players. These tensions will be scrutinised under specific themes, focusing on China's portrayal and its interactions with the world in games developed outside of China.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis is built on the interplay of several key theories, notably Althusser's concept of ideology and Said's Orientalism, along with its extensions into neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism. These theoretical lenses are indispensable tools for examining how China is depicted in video games, enabling a nuanced assessment of China's complex international relationships. This framework is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how video games serve as cultural artefacts that reflect and influence societal ideologies, particularly on the representation of China. This thesis seeks to explore video games as platforms that both mirror and influence perceptions and relationships between China and the West by employing these theories.

Althusser's concept of ideology plays a pivotal role in establishing a dialectical relationship between video games and the ideologies they express and embody. This research adopts his view of ideology as a pervasive and constant phenomenon, offering a framework for analysing how video games both reinforce and challenge the prevailing ideologies within their cultural context. Consistent with Althusser's insights regarding the media's influential role in shaping and reflecting societal ideologies and cultural identities (Althusser 1970), video games are posited as vehicles of ideology, shaped by the ideological contexts of both designers and players. Furthermore, Mukherjee (2018) underscores the significance of video games in the global dissemination of cultural and ideological messages, providing a unique perspective for understanding the construction and dissemination of these narratives in the digital age. This viewpoint aligns with studies by Šisler (2008, 2017) and Bogost (2008, 2010), who explore how video games are influenced by and can influence cultural ideologies and narratives. Bogost (2008), in particular, discusses how video games serve as a visual medium that materialises ideology, rendering them effective channels for political, educational, and advertising messages. Accordingly, this thesis recognises the influence of video games as a medium that not only mirrors but actively engages in the creation and negotiation

of ideological and cultural discourses. Through the analysis of video games and player engagement, this research seeks to explain the complex ways in which video games shape our understanding of cultures, ideologies, and global relationships. This approach facilitates a thorough examination of how video games, as cultural artefacts, interact with and impact the broader socio-political landscape, offering deeper insights into the intricate dynamics involved in the representation of ideologies and cultures in the digital era.

Conversely, the application of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and its derivatives, such as neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism, is crucial in examining China's depiction in video games. This thesis employs Orientalism as a fundamental framework for scrutinising China's representation in video games and the wider geopolitical and cultural dynamics involved. Said's original framework, focusing primarily on the Middle East, provides an analytical lens for understanding the creation and distribution of narratives and images that often perpetuate stereotypes and power imbalances between the 'West' and the 'East'. This framework is essential for analysing cultural representations, as it explains the processes through which certain stereotypes are constructed and sustained in media (Ferguson, 2014). Taking inspiration from Said's groundbreaking scholarship, Vukovich's proposition of Sinological Orientalism is highly pertinent. Sinological Orientalism centres on the depiction of China within Western consciousness, critiquing the Euro-American generation of knowledge about China and challenging the underlying assumptions and biases prevalent in media and conventional Area Studies (Vukovich 2010: 148). Vukovich's approach, while acknowledging the 'otherness' of China, also emphasises the 'sameness' underscored by global capitalist dynamics and political discourse (Vukovich 2010, 2013).

The application of these theoretical frameworks is essential for dissecting how video games may reflect and reinforce ideological constructs related to China. The representation of China in video games surpasses mere aesthetic and narrative choices, being deeply influenced by and reflective of broader geopolitical and cultural dynamics. This thesis inspects Western-centric stereotypes about China frequently embedded in video games. It explores how these games might portray China through a perspective shaped by historical biases, political relations, and cultural misunderstandings, potentially leading to a skewed or one-dimensional view of the country and its people. Furthermore, this research underscores the significance of recognising that video games can convey and challenge specific ideologies. The interplay of various ideologies within video games mirrors and impacts the relationships between China and the Western world.

For a comprehensive understanding of video games as cultural artefacts, it is crucial to explore the dynamic interplay between procedural design, narrative representation, and

the discourses surrounding video games. This research focuses on the inseparable relationship between gameplay and storytelling in video games, unveiling the intricate interactions between gameplay mechanics, narrative structures, and player agency. Employing 'play' as a methodological approach (Aarseth, 2003), the research delves deeper into the deconstruction of video games using procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and the concepts of ludo-narrative dissonance and coherence. The aim of this study is to show how these elements, whether in harmony or dissonance, influence the player's interpretation of China's depiction and the relationship between China and the West as reflected in these games.

Central to all the approaches discussed is the role of the player, characterised by the degree of agency afforded to them. Player agency emerges as a critical point of intersection, shaping how procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative elements are interpreted and engaged with. The player's actions and choices fundamentally shape their journey through the game and, consequently, their perception of the cultural and ideological constructs presented (Murray 1997, Mateas 2001, Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009, Treanor et al. 2011, Stang 2019). In games depicting Chinese culture, player agency determines whether these representations are embraced, challenged, or reinterpreted, fostering a dynamic interaction between the game's design and the player's autonomy.

To fully grasp video games as cultural products influenced by their socio-cultural and political contexts (Kücklich, 2006), my research utilises analytical frameworks like procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance. These frameworks are instrumental in examining the influence of the game system and narrative, as well as their interplay. Procedural Rhetoric, as characterised by Bogost (2010), is described as the art of persuasion through rule-based interaction in video games. This concept suggests that the rules in a game's world are not neutral but imbued with ideological content, influencing players' perceptions and actions. For example, this research posits that Civilization V employs procedures encouraging engagement with Chinese culture and history in specific ways, subtly guiding or misguiding players' understanding of these topics (Bogost 2008, Tanenbaum et al. 2013).

Interlinked with procedural rhetoric is the concept of Ludo-Narrative, emphasising the synergy between a game's narrative elements and its ludic structure. Scholars like Aarseth (2012) and Ryan (2004) emphasise that a game's narrative is more than a backdrop; it dynamically interacts with gameplay, influencing how players' experience and interpret cultural narratives. This approach, therefore, extends beyond procedural aspects, incorporating stories and characters that enhance the gaming experience and contribute to the portrayal of China within the virtual environment. Acknowledging the interwoven nature of game systems and narratives, this method posits that game narratives unfold within the confines of the game system. Consequently, the analysis of

game narrative elements offers interpretive insights into the game system itself. By integrating procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative as analytical tools, a thorough investigation of representation and discourse in video games becomes possible.

The interaction between gameplay mechanics and narrative can result in what Hocking (2007) termed ludo-narrative dissonance, where a discrepancy exists between the narrative's intent and the players' actual capabilities in the game. This dissonance can disrupt the game's cultural representation. Conversely, ludo-narrative coherence, as discussed by Roth van Nuenen et al. (2018), emerges when gameplay and narrative align harmoniously, creating an immersive and authentic experience that deepens the player's engagement with and understanding of Chinese culture.

The integrated framework for understanding video games, particularly in terms of Chinese representation, emphasises the medium's multifaceted nature. This framework, through an analysis of how procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative elements are both influenced by and interact with player agency, facilitates a nuanced understanding of video games as cultural narratives (Bogost, 2007). Games are thus perceived not merely as vehicles for cultural expression but as arenas for ideological engagement and negotiation. This perspective underscores the intricate interplay among game designers' intentions, the mechanics and narratives of the game, and the interpretations and actions of players.

Additionally, this research incorporates personal play style, gaming experience, and streaming experience as methods to deepen familiarity with the games and roles extending beyond academic analysis. This personal engagement with the games fosters a replication of instrumental play for analysis and yields supplementary insights when examining the play-throughs of other players or streamers (Consalvo, 2009). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is utilised as the primary method for data analysis, considering the complex cultural context and the researcher's positionality. CDA is pivotal in unravelling the layered meanings and ideologies within video games, particularly in the representation of China. This method aligns with Althusser's perspective on ideology, essential for understanding how video games can reflect and challenge dominant societal narratives and perceptions (Trattner, 2017). By employing CDA, the research aims to critically dissect the discourses and narratives within video games, shedding light on how they construct and disseminate specific images and ideas about China.

This method of analysis is in harmony with the theoretical foundations of Edward Said's Orientalism and its extensions, such as neo-Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. These theories offer a critical framework for comprehending the Western depiction of the East, and by extension, China, across various cultural mediums, including video games (Said, 1978). The utilisation of CDA facilitates a thorough

examination of how these Orientalist perspectives are presented and possibly challenged in video game narratives and mechanics. Moreover, the "play as method" approach, which involves an in-depth engagement with games from the perspectives of different player types and styles, complements the CDA approach. This method recognises that the player's interaction with the game, influenced by their personal context, beliefs, and play style, is integral to interpreting the game's content and narrative (Aarseth, 2003). Combining insights from "play as method" with CDA enables the research to present a more comprehensive understanding of how video games function as cultural texts that both shape and are shaped by prevailing ideologies and cultural narratives.

Outline

This thesis conducts a comprehensive analysis of the depiction of China in video games, emphasising on game design, player perception, and the complex cultural and historical challenges that arise. Chapter Two forges a link between ideology and video games, drawing on Althusser's concept of ideology as a pervasive phenomenon that shapes both the content and format of video games. In this context, this chapter considers ideology as a central thread connecting the game, the representation of China, and the socio-cultural and historical context. Therefore, this chapter lays the foundation for understanding China's portrayal in games through the lenses of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism, aiming to deepen the understanding of video games as a medium for critiquing and offering alternative representations of 'the Other'.

The implications of Orientalism for power dynamics in various social and political contexts are scrutinised, underscoring the challenges of countering Orientalist mentalities due to the entrenched power-knowledge relationship. The chapter also discusses the global perspective on the relationship between China and the world as depicted in video games, contemplating the ideological processes and their comprehension within economic, political, and ideological frameworks. It explores Vukovich's concept of Sinological Orientalism, which focuses on interpreting China from a Western viewpoint. This concept illuminates the 'sameness' between China and the Western world, structured by hierarchical differences that impart a sense of Western superiority. The chapter further explores the relationship between knowledge and context in the discourse of Orientalism, emphasising its context-dependent and context-independent natures. It discusses the Orient's portrayal in knowledge generation and image construction, referencing the impact of this knowledge on the creation of cultural products, including video games. Additionally, the chapter reviews arguments of Occidentalism, which counters Western Orientalism by portraying the Occident through the lens of the Orient.

Chapter Three builds upon the discussion of Orientalism and extends to understanding video games as narratives, simulations, or a combination of both. It begins by examining the interplay between ideology and discourse, particularly in relation to Orientalism in video games. The chapter introduces general approaches to video game analysis, treating them as texts and employing gameplay as an analytical method. Concepts such as procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance/harmony are introduced to elucidate the correlation between the game system and narrative and the conveyance of messages and ideologies. The chapter acknowledges the dialectical relationship between the player's playstyle and the video game itself, suggesting that a comprehensive understanding of video games through play requires consideration of both the player and the game. It discusses how video games can be viewed from both narratological and ludological perspectives, with the former viewing games as narratives through the application of narrative theories, and the latter treating games as distinct entities by analysing their abstract and formal systems. Furthermore, the chapter explores video games as a mode of discourse, examining how they act as both constitutive and representative agents of ideology. The research posits that player agency, both within and outside the confines of the game, is crucial in constructing and conveying representations of China. The chapter aims to reveal how video games shape and express China's image, reflecting societal ideologies, and how they can serve as platforms for opposition and rebellion.

Chapter Four provides an outline of the research methodology, focusing particularly on the dual roles played by the game and the player in shaping the representation of China. Acknowledging the importance of both elements, the chapter critiques the limitation of relying solely on game analysis tools like play as a method, procedural rhetoric, and ludo-narrative. To address this, the study adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical method, enabling a comprehensive interpretation of video games. This approach goes beyond the game itself to include various contextual factors, stressing the need to analyse both the game and the act of playing. The chapter recognises the evolution of video games into a diverse medium, encompassing different genres, producers, and player environments, setting the stage for a multifaceted analysis of how video games contribute to the portrayal of China.

This thesis examines the portrayal of China through games, considering the broader global perspective and how the relationship between China and the rest of the world is reflected in and influences game design and player interaction. The exploration is divided into three analytical chapters, Chapter Five, Six and Seven, each exploring different aspects of how China is portrayed and perceived in and around video games.

These chapters provide a blend of theoretical analysis and practical application, examining specific games and their portrayal of China through various lenses.

Chapter Five offers an in-depth analysis of the representation of China in two significant Western video games: *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*. The chapter begins by analysing the simulation and narrative elements of these games, utilising the lenses of procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative to dissect their portrayal of China. This analysis extends beyond the games themselves, incorporating elements such as player comments, forum discussions, and streamers' play-throughs to gain a more comprehensive understanding of China's image. The chapter acknowledges the complex and often paradoxical presentation of video games, where the portrayal of China adheres to a West/East duality. This portrayal is critically examined through the lens of Orientalism, drawing on the works of Said and Vukovich. The analysis focuses on two distinct categories in the representation of China: those that emphasise and amplify differences, and those that accentuate and magnify similarities. Consequently, the chapter offers a nuanced perspective on how Western video games represent China, reflecting the intricate interplay between cultural narratives, geopolitical dynamics, and the medium of video games.

Chapter Six centres on the national identity of China as presented, constructed, and perceived in and around video games, as well as the relationship between China and the world as reflected by such portrayals. This chapter delves into the concept of "telling the Chinese story well," a policy proposed by China in its international communication practices, focusing on self-representation. This approach contrasts with the Orientalist method of constructing the 'other' to reflect the West's identity. Instead, it emphasises China's effort to construct and convey preferred images and representations of itself and its culture through various cultural products, including video games. The chapter explores how video games, as cultural products deeply rooted in the culture they originate from, contribute to this narrative of self-representation. Through the analysis of games such as *Chinese Parents* and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*, the chapter investigates how these games project the national identity of China, offering insights into how China seeks to represent itself and its cultural values in the digital realm. This exploration addresses how video games serve as a medium for China to articulate and disseminate its story, reflecting its cultural and national identity in a global context.

Chapter Seven signifies a transition from the cultural to the political aspects when it comes to video game representations of China. It starts with the analysis of two political games, *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China*, which address social and political issues related to the People's Republic of China. These games are viewed as ideological apparatuses, embedding predetermined ideological messages within their design. This

chapter explores how these games, through their mechanics, narrative elements, and player interactions, align with and reinforce these ideological messages. It also discusses *Devotion*, a game that transitioned from being perceived as a "Chinese game" to a "non-Chinese game" due to its politically sensitive content. The focus is on the ideological encounters within the gaming community and the impact of these games on players' perceptions and discussions about China.

The final chapter synthesises the analyses from the previous chapters, offering a comprehensive view of China's portrayal in and around video games. It revisits the concepts of Orientalism, Sinological-Orientalism, and Occidentalism, and their relevance to understanding the multifaceted image of China in video games. This chapter discusses how games contribute to constructing and challenging the stereotypical image of China. It emphasises the role of player agency in shaping these perceptions and the importance of recognising the political context in video game production and consumption. The chapter also highlights the diversity of interpretations of Chinese culture influenced by the presentation of video games and players' socio-cultural contexts. This comprehensive discussion seeks to illuminate the intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the portrayal of China across different games, offering insights into how these representations reflect, reinforce, and challenge Orientalist perspectives.

Chapter Two: Theories of Orientalism and/with the Other

This research explores how video games represent China through games and interactions beyond them, specifically examining how the representation of China is designed, perceived, and challenged by games and players through a set of values linked to a certain culture or historical context. Through this investigation, and taking a global perspective, the research attempts to depict how video games reflect the relationship between China and the rest of the world, and how this relationship shapes game design and player interaction. When proposing a critical approach to understanding media, society, and their relation, Hall (1982) states that the essential characteristic is the "ideological perspective." In his work, Hall proposes two aspects when taking a critical approach: the mechanism of the ideological process and how ideology is comprehended under the social context such as the economic, political, and ideological conditions. Therefore, in this research, ideology is the thread connecting the game, the image of China, and the socio-cultural and historical context. Ideology, as defined by Althusser (1984), is "the representation of the imaginary relationships between individuals and their conditions of existence." Althusser argues that ideology exists and casts its influence through material forms in social practices. Previous studies on video games and ideology (Sicart, 2003; Šisler, 2008; Bogost, 2008, 2010; Mukherjee, 2018) have established that there is a dialectical relationship between video games and ideology. This means that ideology shapes the content and the format of video games, and video games reinforce or sometimes challenge the ideology behind them. To inspect the relationship between China and the rest of the world, Edward Said (1978) proposed his argument about Orientalism. Orientalism, along with its current development, such as neo-Orientalism and Vukovich's Sinological Orientalism (2010), offers a framework for investigating the relationship between China and the rest of the world. Starting with ideology, this chapter will then focus on Orientalism and its theoretical developments, establishing the foundation for understanding China and the relationship between China and the world.

The ideology proposed by Althusser is essential for establishing a dialectical relationship between video games and the ideologies they capture and convey. According to Althusser, video games, as a medium, serve as vehicles of ideology, shaped by the ideological contexts of designers and players alike. Althusser's work on ideology is considered "the opening towards discourse" (Purvis and Hunt 1993: 481). His idea of ideology offers an insight linking ideology with representation, which is one goal this research tries to achieve. Instead of focusing on specific ideologies that change

over time and context, Althusser proposes the concept of Ideology, a pervasive and permanent phenomenon, which is "omni-historical" (Althusser 1984: 35). With the omnipresent ideology, Althusser presents two theses about ideology's structure and function, which are "immutable" (Althusser 1970: 29): a negative conception of ideology proposes that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"; a positive conception stating that "ideology has a material existence... an apparatus, and its practice, or practices". Althusser's negative interpretation of ideology builds on Marx's conception of ideology, using similar terms such as 'illusion', 'allusion', and 'distortion'. However, Althusser's positive conception of ideology explores how ideology works and how individuals internalise ideology, making Althusser's interpretation of ideology the bridge between ideology and discourse.

By restating the material existence of ideology, Althusser introduced the concept of "interpellation," the operation by which ideology constitutes individuals into subjects. Althusser starts with a discussion of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), devices employed and manipulated by the state to reinforce its rule, such as churches, schools, and the family. He states that ISAs primarily function through ideology, and in fact, ISAs are the "realisation" (Althusser 1970: 33) of state ideology. In researching video games, some scholars (Sicart 2003) argue that video games can be perceived as one of these Ideological State Apparatuses, a subtler means of repression that are designated by the state but address individuals privately, "as long as they represent the representation of the real conditions of existence in our cultures" (Sicart 2003: 4). Althusser's notion of ISA is important in that it acknowledges the material form of ideology, not just state ideology, but all ideologies. Ideology does not just reflect one's understanding of reality, but an aspect of reality. Ideology propels individual activity, which installs social significance into one's actions. This materialist approach to ideology opens the possibility of considering ideology beyond just state politics, towards a more general understanding of ideology.

Using Althusser's interpretation of ideology, then, it is possible to establish a dialectical relationship between video games and ideology. Applying Althusser's concept of ideology in relation to video games provides a theoretical framework for analysing how video games both reinforce and challenge the dominant ideologies of their cultural context. Video games act as carriers of ideology, influenced by both the designer's and the player's ideological context. However, video games also possess the power to inspect, understand, and challenge the ideological context they embody. For example, Bogost argues that video games provide a visual medium that can give ideology a "new material form" (Bogost 2008: 79), making them effective tools for delivering political, educational, and advertising messages. Political games, such as *America's Army*,

designed at the request of the US government, serve as a means to convey the State's ideology and exercise repressive power through censorship. Such games call on players to consider a particular worldview, one that emphasises duty, honour, and a singular global political truth (Bogost 2008: 79). In contrast, *Tax Invader*, as discussed by Bogost (2008), demonstrates how designers can embed ideological manifestos into the rules of video games, making them vehicles for carrying ideological biases and reinforcing opposing political ideologies.

More specifically, the use of Orientalism and related concepts provides a lens to examine representations of China in video games and how these representations may be influenced by the dominant ideologies of the cultural context in which the game was produced. When reviewing Vukovich's work on Orientalism and China, Ferguson notes that responses to Orientalism fall into three categories: highly critical, uncritical, and "inspired by Said's text, but not uncritically deferential to the same" (Ferguson 2014: 73). Thus, this research assembles the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism to expand analysis beyond traditional Orientalist tropes and explores how representations of China in video games may be influenced by broader geopolitical and cultural dynamics. By examining the ideological underpinnings of video game representations of China, utilising the theoretical frameworks of Althusser's concept of ideology and Orientalism, this research hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of how video games can be used to critique and challenge dominant ideologies, as well as offer alternative representations of the Other. Now I will provide an overview of the theoretical framework of Orientalism and its related concepts, including neo-Orientalism, Sinological Orientalism, and Occidentalism, to provide a foundation for analysing the representation of China in video games.

Sinological Orientalism and the Same Other

Edward Said's work on Orientalism, as well as other scholars' developments, offers a theoretical framework for interpreting the relationship between the East and West. However, traditional or classical Orientalism mainly focuses on the Middle East region and does not target China. New development of Orientalism, known as Sinological Orientalism, proposed by Daniel F. Vukovich in his ground-breaking work, China, and Orientalism*: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC*, provides a lens for inspecting the relationship between China and the Western world specifically. Before the publication of his book in 2010. Vukovich's work in China and Orientalism, or Sinological Orientalism as he calls it, examines the relationship between "China in theory" and capitalism. The context of the book shares certain similarities with Said's

Orientalism. On one hand, due to China's growing economic, political, and military strength, there has been a gradual increase in the number of studies on China. China studies, or Sinology, is a critical academic tradition. Research focusing on conducting a critical evaluation of the subject is significantly lacking. Fortunately, Vukovich's research fills in this gap. According to Vukovich, China, and Orientalism is "the first book-length, English-language critique of modern Sinology or China studies broadly understood" (Vukovich 2013: xiii).

In his research, Vukovich investigates the integral relationship between capitalism and a new version of "Orientalism" for the critical evaluation of how knowledge about China has been produced in the West. He censured the so-called Area Studies experts' attempt to denigrate China only because of the party-state characteristic of China, which is under the influence of US-led anti-communism. Instead of focusing on the essential difference between the Orient and the Occident as classical Orientalism did, Vukovich emphasises the "sameness" between China and the Western world. "The inevitable process of becoming-the-same," though still structured by "a hierarchical difference," confers a sense of positional superiority in the West. Vukovich shows that the new mentality of Orientalism about China emerges from the astonishing outcome China has accomplished by taking on the capitalist approach to growing the economy in the open and reform policy and "the West's ambivalent relationship to this" (Vukovich 2013: 143), indicating the influential role global capitalism plays in constructing the oriental China. Vukovich states that "it is no accident that the orientalist logic of sameness dovetails with capital's own logic of a homogenising, abstract sameness." However, this knowledge formation is not only based on the logic of capitalism but also the result of China's long history of experiencing imperialism and colonialism. Thus, Vukovich claims that "the logic of sameness dovetails with missionary discourse and the older French universalist logic of the civilising mission (all 'natives can become the same as 'us')" (Vukovich 2013: 5), which (re)presents China as less civilised. The purpose of sameness, obtained by contrasting the Chinese and the Western, is "to validate the universal truth of liberalism and Western forms of governance" (Vukovich 2013: 144), which is also a way to maintain the dominant position of the West and construct Western identification. Vukovich's work identifies the homogenising tendencies of global capitalism in constructing the oriental China, which is structured by a hierarchical difference that confers a sense of positional superiority of the West.

Vukovich's work on Sinological Orientalism has contributed to the critical evaluation of the image of China in the Western world, including in terms of video games, visible in the work of researchers such Wirman (2015). Wirman explored news coverage of Chinese gaming by Western news media and concluded that the image of Chinese gaming as a popular culture and pastime is "less occupied by the strongly political

meanings suggested by Vukovich's study of Sinological-orientalism," although "the barbarising, racist Sinological-Orientalism still exists in Western news media" (Wirman 2015: 309). Therefore, the media discourse surrounding Chinese gaming is a blend of classical Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. As China is the world's largest nation of digital gamers, Wirman's research has shown that "recent media attention has focused on the fast-growing market, investment opportunities, and local developers in China" (Wirman 2015: 309). Her study not only presents the image of "Chinese gaming," but also provides evidence and validation that Orientalism serves as an effective theoretical framework for analysing media discourse in and around video games about China.

Despite the fact that Sinological Orientalism is focused on interpreting China from a Western viewpoint, its underlying premise involves Westernising the East. Thus, several studies about the game *Assassin's Creed* sharing similar arguments have also inspired this thesis The game *Assassin's Creed*, from certain researchers' perspective (e.g. Seif El-Nasr M, Al-Saati M, Niedenthal S, et al., 2008; Komel, 2014; Funcke, 2015; Hastings, 2017), shapes the assassins, originally from the Muslim and Arab culture, from forerunners of modern terrorism into Occidentalised heroic protagonists. In *Assassin's Creed*, the main hero is Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, referred to as Altaïr henceforward. Despite the crucial role that cultural background appears to play in identity construction and understanding game narratives (Seif El-Nasr M, Al-Saati M, Niedenthal S, et al, 2008), Komel (2014) asserts that self-Orientalism has significantly influenced players' gaming experiences, regardless of cultural context. Altaïr's behaviour and mannerisms shape him as a typical Western hero, "more a commando soldier than a secretive Assassin" (Komel 2014: 84). The clothing and physical appearance of Altaïr is different from other Eastern male characters in the game. All of these features serve to portray Altaïr not as the expected Oriental villain, but as an Occidental hero (Komel, 2014; Hastings, 2017). Additionally, within the game, the dichotomy is not between Western and Eastern cultures, but rather between the groups known as the Assassins and the Templars. The Assassins are struggling for truth and freedom, while the Templar are fighting for order and control. Within the game narrative, the honourable Assassins are portrayed as advocates for freedom and champions of righteousness, while the imperialistic Templars are primarily driven by a desire for global supremacy. It is a coincidence that freedom and truth are regarded as the values of Western civilisation and used as justification for Western intervention from the Orientalism perspective. By instilling such values into a character who originates from Muslim and Arab culture, not only is the Orient influenced by Western culture, but the player's identity is also muddled, thereby emphasising freedom and truth as universal values. Though certain scholars (e.g. Bosman, 2016) believe that "[*Assassin's*

Creed] succeeds (at least partially) in discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism", such discarding of stereotypical representation is only achieved by making an Occidentalised Oriental hero.

Classical Orientalism and the different Other

In his famous work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said introduced and popularised the concept of Orientalism, emphasising its ideological aspect. One of Said's most well-known definitions of Orientalism is that it is "the Western style to dominate, restructure and spread its authority over the Orient with the justification that Western culture and values, assumed as opposite to Oriental ones, are superior" (Said 1978: 3). However, Orientalism, according to Said, encompasses several intertwined concepts. The first is an academic discipline that focuses on the Orient, the study of the Orient. Said (1978: 3) proposed "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'", which is the second Orientalism. The last definition is the one that has become the most generally acknowledged aspect of Orientalism, as we mentioned earlier. It is important to note all three aspects of Orientalism because studies that use or critique Said's work (e.g., Yan & Santos, 2009) often focus on the third interpretation, taking for granted the dualisms of the Orient and the Occident that Said sought to challenge. By doing so, researchers may overlook another "achievement" of Orientalism: the self-construction of the West.

To understand Orientalism, it is crucial to comprehend the relationship between the three concepts. Although Said initially focused on Orientalism as an academic tradition, Birch, Schirato, and Srivastava (2001) argue that the assumption that the Orient and the Occident have fundamentally different ontologies and epistemologies is at the foundation of Orientalism. Birch, Schirato, and Srivastava (2001) suggest four related arguments about how the West portrays and comprehends the Orient, which can help us understand the three Orientalisms and their relationships:

The first argument posits that, compared to the West, "the Orientals" are seen as "other than human," lacking true or full humanness (Birch, Schirato, and Srivastava 2001: 3). This perception of the Orientals as "less than" can lead to restrictions on their behaviour and access to certain places. The second argument is that representations of the East, provided by the experts of the Oriental world, construct a knowledge system for the West to discover and comprehend the "real East" or the "truth" of the Oriental world. The third argument suggests that the West, based on the acquired knowledge, adopts a superiority mentality in intellectual, political, moral, and ethical areas toward the Orient and the Orientals. Finally, the fourth argument asserts that this superiority mentality becomes the justification for the West's intervention, and even invasion, of the Orient.

All discussions regarding Orientalism originate from identifying the Occident as "us" and the Orient as "the other". Therefore, Orientalism is essentially the West's method of defining the "West" by utilising the "Orient" as a predetermined condition. Thus, Othering is a crucial aspect of Orientalism, which will be further examined subsequently. Given the ontological and epistemological distinctions between the Occident and the Orient, it becomes imperative to comprehend and explore the Orient. Nevertheless, this fundamental distinction frequently results in comparisons and a mindset of Western superiority. In Said's Orientalism, he credits Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, along with the concept of discourse(Said 1978: 4, 15). When Orientalism is viewed as an academic tradition, it becomes clear that the representations, understanding and treatment of the "Orient" are not due to ignorance or lack of knowledge. Rather, all representations and comprehensions are considered as knowledge, and all interventions are based on knowledge. Knowledge pertaining to the Orient is only produced and disseminated within the Western cultural framework, often with the aim of justifying Western actions towards the Orient. The Orient is regarded as an object in the processes of knowledge generation and image construction. According to Said and other scholars (Šisler 2008, Trattner 2017, Mukherjee 2018), the impact of this knowledge is manifested through the creation of diverse cultural products that are designed to present and reinforce the knowledge and power relations associated with it.

To discuss video game studies specifically, given the context of Orientalism, a large portion of research involving Orientalism and video games targets the representation of the Middle East in video games. One of the most influential studies was conducted by Šisler in 2008, in which he examined more than 90 European or American and 15 Arab video games to explore the representation of Muslims and Arabs. In those games, the diversity of the Muslim and Arab culture, religion, and identity are flattened by the construction of "a series of typologies operating within a broader framework of terrorism and hostility" (Šisler 2008: 203). Therefore, in these "Western games", there is a clear tendency of the Orientalist mentality towards the Muslim and Arab other. The Middle East in those games is depicted in a contemporary and decisive way, stereotyping Arabs and Muslims as the uncivilised, obsoleted, authoritarian and violent other, while by contrast, Westerners are civilised, modern, democratic and peace-loving. Moreover, Šisler's research points out the possibility of video games to challenge Orientalising stereotypes and schematizations by analysing self-representation in the Arab video games. The Arab producers challenge misrepresentations by either "exploiting and reversing stereotypical depiction, narrative, and gameplay" or "humanising Arab and Muslim characters using distinctive Islamic narrative". Höglund (2008) developed Šisler's analyses further by focusing on the first-person military

shooter. Höglund employed the concept of "neo-Orientalism" with a series of games set in the Middle East, to show how the construction of this specific location in the game space, as well as the ideological representation of its peoples, functions as a correlative of the American post-9/11 imperialistic policy in the Middle East.

In Šisler's and Höglund's research, they both investigated the first-person shooter (FPS) games. In those games, the extreme dualism of the East and the West are employed rather than destroyed by the producers to address a certain point of view. In this way, those games are indulging the dichotomy, the foundation of Orientalism, using stereotypes against stereotypes, which may compromise the efforts. This concern is further developed and supported by Saber and Webber's (2017) study. In their research, Saber, and Webber examined the ideologies featured in several games developed to support Hezbollah and the Islamic State (IS). Their study concluded that even through these games have made certain effort to challenge the existing hegemonic (re)presentations of the Middle East and the 'War on Terror', they attempt to achieve such a goal by reducing or removing the agency in video game, making the players the viewer or the witness of the challenge rather the actor. Furthermore, lack of agency in those games results in Mouffe's proposition that Saber and Webber emphasised, that those games are challenging the current hegemony by introducing similar hegemonic frames, "thus contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of the hegemonic order" (Saber, Webber 2017: 90). Therefore, following Said's approach, my own research views video games as a social-cultural product and aims to explore the representation of China in and around video games, examining not only the portrayed image of China but also the implied relationship between China and the West.

The different "Other"

As previously indicated, Orientalism is built upon a connection between self and Other. In this discussion, I will further examine the implications of this relationship. Peter Burke (2001) has identified two categories of encounters with the other. The first is to assimilate others to ourselves or our neighbour's using analogy, consciously or unconsciously denying, or ignoring cultural distance. The second encounter, which is contrary to the first, treats another culture as the opposite of one's own culture, consciously or unconsciously, as Burke mentioned. The simultaneous construction of the self and the other in mutual and unequal opposition is called "othering." As Crang (1998) describes, othering is "a process (...) through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship" (61), echoing Orientalism. Spivak (1985) coined the term "othering" in her essay "*The Rani of Sirmur*," drawing on various philosophical and theoretical traditions, and writers such as Hegel, de Beauvoir, Lacan, and Sartre, among

others. She perceives the concept of othering as a dialectical process. Within this framework, the coloniser not only establishes and reinforces their own identity as the 'Master,' thereby positioning themselves as 'the other' from the perspective of the colonised, but also simultaneously, and through this same process, constructs the colonised individuals as subjugated subjects.

Spivak's research shows that othering is a multidimensional process. She analyses three dimensions of othering present in the archive material of British colonial power in India. Firstly, Spivak identifies that power plays an essential role in othering. By exhibiting power, the exhibition merges and reinforces the power relation between the coloniser and the colonised, leading to the second dimension, the degradation of the colonised, as discussed by Said. In the third dimension, Spivak re-addresses and further develops the relationship between power and knowledge. She indicates that the coloniser not only produces knowledge about the subordinated other but also restricts the subordinate's access to knowledge and the type of knowledge they could access. Through such practice, Spivak (1985) concludes that such manipulation "merges and reinforces the 'natural' difference between the 'master' and the 'native' - a difference in human or racial material" (256).

Various scholars have developed and expanded on Spivak's conceptualisation of othering. For example, Lister defines othering as a "process of differentiation and demarcation, which draws a line between 'us' and 'them,' establishing and maintaining social distance between the more and less powerful" (Lister 2004: 101). Schwalbe and his colleagues define it as "the defining into existence of a group of people who are identifiable, from the standpoint of a group with the capacity to dominate, as inferior" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 777), or as "the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 422). Therefore, power, especially the power-knowledge relation, plays a critical role in examining and explaining the relationship between the Orient and the West. Furthermore, Spivak's "random" examples demonstrate that the process of othering permeates everyday life, affecting both colonisers and the colonised in their daily interactions. Examination of the concept of othering does not just focus on governmental or official records and regulations, but also on the cultural artifacts and daily encounters. When working within the framework of Orientalism, this thesis emphasises the perception and description of difference, as well as the explanation of such results or the implications of othering.

Though both Said and Spivak highlight keywords such as conflict and degradation when understanding the relationship between the East and the West, this is not the only approach. Aravamudan's research (2011) on "enlightenment Orientalism" delineates another side of Orientalism, apart from the "negative form of Orientalism" proposed by

Said. Aravamudan presents a provocative hypothesis that "enlightenment interrogation was not just bent on the domination of the other but also aimed at mutual understanding across cultural differences" (Aravamudan 2011: 3). Although enlightenment Orientalism still involves an imaginative representation of the East, "circulating images of the East that were nine parts invented and one part referential," the domination intention behind enlightenment Orientalism is thin, since the East is not the primary target of Western domination. Enlightenment Orientalism enables a coexistence of cultural exoticism and domestic realism, for cultural diplopia, "stereoscopically puts together multiple chromotropes and xenotropes" (Aravamudan 2011: 239). Investigations into the correlation between exoticism and Orientalism can be found in studies about music, dance, decorative art, and other topics (e.g. Kempadoo 2000, Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, Cheang 2007, Tatsumi 2007). These studies, in combination, illustrate a valuable perception of the portrayal of the other in Orientalism, stressing the contrast between the West and the Orient.

Othering and highlighting differences have certainly influenced video game studies critically. For instance, Mukherjee (2017, 2018) delves into the intricate relationship between video games and post-colonialism, placing particular emphasis on the cultural context of the player. Mukherjee's threefold examination of post-colonialism in video games yields significant insights, revealing that notions of the colonial and the questioning of colonialism are both ingrained within the medium. Consequently, video games offer a unique space with simultaneous possibilities for subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony (Mukherjee 2018: 518). This argument resonates with Šisler's view that video games have the potential to deliver culturally balanced representations (Šisler 2008: 205). Moreover, Mukherjee highlights the profound impact of video games featuring colonial themes, particularly on millions of Indian players who engage with titles such as *Empire: Total War, Colonization, and East India Company*. For the postcolonial subject, their encounter with colonial history through these games is direct and inescapable (Mukherjee 2018: 504). This engagement takes players beyond mere observation; as they assume the role of the coloniser, they become immersed in colonial logic, blurring or even dismantling the boundary between the coloniser and the colonised. Thus, Mukherjee aptly observes, "Playing at colonialism can also turn into the subversion of colonialism" (Mukherjee, 2017: 105).

Not only has the mentality of difference and contrast influenced the interpretation of video games and the identity they form and strengthen, but it has also, according to Fickle (2019), impacted our comprehension of the concepts of game and play themselves. Fickle (2019) comments that Caillois' taxonomy of games is "not applied to but derived from "world cultures," and specifically from the relation between East and West" (127). Caillois' approach, contrasting agon and alea, resembles

"Orientalism's antithetical complementarity" (133), as argued by Fickle. "Agon" represents games based on competition and skill, where players compete under equal conditions to demonstrate superiority. In contrast, "alea" indicates games of chance, where the outcome relies on luck rather than the player's skill or decision-making. In contrasting agon and alea, Caillois states that "Nothing is more noteworthy in this regard than the exact symmetry between the natures of agon and alea: parallel and complementary... However, the two kinds of games have opposite ways of designating the winner" (Caillois 2001:74). In his examination and illustration of alea, Caillois establishes a connection between alea and Eastern culture, particularly Chinese culture. Alea is regarded as a corruption of modern life, an "incurable cancer in the economy" (Caillois 2001: 114). Caillois uses the Chinese charade and Chinese Zodiac as his primary examples when illustrating his argument.

In the special edition of *Diogenes* that he edited, Caillois provides further evidence of this East-West binary in his interpretation of play. He places additional emphasis on the distinction between agon and alea based on cultural differences, and proposes that there is a fundamental difference when understanding time and development. Caillois' argument contends that the East, exemplified by Chinese culture, perceives history and progress through a "circular time" perspective, which implies that individuals are subject to fate or a higher power. The East understands time and historical development from the perspective of an "unfathomable past", in which individuals "can only wait for the cyclical return of the masked gods, imitated at fixed intervals in complete unconsciousness of self" (Caillois 2001: 127). In contrast, the West comprehends the world and history from a developing perspective, thus surpassing the "enclosed and catastrophic vision of history". History is "a continuous development from an unfathomable past toward an undefined future" (Caillois, 1963: 11). Concurrently, Caillois has expressed apprehension regarding the Eastern interpretation of time and history, which may corrupt Western identity. He encourages Western historians to "avoid and rightly distrust these prefabricated sequences" (Caillois, 1963: 12), suggested by the Eastern cyclical understanding of time. Otherwise, it would first compromise the "historical research... philosophy of history, the presentation of events [and] their interpretation and classification (Caillois 1963: 12-13). Then, Western mentality and identity would be jeopardised, for "the development of history then slips once more into the closed form of the circuits familiar to the East" (Caillois 1963: 13). Caillois' argument encourages a closed mindset and a reluctance to accept diverse cultures and viewpoints, leading to a fertile ground for xenophobia.

Xenophobia

In her analysis of the Francophone literary culture, Laroussi highlights the mechanisms that sustain the "exotic guest as tokens of both xenophilia and xenophobia" (Laroussi 2016: 77), revealing the ambivalent nature of integrating new communities. As Said observes, "the Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in - or fear of - novelty" (Said 1978: 53). While Said's work primarily focuses on the interaction between Europe and the Islamic world, he acknowledges that one can discuss Europe's experience of the Near Orient or Islam separately from its experience of the Far Orient (Said 1978: 20). Thus, the xenophobic aspect of Orientalism is mainly associated with the geographic Near East, and in recent research, it is linked to Islamophobia.

Xenophobia refers to the fear of strangers in its literal sense. Francis Nyamnjoh defines it as "intense dislike, hatred, or fear of others" (Nyamnjoh 2006: 5), while Mabel Berezin views it as "fear of difference embodied in persons or groups" (Berezin 2006: 273). In some cases, it is characterised as "hostility towards strangers and all that is foreign" (Stöcke 1999: 28). As a component of Orientalism, xenophobia stems from the identification of "self" and "the other," followed by the negation and even hostility towards the other. Balibar suggests that this mentality arises from a collective self-understanding as the other's other: the collective self receives its identity from being the other of the external collective other. This mentality is taken to extremes in Huntington's view, which posits that "unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are" (Huntington 1996: 21). Therefore, xenophobia also serves as a means of constructing identity.

Xenophobia is generally recognised as an illness and a form of irrationality (Rattansi 2005: 295). However, like stereotypes, it does not arise in a vacuum or based purely on imagination. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Europeans' fear of Islam was initially justifiable. It was because "after Mohammed's death in 632, the military and later the cultural and religious hegemony of Islam grew enormously" (Said 1978: 53). Islam had conquered Spain, Sicily, and parts of France, and had ruled not only the near east but also "as far east as India, Indonesia, and China." To this extraordinary achievement, Europe could only respond with fear and shock. Consequently, according to Said, Islam became symbolised as "terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians," and the "lasting trauma."

During the colonial age, the Orient was gradually seen as a threat, while "the West" emerged as dominant in both the economy and the military. As a result, the representation of the Orient became vague and abstract. Marandi (2009) argues that the

Orient was portrayed as primitive, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatic, and essentially inferior to the Westerner or native informant. Such a depiction of the Orient went beyond the mere fear that was deemed necessary and provided justification for the intervention and invasion of the West, thus serving as a vindication of Western imperialism. Even if we assume for a moment that this portrayal of the Orient was true, with the Orient being primitive, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatic, and essentially inferior to the Westerner or native informant, how would this "evidence" justify colonisation? Why did people view the Occident, being advanced, rational, and peaceful, as superior to the Orient? Chibber offers an "Orientalist answer" to this question by suggesting that "[the West] presumed that Eastern peoples were motivated by the same needs and goals as those of the West" (Chibber 2018: 3). Certain values were created and circulated as "universal values," most of which are documented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, these "universal values" conveniently align with the qualities of the Western world. As a result, they were deemed universal, and therefore, just as Said concludes, Orientalism is not just a product of colonisation, but "colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism" (Said 1985: 39).

This justification has a subtle impact on constructing the identity of the West. As Loomba argues, "if colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former is barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic being that of hard work; if the Orient is static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine" (Loomba 1998: 47). Similarly, Said emphasises that "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1978: 2). As a result, xenophobia may never disappear as an identity-building mechanism since it signifies "the destruction of the barriers that kept East and West from each other" (Said, 1978: 208).

Exoticism and Xenophilia

In reviewing Spivak's definition of "othering" and Rani's study, Jensen noted that Spivak's version of the concept does not focus on the fascination with the "other," as it does not revolve around ambivalence or the exoticism of the colonial gaze. The "other" is always inferior, not fascinating. However, the idea of a fascinating "other" has been investigated as a form of exoticism or xenophilia. Exoticism has been discussed extensively as part of Orientalism and post-colonial studies (Said, 1978; Khabbani, 1986; di Leonardo, 1998; Aravamudan, 2012). Despite this, researchers provide diverse interpretations of exoticism, even though Rousseau and Porter admit that analysing the

exotic was a challenging and invigorating task. When exploring Enlightenment Orientalism in 18th-century Orientalist fictions, Aravamudan (2012) expressed that the Orientalist fictions do not align with imperialist assimilation and domination. Instead, they attempt to mediate on sexuality, religion, and politics and express "a strong desire to understand civilizational differences both relativistically and universally."

However, current studies emphasise the relationship between exoticism and colonial power, arguing that exoticism acts as a tool to establish Western-centric exoticism and power over the unknown. When investigating exoticism in the Caribbean, Kempadoo (2000) defines it as "the romanticisation of the racial, ethnic, or cultural other, yet the simultaneous oppression and exploitation that occurs with it." In Forsdick's research, exoticism often describes "an imagined quality or essence of difference (mystery, savagery, eroticism, cruelty) ascribed by one culture to another radically different (and often threatening) culture that falls outside its customary domestic frame of reference" (Forsdick 2014: 48). The definition seems neutral at first glance, but Forsdick's further explanation of the concept reveals the fixed colonial understanding of the concept. In addition, Forsdick's analysis suggests that exoticism was used as colonial propaganda to convey the West's right to colonise and the justness of imperialism.

Exoticism is an approach towards the non-Western world that eventually offers a justification for Western interference in the Orient. Through analysing tango in Japan, Savigliano indicates that "exoticism is a way of establishing order in an unknown world through fantasy; a daydream guided by pleasurable self-reassurance and expansionism" (Savigliano 1995: 189). As Rousseau and Porter assert,

> "The invention of the 'exotic' evidently satisfied needs amongst a European and, later, an Atlantic, civilization which, as it progressively explored and dominated the entire globe with its guns and sails, increasingly assumed the right to define human values and conduct in their highest expression. Other cultures, other creeds, were not merely different, not even merely lower, but positively - even objectively - strange. It was not merely the remoteness of geographical distance in a world where miles counted for much, but the ineluctable sense that all their mental processes and logical deductions were equally as alien. Labelling the anthropological Other as exotic legitimated treating the peoples of the 'third world' as fit to be despised - destroyed even, or at least doomed, like the Tasmanian aborigines, to extinction - while concurrently also constituting them as projections of Western fantasies." (Rousseau Porter 1990: 6-7).

A particular form of exoticism known as Chinoiserie gained popularity in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, influencing areas such as painting,

architecture, and interior design. Domanska investigates the presence of Chinoiserie in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland, highlighting its indirect yet profound influence, which extends even to contemporary Polish popular culture. Notably, Tazbir points out that despite the prevailing xenophobia of the Baroque period (1620-1740) in Poland, the enthusiasm for Chinoiserie remained unabated. The incredible mania for Chinoiserie, characterised by the so-called "enlightened Sinophilia," emerged during the eighteenth century, with Voltaire playing a prominent role (Domanska 2004: 84). Sinophilia served as a catalyst for the emergence of a new civilisation in the West—a tool used to challenge absolutism and the church—ultimately giving rise to scientific rationalism, empiricism, and scepticism, which are key legacies of the Enlightenment.

Therefore, this interpretation of exoticism emphasises the relationship between exoticism and colonial power, arguing that exoticism acts as a tool to establish the Western-centric exoticism that power over the unknown.

Occidentalism

So far, in the former discussion of Orientalism, the Orient has been studied, defined, represented, and otherized by the West as an object. During this process, as Said argued, the West establishes and reinforces its identity through Orientalist discourse. As a result, the relationship between the Orient and the Occident, as indicated and constructed by such a process, is contextual, dynamic, and fluid, depending on the power relations between the two. Therefore, with the rapid development of the non-Western world, including China and Africa, the Western economic, political, and cultural hegemony in its totality is challenged, not only by "Islamic fundamentalism," as Mutman addressed (Mutman 1993: 165), but by all the "non-Western." Consequently, the Orient begins to reconsider the East-West relationship from the standpoint and perspective of the Orient. Hence, the discussion of Occidentalism becomes more and more visible.

Research on Occidentalism has become fruitful (see Nader, 1989; Carrier, 1992, 1995; Mutman, 1993; Coronil, 1996; Mamdani, 1998; Buruma and Margalit, 2004; Bilgrami, 2006) in recent years with the investigation of the image of the West perceived and constructed in the Islamic world. Arguments of Occidentalism build upon the dualism of the Orient and the Occident, identified by Said, to describe not only the image of the West but also the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. Most of their arguments suggest that Occidentalism is the mentality possessed by the Orient to portray the Occident through their lens as the twin of Orientalism. Therefore, the Occidentalism discourse is portrayed as a counter-discourse against Western Orientalism, a resistance.

Given this research's Chinese cultural context and the contextual nature of the Orientalism and Occidentalism discussion, Xiaomei Chen's work (1995) discussing Occidentalism in China will be relevant and will be under detailed review. But before moving on to Chen's work, my research acknowledges a critical perspective introduced by Nader in 1989, which, while not the primary focus of my study, is essential for contextual understanding. Nader's analysis of academic writings and official reports on 'progress' in gender dynamics reveals a pervasive issue: cultural comparisons often inadvertently reinforce female subordination across different societies. Nader argues that in discussions of cultural identity, other facets like gender identity are sometimes relegated to a subordinate status. This occurs as nations strive to preserve moral authority amidst challenging international power dynamics (Nader 1989: 376). This concept becomes particularly pertinent in the context of Chinese culture, where the collective nature of society might lead to the oversimplification or marginalisation of other identities, including gender. Thus, while examining Chen's work, it is crucial to be mindful of this potential for other identities to be overshadowed or simplified within the broader discourse on cultural identity.

In the discussion of Occidentalism in the post-Mao period of China, Xiaomei Chen (1995) defines Occidentalism as "a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to actively participate, with indigenous creativity, in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others" (Chen 1995: 2). With this definition, Chen suggests that the Orient takes initiative and countermeasures against the West. She studied the period from 1978 to 1988 to identify two "related, co-existing, and even overlapping discursive practices": official Occidentalism and anti-official Occidentalism. Chen argues that official Occidentalism aims to discipline and support patriotism in the Chinese people, while also serving as propaganda to denigrate "the West." In contrast, anti-official Occidentalism constructs an ideal "West" to promote reform and even Westernisation. Through constructing difference, both discourses propose opinions about what China is, or what it is not. However, unlike Orientalism, which, according to Said, ultimately justifies Western aggression towards the Orient, the practice of Occidentalism in China is mostly focused internally. As Chen notes, "its aims are largely and specifically Chinese" (Chen 1995: 8). Chen argues that this emphasis on internal issues reflects the historical and power structures of China and the West between the late 1970s and early 1990s, a time when "Western imperialism... was... a threat even to the prevailing Chinese political order" (Chen 1995: 8). Thus, the process of constructing the Western "Other" is a process of self-construction focused solely on the self.

In recent years, China has shifted its focus from constructing the West to self-representation, commonly known as "telling the Chinese story," particularly in international communication. Ma and Chen (2019) propose four rules for telling this story. Firstly, it should be based on current developments while emphasising the Chinese cultural and historical context. Secondly, it should employ "Western logic" as a narrative structure. Thirdly, it should combine truth with the elements of a compelling story, often highlighting the lives of ordinary people. Lastly, Wang (2019) suggests that stories should be diverse, not limited by political aspects, but rather encompassing culture, education, technology, and more. Some researchers, such as Mao (2019), Li and Li (2019), and Gu (2018), have focused on the "One Belt One Road" policy, recommending tailored strategies based on the cultural, social, and historical contexts of the involved countries. These studies tend to overlook or neglect "the other," seemingly constructing images and representations through a concentration on China itself and the narrative of the "Chinese story." However, it is important to note that no representation exists in isolation. The duality between China and the West is not overt but rather embedded in communication. Wang (2019) highlighted that when discussing "telling the Chinese story," he often encountered sceptical responses claiming it sounded like propaganda. Unlike Chen's discussion on Chinese Occidentalisms, "telling the Chinese story" represents an external approach challenging the Western representational system of China. Such resistance relies on the notion of authenticity, which warrants a closer examination of the concept itself.

The concept of authenticity itself is not without its challenges. Nazir (2017) describes the issue of authenticity in cultural representation as a critical search for genuine cultural artifacts that embody the essence of a culture and serve as its symbolic representation. From the viewpoint of cultural product, Fanon (2001) criticises certain African poets and scholars for adopting an essentialist and racial approach towards African culture. He argues that native intellectuals often exploit their cultural identity, similar to the criticism posed by Bahdad and Williams (2010) towards neo-Orientalists when creating supposedly "authentic" cultural products. Fanon characterises these cultural products as "mummified fragments," challenging the static notion of culture. Consequently, Huggan (2001) suggests that authenticity circulates as commodities available for commercial exploitation and as signs within a larger semiotic system: the postcolonial exotic, particularly within the capitalist mode of production. Huggan's argument coincides with the idea of cultural appropriation discussed before. However, considering former Chinese study, a large proportion of the research highlights the Chinese cultural symbols, especially the Chinese exclusive cultural elements.

From the game studies perspective, Wirman's (2015) observation highlights a significant gap. Media discourse surrounding Chinese gaming often oscillates between classical Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. Despite her observation, there has been a tendency to either overlook theoretical frameworks such as Orientalism or to focus narrowly on the design and artwork of games. By highlighting these gaps, we are positioned to better appreciate the value of a comprehensive approach that incorporates both theoretical and cultural perspectives in game studies, particularly in the context of Chinese video gaming. At the meantime, few studies have investigated the game mechanism or the cultural aspect of games in China by Chinese scholars, some of which are problematic.

Wang (2013) attempted to portray the image of China in video games in his master's thesis. He investigated what he called "the new media entertainment marketing of country image" (Wang 2013: 1), using video games as the new media. Through content analysis, he investigated all American video games produced from 2006 to 2012 to identify the image of America, Russia, and China in the selected games. He concluded that the American video games deliberately stigmatised China, portraying it as an evil war machine initially. Later games still depicted China as America's enemy, but the conflict between the two countries was due to resources, from petroleum to rare-earth ores. Moreover, Wang argued that the so-called "Chinese culture" in American video games was the American culture at the core, coated with certain Chinese elements like costumes or background music. However, Wang's analysis is flawed. The data for his research is the plot descriptions of games on Wikipedia, specifically the English Wikipedia, which he claims has high-quality, objective content. Additionally, he examined only the cover and two screenshots of selected games to complement his content analysis. The credibility of his analysis and conclusion is therefore questionable.

In 2015, Xue examined China's image in video games after 2000. He investigated *Command and Conquer: Generals, Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*, and *Battlefield 4*. He used Professor Youzhong Sun's operationalization (2009) of national image to conduct his research, analysing national image from four perspectives: Internal Politics, Military Technology, Diplomacy, and Residency Economics. Xue discovered that in the games he analysed, China was portrayed as a friendly yet cautious ally of America. Contrary to the stereotyped image, China was not a completely evil country in those games. Although there were ideological differences between China and America, causing conflicts, the two powerful countries shared a common enemy: terrorism. In those games, China was a powerful country, particularly in the military, and was a threat to America. However, when faced with terrorism, China was one of America's most reliable allies. Xue believes that after 9/11, terrorism, not China,

became the major threat to America, which led to the war on terror. Therefore, American games after 2000 reflected the international and social conditions during that period.

In his study, Xue employs a methodology that merits further discussion. His analysis primarily centres on the narrative elements of video games, such as in *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2,* which features multiple endings. This approach may overlook the dynamic simulation aspect of these games. For instance, in his discussion, there appears to be a disconnection between the plot descriptions and the derived results. Xue presents a table correlating descriptions of China in these games with the interpreted image of China. However, these interpretations, largely paraphrases of in-game narrations, seem to lack a deeper critical analysis. For example, he describes, "the real leader of the Chinese army is a hard-liner," and interprets this as "the hawks control the Chinese army" (Xue 2015: 23). Similarly, in his analysis of *Battlefield 4*, the section titled analysis of the game content might benefit from a more rigorous analytical approach, as it primarily uses visual elements from the game to assert its authenticity, which may not substantially contribute to the overall analysis.

Furthermore, Xue's research could be viewed as having a significant limitation. In examining *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*, the focus is predominantly on the more positive outcomes, such as the scenario where China and America resolve their standoff. This seems to have overlooked alternative endings that depict a breakdown in relations, potentially limiting the scope of his analysis. The emphasis on certain plot elements without clear justification might give the impression of selective analysis, particularly when endings that do not align with his conclusions are not considered. While both Xue and Wang's methods and analyses present certain constraints that might affect their findings, it is noteworthy that they both highlight the portrayal of China in American video games as aligning with traditional Oriental stereotypes. Regrettably, their analyses do not extensively engage with concepts of Orientalism or neo-Orientalism, which might have lent more depth to their discussions.

Several researchers (Jiang, 2014; Jiang, Li, Cang, 2014, Xiao, Chen, 2014, Zhang, 2013) have focused on the artworks of game design, such as costumes, props, and background music that deliver an authentic Chinese experience. They advise that one should always explore and be inspired by the abundant Chinese traditional culture when incorporating Chinese elements into video games. They agree that these aspects are both fragmented and superficial. However, they argue that artworks are the starting point for producing high-quality games with Chinese characteristics. Games such as the *Chinese Paladin* series are well known across the Greater China region. The success of the game has led both the industry and scholars to introspect and

investigate ways to transfer the rich Chinese literature into video games. Hence, various studies (Du, Li, Chen, Wang, Zhong, 2009, Yan, 2018) have attempted to unravel the narrative mechanism in such Chinese games. Although they have analysed different games, the results are similar. They conclude that by adopting Chinese novels, myths, and legends in video games, video games become an effective medium to circulate Chinese literary heritage. However, all of these studies are descriptive, failing to place their studies in a historical or conceptual framework, making their results, as they have agreed, fragmented and superficial.

Instead of inspecting the narrative, Chen (2006) investigated the genre of the *Chinese Paladin* series, the wuxia genre. The wuxia genre is usually about the adventures of one or many high-achieving martial artists in ancient China. In his research, Chen attempted to determine why the wuxia genre is popular in China and "how it modulates Chinese cultural identity within transnational games networks" (Chen 2006: 182). He concludes that the nostalgic element of the wuxia genre tempts Chinese gamers, offering "a sense of spatial and temporal continuity, as well as cultural specificity" (Chen 2006: 184). Nostalgia may be one influence; however, Chen cannot provide a deeper explanation of the nostalgic imagination. He does not present the target of the nostalgic imagination, the value, and spirit of the martial artists, the meaning of "xia" (the hero). Moreover, all the studies mentioned in this section and the ones in the Occidentalism section share a flaw when seeking to interpret China in video games, which is that the game is never being researched as a game. Some (Yan, 2018) may mention how the game as a game will influence or even compromise the message delivered. However, those games are normally analysed as a novel or a movie, neglecting the "play" aspect.

Therefore, by employing the framework of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, and Occidentalism, this research can investigate beyond the apparent Chinese symbols and elements in Western video games, to explore and comprehend the relationship between China and the West projected through video games in the contemporary world. To address the limitation in former studies that games are not researched as games, this research considers play as the approach to further deconstruct video games with procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative coherence/ dissonance, which will be unpacked in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Theories to Understand Video Games

The previous chapter introduced and examined theories of Orientalism to understand and interpret the portrayal of China and the relationship between China and the West. These portrayals implied, constructed, and strengthened certain notions, and video games, as cultural products, provide a means to construct, reinforce, and potentially challenge these portrayals and the underlying ideology. The latest research on video games equips us with valuable tools and strategies for understanding them, as they can be viewed as narratives, simulations, or both, depending on one's perspective. Therefore, this section serves multiple purposes for this research.

Firstly, there is a strong correlation between the reviewed theories and the methodology employed. The topic at hand revolves around our understanding of video games and our approach to them, and the methodology's framework can be inferred from these theories. Secondly, the reviewed theories provide the research context necessary for comprehending video games. Given that interactivity is a significant characteristic of video games, it requires diverse approaches to grasp their essence. Consequently, a dedicated chapter is essential for a comprehensive examination of video games and the associated ideology.

This section will commence by introducing the association between ideology and discourse, establishing the connection between Orientalism and video games. The focus will be on the potential of video games as discourse or discursive practice. Subsequently, the chapter will present general approaches towards understanding video games, specifically treating games as texts and employing gameplay as the method of analysis. The following segment will introduce the concepts of procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance/harmony to elucidate the correlation between the game system and the narrative. The aim is to clarify how these concepts collectively convey messages and ideologies.

The preceding chapter thoroughly explored the definition and interpretation of ideology. It is essential to engage in an in-depth discussion about the interplay between ideology and discourse before examining specific methodologies. This foundational dialogue is vital for comprehending video games as a form of discourse or discursive practice.

When examining the relationship between ideology and discourse, a classic question posed by Purvis and Hunt emerges: "Would Althusser 'say' the same if we substituted 'discourse' on each occasion he used 'ideology'? Would we have a different Foucault if his texts were republished with 'ideology' substituted for 'discourse'?" (Purvis and Hunt 1993: 474). In a similar vein, Määttä (2014) raised questions in his investigation,

pondering the distinction between the usage of "racist ideology," "racist discourse," "feminist ideology," and "feminist discourse." Purvis and Hunt propose, in their study, that ideology, and discourse mutually expand and supplement each other in understanding individual comprehension and consciousness of social relations and activities. However, Määttä argues, in his exploration, that the concepts of "ideology" and "discourse" vary depending on the paradigm. In different paradigms, ideology, and discourse can be "conceptualised as theoretical concepts or analytical tools, or both" (Määttä 2014: 73). In line with the objective of this research, which is to understand the image of China established and solidified in and around video games, it aligns with Purvis and Hunt's idea that ideology and discourse expand and supplement one another. Furthermore, previous studies (e.g. Bogost, 2006, 2010; Šisler, 2007; Höglund, 2008) emphasise that when considering video games as discourse, the relationship between discourse and ideology aligns with Fairclough's argument that discourse embodies or acts as a vehicle for ideology.

Althusser's theory of interpellation and the formation of the subject presents an opportunity to further explore the relationship between discourse and ideology. In their investigation, Purvis, and Hunt argue that Althusser's theory on ideology lacks a "developed theorisation of linguistic practice as material practice." However, Althusser does acknowledge the role of language and other semiotics in interpellation in his earlier work (Althusser, 1966/2003). He states that "every discourse produces a subjectivity-effect... 'produces' or 'induces' a subject-effect" (48).

It is Pêcheux and Fuchs (1975/2014) who explicitly address the connection between discourse and ideology. In their work, they recognise that discourse constitutes a material aspect of what they refer to as "the ideological materiality" (91-92). Moreover, they argue that the interpellation of individuals as subjects is realised through ideological formation, in which the discursive formation is "necessarily included" (92). To support their argument, Pêcheux, and Fuchs provide an example of religious ideological formation, illustrating the various discursive formations involved in creating and disseminating religious ideological relations and subjectivity-effects.

In summary, quoting Purvis and Hunt, the relationship between ideology and discourse, as derived from Althusser's theory of ideology, can be understood as:

> "It is through discourse that individuals are interpellated as subjects; ideology represents those specific forms of discourse whose contents are inadequate to articulate the interests of those social categories (classes, groups, etc.) who are constituted through those discourses" (Purvis and Hunt 1993: 483-484).

But what exactly is discourse? Stuart Hall provides a broad definition of discourse as "sets of ready-made and preconstituted 'experiencings' displayed and arranged through language" (Hall 1977: 322). Building upon the elaboration in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault presents various characteristics of discourse that serve as approaches to understanding it. According to Foucault, discourse comprises a collection of statements attributed to the same discursive formation within a socio-historical context. He further suggests that discourse is not only a tool for creating knowledge, particularly in relation to power, but also "the object that is to be conquered; discourse is the power that is to be seized" (Foucault 1970: 53). Therefore, discourse serves as "a space of positions and functioning, differentiated for individuals" to engage with the "all-powerful subject" (Foucault 1968/2014: 104). By analysing Foucault's discourse theory, both Hall (1977) and Foucault acknowledge the "material reality" of discourse, which Hall sees as language and Foucault sees as "something pronounced or written" (Foucault 1970: 52). Both researchers explore beyond mere linguistic expression. Hall's definition captures the notion that individuals live within and experience discourse, which is structured and predetermined, aligning with Foucault's argument on the "regulation and delimitation of discourse" (Foucault 1970: 56). Although Foucault avoids using the term "ideology," or seemingly contrasts discourse and ideology, as argued by various researchers (e.g., Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Stoddart, 2007), his theory of discourse offers "the possibility of understanding the emergence of ideology from a complex interplay of social and institutional practices" (Purvis and Hunt 1993: 490). Considering discourse as "discontinuous practices," it is natural to question the relationship between discursive practices, especially the discontinuities within a coherent totality that reflect the power dynamics and social institutions shaping such conformity. This notion of discontinuity, rather than homogeneity, as advocated by Foucault, gives rise to new discourses—such as his own analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault posits that "every point in the exercise of power is a locus of knowledge formation. Conversely, every established piece of knowledge permits and ensures the exercise of power," illustrating the dialectical relationship between power and knowledge mediated by discourse. Furthermore, by examining the control and suppression of discourse, Foucault suggests that the exclusion of knowledge through censorship also reveals a connection between knowledge and power. Said has drawn on such an understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge in Orientalism, discussing the construction and communication of the image of the Orient that is selective, which is the result of the colonial ideology exercising and abusing their power, as discussed before.

The preceding discussions have laid the groundwork for the upcoming exploration of video games as a discourse. Initially, video games can be seen as textual entities that

convey meaning. This argument will be further unpacked in the following section. Our attention will now be directed towards the discussion of video games as a mode of discourse. Video games, alongside other media forms, serve as both constitutive and representative agents of ideology (Corner 2015: 266). When we engage in gaming, we temporarily adopt or simulate various identities (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009: 192).

Drawing from the previous examination of discourse definitions and characteristics, understanding video games as discourse necessitates the recognition of their expressive power – how video games convey ideas. Secondly, when interacting with games, there are three versions of discursive practice: playing the game, commenting on the game, and modding the game. A crucial distinction lies in whether an explicit ideological agenda is already predetermined before a game's design. In this case, the game becomes a pronounced tool to propagate a certain ideology. For instance, *Animal Farm: China* and *Civilization V*, both examined in this study, exemplify these two versions. *Animal Farm: Chin*a can be interpreted as anti-China discourse, explicitly manifesting an anti-China ideology. The game serves as a means to a predetermined end. On the other hand, although *Civilization V* portrays a hostile China, one cannot conclusively attribute the created meaning to the designers' conscious introspection alone. While both Althusser and Foucault have addressed discourse's impact on the unconscious, this research aims to distinguish between a game as a predesigned instrument and a game as, well, a game.

Thirdly, to consider the specific formalities of a game, one form of discontinuity in video game discourse can be characterised as ludo-narrative dissonance – the discordance between a game's ruling system and its narrative, which will be examined in greater detail later. Fourthly, as Foucault suggests, discourse possesses the power of both persuasion and resistance. Šisler (2008), Saber, and Webber (2017), as discussed earlier, also support this argument. Therefore, this study incorporates the concept of player agency, encompassing both in-game agency proposed by Murray (1997), Mateas (2001), Tulloch (2014), and player agency beyond the confines of the game, as argued by Stang (2019). This exploration aims to uncover how video games construct and convey representations of China, how they mirror and reinforce societal ideologies projected onto China's image, and how video games can serve as sites of resistance and subversion. By analysing the discursive practice of video games, we can discover how games shape and express the image of China, how they mirror and strengthen societal ideologies reflected by this image, and how video games can serve as a platform for opposition and rebellion.

Game as text and Play as method

In this research, the concept of text is defined as a material vehicle that conveys information and meaning. Traditionally, text primarily referred to written or transcribed forms of spoken words. However, as various research fields like linguistics, literature, and technology have evolved, the definition of text has expanded. Halliday (1978) takes a functional perspective, considering text as an ongoing process of semantic choice that encompasses any meaningful expression under specific circumstances. Therefore, video games can be viewed as material traces that guide us in understanding how individuals make sense of the world in their own unique ways. In understanding games as text, three approaches are commonly employed. The first approach adopts a traditional linguistic perspective, focusing on the textual elements within the game such as rules, artifacts, in-game conversations, and player communication. Scholars like Steinkuehler (2006), Gee (2014), Suvannasankha (2019), Ensslin and Balteiro (2019) follow this approach. The second approach involves analysing the textual structure of the game, such as studying the plot descriptions of video games on English Wikipedia (Wang, 2013)[1]. However, this method often presents more challenges than solutions and is seldom utilised. In the third approach, the game is perceived as a cybertext, a concept initially coined by Boston (1992), popularised by Aarseth (1997), and emphasised in this research.

Aarseth (1997) argues that cybertext is not a novel or revolutionary form of text, but rather a perspective that applies to all forms of textual expression. It recognises the medium as an essential component of literary exchange and focuses on the text's user as an integrated figure. Aarseth perceives cybertext as a function-oriented outlook, where the function of the medium becomes the crucial variable. In traditional text, the user's interaction is limited to interpretation and eye movement, whereas in cybertext, a cybernetic feedback loop between the text and the user is established. This means that when engaging with cybertext, the user's actions and behaviour are influenced by the text, which unfolds further content for the user to react to. Thus, cybertext users possess additional functions beyond interpretation, including textonic, configurative, and explorative functions. Through these functions, information flows from the text to the user and back to the text. Eskelinen (2013) highlights the significance of the information feedback loop and suggests that researchers should focus on the interactions between different parts and phases of the text, as well as those interactions between users and between texts. Aarseth coined the term "ergodic" to characterise the

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[1] The author emphasizes "English" Wikipedia, for "English Wikipedia not only contains abundant information to analyse, but also the editing process of the English Wikipedia is under a high discipline which leads to high quality and objective contents" (p30).

defining features of cybertext. Ergodic literature requires non-trivial effort from the reader or player to navigate the text, highlighting the player's role in shaping the cybertext. Thus, play is fundamental to both the creation and design of cybertext.

In recent years, contemporary game studies have expanded the understanding of games as text. Emphasising cybertext does not imply disregarding the textual or verbal aspects of the game in favour of interactivity or the information feedback loop. When analysing video games as text, Krzywinska (2006) suggests considering "all formal aspects of a game" (Krzywinska 2006: 121), including narrative structure, audio-visual signifiers, and the rule system governing player interaction (Šisler 2017: 129). The notion of cybertext highlights the importance of incorporating the player's actions into the analysis. Fernandez-Vara (2019) argues that video games can be studied as cultural products, fostering the interpretation rather than mere description of video games. As such, the cultural significance of video games lies in the context of play – who plays the games, why and how they play, and how the act of playing relates to other socio-cultural activities and practices (Fernandez-Vara 2019: 6). Thus, understanding the cultural significance of a game necessitates considering its context. Fernandez-Vara extends the concept of paratext to video game analysis, focusing on the surrounding factors and the players' interpretations of the game, enabling further layers of interpretation (7). Inspired by the concept of paratext, this research examines the depiction of China within and surrounding video games. In the methodology section, the variety of elements related to the "surrounding" of video games utilised in this research to analyse video games, will be discussed. Given the "performance-oriented" nature of video games (Aarseth 2003: 7), play becomes a crucial component in understanding them, thereby prompting the idea of play as a methodological approach.

This research applies the concept of "play as method," which not only involves examining the researcher/player's positionality and the player typology presented by Bartle (1996), but also acknowledges the influence of different play styles on the interpretation of video games. The discussion on play as a method not only focuses on how the game is played, but also on who is playing it. Bartle (1996) identifies four player types based on two dimensions of playing style: action versus interaction, and world-oriented versus player-oriented. In 2005, Bartle introduces a third dimension, implicit/explicit, resulting in a 3D graph with eight player types. These diverse play styles and the players who adopt them can be analysed to understand player behaviour and how the styles themselves impact the game environment.

Taking a step further, Aarseth (2003) proposes a methodology for game-centred play. He identifies the different levels of engagement that play analysis permits, ranging from superficial play and light play to innovative play. However, Lammes (2007) criticises

Aarseth's approach for oversimplifying the range of players and neglecting the social, cultural, and historical context of the game and player. Lammes suggests that researchers should employ reflexivity and situation as tools when studying games, although she does not provide specific examples of how these tools should be used in gameplay and research (332).

Aarseth's (2007) model of the implied player and transgressive play is an inspiring concept. The implied player is a role constructed by the game, and for the game to have its intended impact, the player must meet certain expectations. Initially, this concept appears to mirror the "puppy player," who strictly adheres to the designer's intentions. Aarseth transitions directly from the implied player to transgressive play, which encompasses unexpected gameplay that would not have been foreseen by the game designers. Transgressive play is closely associated with cheating in games, causing the expectations set by the game in Aarseth's implied player model to become ambiguous. As a result, either Aarseth's implied player model encompasses all legitimate play styles, contradicting his own definition, or there is a gap between the implied model and transgressive play that remains unaddressed.

While the previous review provides valuable insights and theories on integrating gaming experience with academic understanding to comprehend video games, its suggestions, and considerations remain more theoretical than practical. Furthermore, the previous discussions on play as a method solely focus on the player, overlooking the underdeveloped aspects of the game's role and the relationship between the game and the player. This research argues that to truly understand video games through the method of play, it is crucial to consider the dialectical relationship between the player's playstyle and the video game itself. On one hand, diverse playstyles influenced by the player's skills, goals, and sociocultural context offer valuable perspectives for analysing video games. On the other hand, the design of a video game can either encourage or restrict certain playstyles. In order to examine play as a method both theoretically and practically, this research puts forth the concept of player agency as a means to further develop the idea of play as a method.

Player Agency

Studies on player agency (Murray, 1997; Church, 1999; Mateas, 2001; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009; Stang, 2019) have examined how player agency challenges the predefined messages and interpretations of game designers. The concept of player agency revolves around the relationship between game control and player control. Various perspectives have been proposed to define agency.

Murray defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices... However, we do not usually expect to experience agency within a narrative environment" (1997:126). Murray's definition places emphasis on the player's intention and control over their actions, distinguishing agency from the broader concept of "interactivity". Building upon Murray's interpretation of agency and Laurel's Aristotelian structural model, Mateas (2001) presents a model that identifies the factors that influence players' expectations of their actions in interactive media, such as interactive drama and video games. In contrast to Murray, who focuses on the player's perspective, Mateas argues that agency is embedded in the game's structure. Mateas suggests that players experience agency when there is a balance between material and formal constraints (Mateas 2001:145). Material constraints refer to the resources available to the player for action, while formal constraints can be seen as the plans, goals, or rules in the game that delimit specific actions.

Expanding upon prior work, Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) develop the notion of agency as a phenomenon involving both the game and the player. They propose that agency occurs when players' desired actions are among those supported by the underlying computational model. Mukherjee (2017, 2018) acknowledges the complexity of the perspective of the player or subject of ideology to understand the relationship between video games and post-colonialism and the role played by the players. He argues that the player's experience in video games holds the potential for a deeper understanding and engagement with postcolonial themes. The act of playing facilitates an active and embodied encounter with the complexities of postcolonial narratives, offering a means for players to grapple with the nuances of colonial histories and their impact on contemporary contexts. The immersive nature of gaming enables the postcolonial subject to confront the legacy of colonialism and reflect on power dynamics, identity, and agency within a virtual world. This experiential dimension of play becomes a critical aspect of postcolonial engagement, as it encourages players to critically assess historical narratives and challenge dominant representations. This understanding and further application of agency is more complex yet proves beneficial to this study since it acknowledges the importance of social, cultural, and historical contexts, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of agency.

Furthermore, Stang's study (2019) draws on the concept of illusory agency, suggesting that in-game player agency is illusory and provided by the designers. Stang argues that "true player agency" lies in players' interpretations of the game text, their engagement with fan communities, and the exchanges that transpire between fans and developers. Stang's idea of "true agency" encourages investigating diverse interpretations of games from the player's perspective. However, in her pursuit of "true agency," Stang presents the player in opposition to the designer, thereby disconnecting "true agency" from the

game and play. Consequently, she asserts that exploring the designed world as intended necessitates a specific play style known as instrumental play.

The concept of instrumental play is a valuable approach for exploring the designer-centric world of games. It allows us to uncover the underlying intentions of the game designers. In his critique of proceduralists, particularly Ian Bogost, Sicart (2011) reintroduces the concept of instrumental play. Bogost (2010) argues that the rule system, as the fundamental essence of video games, should be the primary focus for analysis. However, Sicart argues against this perspective and draws upon instrumental rationality to define instrumental play. Emphasising on procedurality is problematic. First, heavily embracing a designer-centred game ontology and the persuasive nature of games implies that a game, or the specific game under consideration, is intentionally designed to convey a particular message and persuade its players. In other words, games are created under certain agendas, with the purpose of influencing and convincing players. Secondly, within this context, the player and the act of play itself are often overshadowed or diminished. This aligns with the notion of the implied player proposed by Aarseth. It is assumed that play is rational. Here, rationality implies that the player engages in the game with the aim of winning, defeating opponents, or completing the game successfully. Winning becomes the sole objective, and the player will take strategic actions and make "correct" decisions in order to achieve victory and avoid failure. In this play style, rationality is instrumentalist to justify the desired outcome. Taylor (2003) characterises instrumental play as involving a focus on efficiency, an instrumental orientation, dynamic goal setting, commitment to understanding the underlying game systems and structure, as well as technical and skill proficiency.

To illustrate this concept, consider the current version of Tetris with the 7-bags system[2]. Skilled *Tetris* players, such as Kazu and furia (2021[3]) and Uyeshota (2021), suggest that starting with a back-to-back T-spin triple and T-spin double is the optimal strategy. This approach capitalises on the rule system, which assigns greater firepower to T-spins compared to making traditional Tetris lines[4]. This formulaic approach, where players prioritise construction speed with a single-minded focus on winning the game, can be considered instrumental play. Sicart explores further into the concept of instrumental play and highlights the frequent conflict that arises between "power gamers," who employ this play style, and casual gamers. By reintroducing instrumental play, Sicart

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[2] The 7-bag system is a new randomiser for Tetris. The 7-Bag system suggests that each of the seven different tetrominos are put in a "bag". In each bag, the appearance of a piece is random. After emptying one bag, the pieces are refilled and the process is repeated. Therefore, the largest gap between the same two tetrominos is 14 blocks, which is more predictable than before.

[3] They made statement in the reflection live streaming of Kemonomichi 4 result where Kazu beat Amemiya Taiyo.

[4] In Tetris, using the "I" tetromino to clear four lines is Tetris. T-spin double means that the player conducts a spin with the "T" tetromino to accomplish clearing two rows. T-spin triple is using spin with the "T" tetromino to clear three rows.

criticises proceduralist designers for adopting an approach that establishes the action before it occurs and disregards the significance of anything that is not predetermined. According to Sicart (2011), proceduralists maintain a "system-centred" game ontology that reduces play to mere labour. When this "designer-centric" or "system-centred" perspective becomes exaggerated, play becomes a means to achieve an externally decided, predetermined, and rational outcome. This understanding reflects the programmatic nature of games, particularly those dependent on devices, such as arcade games or video games. Sicart's criticism exposes that the "system-centred" game ontology aligns with the implied player model. However, it is important to note that this perspective, similar to that of some proceduralists, mistakes possibility for inevitability. From the proceduralists' standpoint, the suggestion is that play is potentially determined by the rules, whereas Sicart argues that play should be framed by the rules, rather than entirely determined by them.

The warning raised by Sicart holds significant importance. The rise in popularity of the "walking simulator" genre in recent years aligns with Ryan's (2009) observations on narrative games and playable stories. This distinction draws from Caillois' (1958) differentiation between ludus and paidia. Walking simulators are often labelled as interactive novels or playable games, but according to Ryan, the player's involvement is "peripheral," akin to "holding the strings of the characters like a puppet master" (Ryan 2009: 58). By limiting player agency, walking simulators offer restricted perspectives for interpretation. Therefore, in my research, instrumental play is regarded as one specific playstyle and a distinct part of player agency. Simultaneously, the ideas of both "illusory" and "true" player agency offer opportunities for players to interpret the game in ways that challenge its design and provide additional context for comparison and analysis. By combining these different interpretations, we can adopt a contextual approach to understanding games, aligning with Aarseth's call for diverse information. Examining different playstyles and off-game interactions surrounding video games provides diverse interpretations, thereby breaking away from the constructed and limited image of China. It allows for a more comprehensive understanding, one that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of cultural representations. By embracing this plurality of perspectives, video game studies can offer a richer, more varied, and ultimately more accurate depiction of China, reflecting not just a singular narrative but a tapestry of experiences and interpretations.

Furthermore, this combination of perspectives is crucial for studying ideology in video games due to the dialogical relationship between the concepts of subject and ideology. The subject of ideology is depicted as both "a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions," and "a subjected being who submits to a higher authority and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting

his submission" (Althusser, 1971). To understand the player's role within this context, voluntary submission to ideology is significant, given player agency. On one hand, instrumental play, as demonstrated by an implied player, willingly follows the designer's instructions, with the player immersing themselves in the game world. On the other hand, player agency creates spaces for players to challenge the game and potentially contest dominant ideologies within the game itself. A prime example can be found in the game *Frostpunk*, where players are intentionally restrained from challenging stubborn individualism and the ludo-narrative deliberately provokes the player's decisions towards winning the game. In this manner, the game encourages players to reconsider their actions when confronting the apocalypse, while providing limited expressive space within the game. It can be argued that comments, reviews, and posts about the game, referred to by Stang as "true agency," are manipulated by the designer. However, it is crucial to recognise that the player is not the sole subject when considering ideology in and around video games. The designer, as they deliver their ideology through the game, is also constructed by the very ideology they convey, making them subjects of the ideology as well.

Game system and game narrative

Approaches to understanding video games vary, with two traditional perspectives: narratology and ludology. While these perspectives are often seen as mutually exclusive in some debates, they differ in their focus and priority. The narratological perspective views games as narratives and applies narrative theories, exemplified by Atkins (2003) and Jenkins (2004). On the other hand, the ludological perspective treats games as distinct entities and analyses their abstract and formal systems, as proposed by Aarseth (2001) and Eskelinen (2001). In 1999, Juul conducted research to explore the relationship between story and video games. His findings suggested that video games and narratives share certain traits; for instance, some role-playing games and "walking simulators" have relatively clear narratives. However, they also exhibit significant differences, notably in the transformability and influence of time. However, Juul's claimed disparities between computer games and narratives were later refuted by games like *Icey*, which incorporated innovative devices that generated extensive discussions and acclaim within the gaming community.

Contemporary researchers now agree that games possess qualities of both game systems and stories, as well as simulations and narratives. For instance, Planells (2017) regards video games as "complex fictional worlds." Utilising audiovisual narratology tools and accounting for the interactive nature of video games, Planells seeks to comprehend video games as cultural products that both shape and are shaped by the

socio-cultural and political context of their creation. To gain a comprehensive understanding of video games, this thesis will employ procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance as analytical frameworks to examine the impact of the game system, narrative, and their interrelationship. While this section initially presents procedural rhetoric, ludo-narrative, and ludo-narrative dissonance/harmony in isolation, it recognises the intertwined nature of game systems and game narratives. Subsequent studies assert that game narratives unfold within the constraints of the game system, while the analysis of game narrative elements offers interpretive possibilities and insights into the analysis of the game system.

Thus, the integration of procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative as analytical frameworks allows my research to examine both the representation and discourse within video games. By scrutinising the shared elements between video games and traditional narratives, as accentuated by Aarseth (2012), the study seeks to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of video games as cultural artefacts. It investigates into the dynamic interplay between procedural design, narrative representation, and the discourses surrounding video games. By exploring the inseparable relationship between gameplay and storytelling within video games, the study seeks to unravel the intricate interactions between gameplay mechanics, narrative structures, and player agency, shedding light on how these elements collaborate or conflict to shape the player's interpretation of the representation of China and the reflected China-West relationship.

Procedural Rhetoric

Video games have evolved beyond a role as mere entertainment, attracting attention from both critics and researchers. In the past, video games, especially those with violent content, were blamed for corrupting children and inciting aggressive behaviour (APA, 2015). However, scholars have increasingly recognised the potential for video games to play a more significant role in social and political contexts, transforming them into a critical tool for engaging with the real world (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004). The emergence of the concepts of "serious games" or "functional games" has further expanded the scope of video games by exploring how virtual experiences can help players navigate reality. Various ideas, such as information deficit, simulation rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and emergent dialogue, aim to investigate how video games communicate messages, influence players, and potentially lead to behavioural changes (Tanenbaum et al., 2013). Procedural rhetoric, in particular, represents the current frontier in designing computational systems that facilitate participatory meaning-making processes (Tanenbaum et al. 2013: 3392).

Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as "a particular kind of rhetoric, one focused on the

art of using processes persuasively" (Bogost 2010: 28). This definition is rooted in the concept of procedurality, which involves rule-based models that govern the virtual world and provide players with space to explore, play, and experience. However, the predefined rules also shape and restrict the gameplay, thereby influencing the player's overall gaming experience. Consequently, procedurality opens up possibilities for persuasion. Bogost asserts that procedural rhetoric involves using processes to effectively persuade and express ideas. In this definition, Bogost simplifies "rhetoric" as the act of persuasion, aiming to change opinions or actions. This aligns with Frasca's concept of simulation rhetoric, which emphasises how games convey values, ideas, and real-life skills through simulation (Frasca, 1999). By simulating the real world, games create a virtual space where players can encounter real-life situations and apply acquired knowledge to the real world.

This viewpoint rests on two assumptions. First, video games make claims about the world that players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate (Bogost 2008). This implies that the virtual space of a game is not merely a repository of cultural, social, and political practices, but an interactive environment where players actively engage with and learn from these practices. Consequently, analysing video games solely through their static artefacts overlooks the agency offered by games and reduces them to platforms for displaying facts or opinions. That's one rationale proposed by Bogost to focus on the procedurality rather than the objects.

Second, when making their claims about the world, video games tend to flatten the real word situation. Bogost highlights that these simulations of the real world are not exact replicas and often "simplify the complexity of the real world by focusing on relevant aspects" (Bogost 2008: 119). This notion is also reflected in Wardrip-Fruin's research on *Sim City*, where he observes that the game simulates certain relationships, such as crime and police presence, while neglecting others, such as crime-related deaths and weapons availability (Wardrip-Fruin 2009). While Bogost and Wardrip-Fruin argue that such simplification allows for the highlighting of the most significant relationships from the perspective of the game designer, Seiffert, and Nothhaft (2015) present an alternate view. Their research suggests that players can internalise the simplified world presented in the game and transfer their experiences and knowledge to the real world. For instance, in the case of *Civilization*, even "critical and enlightened Civ'ers" tend to evaluate real-world politics based on their experiences in the game, believing that resource allocation is a fundamental challenge in human civilisation (Seiffert & Nothhaft 2015: 225).

The effectiveness of procedural rhetoric can be attributed to two key characteristics of video games: the running of processes and the execution of rule-based symbolic

manipulation. These characteristics allow the game to establish an "Aristotelian enthymeme, an incomplete argument" (Bogost, 2010). In their research on the persuasive power of the procedural enthymeme, Brock, and Shepherd (2016) emphasise the main strategy of offering an active role in self-persuasion to achieve persuasive goals. This strategy allows players to complete a given enthymeme through gameplay. In a video game, there is a source system and a procedural model of that source system. Through playing the game, the player develops their own understanding of the modelled system and the source system, which may or may not align with the designer's vision. As Bogost points out (2010: 2), the inherent subjectivity of video games creates dissonance-gaps between the designer's procedural model and the player's subjectivity, preconceptions, and understanding of the simulation. This creates the conditions for video games to communicate ideas by allowing players to compare the simulated world with their own. It is important to note that the designers still control the rule system, and despite the player's ability to "negotiate" through play, the flow of the game remains under the direction of the designer. Consequently, the ideas or values embedded in the gaming process are communicated to the player during gameplay. Identifying a game's procedural rhetoric involves analysing both the game itself and how the game constrains the player's experience and interpretation. While Bogost introduced the concept of enthymeme and procedural rhetoric to elucidate the mechanism of persuasion in games, it is worth noting that procedural enthymeme and procedural rhetoric underlie and are realised in other types of procedural systems as well (Colby, 2014; Brock and Shepherd, 2016).

To develop a theoretical framework for understanding procedural rhetoric, Simon Ferrari proposes exploring the relationship between the rule system, space, and play. He argues that the persuasive power of a video game can be influenced by player choices. While Ferrari acknowledges procedural rhetoric as the primary structure for creating meaning in games, he also suggests that players express themselves through gameplay. His research indicates that games can be evaluated inter-subjectively, taking into account both the objectivity of their rule-sets and the subjectivity of player experiences (Ferrari 2010: x). He proposes examining the persuasive power of video games from three dimensions: rules, space, and play. Additionally, Ferrari introduces the concept of order in ludic expression, differentiating between higher and lower orders. The higher order represents the unique features of a specific game within its spatial and gameplay context, while the lower order encompasses the generic features and fictive aspects of a game. Within the space dimension, Ferrari discusses spatial structure and mise-en-scène, while within the play dimension, he identifies reflective and determinant play. However, the classification of rules is not distinct, as their differentiation is subjective and based on individual gaming experiences (Ferrari, 2010).

Although Ferrari only provides a starting point by introducing the "subjectivity of player experience," this concept aligns with the idea of player agency and further contributes to the discussion of ideology in video games.

Bogost (2010) delves deeper into the exploration of utilising procedural rhetoric to examine ideology. Initially, he defines ideology as "hidden procedural systems that drive social, political, or cultural behaviour" (Bogost 2010: 72). According to Bogost, video games present the logical workings of a political system through procedural representation. By engaging with these games and deciphering the claims made by their procedural rhetorics about political situations, individuals can gain a unique and detached perspective on the underlying ideologies driving them (Bogost 2010). Prior to introducing the concept of procedural rhetoric, Bogost (2006) highlights a key distinction between political rhetoric in video games and other forms of media, noting that games primarily rely on procedural representation rather than verbal communication. He emphasises the significant role played by procedural elements in shaping the political rhetoric of video games. Through an analysis of political, art, and commercial games, Bogost argues that video games convey ideological biases through reinforcement, contestation, and exposition. Using the example of *Tax Invader*, Bogost demonstrates how games can be intentionally designed to carry ideological biases and reinforce opposing political ideologies. Unlike *Tax Invader*, which borrows the rules from *Space Invader*, *Vigilance 1.0* introduces "new rules" that limit interactions and convey specific ideological biases. Bogost asserts that by engaging with such games, players are compelled to ponder the questions posed by the designer and may even take the designer's side, effectively turning the game into a platform for contesting certain ideological biases that deliver the designer's opinion. He reveals the potential of video games to transform perlocutionary acts into illocutionary acts, suggesting that instead of explicitly promoting their agenda through speech, political entities could embed their manifestos within the rules of a game.

In his investigation of how ideology operates in video games, Bogost uses *America's Army* as an example. He suggests that the game designers aim to provide players with an authentic experience of how the US Army functions. Consequently, the game enforces the strict rules of engagement (ROE) set by the US. Army, which are tied to the game's honour system, mirroring real practices of military decoration. Bogost considers the game's "most curious procedural rhetoric" to be the role assigned to each player. Despite featuring opposing sides, both the attacking and defending teams assume the role of the American army. Bogost concludes that this design choice implies the "ideology of early twenty-first-century US military aggression" (Bogost 2010: 78). This indicates that the American military assumes that conflicts are commutative, with the American side always being "right," while the opponents, whom the designers label

as the "villains," are portrayed as merely evil, justifying the hostility. Furthermore, Bogost identifies the presence of the ideology of universal justice in the game, as well as the "United States' one-sided perspective on matters of global conflict" (Bogost, 2010: 78). Thus, *America's Army* serves not only as a recruitment tool but also as a means to promote ideologies such as duty, order, and justice underlying the actions of the US Army, while establishing a "singular global political truth as a desirable worldview" (Bogost, 2010: 79). Although Bogost's approach to procedural rhetoric is based on several assumptions, it undeniably provides a method to identify predetermined representations within games and link these representations to the underlying ideologies.

However, considering the criticism made by Sicart about instrumental play, this research approaches procedural rhetoric with caution. Firstly, it focuses on the relationship between rules and play, drawing inspiration from the analyses of Tulloch (2014) and Šisler (2017). Tulloch emphasises the constructive power of rules rather than their deconstructive or restrictive nature. According to Tulloch, rules give rise to specific events and experiences, shaping the game and its play. By embracing and working with the rules, players have the opportunity to fully experience and preserve the unique identity of the game they are playing. On the other hand, Šisler (2017) offers a different perspective when examining religion in video games. Šisler explores how rules can limit and restrain gameplay, influencing the overall process of the game and determining the possible representations within it. In order to delve into the "expected" interpretations, procedural rhetoric is employed to unravel the intricate relationship between rules and play, particularly how rules constrain the range of possible gameplay experiences. Moreover, procedural rhetoric serves as the lens through which video games are examined. It can be understood as a two-part argument: first, the persuasive power lies within the game's processes, and second, these processes are guided and constrained by the rules. By combining these two studies, a comprehensive approach emerges for analysing the role of rules and the execution of gameplay in relation to the possible interpretations of a game. The rules of video games construct meaning through their execution while simultaneously limiting alternative representations. As a result, this approach provides insight into the potential interpretations of a game under different play styles, taking into account both player agency and instrumental play.

Ludo-narrative

Besides focusing on the procedurality, the narratological approach of video games is effective when spotting, identifying and comprehending the ideologies in video games, especially when it comes to story-based RPGs. Taking *Assassin's Creed III* as an

example, the game restricts players from having any freedom to decide the direction of the main storyline. The predetermined course of the main story requires players to initially assume the role of a Templar, eliminate "good" assassins, and then transform into the son of the Templar, ultimately killing his own father. This linear progression is non-negotiable. One could argue procedural rhetoric is applicable to understand the game and the ideological implications represented by the Assassins. However, it is impossible to overlook the impact of the extensive cut scenes that last over 10 hours in total. Furthermore, one cannot deny the shocking effect of a particular scene depicting the shift from the Templar Haytham to the Assassin Connor. The way in which the narrative is arranged by the game designer significantly influences the player's interpretation of the game. Therefore, as Ryan (2002) suggests, we must consider what types of plots and characters are suitable for video games. For instance, by deliberately limiting player agency to varying degrees, sometimes even eliminating it entirely through their rule-set, "walking simulators" create an immersive narrative experience. In such cases, the narrative plays a significant role in the process of meaning-making, although the restricted gameplay style also impacts the player's interpretation of the video game. Therefore, a ludo-narrative approach is highly applicable for this research as it acknowledges the importance of both gameplay and narrative elements in shaping the overall player experience. Combined with procedural rhetoric, which highlights the interactive challenges and constraints, the narrative framework adds depth and context to the game world, influencing the player's interpretation towards and emotional connection with video games. So, in this section, I will first introduce narrative in video games and video game studies. Then I will share the narrative model of analysing video games, and its application. Lastly, one specific perspective on narrative elements in video games - localised/non-localised translation of the game text - will be introduced.

Numerous studies have explored the narrative aspects of video games, with one of the most widely applied models taken from Propp (1968). Though Propp's approach targets folktales and traditional narratives, it has been suggested that Propp's model works effectively for linear stories at higher levels of abstraction (Grasbon and Braun, 2001; Göbel et al., 2005; Brusentsev et al., 2012). Jenkins (2004) proposes that game design can be likened to narrative architecture, as choices regarding the design and organisation of game spaces have significant narratological implications (129). Consequently, the player's interaction with virtual spaces creates opportunities for immersive narrative experiences, which Jenkens refers to as "environmental storytelling". He identifies four types of narratives in video games: evoked narratives, enacted narratives, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives. Although these approaches offer valuable insights, they are most effective when applied to games with clear storylines, such as *Assassin's Creed III*. However, a potential drawback of these

models is their tendency to overly focus on the narrative aspect, often separating game and narrative or attempting to understand games solely as narratives. This narrow emphasis may neglect the interactive nature of games.

The studies of two scholars who applied narratological approaches to understand video games have inspired this research to focus on the relationship between narrative and video games, with a particular emphasis on understanding narrative within the unique mechanisms and features of video games. Murray's research (1998) suggests that computers have created new possibilities for storytelling, assuming that interactivity and storytelling merge into a unified whole. Murray proposes that scholars can employ narratological tools and models to conceptualise and examine video games. Through her well-known analysis of the game *Tetris*, which she considers "a handy edge case for considering the differences between games and stories" (Murray 2016: 145), Murray seeks to integrate the socio-historical context of the players (Americans) with the game's mechanics, specifically the rules of *Tetris*. However, Murray's approach, which investigates interactivity and storytelling as a unified whole, requires a comprehensive review and analysis of both interactivity and storytelling. This inspires my research to employ theories from the field of video game studies, as well as critical discourse analysis as a methodology. Another scholar, Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), offers her understanding of how narratives can be conveyed in digital systems. She identifies seven features of digital systems: algorithm-driven, reactive and interactive, performative, multiple sensory and semiotic channels, networking capabilities, volatile signs, and modularity. Ryan suggests that these features can significantly shape the narratives in digital systems, including video games. Consequently, video games have the potential to deliver variable discourses from various points of view through diverse plots, rather than solely focusing on a singular position or ideology. Furthermore, Ryan argues that real digital texts would experience substantial loss if they were transferred into print media.

Aarseth presents the ludo-narrative model, which is based on traditional narratology and emphasises the relationship between the game system and narrative. This model investigates narrative in video games through four ontological dimensions: world, objects, agents, and events, identifying shared elements between video games and narrative. Aarseth suggests that the "worlds" within video games can be "linear, multicursal, or open" (Aarseth 2012: 130), influencing players' comprehension of the narrative structure. The objects in the game can be "dynamic, user-created, or static," while the agents can possess either "rich, deep, and rounded personalities" or "shallow, hollow personalities" (Aarseth 2012: 130). Additionally, the arrangement of events can be open, selectable, or plotted. Aarseth's approach, rather than solely focusing on narrative, emphasises the elements shared by the game system and narrative. Compared

to other models, Aarseth's model offers more flexibility in analysing diverse games and attempts to address the relationship between the game system and narrative.

Even though this research ultimately adopts Aarseth's approach to understand the narrative perspective of video games, in general, the narrative approach is effective in identifying and comprehending ideologies in video games, particularly in story-based RPGs where the game serves as an attempt to depict reality. Current studies provide two perspectives when analysing the narrative of video games in consideration of the game system. One perspective focuses on the overall game narrative to explore the possibilities offered by interacting with the game narrative. The other approach examines narrative branches to explore the possibilities offered by the game.

DeVane and Squire (2008) conducted a study on the impact of video games on youth, focusing on *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. They discovered that games with oppositional characterisations and narratives can promote radical politics by challenging hegemonic ideologies through the immersive interactive experience provided to players. In a different study, Bennett (2018) examined *The Walking Dead: Season One*, a narrative-based game, and emphasised the importance of understanding interactivity and interactive dialogue within the game. By analysing the game's narrative and the relationship between the player and avatar, Bennett argued that such games create a space for ideological subversions where opposing ideologies can encounter and clash, potentially challenging and subverting extreme representations of race and gender in video games. Both of the studies focus on different shared elements between game and narrative, for DeVane and Squire (2008) oppositional characterisation, and for Bennett (2018) the interactive dialogues, attempting to interrogate politics, gender, and race issues.

Moreover, there is a growing body of literature that examines the role of localisation in video games, encompassing overlapping concepts from various perspectives. Terms such as localisation, culturalization, translation, and trans-creation are utilised in discussions across different disciplines. The Localisation Industry Standard Association (LISA) defines localisation as the process of "taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/ region and language) where it will be used and sold" (LISA 2003: 13). In the video game industry, it suggests a multilayered process involving a game's "text, graphics, audio, and even elements of story design and gameplay" (Skoog, 2012). Chandler (2006) introduces the concept of culturalisation to emphasise the consideration of cultural differences between locales of game production and consumption, highlighting intercultural conflict, religion, history, and geopolitical friction as crucial factors for game designers to address. Culturally sensitive content design and programming not only benefit game

sales by resolving potential issues beforehand but also contribute to the integrity of creative projects, enabling players to engage more meaningfully with the game (Edwards, 2008). From this perspective, localisation become a means to both reinforce and challenge cultural stereotypes when dealing with culturally sensitive content.

This research specifically focuses on the translation of textual elements to explore how translation influences the game environment and shapes the construction and interpretation of China's image. The relationship between the game, translation process, and national image is complex, considering the discussions on Orientalism and agency. Carlson and Corliss (2011) argue that localisation, beyond translation alone, both emerges from and contributes to cultural imagining. Cultural imagining entails the cultural image constructed in the game's original language and the designer's cultural context. Localisers navigate between the designer's cultural imagination, their own cultural context, and the target language's cultural context. The translated version of the game by localisers also contributes to the formation of the national image, providing them an opportunity to challenge and reconstruct it. Allison (2006) exemplifies this through the localisation of *Pokémon*, showcasing how American localisers engage in "cultural swapping," altering elements and neutralising Japanese cultural references. Scholars employ the term "trans-creation" (Chaume, 2012; Bernal-Merino, 2015) to capture the complexity of the process, considering the constraints of the source text, the influence of the localiser, and the function of channelling. Translation and self-translation, as argued by Guldin (2008) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013), offer a means of constructing cultural identity in resistance to Western colonial hegemony. While translation lies at the core of this analysis, the research also acknowledges the concept of localisation, encompassing both localised and non-localised translation, highlighting their dialectical relationship with cultural imagining. Carlson and Corliss (2011) further contend that the work of video game localisers always involves both cultural differentiation and convergence simultaneously.

Ludo-narrative dissonance and harmony

The combination of story and gameplay within a tightly constrained field of possibilities enables different articulations in video games, as suggested by Voorhees (2014). Many researchers, like Voorhees, adopt a mixed approach to understanding video games from both simulation and narrative perspectives, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of the medium. However, existing debates indicate conflicts between these two aspects. As Juul (2001) has pointed out, the transition between stories and games is not as seamless as that between novels and movies, with the interactive "now" often contradicting the established narrative. This dichotomy

contributes to the concept of the ideology of influence, as Aarseth (1997) describes, illustrating how games shape player responses through interactive actions. This ideology of influence, manifested in players' button-pressing interactions, suggests that games stimulate different experiences due to the bipolar nature of ludology and narratology. These experiences can be categorised into narrative-driven games, mechanics-driven games, or a combination of both (Wolf and Perron, 2014; Kapell, 2015).

Therefore, it is important to analyse the simulation aspect and the narrative aspect of games together in order to fully understand them. However, it should be noted that this does not imply that the game system always aligns perfectly with the narrative. The concepts of ludo-narrative dissonance and ludo-narrative harmony have been introduced to explore the relationship between the game system and the narrative. It is worth mentioning that the use of ludo-narrative in this section differs from its previous mention. While Aarseth's ludo-narrative model focuses on examining the shared elements between the game system and narrative, and seeks to address their relationship, it is not fully adequate in exploring the intricate dynamics between the game system and the narrative, despite its wide coverage across various games. The concept of ludo-narrative dissonance and ludo-narrative harmony will be inspected in this section.

The term "ludo-narrative dissonance" was introduced by game developer Clint Hocking (2007) in his critique of the conflict between simulation and narrative in Bioshock (2007). Hocking identifies contrasting signals within the game's ludic structure and narrative structure. The ludic structure of *Bioshock* encourages players to adopt Randian Objectivism, rewarding self-serving behaviour and promoting radical individualism and ethical egoism. In contrast, the narrative structure contradicts this philosophy by forcing players to help Atlas, a character whose actions oppose Randian rational self-interest. Furthermore, Hocking argues that although the ludic structure of the game suggests a preferred play style centred around self-serving behaviour, it also allows players the freedom to reject this approach and choose a different one. However, the narrative structure is less flexible, presenting players with the binary choice of either continuing to proceed or quitting the game. Hocking contends that this dissonance weakens the game's critique of the philosophy of objectivism, radical individualism, and ethical egoism. He asserts that "the game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it," suggesting that such inconsistency should be avoided.

However, Frédéric Seraphine (2016) provides a comprehensive review of academic and critical sources that discuss the concept of ludo-narrative dissonance. Seraphine identifies three distinct approaches to addressing this dissonance. The first approach

aligns with Hocking's viewpoint, suggesting that ludo-narrative dissonance should be completely avoided during the game design process to maintain player immersion and enhance the gaming experience. The second approach involves introducing emergent narratives that allow players to shape the game through their actions, eliminating the existence of dissonance. Recent studies have emphasised the significance of emergent narratives and emergence in video games, ranging from fan-made narratives to co-creative storytelling games with AI (Murnane, 2018; Soler-Adillon, 2019; Burgess and Jones, 2020; Kreminski et al., 2020). The third approach involves embracing and utilising ludo-narrative dissonance for intentional design purposes. Ballantyne argues that dissonance can create uncomfortable situations within video games, fostering thought-provoking experiences (2015). Furthermore, Murphy contends that ludo-narrative dissonance provides a valuable starting point for examining the underlying political tensions within games. Recognising this dissonance, according to Murphy, expands the scope of critical evaluation and interpretation of the political discourse in video games, facilitating a broader range of perspectives and a better understanding of the ideologies expressed. The game *Frostpunk* serves as an illustrative example as it presents players with difficult choices to survive in a frozen world, raising questions about the worthiness of the cost. By deliberately triggering ludo-narrative dissonance, the game provokes players to rethink their decisions, and many players report that such provocation reinforces their decision-making process and triggers a sense of rebellion.

Ludo-narrative harmony refers to the successful synchronisation of both gameplay and narrative elements to create a consistent and immersive experience (Roth, van Nuenen, and Koenitz 2018: 4). When examining the relationship between game systems and game narratives, Brice, and Pynenburg offer different perspectives. Brice (2012) proposes the concept of ludo-narrative resonance, focusing on the alignment of gameplay with specific plots. According to Brice, gameplay should be designed to effectively convey the intended plot. On the other hand, Pynenburg emphasises the need for gameplay and plot to mutually enhance each other (Pynenburg 2012: 24). The focus here is not solely on the individual functions of game systems and narratives, but rather on the harmony they create, which contributes to a consistent gaming experience. This consistency allows players to feel that the game world "feels right" (Pynenburg, 2012), as suggested by Roth, van Nuenen, and Koenitz. Pynenburg even argues that the worth of a video game can be assessed based on the strength of the harmony between its narrative and gameplay. Although these arguments may seem prescriptive regarding how games "should" or "should not" be played, they underscore the significance of ludo-narrative harmony. Additionally, the presence of dissonance or harmony between the game system and narrative can sometimes be determined by the players themselves, as video games often empower players with agency. For example, in *Assassin's Creed*,

the first creed of the Assassins is "stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent," implying that the player should act as a precise killer rather than a mindless slaughterer. The player has the choice to adhere to the suggested stealth gameplay, achieving ludo-narrative harmony, or deviate from it by killing indiscriminately, creating ludo-narrative dissonance. The relationship and dialogue between simulation and narrative also reflect the ideologies of both the game designer and the player.

Together, this chapter and the preceding one provide a comprehensive toolkit derived from both video game studies and critical studies to investigate the image of China within and surrounding video games, as well as the complex relationship between China and the West. Recognising video games as discursive practices and texts, and embracing play as a research method, this study will construct arguments that involve not only the analysis of games through procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative but also consider the wider game context and the player themselves. It is crucial to understand that both the game and the player contribute to the (re)shaping of China. Neglecting either element would lead to an inadequate understanding of the potential of games and the portrayal of China. Furthermore, considering the criticism and suggestion of player agency raised by Stang (2019), relying solely on tools of game analysis such as play as method, procedural rhetoric, and ludo-narrative would be insufficient for this research project. Consequently, this study will adopt critical discourse analysis as the analytical method for a comprehensive interpretation of video games, placing emphasis not only on the game itself but also on various contextual factors. Theoretical approaches to gaming will play a significant role in analysing both the game and the act of playing.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Sampling

Video games have undergone a significant evolution, becoming a medium encompassing diverse genres, producers, and player environments. Therefore, in order to comprehend the image of China as portrayed in video games and the processes involved in shaping this image, this research focuses on a specific selection of games. The main corpus of this study includes *Devotion* (2019)*, Civilization V* (2010)*, Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* (2015)*, Chinese Parents* (2018)*, The Wall* (2017)*, Animal Farm: China* (2019), and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* (2005). This selection encompasses a range of video game genres, such as First-Person Shooting (FPS), turn-based strategy games, first-person psychological horror games, action-adventure games, and more. Furthermore, it encompasses games from different cultural backgrounds: *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* were developed in a non-Chinese context, while *Chinese Parents* and *The Wall* were created by studios or individuals based in Mainland China. *Devotion, Animal Farm: China*, and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* were produced by studios in Taiwan, China. It is important to note that many games within the corpus exhibit significant contexts of production, distribution, and reception. For instance, *Devotion* gained global popularity upon its initial release, including in Mainland China and Taiwan, China. However, due to sensitive content and imagery, it was swiftly removed from circulation, first within the Chinese region and subsequently worldwide, a mere week after its publication. Similarly, *The Wall* is another noteworthy game in this regard. Initially available on Steam in June 2017, it was soon withdrawn from the market due to its sensitive content. However, discussions within the Steam community and walk-through videos of both games remain accessible. In addition to these four primary games, several other games such as *Oriental Empire*, *Red Alert II* (China mod), *Battlefield 4*, and others will serve as supplementary or "satellite" games, and they will be briefly introduced and analysed as needed throughout the study.

Positionality

Before move on to data collection and analysis, it is imperative to address an important aspect of this research: my own positionality. This discussion serves to provide a rationale for my chosen methodology, while also serving as a personal reminder. In this study, my positionality is multifaceted. Firstly, I navigate a complex cultural context as a Chinese individual from Mainland China, studying abroad in the UK, and writing this dissertation in English, which is my second language. Additionally, I will assume

multiple roles throughout this research, including that of a player, researcher, streamer, writer, and fan. Consequently, it becomes essential to examine my own positionality thoroughly, considering how it may influence the methodology and analysis of this project, as well as to propose appropriate measures to address any potential challenges.

The primary challenge arises from the interplay between my roles as a researcher and my involvement in other positions. The earlier section on "play as method" already explores the relationship between play and research, touching upon the discussion of positionality. However, "play as method" primarily focuses on utilising gameplay as a means to understand and interpret video games, placing more emphasis on the process of playing and how the player's cultural and historical context may influence their comprehension and interpretation. Therefore, "play as method" can be seen as the researcher's endeavour to introduce players to game studies or as an attempt to integrate their role as a player within the field of game studies. However, the dynamic between these two roles has not been thoroughly examined and addressed thus far.

As highlighted earlier, the act of playing is integral when analysing video games due to their interactive nature. The rise of "cloud gaming," where individuals watch streamers' live gameplay instead of playing the game themselves, has become increasingly prevalent with the advent of various live streaming services. However, it is important to note that cloud gaming or watching play-throughs cannot fully replace the researcher's own play experience, as live streaming is a complex process that can be considered a form of collaborative gameplay (Lin, Bowman, Lin, & Chen 2019: 1). The dual positionality of being both a player and a researcher presents a tension between these roles, highlighting the need to navigate conflicting responsibilities. On one hand, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and generalisable understanding of the image of China and the relationship between China and the Western world within the realm of video games. On the other hand, as a cultural study of video games, it is equally important to embrace an open understanding of what constitutes a game, why games are appealing, and how they shape identity, interpretation, and behavioural effects (Krzywinska 2006: 122).

Therefore, in the data collection phase, my own play style, gaming experience, and streaming experience will serve as a means to familiarise myself with the games and roles beyond that of a researcher. This information will enable me to replicate the instrumental play of the games for analysis. Furthermore, my personal experiences will act as supplementary insights when analysing the play-throughs of other players or streamers. Additionally, given my complex cultural context and positionality, critical discourse analysis will be employed as the data analysis method for this research. Further elaboration on these aspects will be provided in the subsequent sections.

Data collection

Rethinking play as method

This research aims to investigate China's image "in" and "around" video games. To begin, I will introduce the approach to understanding the image "in" video games. As previously mentioned, both procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative aim to illustrate how video games make arguments through procedurality and narrative. Play serves as the means to access the procedural and narrative aspects of the game. As a programmed system, video games establish rules and corresponding algorithms that govern and guide the player's actions. The theories I have reviewed, such as procedural rhetoric, implied player, and instrumental play, all focus on a specific type of play style—an idealised play style, from the designers' point of view, that follows the rules, guidance, and main storyline to complete the game or achieve victory in player versus player (PvP) battles. While individual context and differences may influence this play style to some extent, it is commonly shared among players when the objective is to complete the game or emerge victorious in battles.

For instance, taking *Civilization V* as an example, when playing as China, strategic decisions would involve studying the unique abilities, units, and buildings available to China. The rational choice might be to pursue a path of war, which entails developing the army, adopting the "Honour"[5] social policy at the beginning, and if early victories are not feasible, selecting either "Order"[6] or "Autocracy" as the ideology. This strategy does not guarantee victory, but it optimises China's advantages according to the game's design, providing the best opportunity for success. While specific maps or opponents may require adjustments in gameplay details, the overarching strategy of playing as China remains consistent according to the game's design. However, it is important to note that the model of the implied player is difficult to be identified, and therefore, the corresponding play style or procedure of such a player is hard to be pinpointed. The concept of instrumental play, which has been reviewed, alone, is insufficient to describe this play style accurately for several reasons. Firstly, while instrumental play instrumentalises the act of playing in pursuit of game completion or defeating opponents, extreme cases of instrumental play contradict the play style currently under examination. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, all play styles are instrumental because play serves as a means to an end, whether that end is winning, achievement milestones, or simply enjoying the game.

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[5] "Honour" improves the effectiveness of one's army in a variety of ways. When adopted, this policy grants all units a combat bonus when fighting barbarians. Additionally, eliminating barbarian units yields culture points. Adopting all policies in the Honor tree will grant Gold for each enemy unit killed.

[6] The policy of "order" values stability above all else.

Consequently, the preconceived image of China within the game will be discovered through a playstyle resembling instrumental play and the principles of implied player theory. This playstyle will be guided by the game's rules and design, with the objective of completing the game or achieving victory, or at the very least, maximising the chances of success. Such a play style allows for subsequent analysis of the game's argument through procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative, which can be challenged by alternative play styles and the reception of the game.

Despite games often presenting a "preferred" approach, there is no unified method for playing a game due to varying motivations, player skills, and socio-cultural contexts. To provide a comprehensive portrayal of China in video games, it is essential to consider the diverse play styles adopted by different gamers for different reasons. Firstly, different play styles offer distinct interpretations of China within the games played. Secondly, as argued, the agency granted to players within the game empowers them to challenge the pre-designed arguments embedded in the game. Hence, walk-throughs and streaming records from different players and streamers play a crucial role. These diverse approaches will also be selected for analysis.

Also using *Civilization V* as an example, personally, my play style aligns with that of many other players, focusing on a defensive approach rather than aggression. I prioritise farming, technology development, and economy while avoiding wars. Will this play style guarantee victory? Perhaps against low-level AI opponents, but in "real" games, such as playing with friends or against high-level AI, there is little chance of winning if I choose China. However, I find enjoyment in this play style. Additionally, *Civilization V* offers another distinct play style. Some videos feature AI-only matches, where all players are controlled by artificial intelligence. One might argue that this play style represents the "official" way to play the game with selected civilisations. However, in this research, I believe this play style should not replace instrumental play; instead, it should be treated as a separate play style for individual analysis. When employing Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model (1989, 1992), which highlights the analysis of discursive practices, it becomes evident that the diverse play styles merely constitute a fraction of the broader practice. However, an essential element appears to be absent or overlooked in this context.

As previously mentioned, localised translation plays a crucial role in understanding the construction and interpretation of China in video games. Localisation holds the potential to transmit and even establish new socio-cultural identities (Di Marco, 2007). Given my research's emphasis on localised and non-localised translation, the primary focus will be on the written and spoken content—within the narrow definition of text—of the game.

Thus, during the data collection stage, I played both the Chinese and English version of the selected games to capture their textual elements. Previous studies suggest that a game's localised translation includes not only plot descriptions, narration, and dialogue (Di Marco, 2007; Palumbo, 2009; Sajna, 2013), but also encompasses the user interface (Mandiberg, 2021) and dubbing or voice-over (Sajna, 2013). However, this research will primarily concentrate on the traditional textual components of video games, namely, the descriptions, narration, and dialogues. It is worth noting that some of the selected games, namely *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* and *Animal Farm: China*, do not have an official English version available, and despite their popularity in the Western world, there are currently no well-known fan-made English versions that can be analysed. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, The Wall has been unavailable since 2017, and access to the gaming experience is limited to other players' play-throughs. Furthermore, the significance of *Devotion* extends beyond the game itself. Therefore, the localised translation choices of the aforementioned games will not be analysed. Instead, the focus will be on the localised translations of two selected games: *Civilization V* and *Chinese Parents*. *Civilization V*, developed by Firaxis Games, has its source text in English and target text in Chinese. On the other hand, *Chinese Parents* underwent localised translation from Chinese to English. Moreover, as *Civilization V* offers an official Traditional Chinese version of the game without an official Simplified Chinese version, this research will analyse both the official Traditional Chinese version and the Simplified Chinese version provided by CivClub, a forum and fan site dedicated to the *Civilization* series in China (CivClub, 2008).

Around the Game

The preceding section explored the concept of the image "in" video games, while the focus here shifts to the image "around" them. Consequently, at this stage, the individual game serves as the discourse text, and the data introduced in this section partially encompasses its production, distribution, and reception. Presently, it is commonplace for game studies research to treat the game and its "surroundings" as separate entities, with the length of research often being the primary contributing factor to this phenomenon. Adopting Fairclough's (1989) three-step approach to critical discourse analysis, which aims to comprehend the situations, social structures, and ideologies behind the text, is vital for understanding the image of China and the "invisible hand" shaping it within video games. It is crucial to recognise that video games should not be viewed in isolation, as the interpretation of players, industry media comments and reviews, and government regulations all exert influence on and contribute to the image of China in and around the games. One can consider the procedural rhetoric, the narrative elements of the game, personal interpretations, and all the "surroundings" of the game as different actors engaging in a dialogue within the same universe. Hence,

this diverse range of data enables us to observe and analyse the conflicting or cohesive outcomes of this dialogue, ultimately addressing the intricate construction and interpretation of the image of China in and around video games, as well as the dialectical relationship between ideologies and these images. This dialectical relationship is akin to the interplay between "a particular discursive event and the situation (s), institution (s), and social structure (s)" (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258). Such a dialectical relationship suggests that various ideologies and diverse socio-cultural contexts frame and influence the construction and interpretation of the image of China, while simultaneously reinforcing and challenging the ideologies and socio-cultural contexts that shape them.

Given the variations among the games forming the corpus of this research, their respective "surroundings" are generated by considering diverse sources that reflect upon the games. For example, in the case of *Civilization V*, comments and reviews from Steam, forum posts by players and fans on platforms such as "Fandom," the Steam community, NGA, Baidu Tieba, and Civclub, as well as industry media posts from IGN, 3DM, GCores, and others, were selected. When examining *Devotion, The Wall, and Animal Farm: China*, the focus was primarily on investigating comments and reviews from Steam, forum posts by players and fans within the Steam community and related discussions, as well as some media reports about the games. In the case of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* and *Chinese Parents*, analysis encompasses comments and reviews from Steam, forum posts by players and fans on platforms such as the Steam community, NGA, and Baidu Tieba, as well as industry media posts from IGN, 3DM, GCores, and others. Links to the selected articles will be provided in the appendix. Additionally, for games like *Assassin's Creed, Civilization V*, and *Chinese Paladin*, the analysis encompasses both the game itself and the discussions surrounding it. However, for games like *The Wall, Devotion*, and *Animal Farm: China*, and particularly in the case of *Devotion*, the focus of analysis shifts from the (unavailable) game itself to the discussions surrounding it, placing them at the centre of examination.

Data Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The primary analytical approach employed in this research is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Previous studies (Šisler, 2008; Saber and Webber, 2017; Mukherjee, 2018; Bennett, 2018) have highlighted that video games, as cultural products, possess the potential to reflect, reinforce, challenge, and even undermine dominant ideologies within and surrounding the gaming sphere. Consequently, the construction and interpretation of the image of China within video games will also reflect the relationship

between China and the rest of the world, as well as the ideologies that shape this relationship. CDA provides a systematic and comprehensive approach to examine both the image of China and the complex interplay of influences that shape and constrain this image. Fairclough contends that " [C]ritical discourse analysis... aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes; to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony" (Fairclough 1993: 135). While researchers may offer varying interpretations of certain concepts, such as ideology, and adopt diverse approaches to address their research questions, they are united by the shared objective of "attempt[ing] to uncover, reveal or disclose what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately in relations of discursively enacted dominance or their underlying ideologies... imply[ing] a critical and oppositional stance against the powerful and the elites, and especially those who abuse of their power" (Van Dijk 1995: 18).

As mentioned previously, both procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative approaches have inherent limitations when studying video games. These approaches tend to be game-centred, often overlooking the reception of the game and flattening the experiences of players. In line with one of the principles of CDA proposed by Wodak (1996), "it is necessary to analyse texts to investigate their interpretation, reception, and social effect" (Wodak 1996: 17-20, as cited in Titscher et al. 2000: 146), as language use can be ideological. Additionally, CDA aims to explore the relationship between discourse and reality, thus highlighting the criticality of considering the historical, cultural, social, political, and economic context of the text. Therefore, CDA is well-suited to address the limitations posed by procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative in the study of video games.

Researchers in the field of video game studies have applied various approaches of CDA to explore diverse topics, ranging from the representation of "otherness" in video games (Intzidis and Prevedourakis, 2008) to LGBTQ+ sexuality in WoW (Pulos, 2013) and the construction of players' identities in WoW (Rosas and Dhen, 2012). CDA provides a suitable framework to identify and critically evaluate the representation of China in video games. According to Fairclough (1989), his approach to CDA comprises three components: description, interpretation, and explanation, operating at three levels: the textual level, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice. To capture the potential complexity of China's image, this research first conducted a textual analysis of the selected games to uncover the pre-designed interpretation of China

within the framework of instrumental play, employing procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative. Additionally, the interpretations of players and industry media were analysed. Lastly, social context was taken into account to provide insights into the representation of China in and around video games, as well as the dynamics of China's relationship with its global context. Furthermore, the scrutiny of localised translation will be consistent with Fairclough's rendition of CDA, albeit following the methodology advocated by Lambert and van Gorp (1985, in Hermans, 2014).

In the process of textual analysis, the initial step involves describing the text, encompassing both its content and form. According to Fairclough, these two aspects are inseparable, as the form influences and even shapes the content, with a particular form being selected based on the content at hand. Fairclough (1989) presents ten guiding questions pertaining to vocabulary, grammar, and textual structure, to illuminate the formal properties of the text. This particularly fits the study of the localised and non-localised translation. This research inspects both the micro level and the macro level of the source text and the target text, and also explores inter-systematic relations, which are the relationships between the source text and target text in the different language version of a same game, also known as "text comparison" (Lambert and van Gorp, 1985: 47). However, the traditional analytical approach employed for primarily written and spoken texts is inadequate for analysing video games. While written and spoken text does exist within video games, the interactivity of the medium cannot be overlooked. Additionally, in comparison to novels or films, video games afford players agency, granting them a certain degree of manoeuvring within the virtual world. Consequently, it is challenging to "describe" video games using the traditional analytical approach without critical reassessment, as different play styles and approaches can result in diverse realisations of the game's content. In this context, a video game, particularly those with explicit narratives such as *Death Stranding*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Tomb Raider*, resembles an unfinished novel, where the characters, plot, and sometimes the ending are predetermined, but how players navigate and contribute to the unfolding of the story depends on their individual play.

Thus, this research utilises procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative to present and analyse the pre-designed image of China within the play-throughs of the selected video games. Bogost (2012) proposes procedural rhetoric as a framework for understanding how video games persuade players towards certain values through gameplay. By examining the rules, spatial design, and gameplay, the procedural perspective of the game and its pre-designed image of China can be explored. As previously mentioned, this research adopts a distinct perspective when addressing the procedural aspects of video games. The interpretation of the video game from a procedural rhetoric standpoint should be regarded as a model or control group for all potential interpretations. As Anderson et al.

(2019) argue, procedural rhetoric not only offers a lens for examining video games or the designer's assumptions but also presents "an argument about how players interpret and experience games." Moreover, procedural rhetoric does not exist in isolation, particularly in the selected games where there is a discernible storyline, or one based on a grand narrative structure. Thus, the narrative aspect of the game will be examined through the lens of ludo-narrative, as proposed by Aarseth. Aarseth suggests investigating narrative in video games across four ontological dimensions: world, objects, agents, and events. Each of these dimensions encompasses distinct criteria for analysing the diverse applications of narrative in video games. Together, "the particular choices from among the options available in the discourse type which the text draws upon" (Fairclough 1989: 110) can be described.

However, as reviewed, there are cases where the gameplay and the game narrative contradict with each other, namely ludo-narrative dissonance. Thus, this research recognises and embraces the conflicting results that may arise from the analysis under procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative, as such conflicts themselves contribute to the process of meaning-making. In this context, the concepts of ludo-narrative dissonance and ludo-narrative harmony play a significant role in understanding the impact of these conflicts or coherences. Thus, investigating the relationship between simulation and narrative becomes a vital task within this stage. Such investigation enhances our understanding of how the game constructs its argument, aligning with Fairclough's request to analyse the textual structure. Consequently, this stage enables us to "read" the game, gaining insight into its workings according to the design. Most importantly, it provides a foundation for identifying the basic pre-designed images of China within the game and explores how these images are constructed through the game's simulation aspect, its narrative and the interplay between the two.

The second step in Fairclough's version of CDA is the stage of interpretation. According to Fairclough (1989), this involves mapping out the relationship between the text and interaction. The concept of interpretation encompasses two dimensions: the analysis of the stage and the participants' understanding of the text. The primary objective of this stage is to unravel "the participants' processes of text production as well as text interpretation" (Fairclough 1989: 141). When delving into interpretation, Fairclough highlights its intricate nature, encompassing several interconnected aspects. Interpretation entails understanding, judgement, evaluation, and intention scrutiny. To engage in interpretation, one must grasp the meaning of the text, discern the author's appeals, assess the veracity of the author's claims, and examine the alignment with the social or cultural context. Furthermore, one may also be intrigued by the underlying motives behind the author's statements. As Fairclough states, the stage of interpretation serves as a liaison between the other two levels through "manifest intertextuality" and

"constitutive intertextuality" or interdiscursivity. Intertextuality refers to the links established between the text and other texts. Reisigl and Wodak elaborate on the various ways these connections are forged, including explicit references to a topic or main actor, allusions, or evocations, the transfer of key arguments from one text to another, and more (Reisigl and Wodak 2009: 90). On the other hand, interdiscursivity suggests that different texts, themes, or discourses are brought into the textual interpretation by the interpreter. Initially, we may assume that a particular discourse is primarily associated with a specific topic. However, during the process of interpretation, it becomes apparent that such discourse may encompass various topics. For instance, a discourse on vegetarianism may extend to discussions on climate change or even patriotism. As Reisigl and Wodak emphasise, "discourses are open and often hybrid: new sub-topics can be created at many points" (Reisigl and Wodak 2009: 90).

In this step, I analyse diverse types of data associated with the selected games, including online streamers' walk-throughs, players' reviews, and industry media reports. Interpretation serves as a bridge between the text and the surrounding social structures. All the aforementioned types of data can be seen as interactions through which texts are produced and interpreted. As suggested by procedural rhetoric, the depiction of China in video games is partially constructed and comprehended through gameplay. However, video games also provide players with agency, allowing them to express themselves while playing. Bogost (2007) and Anderson, Karzmark, and Wardrip-Fruin (2019) argue that procedural rhetoric can be utilised not just as an analytical tool, but also as an examination tool.

Building upon the previous step, we have established a predefined understanding of the game. The individual perspectives of players, as well as their comprehension skills, influence their play styles and consequently lead to diverse interpretations of games, as indicated by previous studies (Mateas, 2005; Gee, 2007; Treanor et al., 2011; Summerville et al., 2019). The player's walk-through can be seen as a form of resistance against the predetermined world of the game. Moreover, different play styles can also influence or even modify the game's narrative. Therefore, in this stage, our main focus lies on the tension between the pre-designed messages of the game, both from a simulation aspect and a narrative aspect, and individual interpretations. The game's design provides agency, demonstrating the potential for constructing and conveying China's image. Additionally, certain modifications made by players, such as map packs or skins, can be seen as their rebellion against the predefined structure of the game. While most of these design choices are superficial, primarily affecting the presentation of the narrative or representation, they challenge the predetermined world.

Irrespective of whether they manifest as distinct play styles or fan-made modifications,

all these actions within video games represent valuable data. They exemplify players' endeavours to engage with the system, often in a non-verbal manner. On the other hand, discussions, comments, and posts form the data surrounding video games, offering an alternate realm for interpretation. They reflect the players' and industry media's efforts to navigate, surpass, and occasionally challenge the system. Diverging from the procedural or narrative structure of the game, these discussions venture beyond its boundaries. They not only provide insights into players' gaming experiences but also extend beyond the game itself, presenting viewpoints that may contradict the established simulation or narrative. Such opinions cannot be expressed within the confines of the game due to preset rules or narratives; however, they find expression in external discourses. The interplay between the pre-designed message of the game, the personal comprehension of the player, and the unlimited expression enabled by the game expands our understanding of how China is depicted within and around the game.

Additionally, at this phase, a new participant joins the discourse—the game industry media, subsequently referred to as industry media. The power dynamics between the player and the game designer, already defined by a clear hierarchy, become more intricate and dynamic when industry media are added into the equation. Considering the professionalism and influence of the industry media, the power relation between game studios, industry media, and players become increasingly complex. Depending on the researcher's perspective, this relationship can be further complicated by the involvement of game platforms and governmental entities. Although the examination of this power relationship is not the central topic of discussion in this stage, it provides valuable insights into the power structure for subsequent analysis.

The combination of the image of China derived from gamers' play and reflection, along with the industry media's reviews, as well as the pre-designed image constructed by video games, gives rise to more nuanced representations of China within the selected video games. These images may not always align and sometimes even contradict one another, highlighting the participants' reliance on social and cultural insights. Similar to the conflicts observed in the analysis under procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative, these tensions are acknowledged and embraced within this stage of the research. The significance of these tensions lies in their grounding in social and cultural contexts, setting the stage for further analysis and explanation. However, it is important to note that coherence and agreements should not be overlooked, as understanding why individuals within the same or different cultural contexts agree or disagree with each other is a perpetual topic of debate, to which this research aims to contribute.

In the context of this analysis, the keyword that emerges is "tension" - specifically, the tension between the image of China presented through the game system and the one

conveyed through the game narrative, and the tension between the pre-designed image of China in the game and the one experienced and presented by the player in and around the game, scrutinised by the industry media, and subject to inclusion or exclusion by the government. This research provides an opportunity to delve into the detailed examination of how these tensions manifest within specific themes. As mentioned earlier, the first theme primarily focuses on the image of China and the relationship between China and the world in games designed in a non-Chinese context. The second theme revolves around the image of China and the relationship between China and the world in Chinese games. Given the shared similarities in the corpus and perspective of these two themes, the aspects explored are also similar. Within these themes, the stable narrative elements in games related to China, such as the depiction of China, prominent figures, and objects, will be investigated. Moreover, the China experienced by players through the narrative and gaming experience will be interrogated, including how the game's rules, which restrict player actions, shape the player's perception and experience of China within the game. Furthermore, the coherence or conflicts felt by players regarding China while playing the game and engaging with the narrative will be examined. Additionally, comments, reviews, and forum discussions by players and industry media will be analysed to thoroughly investigate the tension between the predetermined image and the interpreted one. As Stang (2019) argues, players exert agency in their engagement with the game. Therefore, the players' and industry media's reflections on their experiences, the game's representation of China, and their suggestions and criticisms about the game will be taken into consideration. Given that this research deals with cultural differences, similarities, and ideologies, the contextual factors surrounding the game, players, and industry media are crucial, particularly when explaining the observed tensions. Consequently, the cultural, economic, political, and social contexts of all the materials will be carefully examined and analysed.

The third topic delves into the political dimension within, around, and beyond video games. Games like *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China* undoubtedly present political arguments about China. However, upon a preliminary examination of the corpus, it becomes apparent that the discussions initially revolve around the games but gradually shift towards broader ideological discourses, distancing themselves from the games themselves. Consequently, when analysing political games, we must carefully observe and analyse the direct clashes between differing mindsets, rationales, and countermeasures. Thus, in addition to analysing the games, comments, reviews, and forum discussions may hold even greater significance during the analysis. Furthermore, the reactions of governmental entities, industry media, and the game platform, Steam, will also be examined to better understand the broader context of the discussions regarding political environment and ideology. Additionally, compared to the "Chinese"

games discussed in the previous two themes, the "identity" of the three selected games remains in question. Therefore, the dialogue between these three themes will provide a deeper comprehension of the representation of China within and around video games, as well as an understanding of the diverse interpretations of "China" and "Chinese."

The final step aims to contextualise the previous analyses, which serve as cumulative evidence of broader social and cultural factors. This step involves further exploration of concepts such as power and ideology. Several questions must be addressed, and various aspects must be analysed. These inquiries primarily revolve around social determinants, ideologies, and their effects. For instance, what power relations influence and shape this discourse? Which aspects of the participants' knowledge and mentality can be evaluated as "ideological"? Elaborating on the struggles within each level of discourse is essential, as is determining whether the discourse supports or challenges existing power relations. In this research, the portrayal of China in video games essentially reflects the relationship between China and the Western world. Consequently, the frameworks of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, and Occidentalism will be critically examined to ascertain their usefulness in understanding these relationships.

Though video games can serve as vehicles for conveying and perpetuating specific ideologies, it is important to acknowledge that they also possess the capacity to challenge and subvert these ideologies. Hence, ideology in this research acts as the connecting thread that binds together various actions, interpretations, and responses. Different ideologies intersect and clash, linking individuals to larger social groups and simplifying the discourse. Ideology establishes a space for comprehending and explaining the interactions, behaviours, and conflicts within individual discourses and among their participants. Ultimately, ideology offers a framework to assemble the image of China and gain a comprehensive understanding of its representation as a whole.

This stage seeks to decipher how video games, as a relatively new technology, in combination with other contemporary technologies like live streaming and social media, reinforce or challenge existing representations of China. It also aims to explore the hidden ideologies behind these representations and how they influence video games. Notably, political games such as *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China* not only convey their own perspectives on China within the game but also provide a platform for players from diverse cultural and political backgrounds to engage in discussions about China under various topics, including political differences. In this context, *Devotion* serves as an extreme example, as it did not explicitly express any political appeal within the game, except for an image that the studio claims to be a testing material mistake. However, a debate ensued beyond the game itself, focusing on political ideologies. Hence, different

games can exert varying levels of influence and be influenced by hidden ideologies and power structures, each with its own unique emphasis.

This thesis embarks on a comprehensive exploration of China's portrayal within and around the realm of video games, employing a multifaceted analytical approach. Collecting the image of China "in" video games through procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative, my research reveals how gameplay mechanics and narrative structures contribute to the portrayal of China. It highlights the significance of play as a method, underscoring how varying play styles and gamer interactions with video games can lead to different interpretations of China. Additionally, my research analyses the image of China "around" video games, taking into account the socio-cultural context and player reception. This includes a critical look at the production, distribution and reception of video games, and how these elements contribute to the broader discourse about China in the gaming world. The research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary tool, allowing for a deeper investigation of the interplay between the discursive practices and the socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts.

Interlude

The forthcoming chapters of this thesis undertake a comprehensive exploration of how video games serve as cultural mirrors, reflecting and shaping perceptions of China both within and beyond its borders. This investigation is structured into three distinct yet interlinked analytical chapters, each focusing on different dimensions of China's portrayal in and around video games.

The first analytical chapter examines the portrayal of China in two Western-developed games: *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*. This analysis dissects both the simulation and narrative elements of these games. A crucial aspect of this investigation involves examining how these games portray China from the perspective of Western perceptions, fluctuating between eroticisation and aggressive characterisations. Furthermore, this chapter will not only consider the games' content but also extend the analysis to encompass community responses, including player comments and forum discussions. Through the sophisticated approaches, we can uncover the complex layers of meaning and interpretation related to China, highlighting the intertwining between game design, players' interpretation, and cultural representation.

The concept of 'Chineseness' is explored in the second chapter, with a focus on its portrayal in games like *Chinese Parents* and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*. In this segment of the thesis, an examination will be conducted on the multiple layers of Chineseness within these games, encompassing authentic cultural elements and the exclusive nature of Chinese cultural references. The chapter aims to illustrate, through a comprehensive analysis of these games, how video games can uphold the exclusivity of Chinese culture while promoting empathy and understanding among a global audience. This chapter contributes to the discourse on how video games can be used as tools for cultural communication and representation in the context of China's policy of "telling the Chinese story well" (Ma and Chen, 2019).

The final analytical chapter adopts a more politicised approach, focusing on the depiction of China in political games such as *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China*. This section will explore how these games serve as ideological apparatuses, embedding specific political messages within their design and interaction. By examining the mechanics, narratives and player interactions, this chapter will reveal how these games convey predetermined ideological perspectives on China. Additionally, this chapter will also discuss *Devotion*, a game that transitioned from being seen as a 'Chinese game' to a 'non-Chinese game' due to its politically sensitive content. Through an analysis of

industry media, comments and forum discussions, this chapter will highlight the clash of Orientalism and Occidentalism, providing insight into the ideological battles waged within the gaming community.

In summary, these chapters collectively aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which video games interpret, represent, and influence perceptions of China. From the depiction of historical and cultural elements to the conveyance of political ideologies, these chapters will unravel the complex relationship between video games and cultural identity, set against the backdrop of the growing influence of digital media in global cultural exchanges.

Chapter Five: China in Western Games

Starting with this chapter, the focus of this thesis shifts towards the analysis and discussion of selected games and the portrayal of China within and around these games. Specifically, this chapter will primarily examine and discuss the image of China in two Western games: *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*. The analysis of these games will commence by exploring their simulation and narrative elements through the lenses of procedural rhetoric and ludo-narrative. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the image of China, this analysis will also incorporate the surrounding elements of the games, including player comments, forum discussions, and streamers' play-throughs.

Within the intricate and at times paradoxical landscape of video games, the portrayal of China adheres to the West/East duality, which can be analysed and critiqued through the lens of Orientalism. The works of Said and Vukovich shed light on the representation of China, highlighting two distinct categories: those that emphasise and amplify the differences and those that accentuate and magnify the similarities. My analysis indicates that *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* present a "different" China, as defined by Said, through two classic approaches that focus on the distinction between the East and the West: an exotic and xenophilic portrayal, and a xenophobic portrayal. In this context, the term "different" holds a threefold interpretation. Firstly, it suggests that China is a distinct culture when compared to the cultural context in which the game is designed. Secondly, there exist conflicting images of China shaped by the game's narrative and its simulation. Lastly, as players engage with the game, the reviews, and criticisms from gamers may diverge from the constructed images within the game.

Based on the game's setting (world) and its constructions (objects), both games portray China as a peaceful country with a rich civilisation and a glorious history. This tendency towards exoticism is also evident in the artwork of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*. However, the gameplay of *Civilization V* reveals a different narrative. Despite the depiction of China's glorious culture, the game's rules and mechanics lead players controlling China towards a path of conquest or world domination. Consequently, through the simulation aspect, the image of China is shaped as a bellicose nation with an aggressive character that poses a potential threat to the entire world. This dissonance between the ludic and narrative elements offers fans, particularly Chinese fans, an opportunity to challenge the predetermined image of China through forum discussions and mod-making.

In the analysis, another significant finding emerges, suggesting that a China characterised by Western "sameness" is also constructed within and around video games. The analysis of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* presents an alternative image of China that signifies a distinct China-World relationship. This new portrayal of China, based on the perceived fundamental differences between China and the Western world, focuses on the shared values between the two. Vukovich's research on Sinological Orientalism highlights the emphasis on shared sameness rooted in French universalist logic. Thus, the "sameness" that China shares with the Western world represents the universal truths or values generated by the Western world.

Set in the Chinese Ming Dynasty and featuring the signature Chinese ink-wash painting art style, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* offers a depiction of ancient China. As a sequel within the *Assassin's Creed* series, the game incorporates China into the Assassin's Creed Universe, where it becomes part of the ongoing conflict between the Templars and the Assassins. By including China in the Assassin's Creed Universe, the game presents a version of China that embraces Western values, specifically the 'universal' values of liberty and democracy. This trend extends beyond the boundaries of the game itself. Chinese players on fan sites and forums have already contributed their own interpretations of China within the Assassin's Creed Universe, assigning historical figures to either the Templar or Assassin factions.

These two approaches, while stemming from the same premise, result in different images of China with diverse receptions. They reveal that the game design is still rooted in the assumption of Western dominance. Furthermore, the analysis of *Civilization V*'s periodisation reinforces and expands upon this argument. On one hand, the periodisation in the game reinforces Western domination over the East by defining and expressing history based on Western conceptions. On the other hand, it incorporates the East into this historical framework. Rather than interpreting Eastern history through a Western lens or magnifying the differences in historical progress between the West and the East, the game establishes a one-size-fits-all model of history that is defined and justified by the West. It is important to note that this model of history is shaped according to Western interpretations.

A "Different" China

Representation in popular culture and mass media involves the othering process, which can "engage feelings, attitudes, and emotions and it (representation) mobilises fears and anxieties in the viewers" (Hall 1997: 226). However, Stuart Hall's theories on stereotypical representation focus more on the exaggerated and simplified expression of difference rather than solely emphasising fear or anxiety. Stereotyping simplifies complex characteristics and cultural contexts into "simple, vivid, memorable, easily

grasped and widely recognised characteristics" (Hall 1997: 258). In this context, visible demonstrations of difference serve as the foundation for stereotypical representation. Video games, along with other media forms like novels and movies, require accessibility to create immersive experiences for audiences from diverse cultural contexts. Thus, highly accessible and recognisable images are employed in the construction of China within video games, which may sometimes take on stereotypical qualities.

The selection of Chinese cultural symbols in video games creates a recognisable portrayal of China for players, often incorporating obvious or stereotypical elements. It can be argued that this highly recognisable or stereotyped imagery is intentional, as games require representativeness. However, this practice of othering, specifically through stereotyping, demonstrates the relationship between "representation, difference, and power" (Hall 1997: 259). By selectively choosing and appropriating culturally significant symbols, a visible, and identifiable image of China is presented.

Examining *Civilization V* in detail, it is important to note that the Civilization series extends beyond a mere game. The game provides a comprehensive overview of history through its Civilopedia, which covers civilisations, leaders, technology, and policies. Like many other games featuring China, *Civilization V* incorporates several Chinese elements to represent Chinese civilisation. Given the game's traditional map-based strategy format, Chinese elements are presented through buildings, wonders, and famous figures. The designers of *Civilization V* have specifically chosen Wu Zetian as the Chinese leader, renowned for being the only female Emperor in ancient China. Additionally, the game features four Chinese World Wonders: the Great Wall, Terracotta Army, Forbidden City, and Porcelain Tower. According to the game's rules, only one copy of a World Wonder can be constructed in a given game. These wonders offer various advantages to players at different stages of the game, with some potentially decisive. From a Chinese perspective, the selection of Wu Zetian, the Great Wall, and the Forbidden City is reasonable due to their widespread fame. However, the inclusion of the Porcelain Tower raises questions that must be further explored.

The selection of the Porcelain Tower in *Civilization V* evokes Western players' long-standing imagination and exoticism towards China. As a cultural symbol, the tower holds greater significance to foreign players than to Chinese players. Historically, the Porcelain Tower gained fame in Europe and became "the Chinese building best known in Europe" (Connor 1979,17, quoted by Ledderose 1991, 232). Johan Nieuhoff, an illustrator on a mission to China in 1654, played a significant role in introducing the tower to European audiences through his writings and drawings. Nieuhoff's descriptions of the tower varied in his original embassy, providing a less grandiose and

more objective account, but became more elaborate and exaggerated in his later published work, *An embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces*. This publication included detailed descriptions and poetic comparisons, elevating the artistry and construction techniques of the Porcelain Tower, even claiming it to be as magnificent as the Seven Wonders of the World. The Porcelain Tower also served as an inspiration for the Trianon de Porcelaine, considered the first European building in a Chinese style (Ledderose, 1991). In the Western world, then, the tower is viewed as a typical Chinese architectural wonder (Thorp, 1988). However, as mentioned in the Civilopedia and historical records, the Porcelain Tower was destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-1900s. While recent efforts have been made to reconstruct the tower by the Nanjing government since 2010, the reception and perception of the tower differ between China and the West. Several articles have highlighted the educational aspect of the Porcelain Tower while targeting the differing public perceptions in China and the West. Interestingly, in the Chinese forum discussing *Civilization V,* many Chinese players, who are not from Nanjing, revealed that they had not heard of the Porcelain Tower prior to playing the game. As a result, the Porcelain Tower, once a magnificent architectural wonder, gradually faded from the collective memory of most Chinese people.

The inclusion of the porcelain tower in *Civilization V* not only creates a sense of familiarity with China for foreign players[7] but also highlights a disparity in perspective between Chinese and non-Chinese players. The reference to China in the game is largely based on Western perceptions of what is considered authentically Chinese, rather than taking into account the perspectives of Chinese players. This practice aligns with an Orientalist approach (Said, 1978; Vukovich, 2012) that characterises the understanding and, more crucially, the definition of the Orient from a Western point of view. Similar to Chibber's analysis of Western intervention, which presumes that that "the Eastern peoples were motivated by the same needs and goals as those of the West" (2018: 3), the Chinese wonder, in this case the Porcelain Tower, is evaluated based on Western standards. Consequently, the inclusion of the Porcelain Tower becomes an embodiment of a Western-centric ideology, reflecting a fusion of classical Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. This echoes Wirman's study (2015) on the coverage of Chinese gaming news by Western media, where the Western perspective shapes the understanding and interpretation of Chinese cultural elements. On one hand, it is the Western perspective that determines the value and definition of a Chinese wonder in the game, even one that is depicted as destroyed hundreds of years ago in reality. On

[7] Allegedly, the famous pagoda on Chinese takeout boxes is inspired by the porcelain tower. However, there is no reference, document, or graphic design to prove such claim except one vlog made by China Global Television Network, or CGTN: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McUoVRa7lJA&t=7s. CGTN is an international media organisation under the influence of China Central Television (CCTV) as well as the Chinese government.

the other hand, this process of definition reflects what Vukovich refers to as the universalist logic or universal truth - the notion that Western standards, including of aesthetic vision, can and should be universally applied to all cultural products. This perpetuates a process of othering and exoticism, by employing the Western stereotypical understanding of China. Othering and a particular form of othering, stereotyping, is a practice presenting the relationship between "representation, difference, and power" (Hall 1997: 259), here reinforcing Western identity. By selecting and appropriating the "appropriate" cultural symbols, a visible, and recognisable China is presented.

Another example that supports this idea is seen in *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*. Throughout most levels of the game, the background is filled with traditional Chinese paintings, encompassing landscapes of ink painting and pavilions (See Feature 1), accompanied by a horizontal 2.5D presentation. This immersive experience resembles a large Chinese ink painting scroll gradually unfolding, allowing players to appreciate the magnificence of Chinese traditional painting art. The weaponry used by the game's protagonist, Shao Jun, such as long swords, hidden foot blades, rope darts, and throwing needles, not only possess distinct Chinese characteristics but are also unique to this particular game in the series. Additionally, the protagonist's pursuit of enemies within iconic Chinese locations like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall reinforces the Chinese setting of the story. Despite varying degrees of criticism from IGN and major Chinese game media regarding aspects such as gameplay and the portrayal of Chinese culture, it is undeniable that players, through their immersion in the ink landscape and use of traditional Chinese weapons, gradually become engrossed in the elegant China meticulously crafted by the game's designers, a China that is imbued with exclusive elements, offering a sense of exoticism.
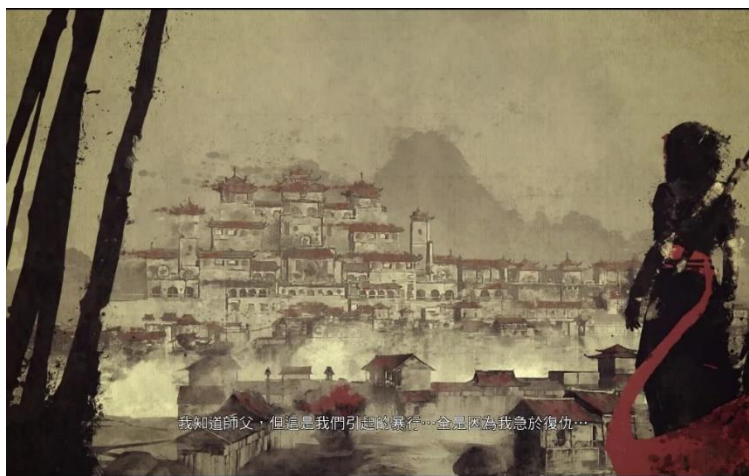

Figure 1 Screenshot of Assassin's Creed Chronicle: China

However, it is important to acknowledge that such a selection, focusing on easily recognised Chinese elements, implies the instrumental use of China within the game franchise, reducing it to a mere commodity. The appropriation of Chinese elements and the commodification of China within video games become exercises of "symbolic power" to present and define China. Only when China is actively included and recognised as China within the video game, can the game construct an authentic representation of China through its procedural mechanics and narrative. Thus, we need to further explore, through such a setting, what image of China is constructed. Ludo-narrative dissonance, which refers to the conflicting messages conveyed by a game's narrative and its rule system, not only reveals the relationship between the narrative and the rules, but also provides an opportunity to examine and challenge the messages conveyed by the game. The analysis of *Civilization V* serves as an avenue to explore and understand the impact and implications of such dissonance.

Given the setting of the game (world) and the constructions (objects) in *Civilization V*, the image of China is a powerful ancient country, a great civilisation with creative inventions and a glorious history. When one has selected China as their civilisation to play, a textual introduction to China can be read during loading. One could also reread the introduction from the Civilopedia. The introduction to China explicitly addresses the greatness of the civilisation as "the oldest and the greatest civilisation that humanity has ever produced", noting that "China's contributions to the arts and sciences are too many and too wondrous to do justice to" (*Civilization V*, 2010). The brief history in the Civilopedia offers a slightly more detailed description of China, from China's four great inventions to the relationship between China and the rest of the world. Additionally, since the introduction must be brief, statements are direct and conclusive. For instance, in the section "China and world", it says that "for many centuries China long held a distinct technological and military edge over any and all external foes". These conclusive statements, with little evidence, are all over China's Civilopedia entry, providing a sense of closure for players and presenting these statements more as facts than opinions, which increases their impact.

Moreover, as I have already indicated, in *Civilization V* China owns four wonders[8], the greatest number of wonders in this game, their cultural influence inducing conversion and political control. Form the short description of the wonders, one can gain a rudimentary understanding of the craft of China. For instance, when introducing the Porcelain Tower, the Civilopedia states:

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[8] There is one wonder called the "Great Firewall", monitoring, censoring and most importantly controlling citizens' access to the information on the internet. While China does own this technology, so do many other countries. Therefore, since the great firewall is not exclusive to China, I have not counted this towards the wonders China owns.

> "The tower was some 97 feet in diameter, with a height of 260 feet.
> The exterior of the building was built of white porcelain bricks that
> shone like mirrors in the sunlight. At night the tower was hung from
> top to bottom with over 100 lamps".

These detailed figures provide viewers with ample information to independently conclude that the tower is indeed "one of the most extraordinary architectural achievements of Chinese history." This approach goes beyond mere argumentation, allowing the audience to make informed judgments.

Another notable example can be seen in the introduction of the Great Wall of China. Unlike the average 100-word introductions for other wonders, the writer dedicates approximately 400 words to meticulously describe the Great Wall's brief history, dimensions and purpose. This extensive coverage underscores the significance and magnitude of the Great Wall:

> "Interestingly, the Great Wall was not designed to keep the nomads
> out - the Chinese knew it was all but impossible to defend such a
> long border - it was designed to make it difficult for the raiders to
> carry off loot, thus making raids far less profitable and thus less
> worth the risks involved... The current wall was built almost
> entirely by the Ming Dynasty between 1368 and 1640 AD. This
> wall was constructed on a grander scale, using more permanent
> materials (like stone). The Ming wall stretches for 3,948 miles from
> Shanhai Pass on the Bohai Gulf in the east to Lop Nur in the
> southeast portion of Xinjiang's Uygur".

This introduction provides a slightly more detailed overview of the Great Wall, concluding that it remains a true wonder of the world. This approach goes beyond a mere mention in the brief history of China, as the detailed description offers additional evidence and rationale, thereby enhancing the persuasive and powerful nature of the argument. As Aarseth (2003) suggests, the information provided serves as the cognitive building blocks of human reality, emphasising the game's setting that portrays China as a great country with unprecedented strength, profound artistic expression, and high scientific attainment. This practice coincides with the discussion of exoticism, especially Chinoiserie or Sinophilia, cerebrating the rich and great history of China.

Furthermore, these building blocks highlight another significant aspect of China's civilisation: its ancient origins. The term "ancient" emerges as a prominent descriptor in previous analyses of China's civilisation, alongside words like "great," "creative,"

and "powerful."[9] For example, the Civilopedia acknowledges China's four great inventions - paper, gunpowder, the compass, and movable type. These technologies are categorised into different "ages," with the compass belonging to the medieval era, described as "quaint and old-fashioned." The Chinese unique building, "paper maker," originates from the ancient era, while gunpowder and the printing press are associated with Renaissance era technology.

The portrayal of the Orient as a primitive and ancient culture by the West was extensively examined by Said (1978) in his work on Orientalism. Similar to Said's argument, the issue lies not in the primitive and ancient nature itself. Rather, it is the process of othering and stereotyping that accentuates the primitive and ancient aspects of the Orient, positioning it in contrast to the West and solidifying the perception of the Orient as a backward culture. Marandi's analysis (2009) also reaches a similar conclusion, emphasising how this construction and fixation of the Orient serve to justify Western imperialism (Said, 1978; Sadar, 1999; Marandi, 2009). Additionally, by presenting the West as the opposite of the primitive and ancient Orient, it creates a rationale for Western intervention and establishes universal values based on the Western value system.

This notion is further exemplified in an in-depth examination of the entry on gunpowder. The Civilopedia recounts an interesting story with a taunting tone, stating that gunpowder was sought by alchemists as an elixir of immortality (which it isn't). This mocking message is characteristic of the Civilopedia. However, it also provides valuable information: firstly, the Chinese initially used gunpowder in "primitive" weapons against the Mongol invaders, resulting in defeat; secondly, the Mongols, in turn, utilised gunpowder against other groups and successfully conquered half of Europe. Furthermore, despite attributing the invention of gunpowder to China, the focus of the introduction is on how the Arabic world weaponized gunpowder and how Europe improved its quality. This combination of a ridiculous origin story and subsequent scenarios perpetuates the image of an "ancient" China that remains stagnant in technological development. The representation of China's ancient and primitive nature, as depicted in the Civilopedia's entry on gunpowder, aligns with Said's traditional Orientalism, echoing Loomba's observation about Orientalism that "if the Orient is static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead" (Loomba 1998: 47). However, it also extends into the concept of 'Sinological-orientalism' as conceptualised by Vukovich (2012). By placing China's contributions alongside Western advancements, this discourse implies that the Western is developing with the Chinese former contribution, showing the both the similarity and superiority from the Western

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[9] See https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Chinese_(Civ5).

perspective, By presupposing a less civilised China, it validates the "universal truths of liberalism and Western forms of governance" (Vukovich 2012: 144), more importantly, reinforcing the Western superior identity.

Domination

Civilization V can be described using various labels, such as a turn-based strategy game, a 4X game, or a video game. However, the notion of a "4X" game, representing the concepts of "explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate," encapsulates the core elements of *Civilization V*. In this game, players assume the role of a country or civilisation with the objective of exploring the map and the world while expanding their territory and exerting influence in various domains such as economics, military, diplomacy, and science. The ultimate goal is to achieve one of a number of kinds of "victory", each achieved through meeting different conditions. Victory types include "world domination", "diplomatic victory", "cultural victory", "scientific victory", or, in the absence of specific criteria, by achieving the highest score by the year 2050. To triumph, players guide their civilisation's development through different historical periods, utilising technological "upgrades" appropriate to each era.

Although winning in *Civilization V* is commonly understood as achieving "world domination," described as the act of "crushing all of your enemies beneath the wheels of your chariot" (Civilopedia, 2010), a closer examination reveals that all of the winning conditions involve some form of domination within specific criteria. For example, even though it is labelled as a "cultural victory," the actual winning condition is to "become the dominant cultural influence in every civilisation in the game" (Civilopedia, 2010). The assessment for this victory is based on surpassing the cumulative Culture output of each remaining civilisation in the game with the player's cumulative Tourism output (for the entire game) (Civilopedia, 2010). Similar qualifications can be found for the science victory and diplomatic victory conditions. While *Civilization V*, like any other game, can only have one winner, all winning conditions essentially entail some form of domination, albeit in different aspects.

The notion that victories in *Civilization V* are synonymous with domination significantly influences the behaviour of players who aim to win the game. In some ways, the overall dynamics of *Civilization V* resemble those of *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG), a first-person shooter game centred around being the "last one standing." However, unlike *PUBG*, where one can rely on luck and stealth to survive until the final round and seize victory through camping or sniping the remaining competitors, *Civilization V* does not allow players with a "that'll do" attitude to secure a win. Although the game's rules present the "world domination" condition as a variation of the traditional "domination victory," suggesting a potential means of

"stealing" victory, a player cannot claim overall victory in *Civilization V* unless they become the most powerful civilisation.

In *Civilization V*, it is possible to govern a country with content citizens, advanced technology, a formidable military, and a stable national status without achieving victory in the game. The pursuit of victory or domination in *Civilization V* compels "rational" players to deeply study the game and develop a behavioural pattern or gaming style that aligns with their goals. At the same time, rational players or implied players would encounter the world shaped and manipulated by the rule system of the game, which differs from the world constructed by the game's narrative elements.

Warmongering China in Civilization V

As part of the ludo-narrative dissonance of the game, the playstyle employed when using China in *Civilization V* opens up the opportunity to develop a new impression of China through the game's procedural rhetoric. The game's rules and setting not only encourage players who choose China to pursue a path of war but also ensure that they will inevitably possess a large army and engage in, or even initiate, more wars. In this context, China is portrayed as an evil and outdated warmonger. This depiction is reinforced by China's unique ability, unique building, and unique unit in the game.

China's unique ability grants a doubled combat bonus [10] for Great Generals and increases their spawn rate by 50%. This means that as long as the player keeps attacking and engaging in battles, they will generate Great Generals faster than other civilisations, thereby gaining more combat bonuses. This advantage not only leads to a more powerful army but also accelerates the promotions of battle units, creating further advantages in warfare. Additionally, China's unique building, the papermaker, offers an additional 2 gold from the early stages of the game, enabling the player to maintain a large army and declare wars. In the Medieval Era, China's unique unit, the Chu-Ko-Nu, adds more firepower to the army with its double-attack ability. This combination provides improvements to combat strength, experience, and gold supply for warfare. While players are presented with other options, this war-focused strategy is considered a classic path to achieving domination victory, endorsed not only by many players but also by the Fandom *Civilization* wiki[11].

The perception of warmongering is further fuelled by the game logic of the AI system in *Civilization V*. Posts on Chinese online forums like NGA, CivClub, and Baidu Tieba often refer to Civilization V as "barbarian V," "war machine V," or "war simulator

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[10] Later this buff was changed, and the Great General's combat bonus was only increased by 15%. This is a huge drop, but this still makes for a generally more powerful army almost from the start of the game.
[11] A platform for all the fans of the *Civilization* series to communicate and share their experiences. Even Sid Meier, one of the original designers of the *Civilization* series, has participated in editing some entries.

V.[12]" These nicknames imply that *Civilization V* is not as civilised as its title suggests. They reflect one of the game's key elements: battles. The introduction of mechanisms, such as a random diplomatic system and revised battle rules placed a greater emphasis on warfare, hence establishing *Civilization V* as a renowned war simulator. Although there is no explicit reason behind these nicknames, they are often associated with aggressive and treacherous play by the game's AI, which in *Civilization V* is both unintelligent and unpredictable. Diplomatic activities and military actions often showcase the AI's foolishness and randomness, according to *Civilization V*'s lead designer Jon Shafer (2013).

The diplomacy system in the *Civilization* series plays a crucial role in achieving victory beyond world domination, such as through diplomatic victory. It offers players the opportunity to gain allies, economic benefits, and sign pacts for defence or offence, as well as to progress technologically. However, the random and unpredictable AI diplomacy system can result in lifelong allies turning against the player in the late game to secure their own victory. Shafer describes the AI as "completely enslaved to their gameplay situation, and as a result, they appear random and very little of their personalities shine through" (Shafer, 2013).

Furthermore, players have observed that the AI's decision to declare war seems to be solely based on military strength, disregarding the player's progress in culture or technology. If the player's military force is weaker than the AI's, the AI will consistently declare war. However, *Civilization V* introduced a change by eliminating the stacking of armies. This means that during combat, players can only position one troop on each tile, preventing the combination of different units on the same tile. Battles in *Civilization V* require strategic calculations and arrangements, considering factors such as troop cooperation, location, and defensive postures. The complexity of these calculations exceeds the AI's computational capacity. As a result, the combination of the diplomacy "bug"[13] and the AI's war declaration mechanism has led many players in China to label *Civilization V* as a "battle simulator." Players are constantly engaged in warfare due to the AI's tendencies, but the intricate nature of battles adds depth beyond a simple comparison of troop numbers (Shafer, 2013).

The mechanism of diplomacy and the AI system in *Civilization V*, combined with the game's mechanism of China, often entice players to pursue a path of war as a means to

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[12] See https://www.civclub.net/bbs/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=88550&highlight=%D2%B0%C2%F95, https://www.civclub.net/bbs/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=74260&highlight=%D2%B0%C2%F95.

[13] Jon Shafer clearly thinks this behaviour is a bug. In his new project *At the Gates* (ATG), the diplomacy system is very clear and predictable. He says: "For example, if you're at -5 with a leader, he'll never trade with you, while at +10 he'll always agree to help out in a war if requested."; and: "Leaders in ATG have very distinctive agendas and behaviours" (Shafer, 2013). But many players think the simulation in *Civilization V* is a success, that the AI should want to win, and the betrayal concurs with real-life scenarios, giving the game more authenticity.

secure victory. This gameplay experience gives rise to a particular interpretation of China within the game—a portrayal of China as an aggressive war machine that provokes neighbouring countries and poses a threat to the world. This image resonates with a specific xenophobia towards China: The China threat theory, prevalent in the Western world. The China threat theory claims that China's recent economic growth and increasing international influence are a threat to the national interests of the United States and Asian-Pacific security (Broomfield 2010: 265). This perceived threat encompasses ideological, economic, and strategic dimensions. One of the major concerns associated with China is its status as a nuclear nation, with fears revolving around the "uncivilised" nature of its government and the potential military uncertainties that could lead to a global nuclear war. These concerns stem from notions of China being portrayed as primitive and ancient. The portrayal of China in *Civilization V* aligns with the China threat theory, reinforcing the notion of China as a potential global menace. This representation reflects broader anxieties and fears prevalent in the Western world regarding China's rise on the global stage. Such depictions within the game contribute to the construction and perpetuation of these narratives and ideologies surrounding China's perceived threat.

This observation aligns with Ted Friedman's criticism of the *Civilization* series, where he argues that computer games teach players specific ways of thinking by internalising the logic of the program. To succeed, players must learn to work within the rules of the game, predict consequences, and anticipate the computer's response. Over time, decision-making becomes intuitive, mirroring the computer's own processes (Friedman, 2003). In his analysis of *Civilization III*, by identifying video games as "algorithmic cultural objects" (2006: 86), Galloway proposes that Civilization III is "the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models" (2006: 103). Reflections on original *Civilization* designer Sid Meier's game philosophy and critiques prompt us to reconsider how games construct and convey national images as cultural products. In accordance with Chapman's (2013) proposition, algorithm confers form and significance to player actions and their corresponding procedures. Thus, the procedurality of the game presents an opportunity for players to challenge the predetermined world presented in the game, as will be further discussed.

The implication or interpretation of China as a warmonger or the belief that there is a lack of other "civilised" ways to win in *Civilization V* is challenged by many players from China. On the official fandom page and in various after-game analyses shared by players, the dominant strategy for playing as China is often identified as achieving world domination. Many Chinese players in the forum also attempt to rebel against the pre-designed playing style of the game through in-game play, mods, or fanfics.

In several after-game analyses and tutorials[14], players seek to find a way to win the game by pursuing the cultural victory path. As one player states, "since China is one of the cradles of civilisation, as a Chinese, I have to win by cultural victory." However, several attempts to achieve this victory path have ended in failure, with comments below the posts suggesting that China in *Civilization V* should instead adopt a warmongering approach. Consequently, players with less technological skills have developed their own versions of China that favour either the cultural or scientific victory paths. These versions introduce new unique buildings, units, and abilities that reflect the cultural and scientific achievements of ancient China. In the Chinese forum CivClub, dedicated to the Civilization series, there is a specific section for mods created by players. Some of these mods are designed to simulate historical periods such as the Three Kingdoms era and the Warring States period. Another ambitious project called the "real earth system" aims to simulate the entire history of the world from a Chinese perspective. In the "real earth system" mod, the designer even alters the periodisation of the game, which will be discussed further in a later section (See page 93-94).

Another attempt to challenge the pre-determined image of China is made through fan translations. In *Civilization V*, there are two different Chinese translations illustrating two different images of China, as well as different relationships between China the Western World. The official traditional Chinese version of the game is more direct and literal, which accomplishes one of the goals of localisation, to "convey the original feel of gameplay" (Mangiron and O'Hagan, 2006: 20), quite literally. However, in CivClub's translation, a more traditional form of Chinese expression is employed to further highlight the exclusive Chineseness beyond simply using the Chinese language. This distinction, as well as its consequences, is prominently demonstrated by the translation of the introduction for Wu Zetian, the leader of the Chinese Civilisation in the game.

Table 1 Example of Translation in Civilization V

Original English	Traditional Chinese Version	Simplified Chinese Version
Empress, Wu Zetian, most beautiful and haughty ruler of China!	武则天女皇，中国最美丽、最傲慢的统治者！	圣鉴钦启，垂拱临朝。夫瑞凤来仪，统九州之社稷；瑰姿对影，冠宇内之妖娆

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[14] See https://www.civclub.net/bbs/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=88550&highlight=%D2%B0%C2%F95, https://www.civclub.net/bbs/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=121099&extra=page%3D1, https://www.civclub.net/bbs/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=104051&extra=page%3D2.

| Oh, great Empress, whose shadow causes the flower to blossom and the river to flow! | 伟大的女皇，您的魅影使鲜花绽放、让河水流动! | 蛾眉顾盼，牡丹惭而生妒；身形摇曳，江河痴以逐流 |

Table 1 presents an example of the translations work a player could have access to when loading the game and selecting China as their civilisation to play. The official traditional Chinese translation is accurate in the literal sense. For example, the expression "most haughty ruler" is translated into "最傲慢的统治者", a literally accurate translation that has also captured the negative connotations of the word. Though taking a more literal approach in translation of vernacular expression, the traditional Chinese version has also applied certain artistic approaches, exemplified in the second entry in the table. The word "shadow" is translated as "魅影", which means "shadow of a charming body". This translation resonates with the previous notion of "most beautiful ruler of China", and also grasps the indication of beauty given the context.

However, the simplified Chinese version provides an exclusive Chineseness beyond the usage of the Chinese language, using classical Chinese literary writing with Chinese cultural references. For example, the same expression "most haughty ruler" is translated into "夫瑞凤来仪，统九州之社稷". Instead of directly translating "haughty", the translation employs the metaphor of "Feng Huang" (瑞凤) or "Phoenix" to imply the superior hierarchy of Wu Zetian, since in Chinese culture, Feng Huang is regarded as the God of Birds or the King of Birds (Xu, 2017). The localiser downplays the negative connotation inherited by the word "haughty". They, instead, emphasise the power and authority of Wu Zetian, which dilutes the negative image of her constructed by the game's description. When describing the beauty of Wu Zetian, unlike the literal translation provided by the traditional Chinese version, the simplified Chinese version uses the rhetoric of personification to imply the beauty of Wu Zetian. For example, the original English expression "shadow causes the flower to blossom" is translated into "您的魅影使鲜花绽放" in the official traditional Chinese version. Though with a slight artistic flourish, the translation in general is a translation of the English text into Chinese literally, word by word. In the simplified Chinese version, the expression "蛾眉顾盼，牡丹惭而生妒" provides the flower with human emotion and reaction. "蛾

眉" is the metaphor of beautiful woman in traditional Chinese literature (Luo, 2018).

The simplified version means that "Wu Zetian looks at a peony, the flower feels embarrassed and becomes jealous". In general, the simplified Chinese translation highlights the exclusiveness of Chinese culture.

Considering that both Chinese versions are targeted at Chinese players, they both offer access to the game to Chinese players who have no knowledge of English. However, the simplified Chinese version introduces more cultural references into the translation, exercising what may be called "cultural differentiation" (Carlson and Corliss 2011: 72). Through such cultural differentiation, the Chinese cultural references and elements exclusive to China are blended into a Western-made game to allow Chinese players to find a sense of belonging and cultural recognition. Additionally, such a translation style is only employed in the introduction page for China. The use of classical Chinese writing touches upon the deep-rooted cultural and historical context of the greatness of the Chinese civilisation. Such recall chimes with the construction of China as a peace-loving country with a great civilisation and glorious history from the game's narrative elements, while at the same time contributing to the dissonant images of China constructed through the ludo-narrative dissonance of the game. This translation "visualises the notion of mimesis not as a theory of copy but as the production of difference in sameness" (de Campos 1981: 183, cited in Vieira 1999: 110). Therefore, the simplified Chinese version constructs Chinese identity at the same time as it challenges the predesigned image of China through translation.

All these attempts, whether through in-game mods, translations or imagined rules, represent players' refusal to accept the prevailing image of China or the representations of Chinese culture in the game. They serve as a form of resistance against such representations and provide alternative perspectives on China within the gaming context.

However, it is important to note that the refusals and alternative interpretations of Chinese players do not necessarily imply a complete disagreement with the portrayed image of China as an evil barbaric warmonger. This image can be seen as stemming from both the popular China threat theory and an understanding of China's development. According to this perspective, players interpret the aggressive playstyle as evidence of China's military strength, which is a key indicator of comprehensive national power.

In Chinese games, there are several examples that reinforce this interpretation and depict China as a military giant. One prominent example is the fan-made modification of *Red Alert II*, entitled *The Glory of the Republic*, developed by a Chinese developer

named Lord Hero. This modification has gained significant recognition and influence among fans of the *Red Alert* series in China. However, the addition of China in the mod disrupts the game's balance, as China is depicted as an independent faction with overwhelming advantages. Despite claims in the mod's description that China is a peace-loving country and players need to defend themselves, the starting troops for China are doubled compared to other nations, and China has access to technologies, units, and superweapons from both the Soviet and Allied camps. As a result, the presence of China in the mod can be considered a flaw, and in player-versus-player battles, most games ban the use of China. However, the mod's author asserts that such a setting is intentional and based on their interpretation of patriotism. The author, along with a significant number of players, argue that China should be included in the series and should possess military power equal to or even surpassing that of the United States and other countries in the game. They view the unbalanced portrayal of China as a representation of the nation's growing strength and its vision of achieving great rejuvenation. These examples illustrate how the interpretation of China's image in video games is multifaceted and can be influenced by both external perceptions and internal aspirations. The inclusion of a powerful China in game mods and the arguments made by players reflect their desires for a stronger representation of their nation within the gaming context.

Hence, it appears that Chinese players are not entirely opposed to the portrayal of China with immense military power and aspirations of global dominance. However, an analysis of their comments and mods suggests that their disagreement lies in the rigid and fixed image established through gameplay mechanics, which limits the possibilities for interpretation and player agency within the game. This dissonance between gameplay and narrative elements can also be observed in *Red Alert II: The Glory of the Republic*. Both *Civilization V* and *Red Alert II* provide players with the material affordances to explore alternative approaches and interpretations of China within the game. However, such exploration often comes at the cost of winning, or reduces the likelihood of winning, the game. According to Mateas (2001) and his definition of agency, the balance between formal affordance and material affordance is crucial. While video games offer both types of affordances, in the case of winning being the primary goal (which is true in most cases), these affordances exist but cannot be fully utilised.

As a result, the interpretation of the image of China becomes framed by the limited play styles dictated by the game. In the case of *Civilization V*, China is portrayed as an evil, outdated, barbaric warmonger, which fails to reflect the actual development of China. Instead, it reinforces a dualistic perspective between China and the rest of the world and perpetuates the stigmatisation of China as a global threat. When examining the

game's narrative elements and rule system, it becomes evident that there is a discrepancy in the representation and construction of China. This ludo-narrative dissonance in *Civilization V* gives rise to conflicting images of China. On one hand, China is depicted as a peace-loving nation with a rich civilisation and a glorious history. On the other hand, it is portrayed as a belligerent nation with an aggressive character that poses a potential threat to the entire world. These conflicting representations of China in the game align with the contrasting imaginations of the East by the West, characterised by both xenophilia and xenophobia.

This highlights the ongoing tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. Similar to the discussion around including Chinese elements in video games, the game and its ludo-narrative dissonance also serve as a manifestation of the Western-centric ideology that shapes cultural perceptions and biases. It reflects the complicated and conflicting relationship between China and the West, as suggested by Vukovich (2012) and Wirman (2015). As Lammes (2010) argues, video games can be seen as a complex form that deals with how inheritances of colonial cultures reverberate in contemporary culture in hybridised and transformed ways (1-6). This complexity is reflected in *Civilization V* through its ludo-narrative dissonance. On one hand, China has a glorious culture and history with astonishing accomplishments in recent years, making it an important partner for the Western world. On the other hand, China's development and communist system are viewed as different and threatening within the context of Western capitalism. By examining the dissonance between the game's portrayal of China and the complexities of the China-West relationship, we gain insight into the multifaceted nature of video game representations and their role in perpetuating or challenging cultural perceptions and biases. *Civilization V* serves as a case highlighting the influence of Western-centric ideologies on the construction of national images within video games, and it opens avenues for further exploration of alternative interpretations and narratives within gaming culture.

Consequently, as argued by Mukherjee (2018), "player occupies a position that simultaneously straddles both types described above as well as questions them" (14). In this case, players resist this constrained interpretation of China by creating their own mods and civilisations. The actions of these fans directly challenge the formative affordance of the game and the focus on winning as the primary game objective. They strive to create possibilities for winning the game through different play styles, leading to diverse interpretations of China within the gaming community.

The "Same" China

It requires little effort to comprehend the prevailing dualistic mentality of "us" versus "other" and its impact on the representation and interpretation of cultures, nations, and

ethnicities. This mindset perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces a narrow understanding of "the other." However, Vukovich (2010) presents an alternative approach when it comes to representing and understanding China—one that recognises both the differences and shared elements between China and the Western world. This section aims to explore this alternative approach through an analysis of two video games: *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* and *Civilization V*. While *Civilization V* has been previously discussed, this section will begin by introducing the lesser-known game, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*.

Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China is a part of the *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* series developed by Ubisoft Montreal Studios and Climax. This action game adopts a horizontal 2.5D presentation style. The protagonist of the game is Shao Jun, the last member of the Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins. The game is set two years after the events depicted in the short film *Assassin's Creed: Embers* (2011). Taking place during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty in 1526, Shao Jun returns to China after meeting Ezio Auditore da Firenze. Strengthened by her enhanced stealth and combat skills, she seeks to exact vengeance on the Templars and rebuild the Brotherhood.

As a video game and derivative product, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* may be perceived as inferior to its originating works such as *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* or *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, both in terms of plot and design. The player's agency is considerably limited compared to the original works. However, throughout the entire game, the designer meticulously shapes the classical and ancient beauty of China, evident in various aspects such as the detailed background and props, plot development, and character relationships. The game presents tranquil and picturesque landscapes, showcasing elegant and majestic buildings that capture the essence of China. Moreover, the game incorporates Kung Fu action with distinct Chinese characteristics in its battle scenes. Simultaneously, the designer endeavours to include China in the broader "Assassin's Creed Universe," illustrating that China, like the West, upholds the concept of "freedom" championed by the Assassins. In earlier discussion of ideology, Vukovich's Sinological Orientalism and Occidentalism, freedom is a value deeply embedded in Western ideology, a theme that underpins many aspects of contemporary media and game design. This concept of freedom, often portrayed as a hallmark of Western thought, has been a recurring element in my discussion of ideology and its influence on video game narratives. I would explore this topic in detail later in the analysis of *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China*, in the form of the freedom of speech.

In addition to constructing the elegant and glorious image of ancient China, as discussed previously, it is crucial to acknowledge another significant aspect of image construction: the game's attempt to integrate China into the "Assassin's Creed Universe" through its

overall setting and game development. In the game, the protagonist, Shao Jun, not only serves as a concubine of the Ming Dynasty but also represents the last member of the Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins. Notably, she receives combat and stealth training from the renowned assassin master, Ezio, and is recruited by the traditional Chinese Confucian master, Wang Yangming. Within the "Assassin's Creed Universe," Wang Yangming is not only a Chinese philosopher but also a revered "Master" of the Assassins. Together with figures like Zhu Jiuyuan, they form the Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins. Similar to their Western counterparts, the Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins opposes the Templars, represented by the infamous eight tiger eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty: Liu Jin, Zhang Yong, Gu Dayong, Ma Yongcheng, Qiu Ju, Luo Xiang, Wei Bin, and Gao Feng.

During the course of the game, the ongoing confrontation between the Templars and the Assassins remains consistent within the *Assassin's Creed* series. By creating a Chinese assassin and including China into the Assassin's Creed world, the underlying logic resonates with the "western missionary thoughts and the enlightened mission logic of French universalists" as mentioned in Vukovich's concept of Sinological Orientalism (2010: 144). The apparent struggle over the Piece of Eden, a technology primarily intended to control human thoughts, emotions, and behaviour, actually represents a more profound ideological rift between the conflicting principles of "order" and "freedom." The player-controlled character, Shao Jun, embodies the principles of the Assassins and champions the concept of "freedom." Throughout the game, she ultimately emerges victorious by defeating the Templars, symbolic of "order," and successfully reviving the Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins. This triumph not only signifies a victory within the game itself but, more significantly, exemplifies the triumph of "freedom" upheld by the Assassins against the "order" championed by the Templars.

To further reinforce the triumph of these values, the game incorporates a plot that directly challenges the entrenched "order" upheld by the Templars. In the final level, Zhang Yong, the last remaining Templar, betrays the Mongols, provoking the anger of Altan Khan and inciting a full-scale attack on the Great Wall. Shao Jun, perceiving Zhang Yong's treachery, confronts him and ultimately eliminates him. Before his demise, Zhang Yong questions Shao Jun's understanding of "homeland." He himself is willing to sacrifice the nation, believing that the Templars will eventually establish their dominion and bring order to the world. Prior to the Mongolian army's assault, Shao Jun closes the city gate, effectively barricading the Great Wall and thwarting the Mongol attack. In this sequence, the game employs a cut-scene video, providing players with no control over the events unfolding. Zhang Yong's betrayal not only undermines the Mongols but also subverts the very "order" cherished by the Templars, as his actions

lead to "chaos" rather than the intended "order," vividly and directly conveyed to the player. Consequently, as players assume the role of an assassin and emerge victorious in the final showdown, which includes the salvation of the nation, they are more inclined to accept the value of "freedom" espoused by the Assassins. This culmination of events effectively persuades players to align themselves with the game's underlying values.

The dissemination of the concept of "freedom" extends beyond the Templar's betrayal of their own "order." The game strategically promotes players' acceptance of the notion of "freedom" through not only the gameplay experience but also the emotional engagement and pathos it evokes. As Robert McGee aptly noted in his research on movies, "The understanding of how we create the audience's emotional experience begins with the realisation that there are only two emotions - pleasure and pain" (McGee 1997: 243). When an audience experiences a shift in values, they concurrently undergo an emotional response. Applying this notion to the aforementioned scenario, the triumph of the value of "freedom" is not solely attributed to the halo effect generated by players controlling the character Shao Jun, who embodies "freedom." Instead, it is the interplay of interaction, plot development, and positive emotional experiences aligned with the theme of freedom that emerges as a crucial motivator, facilitated by the integration of game mechanics and narrative.

Consequently, irrespective of players' initial attitudes towards the Western values of "freedom" espoused by the Assassins, the game design deliberately constrains players' choices by allowing them to only "select" Shao Jun as their playable character. Furthermore, regardless of the agency players experience within the game, they are inevitably confronted with mission requirements set by the game itself, culminating in the ultimate task of eliminating the last remaining Templar, Zhang Yong. The value of "freedom" is associated with victory and resulted in positive and joyful emotions, while the failure to uphold "freedom" is tangibly reflected in the game through mission failures, character deaths, and the ensuing negative emotional experiences. Consequently, through the game's progression, the video game effectively merges emotions, values, and gameplay experiences, enabling players to organically explore and uncover the conveyed information, opinions, and values. In the case of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, the value of "freedom" is presented as perceived in the Western context. This coincides with Komel (2014) and Hastings' studies (2016) of the way that Assassin's Creed creates an Occidentalised Oriental hero. In this case, Shao Jun is the Occidentalised Chinese hero fighting for the Western value of freedom.

Furthermore, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* serves as an official inclusion of China within the expansive "Assassin's Creed Universe." This universe perpetuates a

perception of the world that is perpetually confined to the binary opposition between the "Assassin" and the "Templar." Within this framework, the value system of the world is also limited to the dichotomy of "freedom" versus "order." Consequently, players are immersed in the perspective of the assassin, driven by the pursuit of "freedom," a cornerstone of Western ideology and even the foundational truth within the Assassin's Creed universe.

In contrast to Vukovich's concept of "Sinological Orientalism" (2012), wherein the West emphasises the differences between China and the West, thus creating new knowledge about China, the parallel universe of the Assassin's Creed Universe constructs a China that embraces the Western value of freedom. This fabricated China possesses the same cultural distinctiveness as its real-world counterpart, yet simultaneously integrates the Western concept of "freedom" into its constructed cultural identity. Furthermore, this constructed China evolves in parallel with the actual China, implying the possibility of the real-world China embracing the corresponding ideology. Notably, with the introduction of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: Russia* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India, India, and Russia* are also incorporated into the Assassin's Creed universe. Similarly, the Middle East was previously included in the original *Assassin's Creed*. While differences in ideologies, religions, beliefs, and other aspects are ostensibly "respected" and manifested within this universe, they are all ultimately embedded within a common Western ideology centred around the pursuit of "freedom". Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* is not the sole or initial endeavour to incorporate China into the expansive "Assassin's Creed Universe." Prior attempts have been made in various forms, indicating a concerted effort to include China within this fictional universe. For instance, the *Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins* made its first appearance in the app *Assassin's Creed: Revelations - Discover Your Legacy*, originally a Facebook application jointly developed by Ubisoft and GameStop. This app utilised user data from Facebook profiles to determine the user's "bloodline," thereby assigning famous Ming Confucian figures like Fang Xiaoru and the fictional member of the "Chinese Brotherhood of Assassins," Li Tong, as the assassins in the application. Additionally, the character Wei Yu from the Qin Dynasty appeared as a relic in the game *Assassin's Creed II*, which subsequently inspired Chinese writer Yan Leisheng to publish the adapted novel *Assassin's Creed: The Ming Storm* in 2019. Notably, manga adaptations such as *Assassin's Creed: China* by Japanese manga artist Kurata Sanchi and *Assassin's Creed: Dynasty*, which delves into the predecessor of the Chinese Assassin Brotherhood known as the "Invisible," were also published in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Even before the emergence of these officially authorised works, discussions were already underway among Chinese players on domestic game forums and platforms

regarding whether well-known historical figures like Qin Shihuang and Wu Zetian could be classified as "Assassins" or "Templars" within the Assassin's Creed universe. These private and official attempts to incorporate China into the Assassin's Creed universe not only provide a comprehensive experience of China within this fictional world, lending greater credibility to the existence of a China embedded with the Western ideology of freedom, but also involve the participation of domestic players. Their involvement lends a sense of superficial objectivity, authenticity, and authority to the construction of China that aligns with Western ideological categories. Additionally, it unintentionally introduces a new element of superficial subjectivity to this construction, a notion that aligns with Bahdad and Williams' (2010) concept of neo-Orientalism, whereby the abuse of subjectivity is employed to achieve the appearance of objectivity, authenticity, and authority in Orientalist discourse. However, it is crucial to note that this superficial subjectivity is confined to the context of the fictional "Assassin's Creed Universe." Therefore, equating this discourse practice with broader social practices without critical assessment may lead to the trap of attributing excessive influence to media, falsely considering games as a "magic bullet." Nonetheless, it is imperative not to overlook the potential risks associated with such a crisis.

Periodisation

If the inclusion of China into the Assassin's Creed Universe represents a direct approach to addressing the shared sameness between China and the Western world, the *Civilization* series takes a more nuanced and expansive approach to exploring the complexities of human history and the development of civilisations. While the *Assassin's Creed* series focuses on specific historical periods and characters, the *Civilization* series encompasses a much broader scope. The *Civilization* series is renowned for its ambition to simulate the entirety of human history, as highlighted by Koebel (2018). Through its grand narrative structure and the concept of periodisation, the *Civilization* series offers players a comprehensive and immersive experience that spans the breadth of human civilisation. The concept of periodisation serves as a guiding principle, dividing the gameplay into distinct epochs, each marked by significant historical advancements and changes. By analysing the impact of periodisation is employed in *Civilization V*, we gain insights into how the image of China within the game are shaped by the broader historical context and how player's understanding of history and culture are shaped by their engagement of video games. For *Civilization V*, the game's development must adhere to a linear historical timeline. As players engage in the simulation, they respond to changes within the historical context and even influence these changes. Consequently, players encounter the concept of periodisation while playing the game.

In my research, Koebel's definition of periodisation is adopted, referring to the division of historical time into discrete ages, eras, or periods, which can be studied or played (Koebel, 2018). The methods employed to establish, construct, and characterise these periods in *Civilization V* are not arbitrary but rather systematic. They reflect fundamental meta-historical questions central to historical research, such as identifying agents of change in history and assessing their uniformity (Koebel, 2018). However, the nature of video games adds complexity to this case. Unlike academic discussions where ambiguity, overlapping, and degeneration in periodisation are tolerated, *Civilization V* requires a definitive outcome. A single model of periodisation must be selected for the video game to ensure clarity and a satisfying gaming experience. As a result, *Civilization V* understands periodisation in terms of technological development, which Koebel (2017) comments that framework that aligns with a traditional History of Western Civilization course.

In *Civilization V*, players transition to a new era or age when they research the first technology associated with that era or when they have researched all the technologies in the current era. Each new era unlocks additional technologies, buildings, and units. This has led some researchers to argue that *Civilization V* presents a technologically determinist perspective (Ghys, 2012). From this viewpoint, technology is the primary catalyst for historical contextual changes. It is important to note that specific technologies are tied to particular eras, which can diminish the sense of technological development over time. Furthermore, since entering a new era unlocks new buildings and units, the availability of these structures and military assets is also restricted to their corresponding eras. Through the concept of periodisation, *Civilization V* constructs a grand narrative of human history, including a condensed history of technological development.

However, this chosen method of periodisation raises questions about its implications for presenting a unified understanding of human history that includes China. This parallels the approach taken by *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, where China's history is incorporated into a broader Western-centric framework. This raises important questions about the impact of periodisation on the portrayal and understanding of different civilisations within the game. The one-size-fits-all approach overlooks the unique cultural and historical contexts of each civilisation, potentially perpetuating a Western-centric perspective. While it is necessary to consider the limitations and simplifications inherent in game design, critical examination of these design choices can lead to a deeper understanding of how video games reflect and shape cultural perceptions.

In the case of China, the periodisation used in *Civilization V*, such as the ancient era,

Renaissance era, or industrial era, lacks authenticity and explanatory power when applied to Chinese history. Nonetheless, as a civilisation in the game, Chinese history and its future are governed by a "universal" law or standard, namely technological development. In Chinese historiography, the periodisation of Chinese history is primarily based on dynasties, with each period delineated by the ruling family. In contrast, *Civilization V* employs a periodisation method that flattens Chinese history and its unique context, assimilating it into the Western periodisation framework. While the Civilization series aims to simulate historical development, it also ventures into predicting the future. The chosen periodisation in the game constructs a narrative of human history driven by technological progression. While this design choice may not specifically target China, it results in a homogenised explanation or grand narrative for all civilisations.

The periodisation approach adopted in *Civilization V* exhibits characteristics that align with both classic Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. On one hand, it reflects the power dynamic between the West and the East, with the West asserting its authority to define and interpret history, which in turn shapes the understanding of human history and is reflected in cultural products. This supports the former analysis of the Chinese elements selected in the game as well as the description of gunpowder. On the other hand, unlike classic Orientalism where the East is objectively interpreted or even created by the West based on Western experiences and knowledge, this periodisation practice suggests a universal interpretation of history that applies to all civilisations, but with a distinctly Western perspective. Under this interpretation, China, along with other countries and civilisations, becomes subsumed within the Western framework, implying that its history and development should adhere to the Western understanding of history. Rather than emphasising the differences or uniqueness of China, the game flattens individual players into the category of "player" and reduces China and its culture to the concept of a "civilisation." This allows the game to present a one-size-fits-all view of history driven by technological advancement, akin to procedural rhetoric.

However, some Chinese *Civilization* players and communities have taken issue with this periodisation and the general presentation of history in *Civilization V*. They believe that the *Civilization* series should strive for historical accuracy in its simulation of history. As a response, they have created mods that simulate specific historical periods such as the Three Kingdoms era or the Warring States period, complete with authentic maps that reflect the environment of those times. Additionally, projects like the "real earth system" have employed a plot map based on the periodisation of Chinese history, offering players the opportunity to play through different ages and civilisations[15]. These

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[15] See https://forums.civfanatics.com/resources/game-mod%E3%80%8Arealearthsystem%E3%80%8B-for-

mod makers seek to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of China in Western cultural products, including video games, by presenting a more nuanced and complex version of China to players. They do not ignore the flaws or construct an idealised image of China but aim to showcase its diverse aspects. However, as Bogost (2010) suggests, video games simplify the complexity of the real world, creating streamlined systems where actions and consequences are simplified and predictable. This flattening process carries a responsibility, especially when the game establishes an empire with negative attributes under the name of China, such as the portrayal of an evil warmongering empire.

One frequent feedback or complaint about the "real earth system" mod is that it often leads to crashes or lag due to the excessive references and resources it incorporates. This limitation is likely due to technological constraints. While the mod offers references to other civilisations, the *Civilization* series as a whole may be restricted in its ability to provide a comprehensive and nuanced presentation of different civilisations due to these technological limitations. Despite these challenges, the inclusion of player-created mods that challenge and expand upon the game's periodisation and historical presentation indicates a desire for a more multifaceted representation of China and its history within the *Civilization* series. This ongoing dialogue between players and developers demonstrates the dynamic nature of video games as cultural artefacts and their potential to reflect and shape cultural perceptions and interpretations of history.

Before summarising this chapter, it is important to address the issue of fan interpretation regarding the image of China in *Civilization V*. Based on the previous analysis, some Chinese players seem to reject and challenge all in-game representations of China, regardless of whether they reflect a xenophilic perspective, a stereotypical understanding of China as an evil nation or a threat to the world, or an invitation to align with Western development and historical conceptions. Instead, they offer their own interpretations through modding and alternative gameplay styles. On one hand, some players reject the portrayal of China as a warmonger and strive for cultural victory or attempt to change the game's rules. On the other hand, in fan-made mods, many other players embrace the chaotic and disputed periods of Chinese history. This seemingly contradictory attitude reflects two key points. First, the rejection by Chinese players is directed at the simplified and flattened in-game presentation of China, regardless of the underlying ideology it may represent. Second, it suggests that Chinese players still hold the belief, albeit sometimes naively, that providing a more nuanced and informative portrayal of China can help counter the negative and even hostile image

civilization-v-complete-bnw-1-0-3-279.16974/.

perceived by Western audiences. This aligns with the actions the Orient would take to challenge the classic Western Orientalism mentality described by Said (1978). This topic will be further elaborated upon later when discussing politics-related games and the direct confrontation of different ideologies.

In summary, the analysis of *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* in this chapter reveals that the in-game portrayal of China reflects both the characteristics of classic Orientalism and Sinological Orientalism. While these design choices may not have been intentional, the images presented in the games reflect the underlying tension between China and the Western world, particularly in the context of the growing popularity of the China threat theory in the 21st century. These different images of China convey different approaches to addressing the perceived challenge posed by China. One approach is to vilify China, depicting it as evil and uncivilised. The other, more subtle approach, seeks to emphasise the similarities between China and the West, suggesting the possibility of China assimilating into the Western world and encouraging actions to make this possibility a reality. These interpretations and explanations are particularly relevant and understandable in the post-2016 era, and even more so in the wake of the pandemic, which demonstrated by the further analysis in the discussion of *Devotion*'s fan comments. However, the narrative is challenged by the response from Chinese players. On one hand, they reject the stigmatised image of China and strive to provide more detailed information to challenge it. On the other hand, Chinese players, along with the gaming community, spontaneously participate in subtly incorporating China into the Western value system, often through the creation of fan fiction or game sequels. This complex and contradictory response from Chinese players highlights their efforts to navigate and negotiate the portrayal of China in Western cultural products. It reflects their rejection of simplified and stereotypical representations while actively engaging with the content to present a more nuanced and authentic image of China. The gaming community's involvement in creating alternative narratives demonstrates their desire to shape and reclaim the representation of Chinese culture in a way that aligns with their own perspectives and experiences.

Chapter Six: Playing Chineseness

The concept of "Chineseness" is the central focus of this chapter, which aims to explore the national identity of China as presented, constructed, and perceived in and around video games, and the relationship between China and the world reflected by such construction and perception. Recently, in international communication practice, China has proposed the concept of "telling the Chinese story well" (Ma and Chen 2019). This policy essentially refers to the process of "self-representation". Unlike the Orientalists' approach that reflects Western identity through constructing the other, the "telling the Chinese story well" policy suggests that the process should focus on China itself, constructing and conveying preferred images and representations of China and Chinese culture through various cultural products. Video games are "cultural products with deep roots in the culture they stem from", as Kücklich (2006: 104) argues. This chapter seeks to explore the following topics through games such as *Chinese Parents* and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*.

First, the chapter will investigate the Chinese lifestyle presented by video games such as *Chinese Parents*. Second, it will focus on one specific game genre, Wuxia, which is not only exclusive to Chinese culture but also the most recognisable Chinese genre. *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*, forming part of one of the most popular Wuxia game series, has been selected to analyse this iconic genre. Through this analysis, an intertwined and multi-layered Chineseness is constructed through video games and their community. This chapter identifies at least three layers of Chineseness that are present in video games. The first layer is that of authentic Chinese items and experiences, followed by the second layer, which is the exclusiveness of Chinese culture and reference. The third layer is the empathised and shared Chinese experience and values based on the two layers before.

Video games present cultural symbols and artefacts that reflect authentic Chinese experiences, as analysed in the two games. By playing the games, players interact, experience, and, most importantly, receive those symbols and artefacts, which lead to a recognition of one's Chinese identity. However, the experiences and values conveyed are not exclusive to Chinese from two perspectives. First, the constructed Chinese experience reflects the experience of people from certain social statuses and socio-cultural contexts, excluding other Chinese people. Second, players from different cultural backgrounds share, empathise, and comprehend such experience and values, even in the "exclusively Chinese" Wuxia genre. The gaming experience, especially the localised translation of video games, enables such comprehension and sympathy. Therefore, unlike in classical Orientalism, the East and the West are identities that

separate and create "the other." Chinese and Chineseness are resonations that one who is Chinese would recognise such experience, but recognising such experience will not necessarily make one Chinese.

Such empathy and understanding of China and Chinese culture coincide with the policy of telling the Chinese story well. However, appealing to empathy and understanding does not mean refusing the exclusiveness of Chinese culture. It is not the process of "becoming-the-same" (Vukovich, 2012) on the Chinese side, trying to blend into Western culture. With specific cultural references and non-localised translation, video games maintain and express the exclusive elements of Chinese culture.

The Chinese Growing-up experience.

Chinese Parents is a game developed by Moyuwan Games and published by Coconut Island Games. From the beginning, the game has been identified by players and industry media such as 3DM, G-Cores, and IGN as a "real Chinese game (2018)." By this, it is meant that the game is developed and published by Chinese studios and is about Chinese life. The developer describes the game as "a casual yet realistic life sim with a Chinese authenticity" (Moyuwan, 2018). Although titled C*hinese Parents*, the game in fact simulates the life of a Chinese child, or as the developer suggests, an "average child," from birth to the end of high school. When the game was first released, it only had a "son" version, meaning the player could only play as a Chinese son. Later, on January 19th, 2019, the studio released the "daughter" version. Initially, the language setting only supported Simplified Chinese. On June 20th, 2019, the English version was released, and the Japanese version was released on August 19th, 2020.

The game mainly simulates the educational life of a child from birth. The player has the choice to study primary subjects such as Chinese, Maths, English, and Science, or skills such as cooking and programming. All studies cost "knowledge" points, and the cost of knowledge depends on the score in different characteristics: IQ, EQ, Constitution, Memory, and Imagination. The main gameplay mechanics of *Chinese Parents* are minesweeping and life simulation (yousei). Unlike other life simulation games, such as *The Sims* series, in *Chinese Parents*, the player uses minesweeping mini games to collect trait points and knowledge points for subject or skill study, towards the college entrance examination or Gaokao. The player needs to strike a balance between study and entertainment in the timetable, and between study and relationships. A poorly balanced growing-up experience will influence one's mental status, leading to an increase in one's "mind shadow size" (see figure 2), which triggers a bad ending once the shadow size becomes 100 m^2. At this point, the character experiences a mental collapse, cuts ties with everyone, and leaves hope for the next generation to start a new round.

Figure 2 Stat page of Chinese Parents

However, there is no winning or losing in the game. Whether the player's character is admitted to a fine university or stays at home is determined solely by the player's choices. In addition to the educational life simulation aspect, the game also offers a "gal game" or "otome game" component. If the player's character is male, they can spend action points to invite girls out on dates to acquire intimacy points. Female characters have more options, including accepting invitations from friends and trading action points for intimacy, or bonding with friends in different ways, such as being an after-school friend, a late-night study buddy, or a daily entertainment companion. Players can also get married to a high school crush, or a stranger introduced by their parents' friends. Furthermore, the game features several mini-games, including face-duelling, class president elections, and a red pocket fight. The game's New Game Plus or replay mode introduces a genetic buff[16] for the next generation, meaning that they will inherit some of their parents' characteristics, perpetuating the cycle.

For the sake of the family and future

Former discussion in this thesis has introduced a three-layered understanding of authenticity. *Chinese Parents* employs and commodifies not only Chinese cultural symbols and artefacts, but a Chinese child's growing-up process though interacting with those symbols and artefacts. The cultural symbols and artefacts, and interaction

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[16] One would inherit starting points in IQ, EQ, Constitution, Memory and Imagination.

with them, constructs the first layer of Chineseness, reflecting the authentic Chinese experience and cultural values. At this level, the authenticity of Chineseness indicates that all the experiences can be found in the Chinese lifestyle, exclusive or not. Ludo-narrative dissonance can be a lens to examine how *Chinese Parents* achieves such a goal. As argued by Ballantyne (2015), the dissonance between the game simulation and narrative fosters discomfort for players while playing. Through ludo-narrative dissonance, *Chinese Parents* presents the conflicted growing-up experience of a Chinese child. *Chinese Parents'* main gameplay sets the player up to achieve an excellent result in the Gaokao. With limited resources to work with, the game deliberately sets studying against other activities, such as entertainment, relationships, and skill learning. However, after the Gaokao, studying has no relevance to other important life decisions, such as marriage, occupation, and inheritance. The player's intimacy score determines the marriage of the current generation, and their skill-learning and entertainment use influences their career. In the game, when the player finishes one generation, a new game will start based on that finished generation. The new generation will inherit the former generation's trait points, and their occupation and marriage will further offer a buff for the new generation, hence the inheritance system. Therefore, although the simulation of life centres around studying, marriage is the end of the old story and the start of a new one. This is the main ludo-narrative dissonance of *Chinese Parents*.

Chinese Parents cleverly employs this dissonance, making studying have far-reaching significance from the perspective of the game's system. The player needs to devote themselves to passing the college entrance examination. However, given the bigger picture, the outcome of the Gaokao, which the study in the game system focuses on, has a limited effect on the narrative development of the game. Through such dissonance, players eventually have to contemplate their play style and the consequences of such a style. As argued by numerous scholars (Ballantyne 2015, Seraphine 2016, and Murphy 2016), ludo-narrative dissonance offers an approach to examining tensions in politics, history, and culture. In the case of *Chinese Parents*, the portrayal of the Chinese experience is a product of the designers' and audience's ideological framework, highlighting a key concept in Chinese culture: the idea of family.

The presented and reflected concept of family, which extends to collectivism, can be seen as the "foundation of the Chinese culture" (Qian 2007: 51). Qian (2007) draws this conclusion based on three arguments. First, he states that the core of the Chinese value system is the moral injunction of fidelity to one's parents and siblings, the monarch, and friends, and love and respect for one another. This is built upon the concept of family, and thus, the concept of family sits at the centre of all social values. Second, Qian's research suggests that the relationship between father and son or between

parents and children is much more influential than the husband-and-wife relationship. The parent-children relationship provides the historical context and the continuity of Chinese culture. Last, Qian attempts to map out the relationship between family and power. He proposes that the concept of family and the loyalty towards one's family are not the consequence of feudalism, and that such mentality is not forced into the Chinese by the emperor or by power. With his scrutiny of *Shijing* and *Zuozhuan*, two Chinese classic books, he concludes that the concept of family is derived from the internalised family morality and family affection, which is employed and extended by the ruling class.

In *Chinese Parents*, when the player moves from one generation to another, the narrator says that "I must surpass my parents, becoming a better parent", but there is no change in the gameplay. Thus, the player is trapped in a Sisyphean world where the gameplay is looped and monotone, while change can only be detected in the number of the Chinese child's traits and the unlocked options. Therefore, from the perspective of a single generation, the game presents a life surrounding study, while study does not play the most significant role in one's life. However, if one accepts the traditional Chinese loyalty to family, one would be more likely to "sacrifice" the early generation, laying a firm foundation for future generations' admission to better universities and occupation options. Such a design coincides with the Chinese conception of family and traditional Chinese collectivism. According to Qian's investigation (2007), this approach is not about refusing or eliminating the individual, but rather introducing one's responsibility towards one's family and society. It is an attempt to coordinate and balance the tension between oneself and one's familial, socio-cultural context, which, according to the Confucian school, will be conducive to integrating nature and humans. During each generation's gameplay, though one is living one's life and fulfilling one's dreams, one is also a pawn on a broader chessboard. One's study, entertainment, relationships, and skills will not only influence one's own life but also that of future generations. One's life choices will cast and reflect on future generations' lives. Through such a process, one's own life is tied and connected to the prosperity of one's family, reflecting the traditional Chinese understanding of the relationship between oneself and one's family.

Further examining the game from a generational perspective, another issue that must be addressed is the movement of social classes. The social class movement in this game coincides with Liang's (2003) interpretation of the Chinese conception of family. He concludes that the concept of family takes on certain functions of religion in Chinese culture, highlighting that the Chinese concept of family offers a way for individuals to act in line with realism and exercise their will. The familial prosperity influences individual paths, creating a bifurcation where the capable individuals are inspired to further develop and build upon the ancestral foundations, whereas others choose to

chart their own course in life, independent of this legacy.

To address the issue adequately, I must provide spoilers about the later sections of the game, concerning the class identification of the presented Chinese family. Considering the activities and items available to the Chinese child in the game, which I will discuss in detail later, the in-game family should be seen as being in or above moderate prosperity. As mentioned, for each generation, the only changes in the game are to traits and access to new options following a trait boost. But after analysing all the variables that would affect the future generation's traits, such as marriage, occupation, and set plot interactions, we can conclude that the social class of the in-game family would only climb or remain the same with no risk of decreasing social class. In the game, even if one cannot marry the person they select in the blind date or end up with no job and become a NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), one's next generation will still acquire a boost in their traits, no matter how small it might be. The most extreme case, which I deliberately made happen, is that through the avatar's growing-up, they only learn "turning over" and "clapping with music," the initial two activities one could do when they were born, with no minesweeping. They will not get any extra trait increases other than the ones gained from "turning over" and "clapping with music" and with no subject or skill study. This child ends up failing the Gaokao, becoming a NEET, and failing the blind date but getting married anyway. However, the next generation will still acquire a 3-point boost too IQ and another 2-point boost to their Constitution. This extreme case suggests that no matter the circumstances (other than the game ending because of mental illness), the next generation will always be better than their parents from the perspective of traits. Thus, one's social class in the game, shown by access to activities and items, will only remain the same or improve. Under no circumstances will the family in the game undergo a decline in social status. Apart from fulfilling a desired wish, this design can be seen as a continuation of the Chinese idea of family. Therefore, the combination of realism and inherited accumulated wisdom, as personal traits and material fortune, is reflected through the game's design, especially the ludo-narrative dissonance of the game.

Who is the Chinese child/ parent?

In this section, I analyse the game narrative, particularly the objects and plots, to determine who the "Chinese" parent or child is, as well as their "profile". We employ the ludo-narrative model developed by Aarseth (2012) and the approach proposed by Reinhard (2018) in archaeogaming. In archaeogaming, video games are viewed as archaeological "sites," and researchers "dig" the "site" through playing of the game, piecing together history through the found artefacts.

In *Chinese Parents, the activities, and items* available in the shop are indicators to

identify the Chinese child in the game through reverse engineering. As the child grows, they obtain access to new entertainment activities, such as the sofa trampoline, slides, Tamagotchi, children's palace, trading cards, Nintendo consoles, mobile games, and Southeast Asia tours. The products on offer in the store modify over time, ranging from lollipops and Lego in elementary school, to online game timecards and Wuxia novels in junior high school, and then to karaoke coupons. By listing these activities and items chronologically and reverse engineering, the profile of the Chinese child portrayed by the game emerges. We identify that the Chinese children in the game are those born between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, raised in the city with a family in or above moderate prosperity.

The game's portrayal of "Chinese" parents or children and their lifestyle therefore points to a specific class, region, and age. For example, a child who was born after 2005 not have played on a Gameboy or a Tamagotchi, and their first gaming console may be the PSP or Nintendo Switch. Thus, they may not sympathise with the presented lifestyle, especially the sense of growing up alongside the represented child. Children from rural areas or families below moderate prosperity may not have access to certain items or experiences, such as learning the piano, trips to Europe, or owning home game consoles, making it challenging for them to relate to such a lifestyle. Therefore, these groups are excluded from being "Chinese" given the game's design.

In addition, the depiction of "Chinese" children in the game aligns with the target audience of the game, as stated by the CEO of the game's publishing company. In a 2015 interview, Bao Weiwei, the CEO of Coconut Island, asserted that the company designs games for the middle class, with their primary audience coming from first- and second-tier cities, and possessing a high school education or above and a decent income. These consumers have a discerning aesthetic taste and generally eschew games of low creativity or quality (Shu Shang, 2015). Consequently, it can be inferred that the "Chinese" experience portrayed in the game is tailored to reflect the experiences of people within a specific socio-economic context. The representation of an "authentic" Chinese childhood is therefore ideological and reflective of the social status of the game's consumers. As a result, the game constructs an essentialist version of growing up, collapsing various cultural artefacts and symbols into a flattened, concentrated form, ultimately commodifying and generalising such authenticity as "Chinese."

However, despite replicating and exaggerating the life experience of its target audience, *Chinese Parents* still resonates with other audiences who are not necessarily part of the target demographic. This is because the game presents certain socio-cultural contexts that are relatable to a wider audience through the use of fragmented in-game items or references. These references and items may be unfamiliar to some audiences, but they

still offer a similar adventure or episodes to those ahead of them. In other words, the game's portrayal of the Chinese experience is not limited to just the target audience, but rather, it offers a glimpse into a specific culture that can be appreciated and understood by people from different backgrounds. This echoes with the designer's interview in 2018, where they stated that they put various efforts into finding related references, activities, and memories when designing the game (Wan, 2018). By doing so, *Chinese Parents* communicates the Chinese cultural authenticity to "inspire authentic life in the readers" (Golomb 1995: 15-16). However, this also raises the question of how "Chinese" *Chinese Parents* truly is. While the game's portrayal of Chinese culture is authentic in many ways, it is still presented through a lens that is shaped by the game designers' experiences and perspectives, that may be unfamiliar to some audiences, but still offer a similar adventure or episodes to those ahead of them. The complexity of the conversation is increased as the game has introduced both English and Japanese versions, communicating Chinese authenticity to people of different cultures.

Conveying a hybridised Chineseness to the West

With the release of different versions in various languages, Chinese Parents attempts to deliver "a casual yet realistic life sim with Chinese authenticity" (Moyuwan, 2018). Conveying Chineseness in this game heavily relies on the use of translation to make sense of the game's procedures and cultural references. However, due to different translation techniques, a hybridised Chineseness is constructed, presenting a familiar yet distanced Chinese-Western growing-up experience. Parts of the Chineseness cannot be entirely conveyed to the audience due to borrowing, calque, and literal translation (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). On the other hand, with the help of the recreation of wordplay, deliberate use of regional expressions, and trans-creation (Magiron & O'Hagan, 2006), players without a Chinese-related background can still entirely resonate with some parts of Chineseness.

While Chandler (2005: 11) advises against using "culturally specific references such as the name of a popular movie star or well-known TV show" to make games more universally accessible, authentically depicting a Chinese upbringing necessitates such references. Thus, translating these references is crucial to convey the inherent Chineseness, which poses a challenge to the very notion of what constitutes Chineseness in translation. In some instances, translators opt for using Pinyin, the transliterated version of Chinese words, as a way to preserve Chinese characteristics in the English version of the game. This approach, however, may limit the understanding of Chineseness to only those familiar with Chinese language and culture. A prime example is the term 'Gaokao' (see Figure 3), which refers to China's national college

entrance exam. This term is significant in Chinese culture as it influences the educational and career paths of many individuals. Using 'Gaokao' in its Pinyin form instead of translating it to an equivalent Western concept (like the UK's A-Level exams or the USA's SAT) is a strategic choice. This decision aligns with the use of loanwords rather than a direct translation. The consistent mentions of 'Gaokao' by the parents and narrator in the game ensure that even if initially unfamiliar, players will eventually understand that 'Gaokao' is a college entrance exam. Therefore, while the use of Pinyin may initially create a sense of distance for non-Chinese players, it ultimately facilitates a unique and authentic Chinese experience within the game.
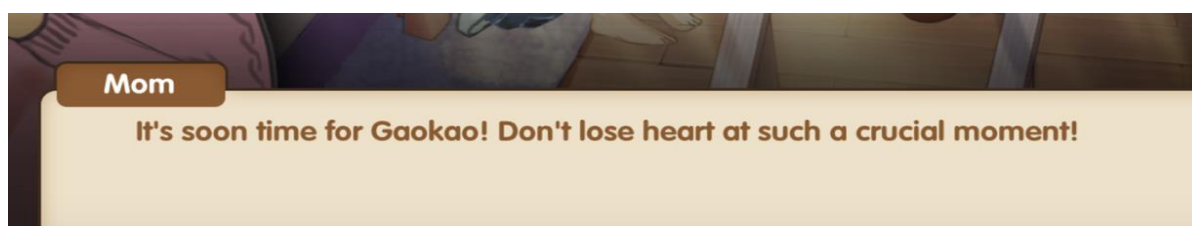

Figure 3 "Gaokao"

In the case of Gaokao, players have sufficient context, provided by the game through playing, to understand the Chinese references. However, in certain cases, using calques would render the Chinese-specific references inaccessible to players without Chinese context, thereby creating an exclusive Chinese experience for Chinese players, which would alienate other players. One of the most prominent examples is the translation of "Hengshui High School" (see Figure 4), which is directly translated using Pinyin. This school is famous in the Chinese context for having stringent regulations and diligent students. People who attend high school in China have probably experienced scenarios where teachers use this high school to motivate students' study. This experience can fully recall Chinese players' school experiences. However, although non-Chinese players can understand the meaning of "Hengshui High School," as a name of a high school, they may feel less connected to it than Chinese players.
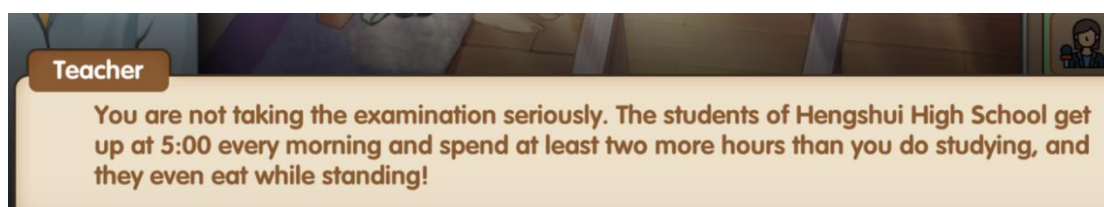

Figure 4 "Hengshui High School"

In various cases, localisers change the Chinese references to ones that are more familiar to English-speaking players to create resonance. This can be exemplified through the case of the player's closest friends (see Figure 5) and the contestants of the talent show

(see Figure 6). In the Chinese version of the game, the player's closest friends are usually a mimicry of a Chinese celebrity. In the English version, the localiser changes the Chinese celebrity to a Western celebrity, such as Voltaire and Nabe Gewell (a mimicry of the co-founder and president of Valve, Gabe Newell). In another case, in the game's trait contest, one of the competitors' names is Sheeran Fei, a combination of a Chinese name "Fei" and a reference to the famous pop-singer, "Ed Sheeran". These localised translations bring in parallel materials that are more familiar to English-speaking players, making the Chinese experience accessible and relatable to those players.
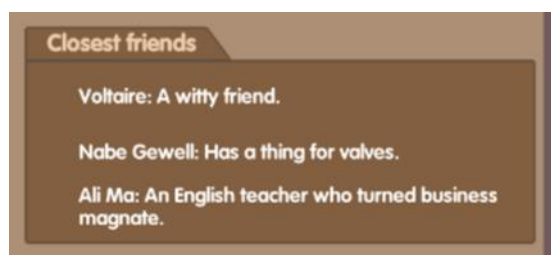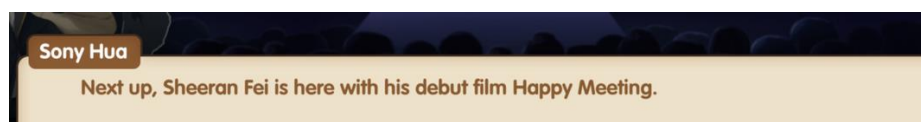

Figure 5 "Closest Friends" in English

Figure 6 Contestant of the talent show in English

From the analysis of different translation approaches, one can conclude that the translation process interacts with the game, creating a hybridised Chineseness that allows us to further examine the idea of Chineseness or "Chinese authenticity" argued by Moyuwan studio. When discussing Britishness in video games, Webber argues that we should "reject an essentialised idea of Britishness" to accept "a discursive and fluid conception of national identity" (Webber 2020: 145), considering both the capacity of video games and the socio-cultural context of the UK. Similar arguments can also be made in this research. The translation of the game grants access for English-speaking players to have a taste of the Chinese growing-up experience, although the general experience is shared between cultural contexts, with appreciation and recognition from diverse cultural contexts. But the calque used in some cases deliberately denies access to the English-speaking player to resonate with the Chinese experience or the Chinese reference exclusively belonging to Chinese players. My colleague (Ren and Li 2020) also remarked on a particular example where the localiser of *Chinese Parents* deliberately left some artwork with Chinese adages or remarks untranslated, thus augmenting the singularity of Chineseness, at the same time highlighting an "authentic" Chineseness. Therefore, the combination of localised translation and non-localised

translation together helps the game establish an ambiguous Chineseness, one that shares a similar experience and values as the West but simultaneously preserves the Chinese specific references. Such distant cultural familiarity, though seemingly contradicting each other, coincides with the idea of "telling a good Chinese story," as the rules suggested by Ma and Chen (2019) are essentially telling a Chinese story with Western logic.

How Chinese is it?

The previous sections explored how the concept of "Chinese" in *Chinese Parents* is limited by socio-cultural factors. We have explored two layers of Chineseness presented by *Chinese Parents*: the first layer is that of authentic Chinese items and experiences, followed by the second layer, which is the exclusiveness of Chinese culture and reference. However, a third layer of Chineseness appears through the analysis of the demographic of the "Chinese child" and, localised and non-localised translation of the game: the empathised and shared Chinese experience and values. My analysis shows that even excluded players without a Chinese context can recognise and relate to similar experiences, without specific cultural references. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the idea of "Chinese" in the game, the next question to ask is: is this experience of growing up unique to "Chinese" children? Based on the comments, game videos, and forum discussions of both "non-Chinese" Chinese players, players who immigrates from China to other countries and players with no Chinese cultural context, the answer is no. This is not surprising since the hardships of studying, schoolwork, balancing studies with other activities, and the bonuses brought by family background and genetics are experiences that most students around the world have to undergo. While "non-Chinese" players may not relate to specific memories associated with particular objects or activities, as discussed earlier, the experience of growing up, learning, and experiencing entertainment is shared and can resonate with others.

Japanese players have increasingly expressed familiarity with and recognition of various experiences in the game since the release of the Japanese version, due to similar competitive pressures and a common cultural background. Many Japanese virtual YouTubers, such as Mononobe Alice (2019), Hanamaru Hareru (2019), and Takatsuki Ritsu (2019), frequently share their own experiences growing up while streaming their playthrough of Chinese Parents, sympathising with the avatar's lifestyle or life choices. During one of Takatsuki Ritsu's livestreams, when she was facing lectures from parents and teachers about how early relationships would compromise one's studies, which would end up with failing the Gaokao, she mentioned that such discourse is not unfamiliar to Japanese children, especially when their parents expect them to go to university. However, she also mentioned that since there are various options other than

going to university in real life in Japan, some parents are not against high school relationships. Other Asian players also expressed similar familiarity. For instance, several players from Hong Kong and Taiwan commented on the game's Steam page[17], stating that "this game actually reflects a universal phenomenon of parenting and education. I think this game can be played by anyone from any country, and they can still relate to it because everyone has experienced parental pressure in their lives."

Many European and American players post in the Steam community about certain circumstances described in the game, such as children becoming a "tool" to ease or maintain the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or husband and wife; the way that, in the game's narrative, it is believed that study has the highest priority; the absolute opposition between study and relationship, etc., also happens to them or their peers, but mostly in less extreme forms. Therefore, one of the most frequently asked question in the Steam community is whether the actual life of a Chinese child is also so extreme in all those aspects.[18]

At this stage, it can be concluded that the game *Chinese Parents* appeals to audiences with specific experiences that trigger emotional bonding. Unlike *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, which present images of China within a contrasting or intercultural context, *Chinese Parents* presents the self-representation of the Chinese experience without such a context. This approach aligns with China's cultural policy of "telling a Chinese story well". When playing the game, players focus on the presented Chinese experience, and introduce the socio-cultural context themselves. This encourages players to become emotionally invested, to experience and better understand the journey. When players come from a different cultural context, they may encounter the process of othering, or facing self-other identification. According to Said (1978) and Spivak (1983, 1988), othering involves dehumanising approaches. However, with *Chinese Parents*, players must depend on their own experiences or experiences from their context to fill in the missing cultural context, humanising the presented Chinese experience and the Chinese child through the player's self-referencing. In Coanda and Aupers's research (2020) about the humanisation of the technological other, they argue that a game's non-playable characters (NPCs) are invested with cultural imagination by the player, injecting humanity into the video game characters. Therefore, when exercising such cultural imagination towards *Chinese Parents*, the experience and the in-game characters within one's own context, Chinese or not, go beyond being merely a flattened concept, word,

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[17] See https://steamcommunity.com/id/geniuschenxw/recommended/736190/,
https://steamcommunity.com/id/galelkh/recommended/736190/,
[18] See https://steamcommunity.com/id/asiuns/recommended/736190/,
https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198037289388/recommended/736190/, and
https://steamcommunity.com/id/ashstuff/recommended/736190/

or symbol. Chinese people become visible and relatable, and a Chinese story following the four rules of telling a Chinese Story (Ma and Chen 2019) is delivered. Through *Chinese Parents*, the growing-up of a Chinese child in the current period with a Chinese cultural context is presented, focusing on issues important not only to the Chinese but also the Western world, and a generally authentic Chinese growing up story child of diverse socio-cultural contexts is told, though with artistic exaggeration.

Another interesting mechanism in the game also contributes to this humanisation. When one arranges one's schedule every day, there will be a series of daily random events, such as extra lessons, donations, physical examinations, the silent treatment, and under these daily random events, the game UI pops up a question "have you experienced a similar incident?", requesting one's own experience. After answering the question, one can read the statistics of how many players have had similar experiences. In the aforementioned streamers' live play-throughs, they actively interact with these questions, sharing their own or their friends' experiences. Having had similar experiences in their growing-up process, some players with Asian cultural backgrounds have also expressed during the streaming that this game has allowed them to relive their study and life experience before the college entrance exam to a certain extent. One comment expresses such opinion straightforwardly, saying that "this yousei game may seem to be built upon 'Chinese standards', but in fact [of different cultural backgrounds] we have also grown up following such standards to varying degrees". IGN Southeast Asia's report (2020)[19] also mentioned that this game will make many Southeast Asia players feel very addressed.

Therefore, the memory and resonance of specific things or specific events may be unique to the "Chinese" players considered by the game, but the growth and life experience that the game tries to express are also shared by players with different cultural contexts. Thus, the Chineseness in *Chinese Parents* is less like the idea of the "Orient" or "Occident" in Orientalist discourse, which serves as a means to build identity. It seems to be leaning much more towards recognition rather than identification, sufficiency rather than necessity. It is not that people who identify and understand this experience are all Chinese, but that Chinese people will understand similar experiences and identify with them. Through the analysis of *Chinese Parents*, we can see that people's sorrows and joys are "connected" and their experiences are similar. Therefore, telling "Chinese" stories is not a process of making things out of nothing but evoking similar experiences and enhancing mutual recognition.

Chinese Parents is a game designed in the context of globalisation, where

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[19] See https://sea.ign.com/nintendo-switch/162515/news/chinese-parents-is-a-bizarre-life-simulator-coming-to-the-nintendo-switch-this-month

homogenisation is one of the significant characters of such a historical context. Therefore, it is possible that certain distinctively Chinese "things" also possess the shared sameness between China and the West. The following section will therefore discuss one of the most crucial, significant and, importantly, most Chinese genres and its representative: the Wuxia game and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*. This section will discuss Wuxia game and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* as a representation of Chinese culture, through the concept of "Xia," and "Jianghu" (see below). The game applies a narrative-heavy technique to form the image of China and displays the essence of "Xia" through a unique theme of love. *Chinese Paladin* centres on emotions instead of heroic sagas, decreasing battles and violence in order to examine the stress between ethnicity and power in China. By expanding the reach of the "Xia" legend past its original cultural context, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* has enabled a larger audience to access and appreciate it. This leads to the consideration of Chinese identity from a global perspective, with particular attention to the similarities and discrepancies between the Wuxia genre and Western Fantasy literature and between "Xia" and chivalry.

"Wu" and "Xia"

Wuxia stories portray a conceptualised Chinese culture. The word wuxia in Chinese consists of two characters: "Wu" and "Xia". Teo (2009) has conducted detailed archaeological work tracing the history of both the use of the word wuxia and the appearance of wuxia as a genre. He claims that the concepts of "Wu" and "Xia" have a long and substantial history in China, and the wuxia genre has an "overwhelming reliance on, and exploitation of, history, historiography, and historicism" (Teo 2009: 6). Works such as *The Water Margin* (or *Outlaws of the Marsh*) and *Journey to the West* established wuxia as a genre. *The Water Margin* sets up "the literary formula emulated by later writers whereby righteous men choose to become outlaws rather than serve under corrupt administrations" (Teo 2015, 20). Lu argues that wuxia "served the inheritance and preservation of the core values of Chinese tradition and stressed a sense of pride" (Lu 2020: 64), especially the concept of "xia". "Xia" has a more profound cultural significance. Research by Zhang (1994) reveals that the meaning of "Xia" is far-reaching and complex, extending beyond its original definition of "gallivanting." According to Yu (2011), the idea of "Xia" transcends social class and represents a particular value system, unlike the Western concept of Chivalry, which connotes a higher social status. Although the Confucius school deems the notion of "Xia" unconventional, anti-orthodox, and anti-power, the individualism, pursuit of justice, and rebellious attitude embody the Chinese ideal characteristics, especially after the Wuxia novel's popularity in the twentieth century. In addition, the Chinese video game industry has embraced the Wuxia genre, creating several masterpieces in the 1990s.

One of the most influential games in this period is *Chinese Paladin* (1998), which inspired a remake, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*, published by Softstar in 2001.

In *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy, the gameplay, or procedurality* is relatively simple and monotonous, relying mainly on numbers. It is a turn-based strategy game, where players wait for their turn to cast spells or use weapons or skills to attack or defend. The damage calculation is straightforward, involving the difference between the attack and defence, corrected by buffs from skills or items, which depletes the health points of the opponent. If players fail in a task, they can opt for easier targets, level up, and increase their numbers or buy new weapons or accessories to boost their traits. Therefore, the rules of the game are straightforward, emphasising that the one with the bigger numbers wins. Despite the simplicity of the game mechanics, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* employs a narrative-heavy approach to constructing, portraying, and presenting the image of China. Players take on the role of Li Xiaoyao, a young boy from a valley, who embarks on an adventure after meeting Zhao Ling'er, the heroine to whom he becomes engaged. Li Xiaoyao inadvertently gains access to secret martial arts and sets off on an adventure with Ling'er to find her mother. Along the way, they team up with another girl, Lin Yue'ru, to whom Li Xiaoyao is also engaged. The tension in the game arises from Ling'er's ancestry as the successor of the Nv'Wa family, the guardian of the Miao people and all the people of China. The tension between the two tribes of the Miao people is used by the Father of the cult in the game, the Moon Worshipper, to fulfil his ambitions of ruling China by first introducing chaos to the Miao tribes. Meanwhile, he discredits Nv'Wa and her successors, thus causing chaos that eventually spreads throughout China, making it convenient for him to rule the entire country. In the 1998 version of *Chinese Paladin*, the plot ends tragically, with the death of both Yue'ru and Ling'er, leaving Li Xiaoyao to depart alone, causing players to feel sorrowful. Nonetheless, players desired a happy ending, leading the game designer to create two hidden plots in which either Yue'ru or Ling'er survive and live happily ever after with Li Xiaoyao.

"Creating Emotion not Hero,"

Through its narrative, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* has selected an unorthodox topic, love, to present the spirit of "Xia". Such presentation further develops the connotation of "Xia" including the sense of individualism as well as individual personality, thus "Xia" embraces the imperfection of the individual, resulting in the humanisation of the legend of "Xia".

Li Xiaoyao, the hero of *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fai*ry, was raised by his aunt in a village following the passing of his parents, who were once influential as "Xia" during their time. Li Xiaoyao inherited their talent and embodies the characteristics of "Xia"

that transcend social class. According to Qi (1970), "Xia" was exclusive to the aristocracy during the Chunqiu era but spread to the peasants with the downfall of feudalism. The idea of "Xia" represents an ideal and romantic lifestyle that allows individuals to fight for justice while living a life of their choice. Li Xiaoyao's circumstances makes a claim to the title of "Xia" out of his league, but it remains a title he could inherit. Ao (2020) notes that "Xia" is an appealing concept to Chinese players, as it represents a way of life that aligns with their ideals. Li Xiaoyao's character and perspective as the dominant narrative voice make him a relatable hero, which draws players into the game's narrative. Additionally, the game's setup coincides with the "new wave of Wuxia literature" (Zhang, 1994), which focuses on the hero's mental movement, emotions, and characteristics, rather than traditional Chinese values.

Despite its Wuxia characteristics, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* is not a game that creates heroes. As noted by game critic Yehua (Wildflower), the game emphasises emotions over heroic narratives, downplaying battles, bloodshed, and violence. The game's focus is on the emotional journey of its four main characters, with the battle system allowing for the simultaneous control of up to three characters. Most of the time, the player controls Li Xiaoyao and two female characters, and the tension between the three accumulates during their adventure. The game sets up several subplots around love, such as the eloping couple in Yue'ru's mansion and the love story between the butterfly fairy Cai'yi and the normal person Liu Jinyuan, which further deepens the emotional message delivered by the game. The emotional climax of the game is reached when Yue'ru passes away while saving Ling'er's life.

One of the central themes of this new wave is the depiction of the hero's individual life story, with the struggle to be primarily about the hero and not necessarily about the greater good of the nation or country. It may involve his quest for revenge, a love affair, or his honour. Throughout the narrative, a story should "highlight the tension between the hero's moral judgement and social norms or pressures" (Zhang, 1994: 81, translated from Chinese). Such a perspective serves to humanise the hero by presenting him as a person with principles, emotions, and agency, rather than as a selfless machine carrying the destiny of a nation. This individualistic perspective resonates with modern society and, to some extent, with the Western interpretation of individualism, which is embraced by players of the game. In the end, only one of the two heroines, Ling'er and Yueru can survive. The game's disastrous finale can evoke emotions of depression, frustration, and sorrow, as the hero or the player cannot save both of the heroines, whereas a contented ending appears more desirable. By asking the player to make this difficult choice, the game intentionally avoids the option of a harem ending, which is consistent with the overall narrative and further enhances the integrity of Li Xiaoyao and the reflected spirit of "Xia".

The game also explores the tension between ethnicity and power dynamics in China. The country comprises 56 ethnic groups, of which the Han population is currently dominant, while other ethnic groups hold a subaltern status. A'Nu, a character introduced later in the game, is the princess of the chief of the Miao people. Her story arc is not developed beyond her initial introduction, which has been criticised for being weak (Ye, 2003). In an interview, the game's designer, Yao (2003), admitted that time and manpower constraints limited the development of A'Nu's character but suggested that the omission might have been for the best. In the final scenes, A'Nu watches Li Xiaoyao depart while playing the flute, revealing her unrequited love for him. However, given the unequal power dynamics between the Han and Miao populations, and the already complicated relationship between Li Xiaoyao, Ling'er, and Yue'ru, it is understandable why the game avoids exploring their relationship further. This decision reinforces Li Xiaoyao's "Xia" spirit and further justifies the game's rejection of the harem ending.

In venturing to present the spirit of "Xia" through the unconventional theme of love, which is not commonly associated with this genre, *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* successfully expands the connotation of "Xia" beyond the traditional depictions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Through the portrayal of Li Xiaoyao's personal struggles with love and his moral judgement, the game illustrates the complex nature of the "Xia" spirit, which includes individualism and the recognition of personal agency. This portrayal of the hero as a real person with relatable struggles makes the story more engaging and allows players to identify with the character on a deeper level. Additionally, such a portrayal expands the reach of the "Xia" legend beyond its original cultural context, making it more accessible and appealing to a wider audience.

"Jiang Hu"

When exploring literature and video games, one can discover various interpretations of Jianghu. These multiple levels of understanding demonstrate that Jianghu is a symbol of Chinese culture, thus enabling the hero to exercise the spirit of Xia. The concept of "Jianghu" is a critical element in the Wuxia genre, serving as the stage where all the legends take place. While it literally translates to "river and lake," the term holds further cultural significance beyond its physical location. Li (2011) identifies at least three interpretations of "Jianghu" in Chinese culture. The first interpretation emphasises the location aspect, while the second interpretation suggests that "Jianghu" is a physical or theoretical space located at the margin of the power structure, in contrast to the central position of "Miaotang." The third interpretation portrays "Jianghu" as the grey area of civil life, characterised by urban legends, unconventional behaviours, and anti-traditional living strategies. Other interpretation's view "Jianghu" as a sub-culture or a

public space derived from the agricultural-centred society.

In this research, I do not aim to define or interpret "Jianghu" definitively. Instead, I adopt an approach similar to my approach to "Orientalism," where "Jianghu" is understood as several intertwined concepts. In the Wuxia genre, "Jianghu" is a broad space consisting of numerous mysterious and romantic myths and legends, requiring exploration. While "Jianghu" occupies a marginal position in broader social, cultural, and historical contexts, it is both influenced by and influencing them. In *Chinese Paladin*, the combination of the alternative history, Wuxia genre, and fairies amplifies the romantic and mysterious sense of "Jianghu". When interpreting "Jianghu", Li (2011) argues that the characteristic of "Jianghu" is "non-acquaintance, non-transparency, and lack of rule" (Li 2011: 32-33). In ancient China, due to the indispensable nature of family and nation, the grey area between family and nation can be understood as Jianghu. People meet strangers rather than acquaintances, and the interaction is chaotic and spontaneous since the government at that time focused on self-maintaining rather than public service. However, in literary works, when Jianghu is portrayed as a social space, the imagination of a romantic space also engages. Thus, many classic plots and legends occur in Jianghu. Now, we will examine the perspective of fairies in relation to the correlation with the romantic and mysterious sense of Jianghu.

The game's narrative is triggered by the severe sickness of Li Xiaoyao's grandmother. The village doctor suggests that a magical cure is needed, which can only be found on the fairy island. The idea of a fairy island or fairy islands in China can be traced back to the Zhanguo era (476 BC to 221 BC) and a philosopher named Zou Yan, who suggested that, beyond China, there are numerous other places across the sea, seeding the imagination of better spaces beyond reach, some of which may even be claimed by gods and goddesses. These imagined wonderlands have not only inspired multiple classic literary masterpieces but also lured emperors such as Qin Shihuang to explore and seek the elixir of life.

Prior research has extensively explored 'Jianghu' as a pivotal symbol in Chinese culture and a metaphor for Chinese society. However, there has been limited discussion on the interplay between the conceptualised 'Jianghu' and the realms of fantasy or heaven. In examining the 'Wuxia' and 'Xianxia' literary genres, which feature demi-god or immortal heroes, Zhou (2020) suggests that 'Xianxia' narratives allow for greater creative freedom in terms of spatial and temporal settings, unbounded by the constraints of historical accuracy or geographical realism. Additionally, Ji's (2020) analysis of the 'cultivation' sub-genre, wherein heroes undergo trials and training to achieve immortality, introduces a unique perspective. Ji argues that 'cultivation novels transcend the traditional dichotomy of 'Jianghu' and 'Miaotang', focusing instead on

the protagonist's personal journey' (Ji 2020: 297). This perspective challenges the prevailing belief that the concept of a fairyland is extraneous to 'Jianghu'. Nonetheless, Ji acknowledges that the pursuit of immortality, while rooted in the current life's time, space, and experiences, positions these mythical realms as the ultimate aspiration within 'Jianghu' narratives.

Jianghu, as introduced, is closely intertwined with Miaotang, political and governmental power. In previous research by Li (2011) and Liu (2004), the importance of studying Jianghu in contrast to Miaotang has been highlighted. Li (2011) suggests one interpretation of the spirit of Xia in Jianghu is being loyal to their friends, and one way to achieve this loyalty is through the formation of virtual kinship. When this obligation to loyalty is expanded to the level of the state, it takes the form of loyalty to one's country. In *Chinese Paladin*, although the main storyline of the game revolves around Li Xiaoyao's love life, when he and his partners discover the Father of the Moon Worshippers' plot to destroy the world upon arriving at the Miao tribe, they immediately decide to expose and foil his scheme, even though it ultimately costs Li Xiaoyao his loved one. This plot arrangement echoes Fan Zhongyan's famous quote, which illustrates the ideal attitude one should adopt under different positions, whether it be in Miaotang or Jianghu: "positioned at the centre of power, one should show solicitude for the people; exiled to remote regions, one should be concern about the sovereigns" (Fan, 1046). Thus, based on previous analyses of Jianghu, it can be concluded that Jianghu, in both game and literature, is a place that reflects the romantic and mysterious aspects of Chinese culture and serves as a place to exercise the spirit of Xia. Moreover, although Jianghu and mainstream or traditional society, whose essence is rooted in the relationship between family and country, appear to contradict each other at first glance, a closer examination of the spirit of Xia reveals similarities in their values. Therefore, both Xia and Jianghu reflect and circulate mainstream values at different stages, raising the question that, while wuxia is Chinese, to what extent is it so, and what expression of Chineseness is conveyed through the Wuxia genre. Games like *Chinese Paladin* draw upon the Wuxia genre, represent and convey Chineseness, challenging us to consider the multilayered expressions of cultural identity within Wuxia.

Chinese Wuxia is Western Fantasy (?)

In an episode of Chinese Movie Report, the host Zhou Liming draws an intriguing comparison between Stan Lee's Marvel Universe and Louis Cha's Wuxia world (Zhou, 2021). Although both legends have created alternative histories based on their cultural context, Zhou argues that they share similarities in their critical reflections of social and historical issues of their time. These issues include individual ability and social responsibility, as well as the imperfections of heroes. While this comparison is

not new, Rehling's research on the translation of *Harry Potter* suggests that Chinese wuxia and Western fantasy genres share similarities in their form, including historical context selection, reflection on "spiritual and ideological customs" of the time and region, application of stereotypical plots of their cultural context, and common plots (Rehling, 2012: 72-73). However, Rehling's research only scratches the surface of the cultural and political values reflected in wuxia novels and fantasy literature, which this analysis of *Chinese Paladin* aims to explore further.

In his analysis of science fiction and fantasy literature, Elkins (1985) argues that fantasy literature can be viewed as a "reaction against the rationalistic, anti-heroic, materialistic and empiricist discourses upon which modern western culture and society are founded" (citing Selling's analysis 2004: 5 on Elkins 1985: 23-31). For example, Giddings (1983: 18-19) recognises *The Lord of the Rings* as a work that "shapes, textures, and conditions the nature of our perceptions of the world we live in." Researchers from different disciplines, including Giddings (1983), Chance (1991), Selling (2004), Hooker (2004), and Donnelly (2007), have investigated the reflection of western values and history in *The Lord of the Rings*. Chance (1991) proposes that *The Lord of the Rings* is a mythology about power and knowledge, specifically discussing the power of individuals within society. *The Lord of the Rings* discusses good versus evil, friendship, and fidelity. Hooker's (2004) research emphasises the relationship between Sam and Frodo, particularly the role played by Sam, which is further developed by Donnelly (2007), who argues that *The Lord of the Rings* presents different aspects of feudal values from different social levels.

When examining the themes of chivalry in Chinese and Western literature, the concepts of Xia and chivalry echo with each other, while sharing differences in their respective treatments. Previous studies in Western literature and sociology have contributed to and constructed a general image of the paladin and the ideology of chivalry behind the paladin metaphor, which resonates with the game's title *Chinese Paladin*. In David Hume's (1947) research on the legacy of chivalry, he interprets chivalry's characteristics as a combination of "extravagant gallantry and adoration of the whole female sex" and "the practice of single combat" (Hume 1947: 60), which further influenced daily life in Europe. In another foundational study, Keen (1984: 17) proposes the three central aspects of chivalry: "Chivalry...is a way of life in which we can discern these three essential facets, the military, the noble, and the religious" (Keen 1984: 17). In analysing chivalry in romantic novels, Dyer (2000: 341) recognises chivalry as "a standard for behaviour," requiring individuals to take self-abrogation and self-sacrificial actions to defend "the powerless and disadvantaged, who are typically, even characteristically, women." Kaeuper's (2009) research introduces a different perspective on chivalry, emphasising the violence of chivalry

and the expectation that paladins or knights, as embodiments of chivalry, be loyal to support and defend their lords and skilful and honourable in aiding and helping those in lower orders who are less powerful and honoured, according to the code of chivalry, "great, honourable, and powerful," proposed by Ramon Llull. Based on the explorations of Keen, Kaeuper, and Sposato, Diacciati (2011) characterises the ideology of chivalry as "the primacy of personal and familial honour over the common good, the profession of arms, a penchant for violence, and a disregard for the law and civic norms" (summarised by Sposato 2018: 3).

The wuxia genre encompasses many themes, values, and the chivalric ideology. According to Rehling (2012), wuxia stories are as significant to Chinese readers as Tolkien spin-offs, King Arthur adaptations, or dragon sagas are to Western readers. Even though Rehling's statement primarily focuses on the literary aspect of the wuxia genre, wuxia, and fantasy share many similarities in their themes and values. They are like twins, raised in different families. The discussion of power and knowledge, particularly the relationship between personal capability and social responsibility, is an eternal topic in the wuxia genre. In *Chinese Paladin*, Li Xiaoyao's skill and Ling'er's and A'Nu's ancestry require them to bear the burden of saving the Miao tribe and the entire nation, even at the cost of their lives. The plot arrangement and their rationales reflect the famous "Peter Parker principle," that "with great power comes great responsibility." Similar values are reflected in the dynamics presented within the Miao tribes and between the Miao tribe and the central government. Despite Rehling's claim that "wuxia does not interfere with the social and political lives of its consumers" (2012: 75), it shapes the Chinese idea of social and political participation, especially for those not in power. Moreover, considering Hume's characterisation of chivalry, combat for marriage, a popular scene in most wuxia works, can be viewed as an event that realises Hume's interpretation of chivalry, a reflection of Western chivalry under the Chinese cultural context. The similarity between wuxia and Western fantasy literature exists not only in their formal aspects, but also in their content and reflected values. This is exemplified by the translated title of the franchise, *Chinese Paladin*, which recognises the similarity between the story and Western legends of the paladins. However, this result, combined with the similar conclusion from the analysis of *Chinese Parents*, raises more questions than it solves. If similar experiences, values, and ideology are shared between China and the West in works about the "Chinese experience" or in the area considered exclusive "Chinese," what can be considered Chinese, and what does "Chinese" mean?

Taking up the discussion from the analysis of *Chinese Parents*, both games strive to present the Chinese story without the influence of the West. However, the values and experiences depicted in these games are shared between different cultural contexts,

with appreciation and recognition from diverse audiences. As demonstrated in the analysis of *Chinese Parents*, the idea of Chineseness in the game could be perceived as recognition rather than identification[20]. While the Wuxia genre has traditionally influenced Chinese identity, the core ideology of Wuxia is also shared with Western fantasy and the ideology of chivalry, creating a conflict between exclusive identity and shared, perhaps even universal, values.

The discussion and analysis in this article suggests a new interpretation of a multi-layered concept of Chineseness. At the first layer, an authentic Chinese lifestyle is presented and perceived, whether in the form of growing-up experiences or encounters with certain items during certain periods. However, such experiences and the embedded values are not exclusive to Chinese culture. Thus, Chineseness can be viewed as a form of recognition, where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds can appreciate and recognise these experiences. Moreover, the shared experiences and values between China and the West create cultural exchange and understanding, which leads to a more comprehensive understanding of China and Chinese culture. The distinctiveness and exclusiveness of Chineseness are also presented with specific cultural references or expressions unique to China. In the context of self-representation and self-identity construction, this multi-layered understanding of Chineseness excludes any Western or external references.

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[20] On august, 2021, a game named *Growing up* has released its demo with the authorization of the original *Chinese Parents* studio creating a similar game about growing up with American parents. The literal translation of the game's Chinese title could be *Growing up with American Parents*. In the demo, the mechanism and narrative shows similarity with *Chinese Parents*.

Chapter Seven: The Direct Encounter

The previous chapters have explored the representation of China in various video games, focusing on its cultural aspects. However, this chapter shifts the focus to the political aspects and discussions that are inspired by or expressed through video games[21]. Specifically, I will examine two political games, The Wall, and Animal Farm*: China*, which address social and political issues related to the People's Republic of China. The concept of political games has been debated, with terms such as serious games, functional games, or "persuasive games" (Bogost 2010) being used to describe games designed with specific ideological purposes. Therefore, political games can be seen as ideological apparatuses, as they serve as vehicles for conveying specific ideological messages. In these games, certain ideological assumptions, and messages are predetermined and incorporated into the game's design from the outset. The game mechanics, narrative elements, and player interactions are carefully crafted to align with and reinforce these predetermined ideological assumptions. The game's objectives, challenges, and outcomes are all structured to support and convey the intended ideological message. The role of political games as ideological apparatuses extends beyond mere entertainment or escapism. They serve as platforms for conveying and promoting specific political goals and agendas. Through gameplay, players are exposed to and immersed in these ideologies, ultimately internalising and potentially adopting them. This means that the game itself becomes the realisation and embodiment of those ideologies.

The Wall, inspired by the Great Firewall, explores the dilemma of internet safety and free access to the internet. *Animal Farm: China*, while heavily drawing from Orwell's novel, presents the studio's view on the current Chinese government and ruling class. Both games portray, reflect, criticise, and to some extent, accuse China based on Western interpretations of civil and human rights. This can be seen as a process of self-Orientalism, where Western perspectives shape the developers' portrayal and critique of China. It is important to recognise that the predetermined nature of political games does not allow for open exploration of political ideas. Instead, these games present a singular viewpoint and limit the range of perspectives and possibilities that players can encounter. The absence of alternative perspectives or critical engagement within the game design reinforces the dominance of the predetermined ideology. Therefore, for a comprehensive understanding, this section

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21 Here, there is one thing I must write before any analysis. Given my identity as a Chinese citizen, my former education and my OWN thinking, certain interpretation and analysis in this section may not seem to be completely objective, in the way of the expression, especially when it comes to political engagement. However, as a researcher, I am obligated to be as rational and objective as I can be. Therefore, I will make it clear when one argument is concluded from my own opinion or completely from the discussion of the other or the mixture of both.

will also employ the concept of player agency from Stang's (2019) study examining player comments, discussions, and play-throughs of these games to initiate further debate on encounters with different ideologies represented in the games.

The second section of this chapter will focus on *Devotion*, a game that has undergone a significant transformation from being a "Chinese game" to a "non-Chinese game" due to its politically sensitive content. Although *Devotion* is not typically categorised as a "political game" according to our earlier definition, its politically sensitive content and initial popularity in China have made it a platform for various rationales, arguments, and stereotypes to collide and confront one another. This section will emphasise the discussion surrounding the politically sensitive content in industry media, comments, and forum discussions. Through analysing and interpreting these arguments, we can observe the encounter between Orientalism and Occidentalism, which shape the ideological perspectives expressed in the discussions.

Overall, this chapter aims to shed light on the political dimensions of video games and the ideological encounters that occur within the gaming community. By examining specific games and analysing player discussions, we can gain insights into the complex relationship between politics, ideology, and video games.

"With the Chinese Characteristics"

Animal Farm: China, an independent game released on Steam in May 2020, carries the title *Animal Farm with Chinese Characteristics* in its Chinese translation. The phrase "with Chinese characteristics" originates from Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), who introduced it in 1919 as a way to apply Marxism to the specific Chinese context. Li emphasised the need to consider the Chinese situation before blindly adopting new theories or techniques (Li, 1919). Ding (2006) suggests that alternative translations for this expression include "Chinese-style," "the Chinese Way," "in the Chinese context," "China's identity," "China-specific," or "with Chinese features" (Ding, 2006). These translations emphasise the distinctiveness of China from other entities. However, in *Animal Farm: China* and *The Wall*, the concept of Chinese characteristics is simplified and stripped of its contextual nuances, focusing solely on the exclusivity of China and its context.

This simplification process can be viewed as a form of neo-Orientalist discourse and cultural appropriation. Similar to the neo-Orientalist discourse identified by Bahdad and Williams (2010), the designers of both games originate from Mainland China. Their native identities grant them a sense of authority and a claim to authenticity, which they exploit to distort the interpretation of Chinese cultural elements, such as the idea of "with Chinese characteristics." Unlike Orientalists, who construct

arguments about China to solidify their Western identity (Said, 1978; Huntington, 1996; Loomba, 1998), or what Spivak refers to as the "identity of the master" (Spivak, 1985), neo-Orientalist arguments arise from their own cultural backgrounds, reconstructing the identities of their respective cultures (Bahdad and Williams, 2010). By interpreting and flattening "with Chinese characteristics" to signify the exclusivity of China, these games single out China in their discourse. This singling-out process highlights the distinction between China and the rest of the world, reinforcing the dualism between "the Orient" and "the Occident," which serves as the foundation of Orientalism (Said, 1978: 3). The discussion is further framed around the notion of freedom of speech.

In the context of games centred around China, discussions around the concept of freedom of speech extend beyond the interpretation and analysis of the games themselves. This is due to factors such as state censorship and self-censorship, as well as debates surrounding game publication and banning, game art and design choices, and subsequent comments and discussions. For instance, there was a longstanding rumour that *Battlefield IV* (EA, 2004) was banned in China. However, there is no official ruling on the former Chinese Ministry of Culture's website regarding the banning of the game[22]. Furthermore, *Battlefield IV* was never officially published in mainland China according to EA's website. This suggests that the rumour may have been fabricated to provoke discussions and criticism regarding game censorship and freedom of speech.

Within the selected games, the interpretation of the concept of freedom of speech and its implications within and around the games became the central focus of discussion. *The Wall* directly addresses the issue of free internet access through its game rules, artwork, and narrative structure, making it a prominent aspect of the freedom of speech discourse. Similarly, *Animal Farm: China* deliberately links the game with the concept of freedom of speech, using it as a representation that dominated discussions and comments surrounding the game. Furthermore, given the incident involving Devotion, the discourse has primarily revolved around the paramountcy of freedom of speech, particularly creative freedom.

The discussions surrounding these selected games initially revolved around interpretations of freedom of speech, but gradually expanded to encompass debates surrounding Western political values and theories, often contrasting them with Chinese political reality. Through these games, along with the accompanying discussions, images, and ideas of China, specifically the People's Republic of China, are formed and expressed within the realm of video games. These discussions

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22 Whereas one can clearly see the ban issued to *Command and Conquer: Generals*, for example.

contribute to the shaping and expression of the relationship between China and the rest of the world, particularly the Western world. In the following sections, I will delve into a detailed analysis of each game, starting with *The Wall*, which closely examines freedom of speech, followed by *Animal Farm: China*, and concluding with *Devotion*, a game that has sparked discussions from a freedom of speech perspective.

Published in 2017 by ZuoBuLai Game[23], *The Wall* quickly gained attention but was unexpectedly removed from Steam by the designer after less than a month, for reasons unknown. Despite its short lifespan, *The Wall* garnered significant engagement, with more than 200 comments on Steam, drawing attention from various news platforms that, anecdotally, practiced self-censorship due to the game's politically sensitive topic. The game employs a simple yet compacted procedure to convey a clear yet conflicting message: the desire for unrestricted internet access.

In *The Wall*, players control an avatar who must navigate while handcuffed, searching for four keys to break through walls. As players collect the keys and breach the walls, they must remain vigilant to avoid detection by patrolling guards. Failing to do so results in being shot and losing the game. However, the reward for successfully breaking down the walls, as indicated by multiple comments, is deemed worthwhile. Upon breaking the wall, players are confronted with parody icons representing Google, Facebook, YouTube, and even Pornhub. Thus, the wall in the game symbolises China's Great Firewall (GFW), while the act of breaking the wall and the icons beyond it represent the pursuit of free internet access.

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23 Interestingly, the English translation of the game studio's name is "I can't do it".

I'm not a person of much political position. I don't think life abroad is necessarily better than in China, neither do I completely deny the existence of Great Fire Wall. I'm just expressing a little hope through my game: May it be that one day, we don't have to use VPN anymore while we are searching for information or playing online games.

-ZuoBuLaiGame RoseDog

我没有什么政治倾向，我不认为国外就一定比中国好，我也不认为GFW完全不对。
这个游戏只是在表达一个愿望：
希望我们有一天查资料不用VPN，玩游戏不用加速器。

-ZuoBuLaiGame RoseDog

In Chinese, using a VPN to access blocked websites is colloquially referred to as "翻墙" (fān qiáng), which translates to "climbing over the wall." However, The Wall's argument challenges the existence of the GFW directly, as it is about breaking the wall rather than circumventing it. Through the game, the designer questions the very existence of the GFW. However, the expressed message in the game contradicts the designer's words regarding free internet access and, consequently, freedom of speech.

The designer presents a conflicting statement within the game. On one hand, they claim that the GFW is "not entirely wrong" or evil[24]. On the other hand, they advocate for VPN-free access to information, a message reinforced through the game's mechanics. This embedded message aligns with the principles of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2010, Ferrari 2012), where games aim to deliver and persuade players through their procedures. Furthermore, when players eventually tear down all the walls, other handcuffed individuals join the fight against the wall, emphasising the game's inclination towards advocating free internet access rather than the notion that "the GFW is not entirely wrong".

A close examination of players' comments on Steam reveals an understanding and resonance with these conflicts, particularly when considering the socio-cultural context and ideological assumptions at play. The analysis of Chinese players' comments reveals contrasting perspectives regarding the Great Firewall (GFW) and its impact on access to information and civil rights. On one hand, the GFW is seen as a restriction that infringes upon individuals' freedom and grants excessive political power. This techno-Orientalist interpretation of China, as proposed by Patterson (2020), portrays the country as a civilisation controlled by oppressive use of technology. Critics argue that the GFW deprives individuals of their inherent right to knowledge, substituting it with a perceived illusion of internet safety. Furthermore, despite the lack of evidence, some comments contend that the GFW contributes to a generation lacking critical thinking skills and cognitive abilities. Interestingly, one commentator who shares a similar argument adds a caveat, stating, "if you cannot understand my argument correctly and like to pigeonhole, don't comment" (Steam discussion, 2017), unintentionally contradicting their appeal for critical thinking.

While the majority of comments (171 out of 241) are in Simplified Chinese, a significant number are written in Traditional Chinese and English. Traditional Chinese is predominantly used in Hong Kong, Macau SAR, and Taiwan, suggesting that these commenters have grown up in different social, cultural, and political contexts, influenced by more Western perspectives. Upon closer examination, these comments focus on the GFW, free access to information, and creative freedom, often accompanied by stereotypical portrayals of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Within the discussion section, one post specifically addresses the game's title, stating, "In English, we call it 'The Great Firewall of China,' or just 'The Great Firewall' for short. Not 'The Wall'" (Steam discussion, 2017). Furthermore, since the broader topic

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24 Though in the English version, the designer says that he does not "completely deny the existence of the GFW", the literal translation of his statement in Chinese is he does not think "the GFW is completely wrong". I believe that there is a mistranslation in the English version. Since the designer is Chinese, here, I mainly present his argument based on the Chinese statement.

revolves around free access to information, this singling-out perpetuates a comparison between China, within its unique context, and the abstract notion of unrestricted access. Such a comparison aligns with traditional Orientalist approaches that describe, imagine, interpret, and criticise the Orient based on abstract Western values, extending beyond its limitations (Said, 1978; Sardar, 1999). Through this comparison, the concept of free internet access is oversimplified and reduced to the availability of specific websites like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others.

Furthermore, the flattened interpretation of free internet access in China, divorced from its complex context, is contrasted with the broader notion of free internet access, predominantly understood in the Western context. This misalignment between China's practice and this flattened understanding leads to further criticism, to accusations that China lacks the Western interpretation of freedom and to the reinforcement of stereotypical impressions. Consequently, within comment and discussion sections, a techno-Orientalist argument emerges, asserting that "China is a country with less tolerance for internet access." This argument not only portrays China as a barbaric dictatorship opposed to free internet access but also solidifies the perception of Western superiority over China as a more civilised and advanced civilisation.

On the other hand, amidst the negative comments that accuse the designer of providing a partial and negative interpretation of the Great Firewall (GFW), there are also nuanced perspectives that emphasise the complex role the GFW plays within its social, cultural, and ideological context. While these comments express negative attitudes toward the GFW, they also offer considerations to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the GFW and its countermeasures, without defending its implementation. Some argue that, given the differences in political ideologies, full openness is unrealistic, and that the cultivation of critical thinking does not immediately occur once the wall is torn down. One comment reflects on the game, stating, "when the wall collapsed, everything changed. It became chaotic, ridiculous, and hell-like, where one could pick up a weapon and shoot randomly without consequences" (Steam discussion, 2017). From a technological standpoint, some identify the technical challenges associated with constructing the wall, such as broadband issues. These comments also link technological perspectives to political considerations, recognising that the right to network operation encompasses issues of sovereignty and national technological security. These considerations reflect a sense of "Chinese characteristics" by interpreting and comprehending the issue within the specific economic, political, and social contexts of China. Such interpretations align with the original understanding of the concept proposed by Li in 1919, which can be traced back to one of the philosophical foundations of CCP governance, namely the

idea of dialectics. In the context of Chinese governance, it often refers to the process of understanding and resolving contradictions within societal, political, and economic systems. The dialectical perspective recognises the GFW as a complex, contradictory entity. It's not simply a tool for censorship, but also an embodiment of China's unique socio-political realities and technological aspirations. From this viewpoint, the GFW represents a balance or resolution of contradictions between China's desire for technological advancement and its need for political stability and ideological control.

These comments, though limited in number, establish a counter-discourse that challenges the techno-Orientalist perspective by emphasising the importance of context in understanding Chinese sociocultural realities. This counter-discourse refuses to accept the "universal truth of liberalism and Western forms of governance," asserting that concepts such as free internet access and democracy should be tailored to fit the Chinese context rather than adhering to Western definitions (Vukovich 2012: 144). It appropriates and transforms Western ideas, presenting a sense of political aspirations through an appeal to the Chinese context, similar to the notion of authenticity (Bhandari, 2016). This counter-discourse challenges the Western interpretation and application of concepts and values, questioning the notion that Western interpretations are universally transferable. It utilises the idea of context to challenge the Western knowledge about China and its operation shaped by colonial legacies.

In the comment and discussion section of the game, two distinct "camps" can be identified[25]. While both acknowledge the potential and drawbacks of the Great Firewall of China from different perspectives, one camp advocates for a rational understanding of the GFW within the Chinese context, while the other camp flattens the concept of free internet access to condemn the GFW practice and perceives it as a complete violation of the idea of free access. The clash between these camps primarily occurs in the discussions, with minimal debate taking place in the comment section. One camp asserts that free internet access is a fundamental, unconditional, and non-negotiable pillar of civilised life, rendering the consideration of the Chinese context irrelevant. Meanwhile, the other camp argues for an understanding of the social, cultural, and political context when criticising or attacking the GFW. This confrontation reveals that the arguments put forth by these camps are rooted in different discursive systems, representing a dualism between Western political values or theories and the Chinese political and social reality.

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[25] See https://steamcommunity.com/id/rsjsygb/recommended/635070/;
https://steamcommunity.com/id/libukong/recommended/635070;
https://steamcommunity.com/id/Miao_Miao_Jiang/recommended/635070/ and
https://steamcommunity.com/id/Dingtl/recommended/635070/.

However, it is important to note that Clifford (1980) and Said's research did not seek to replace false stereotypes of Orientalism with an appeal to authentic or traditional Oriental realities. He viewed culture as a fluid, developing, and negotiated process. In this specific context, the counter-discourse employs the Chinese context as a form of Oriental reality, aiming to invalidate the techno-Orientalist argument. This attempt can be understood within the framework of the knowledge-power relationship proposed by Said, wherein Orientalism functions as a filter through which the Orient is perceived in Western consciousness (Said, 1978).

On one hand, arguments based on the Chinese context suggest that Western misunderstanding arises from an information deficit, claiming that Westerners lack the necessary knowledge to comprehend and empathise with the Chinese perspective. On the other hand, as argued by Said (1978), Western arguments reflect not ignorance, but rather the knowledge and discursive system that advocates for unconditional free access to information. The debate is not about a lack of knowledge, but rather the nature of knowledge itself. Consequently, discussions often lead to intense debates where opposing sides assert their own viewpoints. Complicating matters further, the notion of free access to information is associated with a more "civilised" and "sophisticated" civilisation, a concept defined by the Western perspective and believed to be universally applicable. Therefore, the Chinese side's argument and appeal are not only seen as challenging universal values but also deemed "wrong" according to Western knowledge. However, it is important to recognise that this argument, though intense, still operates within the inherited power structure between the Western and Chinese worlds, wherein the Chinese perspective is positioned against the Western-defined "universal truth." A more intense confrontation can be observed in the comment and discussion section of the game *Devotion*, which will be analysed later in this study.

Significantly, despite the game being taken down, the discussion section of *Devotion* remains accessible. While most discussions occurred in 2017, the year of the game's launch, one thread was updated in April 2021, featuring a dialogue between two "rivals" who hold different political opinions and engaged in a heated debate back in 2019. Interestingly, the individual who previously regarded arguments in favour of tearing down the wall as "whining" now understands and even partially supports the Great Firewall of China (GFW), citing the Covid-19 pandemic and "peaceful transformations" in other regions as factors influencing this shift in perspective. Such shifts in political opinions, particularly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, can be observed more frequently in the comment and discussion section of *Devotion*. However, within *Devotion*'s comment and discussion area, as will be examined later, due to extreme acts of othering and flattening of opposing opinions, individuals who

undergo a change in stance do not explicitly address their shift. Instead, they join the ongoing debate with a different perspective.

Animal Farm: China attempts to associate itself with the concept of freedom of speech, despite the fact that freedom of speech is only one aspect of the argument presented in George Orwell's original novel. *Animal Farm: China* is a game created and published by Gamearning Studio, which according to notlsd.com was a one-man game studio that existed until its website expired. In the game's description, the designer claims that his work is a literal representation of Orwell's masterpiece, asserting that "a hardcore fan would find each and every sentence in the novel" (Gamearning Studio, 2020). Furthermore, the designer states that the game incorporates "expression and emergencies with distinct Chinese characteristics." However, this presents an inconsistency in the designer's statements, as a faithful recreation of *Animal Farm* contradicts the notion of incorporating distinct Chinese characteristics. To maintain consistency in the game's description, the title, and description imply that the story of *Animal Farm* is set in China or is "telling a Chinese story." In addition to the aforementioned description, the game's introduction paraphrases an ancient Chinese poem associated with former Chairman Jiang Zemin, which later became a meme[26]. Moreover, the description includes other parodies of Chinese governmental expressions and political memes, such as suggesting the game is in "Steamism early access" and featuring an item called "black optical frames."[27] These paraphrases and parodies of Chinese political references not only emphasise the Chineseness of the designer's version of *Animal Farm*, but also serve as a secret code to attract individuals who share a similar worldview to participate in the discussion. Thus, whether titled *Animal Farm: China* or *Animal Farm with Chinese Characteristics*, the underlying message of the game, or the premise of Animal Farm, is centred around China.

However, upon accessing the game, players quickly realise that aside from the poor game design, which will be discussed in later sections, there is a conflict within the game's description that permeates the gameplay and narrative, to the extent that these exist. This conflict leads players to suggest that "the designer has exhausted his talent in the game description."[28] The game follows Orwell's book, beginning with the establishment of the animal farm. The game controls are simple, bordering on primitive, as it only requires the use of the left and right keys to progress through the

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[26] The saying is precisely captured in one famous line presented in the series *Yes, Minister* by Sir Humphrey: "While one does not seek the office, one has pledged oneself to the service of one's country. And if one's friends were to persuade one that that was the best way one could serve, one might reluctantly have to accept the responsibility, whatever one's private wishes might be".

[27] Another reference to the former Chairman Jiang Zemin.

[28] See https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198409363393/recommended/1203660/

story. However, there is no instruction or rule provided to clarify the meaning behind moving right or left in the game. One possible interpretation is that moving right or left signifies adopting a right or left-wing approach. However, the lack of instruction or rule book, combined with the delayed response of the player's movements, results in a gaming experience that feels like a re-reading of *Animal Farm*.

In the original novel, Orwell explores and presents his arguments on various issues, such as the relationship between freedom and equality, the concept of utopia, and the disillusionment of revolution, which reflect his criticism of communist regimes at the time, particularly the former Soviet Union. However, based on the game's description and trailer, the game takes a different angle in presenting its flattened idea, focusing primarily on the concept of free speech. It will later become evident that this emphasis on free speech may act as a double-edged sword for the designer's intended message. Towards the end of the game's description, the designer notes that "due to Chinese law and regulation, certain contents cannot be shown," highlighting the issue of free speech. Additionally, in the trailer, the designer states that "One may have the freedom of speech in the game, but one won't have freedom after one made the speech." By emphasising freedom of speech, the designer successfully redirects the discussion surrounding the game from the original novel, its adaptation, or the intended message to the concept of freedom of speech itself. Through these elements, the designer effectively establishes a link between the game and freedom of speech, suggesting that any censorship or rejection of the game is a violation of freedom of speech. This message has been widely accepted by audiences, garnering positive reviews, while also sparking debates and opposition, particularly due to the politically sensitive nature of the message blended with Chinese elements.

While the designer's objective of reproducing *Animal Farm* as a video game from a literal level has been achieved, their attempt to blend Chinese characteristics into the game can be deemed less successful than the reproduction itself. In contrast to the description, which incorporates several Chinese references, the actual game contains minimal Chinese elements, aside from the language used[29]. One notable Chinese element is a parody of The Internationale called The Song of the Chinese Slaves[30], which also parodies the original anthem of *Animal Farm,* Beast of England. Due to the offensive nature of the song's lyrics[31], I will refrain from providing screenshots or

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[29] In the description, the designer has made it clear that the final version will be in simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English. However, in the early access, the game only offers a simplified Chinese version.

[30] In Chinese, the title is 中华畜牲之歌, the idea of "畜牲" in Chinese has multiple meanings. It means livestock or bastards, which could be further interpreted as slave. Thus, here, the song's title is translated into The Song of the Chinese Slaves.

[31] First, I find the lyrics highly offensive, not only as a Chinese citizen, but also as a human being. Second, it is a sacrilegious parody of The Internationale. Third, the lyrics are offensive from both Western and Chinese perspectives.

a translation. Instead, I will emphasise the role played by the song's inclusion. As the only element directly associated with China, the audience's interpretation of its function diverges. Some players acknowledge and adopt the idea that *Animal Farm* is a metaphor for China, viewing the song as supporting this argument. They believe that the use of offensive language serves as a stimulus for the "brainwashed Chinese" to take action. However, other players express disappointment, suggesting that the game fails to truly capture "Chinese characteristics" since changing *Animal Farm* to China Farm does not automatically imbue the game with these characteristics[32].

Although most of the comments and debates surrounding the game do not focus on the game itself, as we will discuss later, there are still a few voices that attempt to keep the discussion centred on the game. Some users pick up on hints provided by the designer, speculating that political sensitivity may have prevented the full expression of the designer's ideas in the game. However, given the offensive and sensitive nature of the lyrics and the designer's emphasis on freedom of speech, it is difficult to support the argument that political sensitivity was a significant factor holding back the designer.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of "freedom of speech" serves as a disclaimer for the designer's decision-making in the game. This idea is also reflected in the comments, discussions, and reviews of the game. While the game has received mostly positive reviews, a closer examination reveals that the comments primarily focus on the game as a symbol. Therefore, gameplay, game quality, and the rearrangement of Orwell's novel receive little mention or review. Instead, rewrites of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech have become popular comments, expressing a desire to live in a nation where games can be accessed without a VPN, where citizens are loyal to their country, and where opposition is respected and protected. These arguments are based on the idea of freedom of speech and extend beyond this value, advocating for basic civil rights. It indicates that in reality, individuals may not be able to exercise such rights as freely as they desire or imagine.

To further support their argument, an imagined common enemy, referred to as the "evil dictator machine called China," is generated within the comment and discussion section. Unlike the communities of *The Wall* and *Devotion*, where there is active participation from players sharing the social and cultural context of Mainland China who provide context and engage in debates, *Animal Farm: China* primarily attracts players who are critical of the Chinese government. The absence of Chinese players in the comment section transforms potential debates into presentations. Othering

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32 See https://steamcommunity.com/id/Hexexie/recommended/1203660/ and
https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198181854077/recommended/1203660/

becomes a way to establish and reinforce one's identity, and without the presence of the "other," the identity of the critics cannot be fully established and presented. Consequently, comments and discussions often contain expressions such as "if you are Pro-Chinese government, don't bother to cancel this" or "Run, the families of Zhao are coming to cancel you,"[33] constructing a stereotypical image of an oppressive China that suppresses opposing opinions. This reinforces the game's representation of the fight for freedom of expression. Additionally, similar to *The Wall* singling out China through the Great Firewall, the comments, and discussions also employ specific Chinese references to single out China, further perpetuating the notion that China is set against the rest of the world. This narrative of "China against the world" reached its climax when the game was eventually and inevitably removed from Steam globally.

However, before we accuse the Chinese government or the Chinese community of cancelling the game either through political influence or by reporting offensive content to Steam, it is important to recognise that being cancelled is the ultimate way for the game, as well as the comments and discussions, to make their argument. Thus, when creating the imagined China, the comments and discussions consistently link China with the cancellation of the game. Furthermore, the comment section also includes trolls who generate "noise" by commenting on politically sensitive keywords. Combined with the highly offensive content in the game, it appears that the designer and players may intentionally have sought the game's cancellation to prove their point that China is a nation that suppresses expression, using the game's demise as evidence. As the game only offers a simplified Chinese version, the presented and expressed relation between an absent China and the rest of the world resonates with arguments proposed by Bahdad and Williams (2010). These arguments primarily come from individuals in mainland China, which superficially lends authority to their claims, specifically targeting freedom of speech and making political appeals within the game and its associated discussions. By exploiting their identity, a self-Orientalist argument about China is presented, amplifying the differences between China and the Western world. Moreover, given the amplified dualism between China and the Western world and the focus on political topics, their call to action is clear: they aim to challenge the political foundation of the CCP and advocate for Westernisation in China, a sensitive and potentially dangerous topic to address. In a way, their identification as "putschists" accurately captures their intent.

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[33] "The families of Zhao", in Chinese "赵家人", is an expression derivative from the novella The True Story of Ah Q by Lu Xun which became online slang recently in China to refer to people in power.

So far, both *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China* have employed the idea of "with Chinese characteristics" to highlight and exaggerate the differences between China and the rest of the world. While some attempts have been made to encourage understanding, the Chinese perspective is often absent or takes a passive role in the interpretation and exchange of ideas. However, in the case of the game *Devotion*, a more intense and assertive Chinese voice emerges, challenging not only Western narratives and ideologies but also the perceived authority of the West.

In previous sections, the Chinese voice was either inactive or played a defensive role in shaping the image of China and its relationship with the Western world. However, in the context of *Devotion*, a more active Chinese voice can be observed. Some individuals, who may subscribe to the ideology of China as a threat, might even perceive it as aggressive. *Devotion*, initially known as a horror game and hailed by many players and industry media as "the pride of Chinese gaming,"[34] faced a sudden turn of events that stripped it of its Chinese identity in less than a week. Consequently, the comments and discussions surrounding the game shifted from focusing on the game itself and triggering memories to a political confrontation between Chinese and Western ideologies.

From "the light of Chinese games" to a "putschist game"

In early 2019, Red Candle, a game studio based in Taiwan, China, developed and published *Devotion*, following their previous game *Detention*. *Devotion* is a horror game that initially depicts a family in Taiwan, China, affected by the brainwashing of a cult. The game's mise-en-scène and gameplay create a "walking simulator" experience. Ferri and his colleagues argue that walking simulators are "efficient vehicle[s] for the presentation of certain kinds of knowledge, in the same way in which papers, conference presentations and books are" (Ferri et al. 2016). Carbo-Mascarell (2016) defines walking simulators as "games with an immersive use of exploration as a core mechanic utilised for environmental storytelling purposes" (2). The design of the mise-en-scène sets up the nostalgia and memories for players from Mainland, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, China. It recreates a 1980s apartment with familiar elements like ceramic-tiled bathrooms, green iron front doors, and televisions with buttons and knobs. Moreover, as former studies (Muscat et al. 2016) suggested, walking simulators tends to employ a limited player agency, some even to none, reflects a distinctive procedural rhetoric. The game would challenge players with themes and motifs that necessitate interpretation, rather than interactive gameplay.

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[34] See the report of the game: https://theinitium.com/zh-Hans/article/20190228-youropinion-devotion

The deliberate design choice of restricting player actions within a maze-like structure can be understood from two perspectives. First, from a narrative perspective, the design encourages players to focus on the main story, as the only option, apart from uninstalling, is to complete the narrative. This aligns the game more with interactive cinema or narrative experiences rather than traditional gameplay. The second perspective draws from Bogost's notion of the "simulation gap" (2007), previously mentioned as the designer's use of enthymemes that need to be filled in by players during gameplay. The spatial design and restricted movement create an exclusive interaction, leading to a predetermined interpretation. This erases player agency, transforming the game into a "walking simulator" where players are guided and commanded by the game itself. By removing agency, players are compelled to follow the designer's intended path, completing the pre-determined story and arriving at the singular ending and judgement of the game—a commentary on cults. Counterbalancing the cult's brainwashing is the theme of family love and the potential for a promising life for a young girl. This simple yet emotionally impactful story provides players from the Greater Chinese region with an opportunity to reminisce about their own lives within the game's mise-en-scène and spatial design, reawakening the emotional roller-coaster associated with the dread of the cult through the restriction of agency (Mateas, 2010).

Thus, the well-designed game successfully evokes nostalgic memories and received recognition as a significant contribution to the Chinese gaming industry. Despite being developed by a Taiwan-based studio, players from Mainland China embraced the game due to their emotional connection and the historical evidence supporting Taiwan's position as an integral part of China. This sentiment is demonstrated by the widespread streaming of the game by Mainland Chinese players on various platforms, with numerous play-throughs attracting millions of views on BiliBili alone. The game's popularity and positive reception remove any doubts regarding the contribution of Mainland players.

However, an unexpected incident led to a complete reversal of the game's identity and perception, transforming it from the "light of Chinese game" to a controversial and politically charged entity. On February 23, 2019, a Mainland Chinese player discovered a hidden message within the game that appeared to mock or insult Chairman Xi Jinping. The message depicted Chairman Xi as Winnie the Pooh and contained derogatory language[35]. It was later revealed that the game had already

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[35] For many reasons, I will not put the picture in the dissertation. Instead, I will describe the content of the picture. For people who are interested, the picture is so famous that you could easily find it using Google. Thanks to SteamDB and some technology in the grey area, I have viewed the Fuzhou first-handed to prove it is real and is not a hoax.

addressed and resolved this issue in an update on February 21, 2019[36], indicating their awareness of the offensive content. However, the player who discovered the message had not updated their version in time. The studio issued an apology, stating that the picture was an "art material" sourced online and mistakenly included in the game during the testing phase, unintentionally overlooked in the final version.

The impact on the game was significant. Within a day, the game's positive review score plummeted from 95% to 40%, and on February 24, 2019, the game was removed from the Steam platform. The co-publisher and promoter in Mainland China swiftly severed ties with the game, leading bankruptcy of the co-publisher and promoter months later. *Devotion*'s experience can be likened to a failed rocket, soaring to great heights only to explode catastrophically. Consequently, there are calls for reflection on the damage caused to the video game industry, particularly in Taiwan, as a result of this incident. All previous play-throughs, reviews, and promotional materials were subsequently taken down.

All of the aforementioned actions, such as the removal of fan productions and the influx of negative comments, reflect the emergence of spontaneous grassroots nationalism, often referred to as cyber-nationalism or techno-nationalism (Xu, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021). Xu, Kaye, and Zeng (2021) characterise Chinese cyber-nationalism as a "bottom-up spontaneous nationalistic sentiment fuelled by Internet users' perceptions of external threats against China" (6). Content creators who took down their productions state that their actions were voluntary and they had not been instructed by anyone. They felt that the game had gone too far and betrayed their expectations, leading to the labelling of the game as a "putschist [of Chinese] game."[37]

However, the concept of Chinese cyber-nationalism as conceptualised by previous studies may present some challenges, particularly in separating China as a civilisation from China as a nation, as it primarily focuses on the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Gris, 2005; Wu, 2007; Liu, 2012; Xu et al., 2021). For instance, the label "the light of Chinese game" suggests an interpretation of Chinese as meaning a culture or civilisation, while at the same time the label refers specifically to China as a country, namely the PRC. Initially, this reading seems logical as the game was taken down due to an insult targeting a political figure in the PRC. However, it fails to explain the

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[36] One report suggested that a player from Taiwan spotted this picture, treated it as an Easter egg and circulated it on February 21st, and then the studio found out and issued an update.

[37] This comment is made by a streamer on BiliBili whose play-through of Devotion has hit over 3 million views. After taking down his or her video, the content creator made this comment, saying that he would not want to be associated with the game, that all of the income from that video would be donated to a charity and after three days, he or she would delete this comment. Similar claims and actions can be found from many content creators and industry media at that time. Thus, I respect their anonymity and I will not disclose the screenshot or links to their articles.

perceived "betrayal" experienced by players from Mainland China. Several comments express the sentiment that the game should have been more cautious and avoided including any political messages, not just in "art material," but altogether. Some suggest that the designer made a poor choice in creating a game that smuggled a contextless political message, providing no constructive suggestions or inspiration, solely serving the self-interest of a particular individual or studio. This decision came at the expense of a well-designed game and a potentially significant market that may now hesitate to support future game releases.

Hence, it is thought-provoking to explore the concept of "Chinese" in relation to both civilisation and as an acknowledgment of China's national unity. The actions taken by the game designer and studio indicate a lack of respect for the political traditions in Mainland China, which they should have been aware of. This disregard for the political context of Mainland China extends further to be seen as representative of Taiwan independence activists. Consequently, it poses a threat to the conceptual idea of China as a nation. Therefore, when we refer to China as a civilisation, it encompasses the historical and contemporary aspects, with Taiwan being an integral part of it. Thus, the act of "back-stabbing", from the mainland China player's perspective, which involves disrespecting another's political traditions and represents secession from China, also becomes a betrayal of Chinese culture, particularly Chinese history, which is currently preserved by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Prior to the global removal of the game (initially only taken down in the Chinese market), the situation mirrored the analysis conducted on *The Wall*. Players from Mainland China expressed their disappointment, providing contextual information for others to understand the reasons behind their sentiments. Unlike the comments and discussions on *The Wall* or *Animal Farm: China*, where the voices of Mainland China players go unheard, the comment section of *Devotion* is flooded with expressions of anger and appeals for understanding from Mainland China players. However, similar to the analysis of *The Wall*, presenting context that contradicts Western knowledge did not necessarily foster understanding among those with a Western mentality and ideology. It often led to the dismissal of the provided context based on their existing knowledge. The confrontation required a catalyst, and that catalyst emerged soon after, specifically within one day: the global removal of *Devotion*.

A Taste of the West's own medicine

In previous online discussions, netizens engaged in debates with individuals outside Mainland China regarding issues that either resulted in misunderstandings or offended China. These debates, often referred to as "friendly exchanges," primarily focused on

separatist movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong. These discussions typically followed a three-stage development process (Li, 2016; Wang, 2016; Mao, Cai, 2017).[38]

During the first stage, there was a raw explosion of disagreement and anger, often accompanied by strong language and occasional verbal attacks. Memes were the primary tool used during this stage to convey messages. The second stage involved a shift towards patriotic discourse, which centred around patriotic values, theories of the time, and Chinese history, particularly the "one-China principle." Participants in these discussions addressed questions raised by those interested in the trend, the discourse itself, and the peculiar memes. They engaged in serious debates, providing reasons and contexts to support their opinions, rather than simply expressing bursts of rage. The third and final stage was characterised by a focus on "friendly exchanges." During this stage, participants from both sides shared their favourite idols, discussed delicious dishes, and showcased treasured scenery. They even invited each other to visit their respective countries. Initially, discussions surrounding *Devotion* seemed to align with this model. The overall conversation and debates were centred around this script, and by February 23rd, in the group discussion on *Devotion*, people had already made amends and were extending invitations to one another (Steam, 2019). However, the game was taken down globally the following day, February 24th.

Accusations soon arose when the game was eventually removed from Steam worldwide. Players from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, China, and other foreign countries claimed that this action was a result of "cancel culture" driven by extreme nationalism or, as they put it, brainwashed nationalism[39]. They viewed it as an exercise of autocratic power over cultural products, resulting in the suppression of freedom of speech. These accusations initially appeared in the comment section as a counterbalance to the flood of negative reviews for the game. However, even today, for those who still own the game (such as myself) and can still view the comments, negative reviews continue to dominate the comment section.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the debates in the comment section resemble those around *The Wall*. Individuals who align with Western ideology employ an Orientalist discourse, arguing that freedom of speech and free expression in cultural products should be unconditional and universal. Conversely, players from Mainland China point out that, regardless of political agenda or implications, using derogatory language without any context is rude and offensive, especially when insulting the

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[38] The stages are inducted according to their "instruction" and rules. Beyond academic research, you can also find several reports on the issue at: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/zg/2016-01-21/doc-ifxnuvxe8316358.shtml, https://web.archive.org/web/20160224075404/http://www.pingwest.com/fighting-with-fun/.
[39] For example, the comment of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQZN_kLHdGk

president of a country. This confrontation stems from the stark differences between Western political traditions that consider mocking political figures as exercising freedom of speech and the Chinese political tradition of critique, which places limits on exaggeration. Additionally, since the Chairman of China represents the nation, criticism towards him should not be random or devoid of context.

Therefore, the discussion surrounding the accusation and its response can be analysed through the lens of Orientalism. Encompassing a broader critique of how the West perceives and portrays Eastern cultures, it would help us to analyse the ways in which Chinese actions are interpreted, possibly revealing underlying biases or stereotypes in these interpretations. As stated by Said, the production of knowledge about the Orient reflects and sometimes establishes a relationship of power, domination, and varying degrees of complex hegemony (Said 1978: 5). Thus, within the discourse of Orientalism, the relation between discourse about the Chinese context and the Western tradition mirrors the relationship between China and the West, with the West exercising authority by claiming their ideology is universal and deeming the Chinese context as incorrect. If we follow the relationship between the West and the East, particularly the Islamic East, which has often been scrutinised in Orientalism-related studies, it inevitably leads to what Mutman (1992) predicted: "[Western power] is sovereign without even appearing, or appearing victorious only afterwards, once that space is guaranteed as neutral, blank" (Mutman 1992: 169). Western power is produced and positioned in the "universal position of knowledge" (Mutman 1992: 170). However, as stressed by Said, the production of the "other," or the process of othering, is inherently linked to political power. Considering the current global political and economic power relations between China and the Western world, this Western-centric Orientalist mentality would inevitably be challenged in the discussion of *Devotion*. This also aligns with Šisler's (2008) argument that video games possess the potential to challenge Orientalising stereotypes and schematizations. However, the game *Devotion* took a different path. By mocking the President, *Devotion* inadvertently reinforced stereotypical representations of China. But it was the players who boycotted the game, who actually challenged these representations, through the forms of player agency argued for by Stang (2019).

One way to address the offensive message and the accusation is to provide explanations and context, in an effort to seek understanding and empathy. However, if we accept that Orientalism is a "system of knowledge," we must also acknowledge that certain contextual information may not be filtered through, thus the Orientalist mentality remains unchallenged and unchanged. Therefore, another approach has emerged and been spontaneously employed to further challenge and confront the Orientalist discourse and knowledge system. This approach arises from current global

political and economic relations, which perpetuate the dichotomy between China and the West, forming the foundation of Orientalism. This alternative discourse and knowledge system can be seen as Occidentalism, which can be perceived as anti-Westernism when taken to the extreme. Moreover, this discourse can also be observed in the discussion of *Devotion*.

Instead of solely emphasising the Chinese context, players who hold an Occidentalist mentality directly challenge Western values and ideologies. In the *Devotion* discussion, criticism quickly escalated from discussing freedom of expression to accusing China of being an authoritarian nation. However, this time, players started questioning the very idea of freedom of speech, particularly its universality and absoluteness. To support their arguments, they referenced incidents such as WikiLeaks and Snowden to expose the hypocrisy of the West's claim to freedom of speech, while also establishing a counterargument against the concept itself [40]. Since Western countries, who invented the concept of freedom of speech, do not always adhere to their own principles, these players argue that the idea of freedom of speech is unattainable and should be completely abandoned. This interpretation deliberately oversimplifies and misunderstands the concept of freedom of speech as absolute freedom, which can be viewed as an Occidentalist way of understanding the West from an Eastern perspective for the sake of their argument.

Furthermore, their argument escalates from questioning freedom of speech to criticising Western political ideologies, the rule of law, freedom, equality, and ultimately democracy, mirroring the accusations they face. To counter the accusations and engage in the debate, they present evidence such as continuous shooting tragedies, racial discrimination incidents and legal cases like LE PIÈGE AMÉRICAIN and Wanzhou Meng[41]. These examples are used to corroborate their argument that the West exhibits hypocrisy and double standards in relation to their own values, aiming to challenge and discredit the Western value system.

The metaphor of a "mirror" has been employed in discussing the relationship between Orientalism and Occidentalism on multiple occasions (see Sadri, 1996; Coronil, 1996; Buruma and Margalit, 2004; Joffé 2007; Cooper 2008). While there are disagreements (see Cole 1992, Chen, 1995), superficially, the arguments put forth by Orientalists and Occidentalists share similarities in terms of rhetoric, structure, and claims. However, considering the relationship between discourse and power, Occidentalists, especially those from the East, do not possess the power to define, imagine, and reshape the

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[40] See the comment section of the play-through: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpJOdJGHStU, and another discussion video of the incident: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hK2Us6PE3lo

[41] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47765974 and https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-14/Huawei-Alstom-A-tale-of-two-companies--S7Q60KEUKs/index.html.

West in the same way Orientalists reshaped the East. Thus, one can observe differences in the formation of arguments: the accusations and criticisms against the Chinese government for allegedly pressuring Steam to globally remove the game are based on values that the accusers and critics believe should be universally applied. On the other hand, those who challenge Orientalist mentalities formulate their arguments based on robust evidence, evidence that has been discovered, analysed, and reported by the Western world itself to ensure authenticity.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in human rights reports compiled by the US government and the Chinese government (Li, 2017). The US human rights report that targets China and accuses it of violating universal human rights is based on "sources" and "individuals with access." Conversely, the Chinese version of the human rights report on US human rights violations is grounded in reports by CNN, The New York Times, US think tank reports, and official releases. These differences in argumentative development suggest that the West still holds a higher position in the global power structure compared to China, despite China having become the second-largest economy a decade ago (The Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2011). However, the global situation has evolved significantly since 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2016, on the 95th anniversary of the CCP, Chairman Xi proposed the "four matters of confidence," urging the entire Party to have confidence in "the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xi, 2016). These four matters of confidence, particularly confidence in the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, have been quoted in discussions by many players from Mainland China as theoretical support and a source of morale in their "battle." Some of these debates continue, but their dynamics changed after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Due to differing approaches in managing the pandemic, Mainland China managed to contain the Covid pandemic within half a year, while it remained severe in many other parts of the world by September 2021. As a result, by May 2020, when China had only sporadic cases while the pandemic was raging outside Mainland China, arguments surrounding "confidence in the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics" emerged as weapons to criticise Western ideologies. In these arguments, the development of the pandemic further exposed the West's perceived hypocrisy, particularly regarding the concept of "democracy." According to the CCP's interpretation of democracy (Hua, 2021), democratic principles or a government should prioritise protecting the lives of its citizens. Moreover, debates in the West about wearing masks and achieving herd immunity led to discussions that reevaluated and redefined the idea of "freedom," especially the "freedom of speech."

These arguments share a common theme: redefining ideological concepts that serve as cornerstones of Western political ideology.

This phenomenon can be interpreted using a combination of ideas from Vukovich's research on Sinological Orientalism (2012) and Chen's research on Occidentalism in post-Mao China (1995). On one hand, China has incorporated the ideas of democracy, the rule of law, and freedom into its socialist system, which aligns with Vukovich's theory of becoming-the-sameness. However, upon reflection, it becomes evident that as China progresses, particularly with the rise of the "China threat theory," it seeks understanding while challenging the exclusive interpretation of political ideologies dominated by the Western world. This challenge aligns with and further develops Chen's Occidentalism, especially official Occidentalism. Rather than merely interpreting Western political ideologies and society for the Chinese audience, China, with its economic development, also aims to exercise and circulate its own interpretation of Western ideologies and society in the Western world. And thus to tell China's story well, where here China's story doesn't mean the story of China, it means China's narrative, its interpretation of ideas. This serves the dual purpose of fitting in and establishing/maintaining its own identity.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for the Orient, specifically China, to educate the Occident. As arguments challenging the Western understanding of democracy arise and the priority of democracy is redefined as protecting the lives of citizens, some argue that Western nations are unwilling to adopt China's successful pandemic-fighting strategies due to ideological reasons, even if it comes at the cost of citizens' lives. Thus, while before the pandemic, defensive/aggressive actions by players from Mainland China broke through the Orientalism discourse system using Occidentalist discourse, they were still guided by the prevailing East-West power structure. The pandemic served as a game changer, enabling players from Mainland China not only to have confidence in the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics but also to reach an advantageous position to further challenge Western ideologies and their dominant position. The only counterattack became conspiracy theories suggesting that China deliberately created the virus and manipulated numbers to make the pandemic appear to disappear, which quickly lost credibility as the pandemic unfolded.

Upon analysing the former discussions, then, it becomes apparent that the comments and discussions surrounding the game *Devotion* shifted focus. The initial discourse about the game itself diminished in comparison to the later political discussions, which were prompted by various game design elements, particularly its art and narrative. The popularity of *Devotion* propelled these political discussions into a

chaotic state, characterised by unambiguous dichotomous positions. Consequently, the essence of the discussion surrounding the *Devotion* incident can be understood as a confrontation between two discourse systems, Orientalism and Occidentalism, both of which perpetuate the dualism between the East and the West. However, due to China's increasing global influence and the opportune timing of the Covid-19 pandemic, players from Mainland China possessed a certain power to challenge not only Western ideologies or interpretations of values masquerading as universal, but also the dominant position of the West. It should be noted that, despite this, the West still holds overall authority. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that when political issues and discussions arise, the dichotomy between China and the Western world becomes more pronounced and absolute. This dynamic complicates the image of China in my analysis as it reflects the political, economic, and historical context of the period under examination. The uniqueness of China's position becomes more apparent due to the extreme dichotomy between China and the West.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In the last three chapters, this thesis has discussed the image of China in and around different video games separately. Consequently, this concluding chapter attempts to bring the separate analyses together, demonstrating a more intricate view of China in and around video games, corresponding to the mindset of Orientalism, Sinological-Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the social and cultural environment of China and global development.

In the first analytical chapter, I introduced a construction of China in games based on both traditional Orientalism and on Sinological-Orientalism. Games portray China with both stereotypical interpretations, coinciding with current China threat theory, and focusing on the sameness between China and the West. In focusing on sameness, games can be perceived to attempt to include China in the Western interpretation of the world. Analysing *Civilization V* and *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, such a multi-layered image of China is established and shaped through the games' narratives, as well as their procedurality. At the same time, such an image is also challenged by the players through in-game actions, such as playing and modding, as well as out-of-game actions, such as forum discussion.

Unlike the first analytical chapter inspecting two games designed within a less-Chinese cultural context, the second analytical chapter examines two games designed under a Chinese cultural context: *Chinese Parents* and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*. The consideration of future generations, the lifestyle when growing-up, the notion of "Xia" and "Jianghu": all these testify to a three-layered Chineseness as well as the relationship between China and the Western world. First, unlike the Orientalist discourse contrasting the Orient with the Occident, the construction of Chineseness emphasises China only, which echoes the international communication policy of China: telling the Chinese story. The other, in this case the West, is absent when building an image of China that reflects Chineseness. Second, not only could the absent West empathise with the portrayed Chinese experience, but the portrayed Chinese experience possesses the merits of certain social statuses or socio-cultural contexts. The idea of Chineseness develops beyond being exclusive to China. Chineseness is present in a way that one who is Chinese would recognise such an experience, but recognising the experience will not necessarily make one Chinese. However, this does not mean the refusal of exclusiveness within Chineseness. Instead, Chineseness becomes a multi-layered concept.

Although I attempt to discuss my interest in the image of China in and around video games without discussing it from a political perspective, the political context of video game production and consumption cannot and should not be neglected, as it is a cultural product. Therefore, the last analytical chapter highlights three video games that deliberately or unpredictably engage with political discussion. In the political discussion within video games, the difference between China and the Western world is amplified and becomes mutually exclusive. However, in forum discussions about these games, some players express the view that political and ideological differences can coexist with each other. The context of China, or the idea of "with Chinese characteristics," should be understood and respected. This is not about refusing the idea of universal values but instead refusing a universal standard of operation of such values, a "reflexive universalist" argument according to Turner and Khondker (2010: 36). Yet, participants bring a more confrontational discourse into the discussion about the *Devotion* incident, an Occidentalist discourse which circles back to the extreme dualism between China and the West. In summary, then, this study has attempted to describe the various yet limited images of Chineseness constructed in and around video games, and, more importantly, how these images reflect, reinforce, and challenge the stereotypical image of China according to Orientalism.

Although images of China have been discussed separately in relation to different games, this thesis aims to provide a more comprehensive discussion highlighting the intertextuality and interdiscursivity between these representations. The image of China presented in a game varies depending on the game genre and its socio-cultural context. As a result, the interpretation of Chinese culture as aggressive and barbaric or as one with the spirit of Xia, a Chinese chivalry story, is influenced by the presentation of the video game and the player's own socio-cultural context. Video games offer a platform and possibility to generate various interpretations, as argued by Bogost (2010), who suggested that video games simplify and flatten how the real world operates, creating a simulation of the real world. This simplifying and flattening process becomes a breeding ground for stereotypical reading of culture and identity, as argued by Hall (1997) when discussing how stereotypes are socially constructed. However, because of the simplification and flattening, whether in the game's narrative elements or in its procedurality, it's easier for players to spot, identify and react to these stereotypes, either in-game or in discussions of the game. As a result, players can actively join in discussion of the flattened images, as players of *Civilization V*, *Chinese Parents*, and *Devotion* can be seen to do.

In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) argues that the East in the Orientalist discourse is "a system of representations framed by an entire set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (202-203).

However, when we inspect video games, besides political games, as discursive practices, such representation systems are not homeostatic, as demonstrated by the ludo-narrative dissonance in the games I have analysed, such as *Civilization V*, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, and *Chinese Parents*. The dissonance of the game further supports what we have discussed: the idea of a multi-layered Chineseness. Such dissonance, or using Foucault's concept, discontinuity (1971: 22), compromises the harmonious totality of a discourse, whether it is an Orientalist stereotypical reading into the image of China or a Sinological Orientalist-focused sameness. These video games are not a realisation of those specific discourses, which we must acknowledge and accept when understanding the image of China or any other nation or culture. Thus, the construction of a nation's or a culture's image becomes plural and open to discussion and challenge, especially considering the nature of interactivity, or what Aarseth (1997) conceptualised as the "ergodic" nature of video games.

Video games, as a medium, offer greater potential for "pluralising the reader's intake," as conceptualised by Barthes (Johnson 1981: 168), due to player agency both in and beyond the game. Whether it is in the discussion section of NGA on *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, in the CivClub mod sharing section on *Civilization V*, or different play-throughs of *Chinese Parents* and *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy* on BiliBili, players interact, experience, express, and debate their interpretation of China with games as well as other players. Player agency further enriches or pluralises the construction and interpretation of China in and around video games. However, acknowledging the plural China does not mean that each interpretation weighs the same. Previous studies (e.g., Aarseth, 1997, 2004, 2012; Bogost, 2006, 2010; Šisler, 2008, 2017; Wirman, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017, 2018; Saber and Webber, 2017) suggest that the procedurality and narrative of a game serve as ways to express and even persuade players of certain arguments. Therefore, the predetermined image of China in games would guide and even dominate players' perceived image of China, which serves as the premise of Stang's appeal (2019) to a "real player agency" outside the video game. Such a hierarchy is also demonstrated in Kücklich's study (2005) on modders, which states that modding struggles between becoming "a counter-culture" or "prey to the neo-liberal ideology of the games industry," despite having access to the software development kit that allows them to transcend the rule system.

Another phenomenon that this research has only briefly mentioned is live streaming, which may possess more potential in both reinforcing and challenging the pre-designed messages of a game. T.L. Taylor (2018: 73-79) has identified multiple layers in the production of live streaming, including set design, performance, critique, and evaluation, sociality, material, and digital infrastructure, and commercial frameworks.

Among all these layers, the game, though crucial, is only one layer. Taylor concludes that game streamers engage in a playstyle called "performative play" (2018: 86). Considering game streaming as entertainment, streamers need to communicate "often-inexpressible and visceral experiences" (Taylor 2018: 86) through live streaming. For example, when playing *Chinese Parents*, foreign streamers and video content creators actively connect their gaming experience with their own or their friends' experiences. Moreover, their performance and their identity – both their self-identification and stereotypical assumptions about them based on their race, gender, and background – are in a dialectical relationship. A streamer's self-identification frames the way they engage with the game. For example, when playing *Chinese Parents*, Mononobe Alice, a virtual Youtuber who presents as a 16-year-old Japanese JK (high school student), refers to the growing-up experience in the game as an experience she is currently experiencing to maintain her performance. At the same time, streamers' performances further construct and reinforce their existing identity and sometimes generate new identities. Coinciding with the audience's expectations, and thus sometimes being stereotypical, allows the streamer to interact with the game using different approaches. Furthermore, due to the relationship between streamers and audiences, the multiple interpretations of a nation's image created from a streamer's live streaming or play-through videos could contradict or amplify the established image.

In addition, this research transcends the analysis of China's portrayal in video games and examines the broader structure of Orientalism used to form such images, with their socio-cultural and historical surroundings. Whether it is Edward Said's Orientalism, Vukovich's Sinological Orientalism, or Patterson's techno-Orientalism, these theories share a common argument that acknowledges the existence of a dualistic understanding of the West and the Orient. This understanding is dominated by the West, projecting their interpretation of the Orient while simultaneously exerting their power and influence over it. Moreover, this dualism is supported, reinforced, and justified by the power and knowledge of the West. For example, in Vukovich's Sinological Orientalism, he notes the "uneven imbalance in terms of knowledge production" (Vukovich 2012: 138) between the West and China, wherein the Western world writes, discusses, and engages with issues related to China. Therefore, "the power/knowledge relationship... applies to China and its discursive production in the West" (Vukovich 2012: 85). Similar arguments can also be found in discussions on techno-Orientalism. For instance, when investigating the techno-Orientalism of Japan, Lozano-Mendez (2010) argues that it is established by the West with a power-knowledge structure that presents their hegemony, arranging the role played by East Asia in the era of globalisation. Patterson's research challenges the techno-Orientalism argument in video games that "see [s] Asia as a space of

manufacture/production and America as a site of development/design" (Patterson, 2020: 9). As a result, the image of China in video games is not only produced "as being awfully similar to the older, more obviously orientalist mode" (Vukovich, 2012: 9) but also based on the idea of power/knowledge relations, constructing and justifying the knowledge of China.

As argued by Vukovich, the "real problematic" in Said's argument is "the uneven and combined, global production of knowledge" (Vukovich 2012: 20). However, what is worth noting is that the idea of knowledge, as well as the nexus of knowledge and power, is itself problematic, if not more so. In any version of Orientalism, Orientalism is a system of knowledge that guides the understanding and reconstruction of the Orient in the West. Such a system of knowledge is not only based on academic research in Western societies and academia, but also protected and influenced by Western hegemony. Therefore, as best demonstrated in political games, the flattening construction of China works smoothly when judging the Chinese political reality under Western political ideology without any context. Such judgments on China are established upon and further reinforce the orientalist knowledge of China. Such knowledge, as well as the nexus of knowledge and power, is the crucial lens when understanding the relationship between the Orient and Occident and the distortion of the Orient. As argued by Said, when Orientalism is seen as a system of knowledge, as an academic tradition, the stereotypical construction, and presentation of China acquire authority and start to accumulate, which cannot be easily dismissed. Attempts to challenge such stereotypical construction are an attempt to dismiss the knowledge endorsed by academics, authorised by institutions, and empowered by political and economic powers. Therefore, combining the aforementioned flattening and simplifying process of video games, the attempt and potential of video games can be seen as an added layer of context to reinforce or challenge such knowledge. Here, what is emphasised is the aspect of challenging.

From the perspective of challenge, the essence of understanding such a challenge lies in the relationship between knowledge and context. The idea of context holds a crucial position in critical discourse analysis, as asserted by Titscher et al. (2002), who argue that "all discourses...can...only be understood with reference to their context" (166). However, within my discussion of knowledge and context, there exist two distinct contexts. When examining the knowledge aspect of Orientalism, Orientalism can be viewed as both context-free and context-sensitive, concepts borrowed from the seminal work of Sack et al. (Sack et al., 1978).

Being context-free, Orientalism can be universally applied to describe the Orient and the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. On the other hand, being

context-sensitive allows Orientalism to adapt to various contexts, encompassing social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Dirlik (1996: 110) aptly points out that the issue with orientalism lies not in orientalism itself, but rather in its implications for power within different social and political contexts. In his critique of Orientalism and Occidentalism, Gu (2013) argues that they fail to offer "constructive theories that are conducive to the production of knowledge" (Gu 2013: 59). While he proposes that knowledge and academic research possess a relatively neutral nature, his criticism appears to overlook the role of power and the power relations between the West and the Orient in shaping knowledge production.

As a result, the tenets of Orientalism endure across ages, locations, and historical contexts, perpetuated and reinforced by various cultural products, including video games. However, due to the power-knowledge relationship, challenging the Orientalist mentality merely by adding contextual information becomes a daunting task. Like Said's characterisation of Orientalism as a system of knowledge, it acts as an accepted grid filtering the Orient into Western consciousness (Said 1978: 7), leaving contextual information filtered and disregarded. Consequently, the Western stereotypical understanding of the Orient is not rooted in ignorance but rather a result of the prevailing system of knowledge.

In this research, particularly within the discussion of political games, one can observe that different interpretations devolve into "monologues" rather than "conversations." For instance, player interactions in the Steam discussion section on "with Chinese characteristics" exemplify this trend. Chinese players argue against the copy-paste replication of the Western political system in China, deeming it inappropriate and doomed to fail. Regardless of supporting material, social context, or evidence presented, arguments influenced by the Orientalist or Sinological Orientalist mentality tend to oversimplify and flatten the discourse, advocating the universality of Western values such as democracy and freedom. Vukovich emphasises that Sinological Orientalism's main statement functions as authorised knowledge, making challenging such knowledge a complex endeavour that involves not only confronting the knowledge itself but also the endorsing and supporting power structures.

As we delve into the second chapter concerning the relationship between the three Orientalisms delineated by Said, it becomes evident that knowledge and the knowledge-power dynamics regarding the Orient serve to reinforce and justify the existence of an "ontological and epistemological distinction" (Said 1978: 3) between the East and the West. Said's argument and conclusion must be understood within its historical context. Particularly, when discussing the modern Orientalist's perspective on the Orient and Occident relationship, Said describes the modernisation of the

Orient. He contends that modern Orientalist research seeks to contemporise the Orient, rescuing it from obscurity, alienation, and otherness that they themselves have attributed to it (Said 1978: 122).

Thus, the dualism between the Orient and the West, especially the fundamental differences emphasised between them, forms the basis for Western involvement and intervention in issues pertaining to the Orient, often in the guise of modernisation. Vukovich (2012: 5) posits that the logic behind Sinological Orientalism aligns with the "missionary discourse and the older French universalist logic of the civilising mission." Accentuating these differences allows the assimilation of the Orient into the Western framework, thereby maintaining the power dynamics between the West and the East. This mentality is observable in the portrayal of China in *Civilization V*, particularly in the selection of Chinese wonders. Additionally, it surfaces in discussions about the freedom of speech concerning *The Wall* and *Animal Farm: China*. The argument put forth by the designers and some players in the comments section suggests that the freedom of speech is a universal concept, irrespective of context. This universal application of Western ideologies corresponds to the Orientalist mentality described by Said as the process of "converting the Orient ... into something else...connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms of the West" (Said 1978: 68). Such a perspective ultimately led Said, in his time, to contend that in the Orient, there is "no corresponding equivalent" (Said 1978: 205) to Orientalism, primarily due to the disparity in power between the Orient and the West.

Whether it's Occidentalism in China argued by Chen (2005) or the Occidentalism, or anti-Westernism, proposed by Buruma and Margalit (2004), Occidentalism, much like Orientalism, is *for* the Western public, and *targets* the Eastern public. In their works, Occidentalism becomes a counterargument to Orientalism, essentially attempting to navigate the relationship with the West in culture, economy, and politics. However, unlike Orientalism, which serves as the rationale for Western intervention in the Orient, Occidentalism operates entirely inwardly, as a reflexive coping mentality.

But, as demonstrated in the discussion around *Devotion*, in certain instances Chinese players forego the method of conversation in which they provide additional information or socio-cultural and historical context to help people with different contexts understand the situation and convey the Chinese side of the story. Instead, a new counter-discourse is employed to confront the Orientalist discourse. This discourse stems from the Occidentalist perspective, which interprets the West through the lens of the Orient's reality and mentality. Unlike the former Occidentalist discourse that focuses inward, this discourse rejects the Orientalist interpretation of

the Orient. By highlighting the hypocrisy and double standards in Orientalist discourse, such as the flexible standard on freedom of speech, racial equality, and the idea of sovereignty, the new Occidentalist discourse argues that the West has no power or moral standing to judge or involve itself in Chinese issues.

Inheriting the dualism of the East and West, this new Occidentalist discourse further escalates the dualism, creating a stand-off between Orientalism and Occidentalism. Moreover, due to China's economic development in the past two decades and the recent pandemic, China holds greater weight in discussions of global issues. This counter-discourse to confront the Orientalist discourse can also be observed in official settings. For example, in the US-China Summit in Alaska 2021, senior Chinese diplomat Jiechi Yang responded to US State Secretary Blinken's opening remarks by stating, "in front of the Chinese side, the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength" (Yang, 2021). Hence, a more direct East and West dualism may be observed in the future, one that is much more explicit than the dualism identified by Said and/or Vukovich. This dualism is not derived from universalist ideology but rather acknowledges the differences between cultures and/or nations, necessitating respect for diversity.

Therefore, one can deduce that the image of China, explored in this thesis in video games, is not only multi-layered but also multiple and co-existing. Moreover, the various images of China are structured with the image constructed by the video game at the centre, surrounded by players' individual interpretations that either coincide with or challenge the game's portrayal. This aligns with the interpretation and meaning of representation proposed by Hall (1970, 2003), Culler (1976), and Foucault (1972). My analysis demonstrates that the interpretation of the game's selected representation of China is diverse, co-existing, and subject to debate. Culler explains that "because it is arbitrary, the sign is totally subject to history, and the combination at the particular moment of a given signifier and signified is a contingent result of the historical process" (Culler 1976: 36). As illustrated by the analysis of the Porcelain Tower in *Civilization V*, the diverse cultural and historical contexts lead different players to interpret the same item differently, reflecting distinct perspectives on the image of China. These interpretations co-exist and engage in dialogue through in-game playing and off-game activities.

However, we should also consider Bogost's designer-centric game ontology and Foucault's knowledge/power theory when discussing the co-existing interpretations. Sicart (2011) criticises the designer-centric game ontology embedded in Bogost's approach, as it may overlook player agency when understanding video games, especially in terms of the game's cultural statement and players' social, cultural, and

historical context. Sicart's argument provides a rationale for employing CDA as the main methodology in this research. Nevertheless, Sicart's criticism complements Bogost's approach rather than replacing it, as procedural rhetoric is built on the recognition that the video game designer holds a dominant position in the relationship between the game and the player. This dominance is also the reason why Stang (2019) argues that "real player agency" can only be found outside the game. Therefore, even though this research has demonstrated many possibilities and potentials for video games to present, reinforce, and even challenge stereotypical representations of China, it is essential to remain aware that the image constructed by the game plays a crucial role in delivering the image of a nation due to its dominant position.

However, there are two crucial areas that remain unexplored in this thesis due to limitations in length and a lack of available material in my case studies. These unaddressed aspects include the issue of gender in and around video games, and the portrayal of "the other" in Chinese games.

The issue of gender in video games has been an ongoing subject of debate and scrutiny within the gaming community and academia. Video games have faced criticism for perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Female characters, in particular, are often depicted in an objectified manner, catering to the male gaze and perpetuating notions of female subservience (see Fox and Bailenson, 2009; Begue et al., 2017). More recently, there have been efforts in the video game industry to alter the design of female characters, either voluntarily or under pressure. Simultaneously, the "Lara phenomenon," based on Lara Croft, the main character of the game *Tomb Raider*, has been observed and studied in recent years (See Jansz and Martis, 2007; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Engelbrecht, 2020).

Within the context of Chinese video games, the gender issue may intersect with Chinese cultural and historical influences. As games serve as a medium for cultural expression and representation, the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes can be influenced by prevailing cultural norms and expectations. For instance, traditional Chinese values may be manifested in video games through depictions of women in subservient or passive roles, reflecting historical gender dynamics, as seen in the game *Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy*. On the other hand, some Chinese games may also challenge traditional gender norms by presenting strong and empowered female characters, breaking away from conventional expectations, as exemplified by *Genshin Impact*, which is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Genshin Impact has sparked a significant discussion regarding the implications of the design of female characters and the female image in China. Before the release of version 2.4, the developers of *Genshin Impact* made an announcement that on the

Chinese server, the design, and artwork of four female characters would be modified in the version 2.4 update. These modifications aimed to desexualise the characters by changing their outfits and motion designs. The decision elicited mixed reactions from players and the gaming community. Some players who were critical of the original design claimed that they had reported *Genshin Impact* to the government for censorship, leading to the changes in character design. These individuals argued that the game itself objectified women through a male gaze, reducing female characters to mere objects of desire for the male audience. They expressed concerns that the game perpetuated harmful gender stereotypes and reinforced traditional notions of female subservience. On the other hand, supporters of the game defended its narrative and gameplay mechanics, asserting that all the female characters in *Genshin Impact* under discussion were depicted as independent and powerful individuals. They argued that the character designs, while aesthetically pleasing, did not diminish the strength or agency of these female protagonists. The debate surrounding *Genshin Impact*'s character design reflects broader discussions on the portrayal of women in video games and popular media. *Genshin Impact* is an appropriate example to help further develop the Lara phenomenon, to highlight and embrace the complexity of the female character in video games.

Additionally, exploring the representation of "the other" in Chinese video games is of utmost importance. As previously discussed, within the context of Chinese games, the portrayal of foreign cultures and nationalities is relatively rare. Adhering to the policy of "telling the Chinese story well", Chinese cultural products, including video games, primarily focus on depicting and portraying Chinese culture and context. Few cultural products dare to confront the collision between Chinese and Western cultures, let alone video games. However, in a notable development in 2022, Lingkong Game took a bold step and released a promotional video for a game called *Showa American Story*. This game marks an unprecedented attempt by a Chinese game studio to approach the topic of "the other" culture from the Chinese perspective. *Showa American Story* can be seen as an alternative viewpoint on Western culture and history, presenting it through a Chinese lens. The game's setting is reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, with a twist on the middle of the 20th century, where Fascism triumphed in World War II, and Japan has occupied the United States. From the promotional video, it appears to depict the adventure of a girl in the Japanese-occupied US. The video garnered significant attention and interest both in China and the Western world. However, at present, detailed information about the game is scarce.

Further research could utilise *Showa American Story* after release, as an illustrative example to understand how Chinese designers approach the representation of different

cultures. The game's innovative approach and its potential impact on the portrayal of the other in video games open up exciting avenues for research. By examining the game's gameplay, narrative, characterisations, and cultural references, scholars can gain valuable insights into how a Chinese game studio interprets and portrays Western culture. Such research could shed light on the complexities of cross-cultural representation in video games and contribute to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive gaming landscape. Research like this holds the potential to enrich our understanding of cultural exchange in the gaming industry and foster mutual appreciation between diverse cultures. As video games continue to evolve as a powerful medium of expression, it is essential for scholars and game developers alike to engage in critical discussions on cultural representation, promoting authentic and respectful portrayals of all cultures within the global gaming community.

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