'She must write herself': Encoding & Adapting Femininity Into Video Game Narratives

Kate King-Smith

Video games have often represented feminine experiences through what Shira Chess defines as a 'designed identity of the woman player' (15). This designed identity has not been 'constructed [and] designed' with the 'real, lived experiences' of feminine players in mind (5) but rather with an 'expectation of how women *should* play' (15). Real, lived experience is cast aside in favour of presumptive stereotypes about femininity, narrowing feminine experience down to themes of 'personal beauty, the care of self and others, domesticity, [and] bodily management' (15). In writing femininity from a merely 'ideological' perspective, Chess argues that, whether as players or as player-characters, women '[do] not exist' in gaming culture as their true selves (24) but rather, as a 'perceived' audience (32) constructed to please economic markets and a presumably male-consumer base.

This simplification of women as potential games 'audiences precipitates their similarly narrow representation in games' narrative construction. Despite progress in recent years toward more representational diversity, mainstream game narrative almost always encourage players to embody a 'traditional highly militarized masculine ideal of strength' over more diverse, marginalised perspectives (Murray 104). This ideal is further associated with 'traditionally valued qualities of challenge, choice, and mastery' (Keogh 170), whereby players continually expect their personal agency to prioritised in a game's design. Brendan Keogh analogises this expectation as integral to the 'hacker' archetype, which describes a 'normative, dominant, technofetishist, and ultimately masculinist' player who plays in search of mastery and control (172). This archetypal identity forms the 'foundational values of videogames' (Keogh 179), inevitably creating stories that prioritise player agency above all else. Playable characters are almost always 'white, middle-class, able-bodied, and cis-gendered' individuals (Chess 171) whose skill and ability in the diegetic game world mirror the 'freedom of social movement' afforded to the 'predominately white, straight, male' game developers in industry (Keogh 185).

In contrast to how feminine experiences are simplified into stereotypes, masculine experiences are foundational to traditional games writing. Such an understanding brings forth an important question: what might a game built from women's true, lived experiences actually look like? Even more pressingly, how might video game writing adapt to better encode femininity in its ludonarrative structure?

This presentation explores how feminine experiences may still yet be '[brought] to writing' in games (Cixous 875) and further proposes that this 'new insurgent writing' (Cixous 880) hinges on confounding the player's attempts at constant control over an avatar's physical and emotional state. This exploration takes on both a critical and creative approach in its investigation, drawing from Helene Cixous' theory of *ecriture feminine* ('women's writing') as both a theoretical framework for analysis and a model for games construction. *Ecriture feminine* calls for writers to 'bring women to writing' (Cixous 875), to write 'through their bodies' and 'invent [a]...language that...wreck[s] partitions, classes, rhetorics, regulations and codes' within patriarchal hegemonies (Cixous 86). In the context of narrative design, this 'feminine practice of writing' (Cixous 883) defies traditional structures in casting 'designed identity' aside (Chess 15) and further encourages writers to compose player-characters that

embody the 'floods' and 'outbursts' of human experience (Cixous 876) rather than act as tools for masterful displays of skill.

For my critical analysis, I will compare the use of *ecriture feminine* in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (TLOU) series, adopting a close-playing lens that integrates my phenomenological experiences as a 'deeply invested' player rather than 'objective' observer into critical analysis (Paterson et al. 13). This comparison argues that *The Last of Us: Part II* (*TLOUII*) subverts the hegemonically pleasing player-character of its predecessor and uplifts avatars that are complex women who deny the player moral absolution and ultimate control over their narrative decisions. I reveal how TLOUII's narrative denial of masculinist agency in favour of portraying the 'floods' and 'outburst' of feminine grief creates discontent within the player (Cixous 876), challenging their close affiliation with the avatar's body and personality. I argue that this discontent is crucial to the development of 'feminine' perspectives in games writing, whereby control and mastery are de-emphasised in favour of introspection, moral flexibility and raw, painful emotionality.

Beyond this critical approach, I develop a creative game script, *Don't Tell Your Father*, that similarly denies the player a chance for mastery. Utilising dialogue trees and paratextual elements, the narrative depicts the avatar's attempts to reveal their recent sexual assault to their closest loved ones, challenging the player to adapt to the avatar's personality to achieve catharsis. While the critical component argues that TLOU denies player agency through a combination of narrative linearity and moral complicity, my creative work de-emphasises the player's agency and encourages them to enact emotional labour on the behalf of the player character.

This presentation ultimately reveals a new way of conceiving of and constructing the player-avatar relationship in games. This has implications both at academic and industry levels: creative writers in industry may yet construct games with more careful manipulation of the player-avatar relationship and theorists may analyse such constructions in the continuing the 'ongoing feminist battle' to normalise 'the act of reading between the lines' of game narratives and ludology (Stang 234).

Author Bio
Kate King-Smith is a writer, independent researcher and creative writing graduate from The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on exploring and implementing feminist writing practices into narrative design, blending traditional literary theory with ludological approaches to narrative construction. She has written for independent games media and is currently working on develop an Australian Gothic survival horror game script, drawing on similar themes related to the body, experience and memory.

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Author's Statement
Full Name: Qingyun Cao
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Description of selected research, publications, and presentations:
(1) Couldry, Nick, and Andreas Hepp. 2016.
As the selected publication, this study provides a theoretical basis for analyzing how digital medium platform is used as a space for self-expression and social interaction.
(2) Mulvey, Laura. 2019. "VISUAL PLEASURE AND NARRATIVE CINEMA (UK, 1975)."
As the selected research, this study provides the theory for male gaze which as a framework to support the reverse gaze of otome games.
(3) Wu, Haixia. 2017."传统与现代化的新议题：儒学与女权."
As the selected publication, this study shows the influence of Confucian tradition on gender roles in modern China, providing support for the study of gender dynamics in postcolonial games.

Title: Reshaping gender dynamics and self-expression: The role of otome games as digital medium platforms in the context of postcolonial Chinese culture

Abstract
In the context of Chinese culture, combining academic perspectives on post-colonialism, digital media theory, and gender studies, this paper aims to address a key research question: Taking *Love and Deepspace* (2024) as the main case, how otome games play the role as a digital platform medium that promotes female self-expression and reshapes gender dynamics?

In the past hundred years, China has experienced invasion and settlement system, which has reshaped Chinese culture and social values to a certain extent. Today, Chinese socio-cultural context is influenced by post-colonialism and rooted in gender norms and social structures in traditional Confucian culture, so Chinese females are still under the continuous influence of patriarchy (Wu 2017). Influenced by the Western thoughts of female liberation and the pressure of Chinese patriarchy, Chinese women are eager to seek the space of self-identity and emotional expression. As a new form of game culture, otome games also serve as a medium to build a digital platform for women to seek actively.

Couldry and Andreas Hepp's research on digital media platforms shows that digital media platforms constitute the Mediated Society, which is not only a tool to promote content consumption, but also an important space for social interactions, identity construction and self-expression (Couldry and Hepp 2016). As a female-oriented game, otome games not only have interactive narrative and focus on the role of females' needs, but also can be regarded as a media platform and virtual space. Through the chat area and other functions, the otome game, *Love and Deepspace* (2024) has built a communication platform for female players, providing players with

a space for self-expression and communication, which is conducive to meeting the emotional needs of players.

Lura Mulvey(2019) points out "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other", and the female image becomes a reflection of the male desire. Otome games design for female players to choose the ideal boyfriend image, while providing a discussion area. These platforms provide women the reverse gaze to discuss about male characters, and produce a lot of UGC and secondary creation. But at the same time, most of the heroines represented by *Love and Deepspace* (2024) are still the traditional ideal female images. These heroines are beautiful, with big eyes, slim bodies, and fair skin. Even with their inner qualities such as bravery and kindness, they are still the ideal women defined by men in the past. Therefore, there are still shortcomings in some details of Chinese otome games.

In order to more comprehensively understand the social significance of otome games as a media platform, this paper uses Qualitative Research Methods, Case Study and Player Behavior Analysis and In-Depth Interviews of players explore how otome games play the role as media platform. This article focuses on the symbolic meaning and cultural dimension of the game. By analyzing its narrative structure, role interaction, players' choice and interaction mode in the game, players' personal experience and subjective views on the game, this paper studies how otome games achieve female self-expression and gender dynamic reconstruction.

In recent years, despite their growing popularity worldwide, there has been little research on otome games as digital medium platforms, especially in the context of both post-colonial and Confucian culture in China. At the same time, the study goes some way to developing the discussion of otome games as roles for female expression and gender dynamics. Preliminary findings suggest that otome games serve a dual function as a digital media platform: Firstly, they create a virtual digital media space that enables female players to engage in cultural and gender renegotiation, challenging traditional gender dynamics. Secondly, develop the redefinition of cultural identity under the influence of globalization. But today's otome games still use idealized female figures, which inadvertently perpetuates patriarchal norms. In addition, the study has implications for digital media platforms and the cultural industry to build more inclusive narratives that promote greater gender equality and diversity in the digital space.

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Keywords: Otome Games, Digital Medium Platforms, Male Gaze, Mediated Society, Post-colonialism, Gender Dynamics, User-Generated Content (UGC)

Digital Bodies and Cyborg Souls in Cyberpunk Landscapes: A Case Study of

Female Cyborg Narratives in Cyberpunk 2077

This paper examines the representation of female cyborgs in *Cyberpunk 2077*

through the characters of Altiera Cunningham (Alt) and Female V, focusing on their

hacker identities and the game's engagement with post-gender narratives. Rooted in

its literary origins, the cyberpunk genre has evolved to influence diverse media such

as film and video games, providing the contextual framework for this analysis

(McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink 1-4). Unlike traditional media, games function as

artifacts defined by behavior and interaction rather than content delivery, offering

unique avenues for exploring complex themes (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2).

Within this interactive medium, Alt and Female V emerge as pivotal figures in the

discourse on cyborg identity, technological agency, and feminist critique. Employing

an interdisciplinary approach, this research integrates video game analysis, feminist

theory, and posthumanism to examine Alt and Female V as narrative agents. Joleen

Blom's framework of ludic, narrative, and performative agents is applied to

investigate how *Cyberpunk 2077* employs its interactive mechanics to extend and

redefine cyberpunk narratives, blending narrative depth with open-world exploration

and player agency (69). Drawing on Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, this paper

explores how these female characters transcend biological distinctions of gender

through bodily modification and cognitive intrusion, establishing a new paradigm of

existence in the cyberspace. Additionally, this analysis is further informed by more

than 240 hours of gameplay observation, along with insights from developer materials and player commentary.

Alt, a non-playable character and the game world's foremost hacker, exemplifies Haraway's vision of the cyborg as a post-gender being while embodying tensions between autonomy and commodification. Haraway's concept of cyborgization represents a departure from binary oppositions. Unlike beings tied to the myth of Eden, cyborgs are free from patriarchal constraints and the need to depend on the family unit for self-definition (102). However, Alt's portrayal as "Johnny Silverhand's girlfriend" reinforces patriarchal norms through overt sexualization, highlighting the persistent commodification of female characters in the game. Female V's customizable appearance allows players to engage with gender fluidity and embody a cyborg persona. Through body modifications and hacking skills, V surpasses biological limitations, becoming a figure of both empowerment and contradiction, caught between autonomy and systemic constraints. As *Simulation 101* observes, "the nature of simulation as a dynamic system transcends narrative, although it has the ability to generate many potential stories"(paragraphs 12-15). Female V serves as both a narrative and ludic agent, enabling players to influence the story while experiencing the cyborg identity firsthand. This dynamic represents the game's ability to balance player agency with narrative structure, offering an exploration of identity beyond traditional storytelling. However, the potential is ultimately restricted by the game's reliance on market-driven aesthetics and narrative conventions, which prioritize mass appeal over a deeper exploration of feminist cyborg themes.

This study argues that *Cyberpunk 2077* serves as a microcosm for broader debates on gender, identity, and technology in digital media. It highlights the potential of video games to function as critical spaces for interrogating societal norms. Alt and Female V embody the dual possibilities and limitations of cyborg identity: they challenge the binaries and patriarchal frameworks, yet remain bound by the conventions of the gaming industry. While Alt's transformation into digital consciousness subverts human ethic, the narrative of her true identity in the game's plot is insufficient and mostly comes from players' speculation. As a character tied to the male protagonist of the story, Alt's image of a hypersexualized figure reinforces the trope of objectification. At the same time, Female V's customizable body and hacking skills offer a surface-level exploration of post-gender identity, but this potential is constrained by the game's reliance on a binary gender system, determined by the player's initial choice of "Body Type." Despite these limitations, *Cyberpunk 2077* exemplifies the transformative potential of video games to explore complex themes of gender and identity. While shaped by market-driven patriarchal conventions, its innovative narrative and character design still provide valuable insights for interdisciplinary discussions on adaptation, storytelling, and simulation.

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Author Statement

Full Name: Mengdie WU

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Description of Research, Publications, and Presentations:

I completed my MA in English: Issues in Modern Culture at University College London, where I focused on the intersections of gender, technology, and identity in digital media. My master's dissertation, "Digital Bodies and Cyborg Souls in Cyberpunk Landscapes: A Case Study of Female Cyborg Narratives in *Cyberpunk 2077*," explores the representation of female cyborgs in *Cyberpunk 2077*, with an emphasis on themes such as body modification and agency. This academic foundation informs my current work as an independent game designer, specializing in narrative design and interactive storytelling.

Statement:

As a designer and researcher, I am passionate about examining how video games create immersive narratives that challenge traditional ideas of identity and embodiment. By bridging cultural theory and creative practice, I aim to contribute to the development of innovative storytelling approaches in digital media. This paper reflects my dedication to interdisciplinary perspectives and the integration of academic research into game design.

Exploring Gender Dynamics in Chinese Wuxia RPGs: A Feminist Perspective

Suyuan Shi[1]

1. Introduction

The wuxia genre, characterized by its rich cultural heritage and emphasis on martial arts, honor, and personal growth, has long been a cornerstone of Chinese storytelling. In the context of single-player role-playing games (RPGs), wuxia narratives serve as a platform for exploring traditional values while integrating modern digital storytelling techniques. However, these narratives often perpetuate patriarchal norms, marginalizing female characters and reinforcing male-centric storylines (Yang & Guo, 2020). This phenomenon reflects broader societal gender dynamics, where traditional roles and expectations continue to shape cultural production, including digital games.

Feminist scholars have argued that digital games are not only a form of entertainment but also a medium for cultural expression and the reinforcement of social norms (Butler, 1990; Shaw, 2014). Despite the global gaming industry's gradual movement toward inclusivity, Chinese wuxia RPGs remain relatively conservative in their gender portrayals. Male protagonists are often depicted as heroic saviors, while female characters are relegated to secondary or supportive roles, mirroring traditional patriarchal values. This gender imbalance impacts player experiences and limits the potential for diverse storytelling.

While otome games have gained popularity among female players by offering narratives centered on romance and relationships from a female perspective, they often rely on conventional "Cinderella-like" arcs. These narratives, despite their appeal, fail to fully escape gender stereotypes and offer limited agency to female characters (Kow & Fung, 2022). In contrast, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) present opportunities to challenge these entrenched norms by enabling adaptive and dynamic storytelling systems. AI has the potential to create more inclusive narratives by allowing diverse character development and player-driven plotlines

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(Murray, 1997; Chang, 2015). However, these technological solutions are not without ethical concerns, such as biases inherent in AI algorithms and the possibility of perpetuating stereotypes if poorly implemented.

This study seeks to address these issues by examining the intersection of gender, culture, and technology in Chinese wuxia RPGs. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with players, the research aims to uncover how gender dynamics are constructed and perceived within these games. Additionally, it explores the potential of AI-driven narrative systems to promote inclusivity and challenges the ethical implications of their implementation. By situating itself at the crossroads of feminist critique, cultural analysis, and technological innovation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital games can evolve to reflect and shape societal values.

In the following sections, the study will outline its methodology, present findings on gendered narratives in wuxia RPGs, and discuss the implications of AI in fostering more inclusive game designs. Through these discussions, this research not only highlights the cultural significance of wuxia RPGs but also offers actionable insights for developers aiming to create engaging and equitable gaming experiences.

2. Background

The wuxia genre, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural heritage, represents a blend of martial arts, honor, and personal growth narratives. In the realm of single-player role-playing games (RPGs), wuxia games serve as a unique medium for storytelling that merges traditional values with digital interactivity. However, like many forms of media, wuxia RPGs often reinforce gender stereotypes, perpetuating a male-centric narrative that marginalizes female characters. These games typically depict male protagonists as heroic saviors while assigning female characters roles as secondary figures or love interests, reflecting patriarchal values embedded in Chinese society (Yang & Guo, 2020).

Feminist scholars argue that digital games are a powerful platform for cultural expression and reinforcement of social norms (Butler, 1990; Shaw, 2014). While the global gaming industry has made strides toward more inclusive narratives, the Chinese gaming market remains relatively conservative in its portrayal of gender roles.

This is particularly evident in wuxia RPGs, where female agency is often limited despite the genre's narrative potential for diversity.

The rise of otome games, targeted primarily at female audiences, offers a contrasting perspective. These games provide narratives centered on romance and relationships from a female point of view, allowing for greater player agency in character interactions. However, even in otome games, gender norms persist, as these narratives often rely on "Cinderella-like" arcs, where female protagonists achieve success or fulfillment primarily through male validation (Kow & Fung, 2022).

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) present opportunities to challenge these entrenched gender norms in digital games. AI-powered storytelling systems enable dynamic narratives and adaptive character development, offering possibilities for breaking traditional gender stereotypes (Murray, 1997; Chang, 2015). However, the application of AI in gaming also raises ethical concerns, such as bias inherent in AI algorithms and the potential perpetuation of stereotypes through poorly designed systems.

This study situates itself at the intersection of gender, culture, and technology, exploring how AI can be leveraged to address gender biases in Chinese wuxia RPGs. By examining the narrative structures of these games and player perceptions, this research aims to uncover the complex interplay between cultural heritage, gender representation, and technological innovation. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on the potential of AI to foster more inclusive digital storytelling while addressing the limitations and ethical considerations of its implementation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore gender representation and narrative design in Chinese wuxia RPGs. The interviews are guided by a detailed questionnaire designed to capture players' perspectives on key aspects of game design, gender roles, and cultural elements.

(1) Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of gender, age, and gaming experience. The interviewees include both male and female players, with a focus on those familiar with Chinese RPGs, particularly wuxia games.

(2) Interview Structure

The interviews are divided into five sections:

Background Information: Collect demographic data, gaming habits, and preferences to contextualize responses.

Gender and Narrative in Wuxia Games: Examine perceptions of male and female character roles, narrative depth, and alignment with traditional wuxia culture.

Game Mechanics and Player Experience: Explore how game mechanics influence gender representation and whether developers cater to gendered player preferences.

Gender and Cultural Representation: Analyze the interplay between wuxia culture and gender norms, and identify any stereotypes perpetuated in game narratives.

Player Suggestions and Expectations: Gather insights on how future games can improve gender representation and narrative inclusivity.

(3) Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person or online, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for analysis. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for in-depth exploration of players' experiences and viewpoints.

(4) Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes across interviews. Special attention was given to differences in perceptions based on gender, cultural background, and gaming preferences. Key themes include:

Male-dominated narratives and their impact on game immersion.

The role and limitations of female characters.

Players' preferences for diverse and adaptive storytelling.

Cultural influences on gender representation in wuxia games.

(5) Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Consent was obtained for data collection and publication of findings.

This methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how players perceive and engage with gendered narratives in Chinese wuxia RPGs, while also offering actionable insights for game developers aiming to create more inclusive gaming experiences.

4. Research Hypotheses

(1) The narrative design of wuxia RPGs exhibits significant gender biases, with male characters being assigned more dominant and heroic roles, while female characters are often relegated to secondary or supportive positions.

(2) The integration of AI-driven narrative systems can significantly improve gender representation in wuxia RPGs by enabling more diverse character roles and narrative options.

(3) Players of different genders have distinct preferences regarding gender representation in game narratives, with female players favoring games that offer greater character freedom and more diverse storytelling.

(4) The gender narratives in wuxia RPGs reflect traditional Chinese gender norms and values, perpetuating these cultural elements through digital media.

5. Research Questions

How are male and female characters portrayed in wuxia RPG narratives?

To what extent do these portrayals reflect traditional patriarchal values?

How can AI-driven storytelling systems challenge traditional gender stereotypes in wuxia RPGs?

What are the ethical and technical challenges of using AI to address gender bias in games?

What are the expectations of male and female players regarding gender representation in wuxia RPGs?

How do players perceive the impact of AI on narrative diversity and inclusiveness?

In what ways do wuxia RPGs serve as a medium for cultural expression, particularly regarding gender norms?

How can feminist perspectives inform the development of more inclusive wuxia RPGs?

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